

AN ETHICAL DISPOSITION TOWARD THE EROTIC:
THE EARLY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS
OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND
BLACK FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

While many Simone de Beauvoir scholars have discussed the importance of the category of the erotic in Beauvoir's philosophical works, none explored the importance of Beauvoir's early autobiographical works to our understanding of the development of Beauvoir's ethical philosophy nor have they suggested how Beauvoir's ethical engagement with the erotic might be pertinent to black feminist philosophy. As such, this dissertation is a two-fold project. First, it presents an account of the lived experience of Beauvoir as illustrated through her early autobiographical works. This account focuses primarily on Beauvoir's romantic relationships and traces the development of her conversions leading to her most important philosophical contribution, that of existential ethics, through her accounts of these romantic relationships. Using Beauvoir's *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *War-time Diary*, *The Prime of Life*, and *Letters to Sartre*, I maintain that it is only through our close engagement with these early autobiographical writings about her philosophical understanding of her romantic relationships that we are able to understand how Beauvoir comes into the ethical views that will inform the rest of her writing career.

Beauvoir's focus on embodiment, facticity, conversion, and lived experience illustrate the extent to which these matters are inextricable from her existential ethics. Beauvoir claims in her philosophical ethical writings that the erotic moment serves a privileged moment when we encounter the other. Both Beauvoir's autobiographical writings and her ethical writings provide us with what is termed a "disposition toward the erotic," which is an attitude that stems from reflection upon and lived experience with the other in love or an erotic encounter, where we choose to encounter non-beloved others in a manner similar to that which we encounter the beloved other. In this way, a disposition toward the erotic is the foundation of Beauvoir's ethical assertions, with regard to what obligations we have toward the freedoms of others and how and why it is our ethical duty to fight against oppressive circumstances.

The second part of this project draws a bridge between Beauvoir's ethical writings concerning the topic of the erotic and black feminism. As such, I begin my discussion of black feminism by talking about Black women's lived experience as recounted through black feminism itself. After this, I focus on Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," bell hooks' series of books on love and Patricia Hill-Collins' *Black Sexual Politics*, since these serve as sources of direct black feminist engagement with the question of the erotic. I maintain that, in very important ways, black women's lived experience with the erotic has also informed the aims of the project of black feminism. As such, I illustrate how black women's lived experience has been colored by oppressive views of black women's embodiment and sexuality. I argue, as opposed to oppressive understandings of black women and their relationships toward their bodies, that this disposition toward the erotic is a stance that black feminism fundamentally shares with Beauvoir's existential ethics.

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The phrase, “no man is island,” has been uttered by many numerous times, but never does it seem as poignant as when one reaches a milestone in one’s own life. As this dissertation is the culmination of a years-long journey, it offers the opportunity to truly thank all of those people from whom I have drawn strength.

This dissertation focuses on the impact of intellectual and personal influences, and if someone were to write about mine, it would be clear that my mother is my greatest. I would like to thank my mother, Michelle Dacus Carr, for being not only the model of what it means to be a woman, an ethical human being and a scholar, but also of what it means to be a friend. I am one of few people I know who was so thoroughly encouraged from an early age to befriend the written word. My mother raised me in a house full of books and with the knowledge that loving words and ideas was a legitimate, and furthermore, noble pursuit. Growing up as the daughter of an English professor and a poet, my classmates always assumed that my mother wrote and edited my work, but they didn’t know that she gave me a much greater gift—she allowed and encouraged me to pursue and develop my own ideas. In giving me the space to become an independent thinker, my mother was the first to ignite the love of wisdom, the philosopher’s spark, in me. I am truly humbled to be her daughter.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a two-fold project. The first thing it seeks to do is to present an account of the lived experience of Simone de Beauvoir as illustrated through her early autobiographical works. This account focuses primarily on Beauvoir's romantic relationships and attempts to trace the development of her conversions leading to her most important philosophical contribution, that of existential ethics, through her accounts of these romantic relationships. I maintain that it is only through our close engagement with these early autobiographical writings about her philosophical understanding of her romantic relationships that we are able to understand how Beauvoir comes into the ethical views that will inform the rest of her writing career.

Beauvoir's focus on embodiment, facticity, conversion, and lived experience illustrate the extent to which these matters are inextricable from her existential ethics. Beauvoir claims in her philosophical ethical writings that the erotic moment serves a privileged moment when we encounter the Other. Her ethics focuses on our various relations with others and what to do about the problem of the Other. When we are able to encounter the Other as other, while at the same time recognizing the subjectivity of the Other, this is the moment when we inhabit an ethical attitude toward the Other. I would like to suggest that both Beauvoir's autobiographical writings and her ethical writings provide us with what I will term a "disposition toward the erotic," which is an attitude that stems from reflection upon and lived experience with the Other in love or an erotic encounter, where we choose to encounter non-beloved others in a manner similar to that which we naturally (or ideally) encounter the beloved other. In this way, a disposition toward the erotic can serve as an ethical benchmark for our relations with others. It is the foundation of Beauvoir's ethical assertions, with regard to what obligations we have toward the freedoms of others and how and why it is our ethical duty to fight against oppressive circumstances.

This disposition toward the erotic is similar to Audre Lorde's suggestion that we use the erotic as a source of power in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Here, Lorde suggests that the erotic be used as a source of power for women, a way for them to gauge the fulfillment found in their work and political activity. Inspired by her lived experience with the erotic and as a feminist activist, Lorde describes the ways that her experience with the erotic has influenced her ability and willingness to engage in liberatory politics. I maintain, however, that there are important lacunae in Lorde's account that can be remedied by the addition of Beauvoir's writings on the erotic.

In this way, I move to the second part of my project, which draws a bridge between Beauvoir's ethical writings concerning the topic of the erotic and black feminism. I maintain that, in very important ways, black women's lived experience with the erotic has also informed the aims of the project of black feminism. As such, I illustrate how black women's lived experience has been colored by oppressive views of black women's embodiment and sexuality. In important ways, Black women have been overdetermined by their embodiment, such that they have come to be viewed as merely bodies, to the neglect of recognition of their subjectivity. In this way, the suggestion that Black women adopt an ethical disposition toward the erotic might be considered a scandalous and dangerous assertion. I will argue, as opposed to oppressive understandings of black women and their relationships toward their bodies, that this disposition toward the erotic is a stance that black feminism fundamentally shares with Beauvoir's existential ethics.

In the end, just as Beauvoir's ethics asserts that the core of ethics is the recognition of the Other as an embodied other whose subjectivity and freedom it is our duty to respect and preserve, black feminism also seeks the recognition of Black women and others and more open possibilities for the freedom of all oppressed people. Both Beauvoir and black feminism also recognize that oppressive circumstances tend to determine the possibilities for those who are oppressed. As such,

both seek an ethics that not only suggests how we might act toward others, but how our actions and attitudes (orientations) toward others contribute to creating such possibilities.

Important Themes

Autobiography as Philosophy

Before proceeding, I would like to make the case for viewing Beauvoir's autobiographical writings as legitimate grounds for philosophical inquiry. Some philosophers might question analyzing Beauvoir's autobiographical writings for what they can tell us about her thoughts on the erotic and ethics, or even her philosophy in general. Contention surrounds the usefulness and merit of considering autobiographical writings as philosophy. As Seyla Benhabib, in "Taking Ideas Seriously: Can We Distinguish Political Choices from Philosophical Truths?" observes:

"Philosophical theories make claims to truths that transcend social and historical context. From inside the discipline, the details of personal lives seem irrelevant to understanding or evaluating a thinker's views."¹ This sentiment--that utilizing the biographical details of a thinker's life in order to interpret his/her philosophy, what she refers to as a "hermeneutics of suspicion," negates the philosophical project--is rooted in a fundamental view of philosophy a discipline divorced from the lives its practitioners.

Indeed, one should take care not simply to conflate the autobiographical with the philosophical. Criticisms of such conflation point to instances where a philosopher's philosophical writings are viewed through the lens of his biographical information to the detriment of serious consideration of his/her philosophy *qua* philosophy. An infamous case of this is that of phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, whose membership in the Nazi party, in certain circles, leads

¹ Seyla Benhabib, "Taking Ideas Seriously," *Boston Review*, December 1, 2002, <http://www.bostonreview.net/books-ideas/seyla-benhabib-taking-ideas-seriously>.

some interpreters to negate his ideas such that it overshadows his contribution to philosophy.² This case serves as an example of why some philosophers may be hesitant to consider bio-/autobiographical information about a philosopher when attempting to understand said philosopher's philosophical views. Surely, it does seem problematic to *dismiss* a philosopher's writings on the basis of information one knows about him, but is it equally problematic to take seriously the autobiographical writings of a philosopher when trying to provide a more robust account of her philosophy?

I would like to argue, no. I think this is especially poignant in the case of Beauvoir. If we are to fully consider her writing, we must understand the context in which she was writing. One oft-noted characteristic of philosophers associated with the existential school of philosophy is their writing in multiple genres. Sartre famously wrote philosophical essays, novels, plays, and short stories, in addition to his own autobiography. Other thinkers associated with the existential school of philosophy, like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Camus, also wrote in genres outside of the philosophical essay. Among those who identified as existentialists, there appeared to be an understanding that a writing life is one that encompasses many different forms of writing.³ Beauvoir's writing in multiple genres serves as an example of this sentiment. Considering that this is a major characteristic of the movement, it seems especially unwise to ignore those texts that are not explicitly "philosophical" when trying to understand the philosophy of this group of thinkers.

² Says Richard Wolin in the introduction to *The Heidegger Controversy*, "both Heidegger's detractors and apologists err in disseminating simplifying verdicts which tend to suppress the profound complexities of the all-important relationship between politics and philosophy in Heidegger's work. And thus, while Heidegger is far from being a 'Nazi philosopher,' (as some have recently claimed), neither can one make a neat and total separation between his philosophical and political beliefs." Richard Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), 25.

³ Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi, *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Beyond the sociocultural context of existentialism in particular, and philosophy as a whole, considering the autobiographical work of a philosopher is still held to be contentious. Another one of the reasons philosophers have historically been hesitant to consider autobiographical writings as philosophical is their misguided attempt to delineate the boundaries of so-called "philosophy," to enclose the discipline and practice within tight corridors, and to keep what are considered illegitimate voices and viewpoints out of the discipline.⁴ This can be seen, not only in the hesitancy to deal with the autobiographies of some philosophers as opposed to others, but also in the hesitancy to include more commonly accepted genres such as fiction into philosophical consideration.⁵

I want to reject this notion of de facto genre distinction. While we would want to be clear about how we find philosophical merit in those writings that are not explicitly philosophical, I believe that there are cases where analyzing the autobiographical works of a philosopher is a benefit. Even further, there are cases, for instance Beauvoir's, where *not* doing so contributes to a less robust account of that philosopher's work. There may be a few reasons for this. As Karen Vintges suggests, some philosophers find that writing in alternate genres allows them better to illustrate how their philosophical ideas play out beyond theory.⁶ These philosophers might consider the use of alternate genres as a kind of philosophical praxis. In phenomenology, the lived experience of the subject is the grounds for theorizing. Representations of such lived experience in the form of fiction or

⁴ For an importantly sustained inquiry into this problem, see Lewis Gordon's *Disciplinary Decadence*. Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

⁵ Shlomit Schuster makes a good point to note that some philosophical autobiographies are embraced by the philosophical community, namely those of Descartes, Nietzsche and St. Augustine. One might make the case that since the profiles of these philosophers fit neatly into what is traditionally considered "philosophical," their autobiographies do not present the same theoretical problems for philosophy that the autobiographies of other voices appear to. It is also interesting to note that many in the philosophical community have used Sartre's autobiography, *The Words*, as a grounds for better understanding parts of his philosophy. It is very telling that this same theoretical engagement has not often been given to Beauvoir, at least as a whole. Shlomit C. Schuster, *The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003).

⁶ Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).

autobiography serve as further philosophizing. Relatedly, autobiographies of philosophers can sometimes be viewed as these philosophers' attempts to present a unified understanding of their lives. For those who identify closely with their particular systems, these systems can be illustrated by these writers' writings about themselves. As Whitmore notes, all of this is "simply to say that genre lines are (phenomenologically speaking) constituted unities of meaning and consequently, have a contingent, historical and constructed character, that they blur into one another."⁷

There is even more to say about the autobiographies of philosophers that makes them particularly useful for analysis. While some are of the school of thought that any autobiography written by philosopher is inherently philosophical,⁸ I, like Shlomit Shuster, would not want to go quite this far. However, I do think that in certain cases, we can consider such autobiographies important for a few clear reasons. The first is that philosophers' autobiographies offer us windows into the circumstantial and intellectual influences of their writers. In philosophy, philosophical lineage (with whom one worked and with whose philosophy one understands oneself to be in conversation) is a serious matter. It would stand to reason that an author's self-account of such a lineage would be an important tool in any account of the author's philosophical system. Relatedly, the autobiographies of philosophers are important to philosophical analyses of these philosophers because such autobiographies can explain to us the development of thought of their authors. I take this to be a different, yet equally important, point than that previously mentioned. When I speak of the development of thought, I am referring to how a philosopher revises her philosophical views over time. In the case of Beauvoir, her autobiographical writings clearly show how her ideas

⁷ John F. Whitmore, "Questioning the Self: Kierkegaard and Derrida," *Philosophy Today* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 418.

⁸ Shlomit Shuster mentions some philosophers who take this view. She says, "Different from my view are the views of R. G. Collingwood and Wilhelm Dilthey: They find that historical cognition of the self and philosophy cannot be detached. In *An Autobiography*, Collingwood claims a necessary rapprochement between philosophy and history. In his view the philosophical and the autobiographical are one: Philosophy is a historical investigation into the principles a person is unaware of. Dilthey similarly finds philosophy a hermeneutical 'Verstehen,' a historical, biographical, or autobiographical practice." Shuster, *The Philosopher's Autobiography*, 6.

developed throughout the course of her writing life. And since I am especially interested in the theme of conversion in Beauvoir's writings, I draw from this important aspect of the usefulness of autobiographical writings.

The choice to use autobiographical writings in this project is also important to me as it relates to the varying modes of the intellectual production of those who are often on the margins of the academy. This insight is especially invaluable to my project and bears repeating. While attempting to understand the intellectual contributions of such groups (especially, as I am concerned with them here, black women), adhering to strict, limiting notions of what should be considered properly "philosophical" greatly diminishes hope of understanding the ways that such people have contributed to philosophy. This is because there have been many voices that have not had access to philosophy as it is practiced in the academy due to such circumstances as sexism, racism, classism, and other such –isms that have barred entry into higher education, both formally and informally. It is often through the use of autobiographical texts that we garner the liberatory philosophical ideas of certain ex-slaves, for instance.⁹ While I maintain that not all autobiography is philosophical, an unwillingness to comb these sources for what might be philosophically useful keeps us from even being able to determine the difference. As such, a commitment to taking seriously the notion that the autobiographical can also be philosophical is one that aligns with a commitment to representing the voices of the historically oppressed, both of which I am assuming here.

It is also important to consider whether there is a proper delineation between those autobiographical writings that were written for publication and those that were not (at least initially)

⁹ Frederick Douglass's autobiography is an important example of this and has been examined by many for its philosophical import. See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself: A New Critical Edition*, Open Media Series (San Francisco, California: City Lights Books, 2010); Hoang Gia Phan, *Bonds of Citizenship: Law and the Labors of Emancipation, America and the Long 19th Century* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2013); Nicholas Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2012); Linda Bolton, *Facing the Other: Ethical Disruption and the American Mind*, Horizons in Theory and American Culture (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

written for the purposes of publication, such as journals and letters. It might be the case that what we assume to be the initial intent of a form of writing may affect our ability or willingness to consider it philosophical. On the one hand, one might argue that an autobiography, in that it was intended to be read by the public, might be considered "constructed," such that the philosophical information that one might gather from such a source could be said to have been placed within this publication *for the purpose of* conveying certain philosophical concepts. On the other hand, however, we might assume that a diary or letter was not written for the initial purpose of conveying information to a wide readership. If this is the case, then what should we make of the difference here? I would say that former argument would further confirm the usefulness of including autobiographical materials in philosophical inquiry, since it would not be a stretch to suggest that whatever philosophical information these autobiographies contain was intentionally provided by the author. With regard to the second suggestion, however, it may be more difficult to make the case that these works are philosophical, since we would assume that the initial purpose of such writings was not to provide philosophical information to the public in general.

But does this mean that philosophical information that we find in such writings is not then philosophical *qua* philosophical? I would argue, still, no. There are a couple reasons for this. First, while considering those autobiographical writings that were not intentionally published as autobiography, it is not the case that the writer immediately collapses into something like an ethnographer. We might say that the difference between an ethnographer and a philosopher is that the former is concerned with the mere description of lived experience and the latter is concerned with how said lived experience is related to or in some way formulates some kind of concept(s).¹⁰ So just because a philosopher's autobiographical writings are not formal autobiographies, this does not

¹⁰ I take this idea of philosophy as the art of concept formation from Deleuze and Guatarri's *What is Philosophy?* See: Gilles Deleuze, *What Is Philosophy?*, European Perspectives (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

mean that these writings are not engaged in concept formulation. Secondly, the intended audience of the piece of writing does not have bearing on whether the information contained within the piece is philosophical if indeed such information is, again, connected to the construction or engagement with philosophical concepts.¹¹ As such, no delineation of type of autobiographical writing will be made in this project.¹²

A further justification for including Beauvoir's autobiographical writings that were not initially intended for publication also rests in what such writings may positively offer to our account of Beauvoir's philosophy. It should be noted, for instance, that there are sometimes discrepancies between Beauvoir's published autobiographies and the information she includes in her diaries and letters.¹³ For instance, Beauvoir mentions many authors with whom she extensively engaged in her diaries, but does not credit said authors as influences in her autobiographies. This may be due to some revisionist tendencies on her part. It may also be due to some blind spots in her understanding of whom she was influenced by at the time. In this way, examining Beauvoir's diaries and letters for philosophical content allows us to trace alternate intellectual lineages that may have influenced Beauvoir's philosophical contributions, even if she herself may not have explicitly stated them as such. This is important insofar as some philosophers would claim that that which confirms a piece

¹¹ Additionally, concerns, specifically with regard to journals and letters, about the audience of the piece of writing are founded in concerns about the author's intention. Those concerned with intention might question whether the initial intention of the author is related to the author's control over the manipulation of a piece of writing. They may suggest, for instance, that one constructs an autobiography such that it is what the author *wanted* the intended audience to know, whereas a journal, for instance, is assumed to be the author's own private ruminations, which are, in some way, less manipulated than those writings that are intended for publication. This leads us to question whether this claim for lack of manipulation in the diary really holds true such that when we write privately we are in some way telling less manipulated "truths." Two things to say about this: 1) if this is the case, then including those writings of a philosopher that were not initially intended for publication becomes even more important, 2) the "truths" we write about our lives can never be purely truths insofar as any time we reflect upon our world, we are doing so under the influence of our singular perception; hence the claim for some supposed purity of truth is moot. And the authenticity implied by this concept of purity of truth is not in any way important to/for developing an account of a thinker's philosophy.

¹² The impact of this decision will be clearly illustrated in the following chapters, where I draw on Beauvoir's autobiographies, diaries, and letters interchangeably.

¹³ Notably, the scandal surrounding the confirmation of Beauvoir's affairs with various women and with Jacques Bost are due to such discrepancies.

of writing as *philosophical* is its contextual grounding in some sort of historical intellectual tradition.¹⁴ This naming of intellectual influences in her journals and letters confirms Beauvoir's grounding in important historical traditions. Additionally, such writings as these offer us a way to be more critical about/of the autobiographical claims of writers. If a writer has a vested interest in telling her story a particular way, then she may purposely omit influences that do not fit into her own self-narrative at the point at which she wrote the autobiography. Because my project includes a discussion of the theme of conversion, this becomes interesting and important for how we trace Beauvoir's intellectual conversions.

Furthermore, including Beauvoir's letters to Sartre serves yet another important purpose for my project. In terms of understanding Beauvoir's lived experience as of a type of disposition toward the erotic, access to letters to Sartre prove invaluable since they are the enactment of her theoretical engagement with the erotic. It is also extremely important that Sartre was, too, a philosopher. As such, some of their correspondence pertains to their engagement with other philosophers that are clear influences on their respective philosophies. In drawing upon Beauvoir's letters to Sartre, we can trace Beauvoir's first sort of public engagement with some of her philosophical ideas, since Sartre was Beauvoir's most trusted intellectual confidant. This also helps us gather information about the development and conversions in Beauvoir's thoughts on many subjects, including the erotic. Looking to Beauvoir's letters to Sartre as a source also helps to further dispel the myth of Sartrean influence on Beauvoir's thought.¹⁵ As such, we can more clearly make claims about Beauvoir's independent formulation of a disposition toward the erotic.

¹⁴ Debra Bergoffen, for instance, makes such a claim in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*. I will go on to discuss this claim in detail in a later chapter. Debra B. Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, SUNY Series, Feminist Philosophy (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

¹⁵ It is partially through examining the chronology of concepts mentioned in both Beauvoir's letters to Sartre and Sartre's letters to Beauvoir that Kate and Edward Fullbrook suggest that Sartre may have taken some of his notable ideas from Beauvoir in *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend*. Kate Fullbrook and Edward

Before moving on, I would briefly like to mention a genre of writing I am choosing not to include in this project: biography. Biographical information is obviously a feature of autobiographical writing, in that both biographies and autobiographies offer detailed accounts of the lives of subjects. Some of this biographical information will be important to some of my arguments in this project, but I am choosing not to consider any biographies of Beauvoir as important source material. As such, the biographical information that I will use will come from Beauvoir's own writing about herself. This is not to suggest that the accounts that Beauvoir offers in these writings are accurate or that she does not at times intentionally write false information; indeed, Beauvoir notoriously misleads and omits information in her published autobiographies.¹⁶ Rather, because I am interested in formulating Beauvoir's philosophy, I am only interested in her understanding and portrayal of her own life insofar as she recounts her own lived experience. I am interested in how the biographical information furthers or corroborates Beauvoir's philosophical ethics. In this way, only Beauvoir's stated interpretation or account of her own life is sufficient for this project.

The Erotic

I would like to explain my use of the term “the erotic.” As I intend to use it, the erotic can be considered akin to the Western conception of “romantic love,” in that it describes a particular relationship between persons that is founded in desire. I do not want to use the term “romantic love,” though, because I do not want the erotic to be connected to that which is sometimes termed “courtly love.”¹⁷ Additionally, although I do consider the erotic to be fundamentally linked to

Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (New York, New York: BasicBooks, 1994).

¹⁶ “Beauvoir’s American lover Nelson Algren formulated this concisely when he exclaimed, ‘Autobiography—shit!...Autofiction, that’s what she wrote’ (Bair 1990a: 500).” Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion*, 89.

¹⁷ For a good description of courtly love, see Irving Singer’s *The Nature of Love*, in which he discusses the particulars of what began as courtly love and came to be known as romantic love, that love which is conceived of in terms of “romance.” Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

conceptions of love, I want to make it clear that I am here concerned with a particular type of love, a desirous love.

This said, I am also uninterested in distinguishing among so-called types of love. As Jean-Luc Marion asserts:

every concept of love is weakened and compromised as soon as one allows oneself to distinguish competing divergent or indeed irreconcilable meanings... A serious concept of love distinguishes itself by its unity, or rather by its power to keep together significations that nonerotic thought cuts apart, stretches and tears...¹⁸

I take this to mean that the erotic need not be solely understood as stemming from a sexual encounter, but also that it extends beyond the emotional connotation we usually correlate with the idea of love more generally.¹⁹

Additionally, my use of the term “erotic” throughout the dissertation displays a particular interest and concern with its ethical possibilities. Since the erotic, though it need not literally include physical contact, brings to bear embodied connotations, I see it as useful way of acknowledging the importance of situatedness in ethical relations with others, one which other terms (like love, for instance) that might have been used do not. This makes the erotic useful for talking about sexuality and sexualization (and the overdetermination of black women’s embodiment), which themselves need not imply intimate physical relations, but do bring the body to bear in significant ways. In this way, use of the term erotic also parallels Beauvoir’s interest in the concept of ambiguity, since the erotic is a term that implicates both the body and the subject.

These insights, along with the precedent set by Bergoffen and other Beauvoir scholars’ use of the phrase “the erotic,” has led to my adoption of the term for the purposes of this project. As

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4–5.

¹⁹ Karen Elizabeth Davis also provides insight into re-thinking our understandings of the erotic. See Karen Elizabeth Davis, “I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A New Paradigm for Sex,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 21, no. 2–3 (September 1, 1990): 5–24.

Aimee Carrillo Rowe notes, "The *erotic* is a term marked by its ambiguity, paradox, and transformative potential."²⁰

Conversion

The theme of conversion can be found in much of Beauvoir's writing. As such, part of this project will detail points in Beauvoir's autobiographical accounts that might properly be considered conversions. My use of the term 'conversion' is both literal and theoretical, for it alludes not only to Beauvoir's conversion out of her Catholic faith, but also out of particular attitudes toward the erotic. I want to illustrate how Beauvoir's deployment of 'conversion' carries with it an ethical dimension. When she or a character she writes converts out of one attitude into another, this person takes an ethical leap. Whether this leap is positive or negative, it signifies an important shift in the protagonist's understanding of herself in relation to the Other. Though in a certain sense, the term 'conversion,' as it is often used, already implies a change in an individual's status within a (religious) collective, for Beauvoir conversion is intimate and occurs on the individual level. In this way, as Beauvoir deploys it, the ethical implications of converting carry more significant weight with regard to a person's own approach to his/her lived experience.

Beauvoir offers an account of existentialist conversion in *Ethics of Ambiguity*. She writes:

Existentialist conversion should rather be compared to Husserlian reduction: let man put his will to be 'in parentheses' and he will thereby be brought to the consciousness of his true condition. And just as phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external world, whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however, contest, so existentialist conversion does not suppress my instincts, desires, plans, and passions.²¹

²⁰ Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "L Is For...: Longing and Becoming in the L-Word's Racialized Erotic," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marciano, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 92.

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Kindle Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Carol Publishing, 1991), 105–108 Kindle Location.

Here we see the phenomenological understanding of the notion of conversion that Beauvoir develops in her ethical philosophy. Conversion, in this sense, acknowledges the lived experience of the subject while also allowing for the subject's opportunity to engage his/her freedom. When Beauvoir speaks of the "will to be," she is referring to an aspect of phenomenological intentionality that seeks to capture being in a denial of human ambiguity. As such, a subject's possibility of conversion becomes an essential aspect of Beauvoir's ethics.

Indeed, some Beauvoir scholars have highlighted the importance of the theme of conversion in Beauvoir's work.²² In explanation of Beauvoir's use of the idea of conversion as related to ethics, Fredrika Scarth writes:

The moral coming of age that Beauvoir calls for, while enacted individually, is not isolated from the society that helps to construct and sustain the illusions that uphold oppression. If, in her account of this conversion, Beauvoir doesn't provide a roadmap for collective action, she does provide a vision of what subjectivity in equality could be and an account of embodied subjectivity that has relevance today.²³

This highlights an important use of the theme of conversion in this work: that of its individual character. Beauvoir appears to suggest that conversion must happen on the level of particular subjects. So while conversion is related to one's position with regard to a collective group of people, conversion, in the sense that it will be used in this dissertation, is concerned with the convertive possibilities of particular subjects.

²² Indeed, Penelope Deutscher's *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* is organized around particular conversions in Beauvoir's philosophy. Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²³ Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, *Feminist Constructions* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 12.

Black Feminism

Like all forms of feminism, black feminism is especially hard to define.²⁴ One might say that, in general, feminism is a political and theoretical project that seeks to establish the conditions necessary for all human beings to flourish to their full capacity on an equal basis. Beverly Guy-Sheftall offers the following definition of black feminism:

While black feminism is not a monolithic, static ideology, and there is considerable diversity among African American feminists, certain premises are constant: 1) Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources; 2) This "triple jeopardy" has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men; 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation *and* gender equality simultaneously; 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other 'isms' which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism; 5) Black women's commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.²⁵

It stands to reason, then, that black feminism is especially concerned with how the feminist project relates to people who identify as black and woman.

Historically, the emergence of black feminism as an explicitly particular *type* of feminism came about as a response to the feminist movement in the Western world. Bell hooks explains:

These black women observed white feminist focus on male tyranny and women's oppression as if it were a "new" revelation and felt like such a focus had little impact on their lives. To them it was just another indication of the privileged living conditions of middle- and upper-class white women that they would need a theory to inform them that they were "oppressed." The implication being that people who are truly oppressed know it even though they may not be engaged in organized resistance or are unable to articulate in written form the nature of their oppression. These black women saw nothing liberatory in party line analyses of women's oppression. Neither the fact that black women have not organized collectively in

²⁴ In this project, I am particularly concerned with black feminism in the United States context. Additional inquiry will be made into African diasporic feminism in a future project.

²⁵ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Introduction: The Evolution of Feminist Consciousness Among African American Women," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, New York: New Press, 1995), 2.

huge numbers around the issues of 'feminism' (many of us do not know or use the term) nor the fact that we have not had access to the machinery of power that would allow us to share our analyses or theories about gender with the American public negate its presence in our lives or place us in a position of dependency in relationship to those white and nonwhite feminist who address a larger audience.²⁶

While the general cause of feminism was viewed as a worthy one for all of the women who aligned themselves with this cause, black women began to note that their experience within larger feminist political movements was that of marginalization. So while they, too, sought to change the structures responsible for women's oppression at large, they felt as if their particular concerns were not being centered in the movement. Even further than these concerns not being centered, it began to feel as if they were being neglected altogether.

It is reasonable that we generally fight against those injustices that we ourselves experience as oppressive and because the feminist movement during the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was largely composed of white, middle-class women, the injustices fought against focused mostly on their concerns. The lens of a white, middle-class woman, on a very objective basis, is different than that of a black woman (and especially, in this case, a black woman who is more likely to be poor, given historical inequalities that contribute to poverty). However, the general project of feminism made claim to a desire to seek structural changes on behalf of *all* women. As such, neglect of the challenges that *black* women faced was viewed as antithetical to the project.

It is in this context that 'black feminism' emerges. For some, black feminism is a response to (white) hegemonic feminism. For others, it is merely a way of particularizing the concerns of this group of people, of acknowledging (and honoring?) the significance of situatedness. Clearly, black feminism means as many things to as many different groups of black feminist women as feminism means to different groups of feminists.

²⁶ bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, New York: New Press, 1995), 278.

Notably, the historical record of black feminism is ambiguous. In attempting to establish a concrete genesis of black feminism, "legitimate" sources are hard to come by and generally emerge very contemporarily. This means that those who are interested in the history of black feminist theory often must appeal to alternative sources.²⁷ As such, any attempt to trace the emergence of black feminism must 1) acknowledge the historical conditions that affect our understanding of black feminist scholarship and 2) utilize such alternative sources in any account of the history and description of black feminism.

Among the basic concerns of black feminism, the concept of intersectionality appears generally very important. Kimberle Crenshaw, often credited as the originator of the concept, explains it as such: intersectionality seeks to highlight "the needs to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed."²⁸ This recognition is another one of the reasons that black feminists identify as such, marking out a space for their particular feminism as distinct from feminism more generally. For instance, it is difficult to understand what it means to be "black" and to be "woman" as independent identifications such that we can parse which issues affect one as opposed to the other. This makes perfect sense, as a black woman not only experiences herself as a woman but also simultaneously as a black person. With regard to the experience and situation of oppression, both identifications work in tandem. If this is the case, then, the project to change social structures for such a being must acknowledge this simultaneity. To fight for the eradication of oppressive circumstances for a black woman, then, necessarily means fighting for the eradication of oppressive circumstances for those who are black and those who are women, and,

²⁷ "The shadow obscuring Black women's intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization." Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.

²⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1, 1991): 1245.

especially, those who are both. This recognition is another one of the reasons that black feminists identify as such, marking out a space for their particular feminism as distinct from feminism more generally.

We should be careful here to note concerns around the concept of essentialism. While this remains a concern for feminists more generally, this may be of particular concern for black feminism since the extension of the argument for the necessity of black feminism could very well lead to justifications for each minute self-identification to be considered worthy of having its own feminism (e.g., I am a black woman, but I am also a philosopher—shouldn't black women philosophers have their own particular brand of feminism?).²⁹ The response to this must be that the category of black feminism is both large enough and small enough to encompass the goals and concerns of a portion of the feminist population that we determine to be significant. In this way, black feminism does not imply that there is any one particular way to understand or inhabit blackness or to understand or *be a woman*.³⁰

Another response to this might be that the project of black feminism is a project that, at its very core, is *more* inclusive than feminism more generally. Paradoxically, in marking themselves as a particular brand of feminism, black feminists open the door to a wider range of concerns than their larger group. Indeed, it has been the case that those who champion the banner of black feminism

²⁹ Crenshaw offers: “One version of antiessentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say Blacks or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them.” *Ibid.*, 1296.

³⁰ “A black feminist ideology, first and foremost, thus declares the visibility of black women. It acknowledges the fact that two innate and inerasable traits, being both black and female, constitute our special status in American society. Second, black feminism asserts self-determination as essential. Black women are empowered with the right to interpret our reality and define our objectives. While drawing on a rich tradition of struggle as blacks and as women, we continually establish and reestablish our own priorities. As black women, we decide for ourselves the relative salience of any and all identities and oppressions, and how and the extent to which those features inform our politics. Third, a black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the interstructure for the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism both in the dominant society and within the movements for liberation. It is a confrontation with multiple consciousness essential for our liberation, of which feminist consciousness is an integral part.” Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, New York: New Press, 1995), 312.

have made it a point to assert that black feminism especially sees itself as working for the eradication of oppression for *all*. The Combahee River Collective, in their "A Black Feminist Statement," address this:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to the struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the condition of our lives. As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.³¹

Indeed, those who champion the banner of black feminism have made it a point to assert that black feminism especially sees itself as working for the eradication of oppression for *all*.

Black feminist ethics, then, is inherent in the very conception of black feminism. Hill Collins accedes: "Inherent in [black feminist intellectuals'] words and deeds is a definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community."³² In this sense, the project of black feminism is concerned with issues affecting all members of oppressed groups (including, but not limited to, men, non-black peoples, poor peoples, lgbt peoples, disabled peoples, etc.) and is clear to state as such.

Methodology

Methodologically, this project will begin with a discussion of Beauvoir's ethics where I illustrate how the disposition toward the erotic is an important aspect of Beauvoir's ethics, through what are commonly recognized as her philosophical ethical works, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, and "Must We Burn Sade?" I use these works to offer a general account of Beauvoir's ethics, with a focus on how she incorporates the erotic into her discussion. I also focus on Beauvoir's discussion of the concepts of conversion, embodiment/facticity and oppression, as

³¹ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, New York: New Press, 1995), 312.

³² Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 39.

these are intricately tied to understanding the disposition toward the erotic. I illustrate how Beauvoir engages the ethics of philosophers Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, whose writings (amongst others) serve an important role in Beauvoir's autobiographical account of conversion into an ethical stance.

Next, I begin my discussion of Beauvoir's autobiographical writings. I begin with a chapter on Beauvoir's days as a student, as chronicled by *Diary of a Philosophy Student* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. In this section, I discuss Beauvoir's relationships with Zaza, her best childhood friend, and Jacques, her cousin and love-interest at the time. I also analyze her references to various authors that assist her in coming to grips with her evolving ideas about love. This first chapter represents what I am terming Beauvoir's first conversion, to that of atheism and more progressive views on the role of women in romantic relationships with men.

I then move on to a discussion of Beauvoir's autobiographical writings during the War Years, drawing on *The War Diaries*, *The Prime of Life*, and *Letters to Sartre*. This period in time represents Beauvoir's final conversion into the ethical and the political. It is through her dealing with her relationship with Sartre and his absence during the time of the war that Beauvoir comes out of a solipsistic stance and comes to her biggest realizations about the Other. Other revelations also come via her relationships with women, who, because they were not required to go to war, remained in Paris with Beauvoir. During this time Beauvoir also begins her study of Hegel and Heidegger and relates this to her account of her lived experience.

I close with my discussion of black feminism. I hope to have shown in the preceding chapters that Beauvoir's ethical philosophy was directly informed by her lived experience with the erotic. As such, I begin my discussion of black feminism by talking about Black women's lived experience as recounted through black feminism itself. After this, I focus on Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," as it serves as an example of a Black feminist who also, through her lived experience, came to fundamental insights about the disposition toward the erotic. I also discuss bell hooks' series of

books on love and Patricia Hill-Collins' *Black Sexual Politics*, since these serve as two other sources of direct black feminist engagement with the question of the erotic. I hope to illustrate that there are important commonalities between Beauvoir's ethics, a disposition toward the erotic and black feminism. Moreover, I hope to illustrate how Beauvoir's ethical orientation toward the erotic can serve as a helpful ethical stance for black feminism in particular, since issues of embodiment/facticity, conversion and oppression are also pertinent to black feminism.

In the end, I hope to have given an account of Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic as fundamental aspect of her ethics and to show how one's lived experience can contribute to one's adopting such an orientation. I argue for the importance of lived experience, especially what we can gather about lived experience from autobiographical accounts. I also hope to show that black feminism and Beauvoir's ethics, specifically the aspect of Beauvoir's ethics that engenders the disposition toward the erotic, have a parallel relationship with one another and both would be well-served by mutual engagement.

CHAPTER 2: BEAUVOIR'S ETHICS

In this chapter, I would like to present an account of Beauvoir's ethics. I will provide a general account first, but my main interest here is in what I am terming Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic. In order to do this, I will use *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), *The Second Sex* (1949), and "Must We Burn Sade?" (1951-52), which are considered Beauvoir's primary ethical works.

We might say that the cornerstone of Beauvoir's ethics lies in her discussion of ambiguity. She writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it."³³ Beauvoir's task, then, is to describe an ethics that accounts for the ambiguity of our existence. In terms of ambiguity, Beauvoir points to the fact that human beings are both object and subject, conditioned by the past and open to the future, able to make free choices, yet bound by the consequences of those choices. Rather than flee this condition of ambiguity, as Beauvoir suggests that other ethicists have attempted to do, Beauvoir's ethics seek to embrace this condition of ambiguity.

The problem, however, with offering an ethics to beings that are ambiguous is that any ethics that does so must account for this constant state of ambiguity. At various times, Beauvoir focuses on that aspect of our ambiguity that is most present to us—that of our being both subject to ourselves and object to the Other. Beauvoir asserts that in order to deal with this specific condition of our ambiguity, we must understand the ways in which our relations with the Other are imbued by ambiguity. We can see Beauvoir's account of the complexities of humans as both objects and

³³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 31 Kindle Location.

subjects in the following two quotes from *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: she writes first, "Humanity is a discontinuous succession of free men who are irretrievably isolated by their subjectivity."³⁴; and then:

The other easily takes on that marvelous and inaccessible character because he alone experience for himself the void in his heart. For me, he is an object in the world, plenitude. I who am nothing, I believe in his being, and yet he is also something other than an object.³⁵

In the first quote, Beauvoir notes the manner in which human beings are unable to relieve themselves of their subjectivity. As such, this subjectivity, which is ever present in our experience, can never be subsumed by others. However, the second quote adds another dimension to our understanding of the human condition—despite our own subjectivity, we encounter the Other (and likewise know that the Other encounters us) as a seemingly inaccessible object, one that escapes our subjectivity. Despite the Other's seeming objectivity, however, we intuit that the Other is always also bound by his own subjectivity, and thus is more than mere object.

This particular form of ambiguity becomes especially important when we consider the concept of projects. Projects are those ends which we pursue through our actions. As Beauvoir describes it, since human beings are characterized by their original state of being "thrown" into the world, we might understand the human as a projected being, one always engaged, in some form or another, in a project. She writes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, "Each man decides on the place he occupies in the world, but he must occupy one. He can never withdraw from it."³⁶ So we have either the choice of inhabiting the world in the mode of being thrown without maintaining our own ends or we have the option of deciding upon ends for ourselves, such that our lives become meaningful through

³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

those very projects. So if we are to have meaningful lives, we must pursue ends of our choosing. We are to take up the responsibility of making our lives meaningful.

The concept of pursuing projects, then, is tied to ethics because our projects always involve others. It is impossible for us to pursue (not to mention, complete) projects entirely on our own. Because our projects always imply the projects of others, we must appeal to others to take up our projects or to assist us in the pursuit of our projects. Because we must appeal to others, we must then think about how these others may respond to our appeals. Beauvoir writes:

Respect for the other's freedom is not an abstract rule. It is the first condition of my successful effort. I can only appeal to the other's freedom, not constrain it. I can invent the most urgent appeals, try my best to charm it, but it will remain free to respond to those appeals or not, no matter what I do....³⁷

Thus, an appeal must take the form of a recognition of the Other's freedom. And as such, when we attempt to pursue our own projects, we must do so with the full understanding that the Other may utilize his or her freedom in any manner that he/she chooses, even if this choice results in a rejection of our appeal.

There must, then, be conditions for the possibility of the appeal. Beauvoir offers, "In order for this rapport with the Other to be established...I must be allowed to appeal. I will therefore struggle against those who want to stifle my voice, prevent me from expressing myself and prevent me from being."³⁸ So, one of the first conditions of the appeal is the very possibility of the appeal itself. In order for me to successfully appeal to others, my environment must be such that I can utilize the full force of my own freedom.

This leads Beauvoir to the topic of oppression. We must inveigh against oppression because it cordons off the possibility of our very own appeals. Those who oppress others fail to recognize

³⁷ Ibid., 136.

³⁸ Ibid.

the freedom inherent in the Other's subjectivity. To not acknowledge the freedom of the Other is to not acknowledge the freedom of the self. Beauvoir offers a definition of oppression: "As we have already seen, every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. That is what defines a situation of oppression."³⁹ This transcendence refers to the projecting of the self toward self-defined ends. But oppression disavows transcendence. Those who oppress others willingly treat these others merely in the mode of objects. Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*:

But if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing.⁴⁰

Since, again, a human being is defined by his thrown-ness, to keep others from being able to direct their thrown-ness, to merely view them as objects to the neglect of their shared condition of ambiguity, is to treat them inhumanely.

As such, the best way to appeal to others is to acknowledge the ambiguity of the human condition—in other words, to engage others in a manner that recognizes their subjectivity (their inner being), while also acknowledging their objectivity (the fact that they are always already separate and different from us). Beauvoir offers the erotic encounter and the love relationship as salient examples of modes of engaging the Other that acknowledge the Other's ambiguity. In such encounters/relationships, we do not immediately engage the Other in the mode of opposition, but rather we relate to the Other in a way that both acknowledges his/her separation and difference from ourselves, but also retains an appreciation for his/her freedom. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir notes that, in an erotic encounter, "The words 'receive' and 'give' exchange meanings, joy is

³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 880 Kindle Location.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 898 Kindle Location.

gratitude, pleasure is tenderness. In a concrete and sexual form the reciprocal recognition of the self and the other is accomplished in the keenest consciousness of the other and the self."⁴¹ In these cases, then, our freedoms work in tandem as opposed to in opposition.

This is why it is so important to engage the way that Beauvoir describes the erotic encounter. Her description calls for us to adopt a disposition toward the erotic when we engage with others. Beauvoir claims that the erotic is a privileged mode of relating to the Other: "Eroticism is a movement toward the Other, and this is its essential character..."⁴² While we do this more willingly in a love-relationship, we can also use this disposition toward the erotic as a guide for our relations with more general others.

Such a disposition toward the erotic takes on an ethical character in that it allows us to better recognize and engage with the objectivity of the Other, by also assuming the Other's subjectivity. It renders us better able to attend to the situatedness and facticity of our selves and of others. For, in an erotic encounter:

the fact is that alterity no longer has a hostile character; this consciousness of the union of the bodies in their separation is what makes the sexual act moving; it is all the more overwhelming that the two beings who together passionately negate and affirm their limits are fellow creatures and yet are different.⁴³

Since a crucial aspect of our engaging the Other as object is linked to our potential overdetermination of the Other's embodiment, a disposition toward the erotic illustrates how such embodiment, rather than serving as an obstacle to the Other's subjectivity, serves as an entree into considering the Other's subjectivity with joy rather than hostility. It is by virtue of the Other's

⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malvony-Chevallier, Kindle Edition (New York, New York: Random House, LLC, n.d.), 8445 Kindle Location.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9445 Kindle Location.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8448 Kindle Location.

ambiguity that I am moved in a passionate encounter. Thus, a disposition toward the erotic calls for me to take pleasure in my and the Other's ambiguous natures.

In this way, a disposition toward the erotic as an ethical stance offers us a method whereby to fight against systems of oppression. Taking on such a disposition, we recognize that, "We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself. A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied."⁴⁴ Since freedom is crucial to the joy inherent in the erotic, it must be both respected and protected. When I recognize my desire to engage the Other in his freedom, I know that I must create the possibilities for the Other's freedom. As such, the choice to fight against that which denies the freedom of others becomes imperative. Since oppressive systems are those that obstruct the free possibilities of others, they must also be fought against. In this way, a disposition toward the erotic also allows us to assert the connection between oppression and the political.

A disposition toward the erotic cannot be taken at face value, however. In her study of the Marquis de Sade, Beauvoir applauds his ability to take up the responsibility for creating his own ethical stance in the world, but suggests that his particular form of eroticism fails to fully acknowledge the real ethical possibilities of the erotic. She writes:

As a result of this immoderation, the sexual act creates the illusion of sovereign pleasure which gives it incomparable value in Sade's eyes, for all his sadism strove to compensate for the absence of one necessary element which he lacked. The state of emotional intoxication allows one to grasp existence in one's self and in the other, as both subjectivity and passivity. The two partners merge in this ambiguous unity; each one is freed of his own presence and achieves immediate communication with the other. The curse which weighed upon Sade...was this 'autism' which prevented him from ever forgetting himself or being genuinely aware of the reality of the other person.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 992 Kindle Location.

⁴⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, by Marquis de Sade, First Paperback Edition (New York, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 21–22.

So while Sade thinks of his eroticism as a kind of ethic, his inability to acknowledge and respect the subjectivity of the Other mitigates the ethical possibilities of his form of the erotic. As we can see from this discussion of Sade, then, a disposition toward the erotic as an ethical stance not only offers us a means whereby to adopt such a stance, but also allows us to recognize when eroticism does not take on this ethical character.

Yet, between a full adoption of this disposition toward the erotic and a failed eroticism lies the possibility of conversion. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir describes "the passionate man." This person is one who recognizes the Other, but instead of understanding the Other as joyously separate from himself, subsumes the Other into his own subjectivity. While this is, for Beauvoir, a bad faith stance, she notes that the passionate man can be converted into an ethical disposition. She writes:

Yet, a conversion can start within passion itself. The cause of the passionate man's torment is his distance from the object; but he must accept it instead of trying to eliminate it. It is the condition within which the object is disclosed. The individual will then find his joy in the very wrench which separates him from the being of which he makes himself a lack.⁴⁶

So a disposition toward the erotic as an ethical stance allows for convertive possibilities. As such, an authentic ethical engagement with the Other is often only a conversion away.

Thus, we have an account of Beauvoir's ethics, stemming from what I am terming a disposition toward the erotic. Not only does it illustrate to us how we might engage the Other in his/her ambiguity, but it also shows us how we might revel in the Other's ambiguity. This disposition, then, also offers us a means whereby to choose such actions that allow for the free possibilities of other subjects. Beauvoir writes, "To will oneself free is also to will others free. This

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 720 Kindle Location.

will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person concrete action to be achieved."⁴⁷ So, more than being a theoretical ethic, a disposition toward the erotic as an ethical stance offers us grounded praxis. In reveling in our ambiguity, such an ethics provides situated imperatives.

Contextualizing Beauvoir's Ethics

We might best view Beauvoir's ethics in the context of another important ethicist, Immanuel Kant, whose categorical imperative rejects a moral anthropology like Beauvoir's. The categorical imperative is premised upon an attempt to formulate an *a priori* ethical system. There are a few reasons for this, but a couple of the most important illustrate Kant's distrust of human anthropology.⁴⁸ Robert Johnson writes that for Kant:

Moral requirements present themselves as being *absolutely necessary*. But an *a posteriori* method seems ill-suited to discovering and establishing what we *must* do; surely it will only tell us what we *actually* do. So an *a posteriori* method of seeking out and establishing the principle that generates such requirements will not support the presentation of moral "oughts" as necessities.⁴⁹

In this, Kant displays a discomfort with the kind of ambiguity that Beauvoir is interested in. Kant, it seems, does not believe that we can establish *oughts*, the proper aim of ethics, if we rely merely on our understanding of how human beings are, especially as it is related to our being fundamentally ambiguous.

This is also connected to Kant's conception of human anthropology as it is related to the concept of desire. Wood writes of Kant's view:

The picture is clear: In civilization, human relationships based on empirical desire consisted mainly in the domination of one person by another. The domination

⁴⁷ Ibid., 796 Kindle Location.

⁴⁸ There are also a few articles that want to argue that Kant's rejection of moral anthropology is not as strong as some may suggest. See: Claudia M. Schmidt, "Kant's Transcendental, Empirical, Pragmatic, and Moral Anthropology," *Kant - Studien ; Philosophische Zeitschrift* 98, no. 2 (2007): 156–82; Claudia M. Schmidt, "The Anthropological Dimension of Kant's Metaphysics of Morals," *Kant - Studien ; Philosophische Zeitschrift* 96, no. 1 (January 2005): 66–84.

⁴⁹ Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/kant-moral/>.

operates largely through the illusory hopes of the dominated, who fancy themselves on the way either to freedom from the will of all others to else at least to achieving domination over someone else. Thus social relationships founded on natural human desires rest systematically on *deceit*. Where falsehood between people is not intentional, it is built unconsciously into social relations and the natural human feelings associated with them.⁵⁰

As such, we cannot look to the lived condition of human beings in order to establish moral principles, since humans, in an *a posteriori* sense, are always bound within relationships of domination.

If one accepts Kant's view of human anthropology, then it would appear that the only way to produce moral principles is to abstract them from the condition of human beings. This, however, is what Beauvoir claims is the fault of Kantian ethics: "The error of Kantian ethics is to have claimed to make an abstraction of our own presence in the world. Therefore, it leads only to abstract formulas."⁵¹ So, contrary to Kant, Beauvoir believes that the abstract nature of Kant's ethics is what keeps it from being practically useful for the human beings to whom it is supposedly being offered. So while Kant believes that he is furnishing an ethics that is universal by way of its abstraction, he really presents an ethics, because it is so abstracted, that subverts the possibility of being universal.

Beauvoir writes further:

For [Kant] particularity appears only as a moment of the totality in which it must surpass itself. Whereas for existentialism, it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself.⁵²

So in appealing to an *a priori* ethics, Kant dismisses a fundamental, and for Beauvoir, useful aspect of humanity. It is the very fact that we are particulars that is our portal to the universal; in other words,

⁵⁰ Allen W. Wood, "Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 334.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 127.

⁵² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 149 Kindle Location.

our particularity is our universality. So while Kant's argues for the impossibility of ethics based on moral anthropology, Beauvoir has another project. She writes, "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all."⁵³

Beauvoir's refusal to castigate the ambiguous condition of human beings is shared by other ethicists, who also suggest that a denial of the concrete particularity of human beings is not the best method whereby to go about formulating an ethical system. Wood writes:

Some earlier post-Kantian thinkers (such as Schiller, Hegel, and Marx) share Kant's hopes for the progress of human society toward a realm of ends. But they see our internal nature ultimately as reason's ally rather than its enemy, and they conceive the aim of reason as harmony with human nature rather than conquest over it. They do not share Kant's deeply moralistic conception of the human condition, which makes it axiomatic that human beings are capable of living with one another on decent terms only when their natural desires and dispositions are under quite strict constraint (if not forcible external constraint, then rational self-constraint).⁵⁴

So while Beauvoir does share part of Kant's view that human beings often engage one another as others in the mode of opposition, she maintains that this is not a necessary mode. Indeed, a proper ethics offers humans a means whereby to acknowledge others outside of structures of domination, on the very basis of their being concrete particulars, with desires and preferences.⁵⁵ This is why attending particularly to Beauvoir's discussion of the erotic is important to understanding her ethics as a whole.

Among Wood's list of those ethicists who argue for the importance of attending to the condition of human beings in describing ethics are Hegel and Heidegger. I will detail Beauvoir's engagement with these two philosophers in her autobiographies in Chapter Four, but here I want to

⁵³ Ibid., 156 Kindle Location.

⁵⁴ Wood, "Unsociable Sociability," 346.

⁵⁵ Indeed, B writes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, "I am not first a thing but a spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts." 93.

show how Beauvoir, in her philosophical writings, distinguishes their philosophical orientations from that of Kant, most notably on the subject of moral anthropology. Beauvoir recounts her first engagement with Hegel in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She writes:

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.⁵⁶

So while it is clear in her philosophy that Beauvoir finds Hegel's discussion of the master-slave dialectic important to her discussion of recognition, Beauvoir is also clear to illustrate that she found Hegel to be insufficient to describe our experience. Hegel, in Beauvoir's view, is useful because he does recognize that our subjective lived experience must be the basis for our ethics, but Hegel believes our experience of our lives is merely a part of the movement of Absolute Spirit. She writes, "The universal spirit is voiceless, and every man who claims to speak in its name only lends his own voice. How could he adopt the universal's point of view since he *is* not the universal? One cannot have a point of view other than his own."⁵⁷ Thus, we cannot subsume our individual experiences into the Absolute, since we have no other way to view our own experience except through our subjectivity.

As such, Beauvoir turns to Heidegger, as she finds him better able to account for our subjective experience since he does not subscribe to Hegel's dialectical notion of Absolute Spirit. However, even as she appreciates Heidegger's ability to move beyond the blind spots of Kant and Hegel, she still finds issue with Heidegger's description of being-unto-death. She writes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, "And Heidegger has no right to say that this being is precisely *for* death. The fact of being is gratuitous; one is *for nothing*, or rather, the *for* makes no sense. Being is project because it posits an

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1778 Kindle Location.

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 112.

end, says Heidegger. But as being, being posits no end; it is..."⁵⁸ Beauvoir's description here further displays her interest in ambiguity: being is for nothing and at the same time must set up its own ends. So while she is interested in Heidegger's account of being and appreciates his attention to being as situated, she is not fully satisfied with his inability to account for human ambiguity.

Contemporary Critical Responses

Many contemporary critics have turned their focus on Beauvoir's ethics. Ursula Tidd is interested in Beauvoir's conception of selfhood. In *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony*, she focuses on the connection between Beauvoir's philosophy of selfhood as found in her philosophical works and her autobiographical writings. One of the first Beauvoir scholars to highlight the philosophical implications of Beauvoir's autobiographical writings, Tidd here argues that Beauvoir's autobiographical writings serve as "an historically contingent discourse in the context of her notions of selfhood in her earlier philosophical writings."⁵⁹ Tidd continues this inquiry in "The Self-Other Relation in Beauvoir's Ethics and Autobiography," where she shifts from a more singular focus on Beauvoir's conception of the self and focuses more on the distinction between Beauvoir and Sartre on the ethical question of the Other. Again, Tidd insists that part of being ethical is also being willing to testify for the Other and to illustrate the ways in which one's life has been affected by one's relation with others. Tidd sees Beauvoir as having done this in her autobiographical writings, especially since she spends much of the time in these works telling the stories of others. As such, Beauvoir's autobiographical writings are ethical and display a particular notion of the self that necessarily construes selfhood as intricately related to the self's relation to the Other. This, Tidd suggests, is counter to the way that Sartre construes the self in his early philosophy—as "condemned

⁵⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁹ Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony*, Cambridge Studies in French (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

to conflict, with no room for recognition of, and reciprocity with, the Other."⁶⁰—and thus, further illustrates the importance of understanding Beauvoir's ethical philosophy as distinct and superior to Sartre's.

Fredrika Scarth's *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, continues this call to examine Beauvoir's conception of the relationship between the self and the Other. In order to do so, Scarth suggests that Beauvoir's discussion of the Other also calls for us to attend to the "other within," that aspect of our selfhood that is othered to our very selves. This is especially important to our discussion of women's embodiment. Scarth writes, "It is not the body itself that is a problem for women, but what the female body has come to mean—pure immanence—in a culture that refuses ambiguity and instead defines freedom or subjectivity as transcendence."⁶¹ Scarth uses *The Second Sex's* passages on motherhood to argue for Beauvoir's suggestion that we attend to the otherness within ourselves, as opposed to the self in the Other, as the necessary condition for mutual recognition.

Scarth suggests that this recognition of the Other within also has political implications. She writes:

[Beauvoir's] demand that we cease projecting otherness, that we recognize otherness within ourselves, is also a political demand to end structures of political and economic exploitation. But beyond this, if freedom is not only situated but embodied, then Beauvoir's ethical demand is for us to assume our own embodiment by ceasing to project the body-as-flesh onto the other. The political and social inequalities of patriarchal society have made this projection credible. The moral coming of age that Beauvoir calls for, while enacted individually, is not isolated from the society that helps to construct and sustain the illusions that uphold oppression. If, in her account of this conversion, Beauvoir doesn't provide a roadmap for

⁶⁰ Ursula Tidd, "The Self-Other Relation in Beauvoir's Ethics and Autobiography," in *Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 229.

⁶¹ Scarth, *The Other within*, 9.

collective action, she does provide a vision of what subjectivity in equality could be and an account of embodied subjectivity that has relevance today.⁶²

Importantly here, Scarth highlights the bearing of the concept of conversion in Beauvoir's thought. In order to understand the ways in which a true appreciation for otherness within implies a commitment to working toward the political possibilities of all subjects, including the self, one must undergo a conversion into such recognition. Oppressive systems, in maintaining that the Other's otherness, to the neglect of the ways in which we are othered to ourselves and must embrace our self-otherness, is an insurmountable obstacle, especially with regard to the body, deceive their subjects into a belief in freedom as mere transcendence. It is then up to us, as Beauvoir maintains in Scarth's view, to fight against such systems by revisioning our conception of embodiment as not necessarily alienating, not only for the purpose of the betterment of relations with others, but also for a more robust understanding of our-selves.

Gail Weiss continues this discussion of oppression in "Challenging Choices: An Ethic of Oppression." Here, she argues that Beauvoir's later ethical work complicates her earlier ethical commitment to the notion of individual, autonomous radical freedom, à la Sartre. Drawing on Lewis Gordon's important distinction between choices and options in the lives of those who are oppressed, Weiss calls our attention to the horizon upon which we experience our ethical possibilities. In this, she displays a particular interest in the way Beauvoir accounts for our relations with others. Inspired by care ethics, she writes, "Focusing on relations with others, rather than choices, allows us to see moral failures as failures of *relation* rather than merely failures of the individual in question (though this is not to deny that there are also personal failures for which a person alone is primarily responsible)."⁶³ Weiss argues that Beauvoir's ethics is instructive on this

⁶² Ibid., 12.

⁶³ Gail Weiss, "Challenging Choices: An Ethic of Oppression," in *Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 255.

point because of its focus on the intersubjective nature of our relations with others. Since a key point of Beauvoir's ethics maintains that individuals are not able to be free without securing the freedom of others, Beauvoir's work insists that we must fight on the part of these others to secure these very freedoms. Thus, attending to the ethics implicit in our intimate relationships becomes key to our very freedom.

This focus on intimate relationships as the condition upon which we come to understand the larger context of ethics is one which forms the base of the scholarship of Debra Bergoffen. In "Out From Under: Beauvoir's Philosophy of the Erotic," Bergoffen illustrates how Beauvoir's discussion of the erotic highlights its importance to our further understanding of ethics. She writes:

Amidst all the discussions of violence, domination, conquest and war that delineate the ways in which humanity *has* articulated the living of bodily risk-taking that expresses the transcendence of the human subject, the few pages dedicated to the analysis of erotic love [in Beauvoir's work] reveal that of all the risk-taking activities invested by humanity this is the most dangerous and the most indicative of our human condition. In erotic love we must each assume our carnal condition as we ask to be received as free subjects.⁶⁴

As such, the erotic calls our attention to the assumption of risk on the part of those who engage in erotic relations. This risk-taking highlights the ambiguity of the human condition, calling for us recognize our ambiguity as immanent-transcendent subjects. Bergoffen here hints that Beauvoir's philosophy shows us how an appreciation for the erotic body "could become the ground of a new social order."⁶⁵

Bergoffen furthers this thesis in her book, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*. Here, Bergoffen uses Beauvoir's philosophical works to argue that Beauvoir offers a description of a two-fold erotic intentionality that further highlights the importance of the erotic to her ethics. Bergoffen finds this description of erotic intentionality in

⁶⁴ Debra B. Bergoffen, "Out From Under: Beauvoir's Philosophy of the Erotic," in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 190.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

Beauvoir's "muted voice," since she chooses only to use Beauvoir's "philosophical works" in her discussion. Bergoffen suggests, via Beauvoir's ethics, that humans are always engaged in a struggle between these two contesting moments of intentionality and our choice to relate to one as opposed to the Other is an ethical choice. Beyond this attitude, Bergoffen also culls another intonation of love from Beauvoir's writings in *The Ethics* in brief invocation of Bataille which speaks of the "excess of the festival" and the erotic that becomes a result of taking joy in such an occasion. In all these ways, Bergoffen is clear that this voice that speaks of the value of love is in struggle with Beauvoir's more dominant voice that seems to prioritize the ethics of the project, but Bergoffen goads us once more to listen more closely to Beauvoir's "muted voice," that which is implied, yet not directly stated by her philosophical ethics.

Bergoffen cites moments of Beauvoir's muted voice to come to the conclusion that:

Beauvoir's turn to the erotic is crucial not because it validates the sexed and sexual body and not because it challenges the gender codes of patriarchy, but because it validates the sexed and sexual body and challenges the gender codes of patriarchy in accordance with the criteria of generosity and the gift, and according to the body understood as an ambiguous phenomenological intentionality.⁶⁶

In this way, Beauvoir has provided us with an undoubtedly feminist ethic, that of the feminist "ethic of the erotic."

Eva Lundgren-Gothlin further explores this ethic of the erotic in another attempt to distinguish Beauvoir's ethics from that of Sartre. In "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity," she writes:

Sartre tends to place the erotic relationship between the sexes in a special sphere, a sphere in which the reciprocal recognition does not fully apply. This is in line with traditional gender ideology, where such a relationship is placed outside the sphere of justice and rights (Pateman 1988). When Beauvoir refers to the relationship between the sexes in love and sexuality as the emblematic intersubjective relationship, she

⁶⁶ Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, 202.

implicitly criticizes this traditional gender ideology and its division into the private and the public.⁶⁷

Here, Lundgren-Gothlin adds to the scholarship on Beauvoir's ethics, as viewed through the lens of her discussion of the erotic, by suggesting that such an ethic manages to offer critical insight into the public/private distinction commonly assumed by political philosophers. Once we can recognize the ways in which the erotic (the so-called "private,") implicates our further relations with others in the public (since the erotic is a type of relation with an other that typifies human ambiguity and the means through which we can live this ambiguity as ethical), we can better understand how our political possibilities are not only gendered, but also an integral part of living out a practical ethics.

Concerning the political importance of attending to the Beauvoir's engagement with the erotic, Bronwyn Singleton offers a poignant discussion of Beauvoir's "Must We Burn Sade?" In his "Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem with de Sade: The Case of the Virgin Libertine," he argues that "Beauvoir shows us how Sade's defining characteristic is not an erotic excess, but a refusal of Eros, a dogged commitment to virginity that, far from honoring our sexual nature, actually misses the entire point of our erotic being."⁶⁸ Because Sade's erotic ethics are still bound by the structures of domination implicit in his sadism, Beauvoir's discussion of Sade illustrates both the importance of the understanding the erotic as potentially ethical and the ways in which it can be assumed unethically. In order take up an ethical engagement with the erotic, Singleton notes that:

Giving oneself in the erotic relation is a gift that is both extended and received through the flesh. The limits between self, other, and world are all challenged in this sexual encounter, which is never a complete fusion since this would neglect the importance of alterity. Sexual initiation must engage these aspects of Eros, or the encounter will fail to live up to its ethical potential and often founders as inauthentic.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity," in *Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 142.

⁶⁸ Bronwyn Singleton, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem with de Sade: The Case of the Virgin Libertine," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (August 1, 2011): 461.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 465.

So while the erotic can be a site of an ethical encounter with the Other, when it does not engage the Other in his/her alterity in the manner of a gift (both of the self and from the Other), it fails to live up to its potential.

Beyond an exploration of Sade's failure to engage the authentic erotic, Singleton maintains that Beauvoir's discussion of Sade also points us to the positive possibilities of the erotic. As such, he writes:

We have an opportunity to take up a new relation to sex, exploring ways to use it not just in the service of propagation at the species level, but for *becoming*, individually and collectively, in keeping with the conscious development of ethics and culture. Ethics and culture are not so easily distinguished in Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, since freedom is always intersubjective, and hence to some extent political and/or collective. But with this sudden revelation comes anxiety. Our culture lacks adequate structures to support the development of healthy sexual relations, in no small part because of the asymmetrical and hierarchical relations we have established between the sexes.⁷⁰

So while the erotic is, in Beauvoir's writings, connected to the political, it also offers us a means whereby to challenge hegemonic relations with others that are culturally codified. This might be the reason that viewing the erotic through an ethical lens can appear unwise—since this very same weapon that can be used for positive purposes can also be used in a negative fashion, especially in a culture where doing so is supported by such systems as patriarchy and other oppressions.

Further attending to this, Karen Vintges, in *Philosophy as Passion*, wants to use what she describes as the "core of [Beauvoir's] oeuvre: the moral-philosophical treatises written in the 1940s and 1950s; her study of *The Second Sex*; her novel *The Mandarins*; and her autobiographical work..." to construct what she takes to be a kind of conscious, instructional ethics on the part of Beauvoir.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., 474.

⁷¹ Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion*, 5.

Proceeding from the premise that a major theme in Beauvoir's works is that of interpersonal relationships, Vintges' claim is that the works she includes serve the purpose of offering Beauvoir's readers a type of ethics and, more importantly, a phenomenological account of how said ethics display themselves in lived experience, specifically in that of Beauvoir's lived experience of being an 'intellectual woman.'

In her discussion, Vintges, too, notes that Beauvoir's discussion of the erotic adds to her ethics, especially with regard to its connection to the political. Vintges writes:

The moral code of [Beauvoir's] ethics reaches into the political arena; we have to take a stand against injustice and oppression. Beauvoir not only made her ethics a political one, but through her connection of ontological and social freedom, she also gave her moral subject a social base. The subject who assumes a moral attitude is socially situated and is not left floating in a vacuum as in Kant. People are not automatically in a position to will themselves free. The social circumstances have to be such that they are also *able* to assume this attitude. We can now see that Beauvoir's perception of human existence has, in fact, three levels. First, there is the situatedness of man as given: every person is embedded in time and place, and as such every person lives as 'subjective objectivity.' But his situation can mean he is unable to experience actively and realize the *pour-soi* element he carries within. Thus, his situatedness is an absolute given, over which he can exercise no power. Man must have a certain social freedom if he is to realize his himself as *pour-soi* (the second level). Only then can he take on his freedom and actively *situate himself* or, in other words, search out positive ties with others (the third level). Access to the *pour-soi* is a precondition here: this is the background against and from which man can will himself free and actively situate himself in a way that contributes to the freedom of others....Social freedom is an essential precondition for the realization of ontological freedom, which in its turn forms the precondition for moral freedom.⁷²

Thus, the levels of existence that Vintges points out provide the foundation for political action in Beauvoir's ethics. In order for a subject to live in his full existence, he must not only enact his own freedom, but actively work towards the freedom of others. We are *obligated* to ensure the social freedoms of other subjects in order for our own freedom to be substantive. This means fighting

⁷² Ibid., 70–71.

against oppressive circumstances and those who would deny the freedom of other subjects.

Combined with the rejection of moral absolutes, the implication of politics in Beauvoir's ethics means that all individual decisions come with the added weight of realizing the freedoms of others.

There can be no individual moral prescriptions; the individual's ethical choices are an enactment of her individual freedom in the context that her choices affect the freedom of others.

It would seem, then, that in noting the connection between Beauvoir's engagement with the erotic and systems of oppression, such a connection would be useful for theorizing blackness, and especially the intersection of blackness and woman-ness. However, little scholarship has been done concerning Beauvoir's engagement with the erotic and the situation of black women in particular, even though there have been attempts to use Beauvoir's work in theorizing antiblack oppression.

One such piece of writing can be found in Lewis Gordon's collection, *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, where, in Gordon's "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," he highlights the importance of the concept of ambiguity. He writes:

A human being is neither a subject nor an object, but instead, in the language of Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, 'ambiguous.' This ambiguity is an expression of the human being as a meaningful, multifaceted way of being that may involve contradictory interpretations, or at least equivocal ones. Such ambiguity stands out not as a dilemma to be resolved, as in the case of an equivocal sentence, but as a way of living to be described. The phenomenological task at hand is thus to draw out a hermeneutic of this ambiguity.⁷³

While Gordon helpfully points out the usefulness of the concept of ambiguity, since his interest here is not in ethics, Gordon does not explore how Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity is intricately connected to her discussion of the erotic. Robert Birt, in the same anthology, also references

⁷³ Lewis R. Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York, New York: Routledge, 1997), 72.

Beauvoir's work as a means to describe the situation of black people as dehumanized, but, again, his interest is in Beauvoir's descriptive analysis and not necessarily her ethics.⁷⁴

Black feminist philosophers have also called upon Beauvoir's philosophy in order to discuss antiblack, sexist oppression. In the notably important *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, Kathryn Gines notes Beauvoir's attempts, in her writings, to describe the race/gender analogy. However, Gines finds Beauvoir's discussion lacking: "Unfortunately, while Beauvoir and Sartre do recognize problems of white privilege, neither of them explicitly engages black women intellectuals or a black feminist analysis in the texts here discussed. Consequently, their usage of the race/gender analogy results in the erasure of black women who experience both racial and gender oppression."⁷⁵ A similar criticism is leveled against Beauvoir's philosophy in "Calling All Sisters: Continental Philosophy and Black Feminist Thinkers," Kathy Glass's discussion of feminist solidarity. Glass writes about *The Second Sex*:

For all its strengths, Beauvoir's study fails to fully explore the racism integral to white women's historical reluctance to align themselves politically with black women. She, indeed, concedes that, if 'they [women] are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women,' but Beauvoir stops short of interrogating the whiteness that has made possible white women's lack of empathy for their black counterparts. The resignation implicit in her observation suggests that racism necessarily functions as an inevitable obstacle to the collaboration between black and white women.⁷⁶

While Glass finds Beauvoir's discussion of Black people important in many ways, she calls our attention to the ways in which Beauvoir's philosophy neglects to respond to the concept of intersectionality and the importance that it holds for describing the experience of black women.

⁷⁴ Robert Birt, "Existence, Identity, and Liberation," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York, New York: Routledge, 1997), 207.

⁷⁵ Kathryn T. Gines, "Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy: A Case for Black Feminist Philosophy," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 46.

⁷⁶ Kathy Glass, "Calling All Sisters: Continental Philosophy and Black Feminist Thinkers," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 229.

This literature suggests that Beauvoir's philosophy is pertinent, in many ways, to discussions of oppression for black women. While those who have used Beauvoir's philosophy in the service of such a discussion have noted that Beauvoir was not explicitly concerned with the experience of Black women in particular, such scholars have not attended to the ways in which Beauvoir's discussion of ambiguity as it is related to interest in a disposition toward the erotic offers a means through which to understand the foundations of these various oppressions. Additionally interesting is the lack of attention to Beauvoir's discussion of embodiment in the erotic as it is related to liberatory philosophy. Focusing on Beauvoir's ethics and her discussion of those aspects of our condition—ambiguity, embodiment, the erotic, appeal, risk—I hope to show, offers scholars interested in black feminism a means whereby to make use of Beauvoir's philosophy for the task of liberatory philosophy.

CHAPTER 3:
THE STUDENT YEARS:
BEAUVOIR'S STUDENT CONVERSIONS

Arguably, *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, posthumously published in English in 2006, is the most important autobiographical account of Beauvoir's developing understanding of philosophy and the nature of the erotic. Written during the time that Beauvoir was studying at the Sorbonne, *Diary* chronicles Beauvoir's increasingly complex relationship to her waning faith in God and burgeoning interest in secular philosophy, art, and culture from the years 1926 to 1927. While written before Beauvoir published any of her writings, it provides a solid foundation for the ideas about the erotic Beauvoir would later go on to reject and/or uphold in her writings. I will also include in this chapter selections from *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir's first autobiography, published in 1958 and translated into English in 1959. While written 30 years after *Diaries*, *Memoirs* provides additional material with which to cobble together Beauvoir's ethical stance and conversion out of such a stance during the early period of her life. *Memoirs* is Beauvoir's chronicle of the first 20 or so years of her life. In this way, it provides certain early information that *Diary* does not provide since it covers only two years of Beauvoir's life. As such, I find it useful to use the two sources in tandem since *Memoirs* can provide background information on both Beauvoir's understanding of her early childhood experiences and an additional chronicle of her student years. Used together, these two sources offer a means of charting Beauvoir's most important conversions.

During Beauvoir's late teens, two key relationships occur that become integral for understanding Beauvoir's life and subsequent philosophy: that of her best friend *Zaza* and her first love, her cousin Jacques. Both of these relationships would significantly impact her understanding of herself as related to the concept of the erotic. It is through engagement with *Zaza*, Jacques, and

some of her other colleagues during the time that we can gather much about the development of Beauvoir's understanding of the erotic. Also importantly, in *Diary* and *Memoirs* Beauvoir references writers who write very explicitly about the erotic. As such, besides looking into the ways in which some of Beauvoir's early relationships influenced her thought, I also want to include a brief analysis of these writer's theories about the erotic that I hope will provide some insight into Beauvoir's engagement with the subject.

Zaza and Jacques

I want to begin with a discussion of the relationship between Beauvoir and Elizabeth “Zaza” Mabile (Lacoin). While literature about Beauvoir, again, wants to posit that Sartre was the singular most important influence on her thought, Beauvoir's and Zaza's discussions illustrate how much of Beauvoir's later thought was already formulating in the midst this earlier relationship. Beauvoir herself seems to point to such, as *Memoirs* is organized thematically around her relationship with Zaza, and Beauvoir mentions Zaza at the end of each chapter.⁷⁷

Zaza and Beauvoir met at the age of 10, when Zaza was seated next to Beauvoir in their fourth-first form class. Immediately awed by her, Beauvoir writes, “everything she had to say was either interesting or amusing.”⁷⁸ The two went on to form a very close friendship that would last until Zaza's untimely death at the age of 20 (“The doctors called it meningitis, encephalitis; no one was quite sure.”⁷⁹). While Beauvoir admits that she “did not immediately consider what place this friendship had in [her] life,”⁸⁰ upon meeting again after the first summer during which the two were

⁷⁷ “Zaza is the only person besides Simone to have a voice of her own in *Memoires*. She is, therefore, somewhat objectively delineated. We see her, a discrete individual, as Simone did. She thus retains a separate personality to a greater extent than say, Jacques, who is depicted almost exclusively from Simone’s perspective.” Deborah MacKeefe, “Zaza Mabile: Mission and Motive in Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘Mémoires,’” *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 2 (July 1, 1983): 216.

⁷⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. Hazel Rowley (New York, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 91.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

apart, Beauvoir has a revelation: “my tongue was suddenly loosened, and a thousand bright suns began blazing in my breast; radiant with happiness, I told myself: ‘That’s what was wrong; I needed Zaza!’...I needed her presence to realize how much I needed her.”⁸¹ Beauvoir's initial hesitancy to realize the place that Zaza held in her heart can be traced to her prior understanding of a hierarchy of emotions that one reserves for certain people over others. She notes in *Memoirs* that before meeting Zaza, she thought that friendship should be a secondary relationship, coming behind that of family. Through her relationship with Zaza, she comes to understand that her family--her mother, father and sister--does not hold first place in her feelings.

Even further than her family, she comes to understand that there is a kind of love in friendship that can also match that of a romantic relationship. Indeed, it appears that Zaza was Beauvoir's first love. Describing how it feels to realize her love for Zaza, Beauvoir reports: “Zaza was my best friend...In a well-regulated human heart friendship occupies an honourable position, but it has neither the mysterious splendour of love, nor the sacred dignity of filial devotion.”⁸² Here, Beauvoir appears almost stunned by the depth of feeling that she has for Zaza. She wonders whether her heart is not “well-regulated” because she has such a sense of affection for this friend.

While there is no evidence from writings by Beauvoir or Zaza that the two shared an intimate physical relationship, it does seem fair to say that Beauvoir was in love with Zaza. She describes her feelings for Zaza in terms of love: “I could think of nothing better in the world than being myself, and loving Zaza.”⁸³ And later she notes, “I loved Zaza so much that she seemed to be more real than myself.”⁸⁴ In this, Beauvoir begins a trend of romanticizing her chosen loved ones.

⁸¹ Ibid., 95.

⁸² Ibid., 94.

⁸³ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 113.

Describing Zaza as “more real” than herself, she places her beloved Other above herself. While many commentators have focused on the subjugation involved in Beauvoir's interpretation of her relationship with Zaza,⁸⁵ I do not want to assume that Beauvoir's interpretation of the power dynamics of her relationships should be taken at face value. The case of intellectual exchange is a particularly fecund area of her relationships to look for signs of Beauvoir's powerful contributions to her love relationships. Throughout the course of her love life, it is clear that Beauvoir prized the exchange of ideas with those she loved and, often, was the purveyor of these ideas.

Again and again in her life, this theme emerges: part of what it means to love someone is to engage in the activity of exchanging ideas with him/her. Indeed, as Beauvoir describes it, the initial seed of her relationship with Zaza began with their shared love of “books and studying.”⁸⁶ It is clear that theirs was an intellectual friendship. Beauvoir claims that “...when a subject interested us we discussed it with great intensity.... [W]e liked to argue in a rational way.”⁸⁷ Thus, we can note a precedent that continues throughout Beauvoir's life for engaging with her loved ones on an intellectual basis. And this intellectual engagement not only strengthens Beauvoir's relationships with these loved ones, but also allows Beauvoir to work through her philosophical ideas.

Much like with Zaza, Beauvoir's relationship with her first cousin Jacques Champigneulle revolved around her reverence for his intellect and their shared discussion of intellectual figures. Beauvoir fell in love with her cousin at the age of 15 and developed hopes of marrying him. Beauvoir thought him a good match for her because of his ability to expose her to new authors at an age when she felt she had little exposure. Beauvoir writes in her diary, “This world that I carry within me, in which you [, Jacques,] are the center, along with these beings similar to ourselves who

⁸⁵ MacKeefe, “Zaza Mabile.”

⁸⁶ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 93.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

are grouped around you and seen in part through you: Fournier, Rivière, Gide...”⁸⁸ As we will see, these very authors occupy much of Beauvoir’s intellectual horizon for much of her young adulthood. She writes, “The majority of the boys I knew seemed to me uncouth and of very limited intelligence.... My cousin Jacques had never lost his prestige in my eyes.”⁸⁹ So it is under Jacques’ influence that Beauvoir comes to engage some of her most formative intellectual influences.⁹⁰

In the next section, I would like to focus on some of the writers Beauvoir, Zaza, and Jacques read during this time. Beyond their mention in *Memoirs*, Beauvoir also cites many of these authors in *Diary*. I am interested in what these writers have to say about the erotic because 1) their ideas about the erotic appear in Beauvoir's writing throughout the course of her life and 2) these ideas concerning the erotic are so foundational for Beauvoir that her subsequent thought concerning her disposition toward the erotic takes cues from these thinkers. In this way, they provide the foundation for many of her initial positions toward the erotic and also the launching pad for her conversions, offering Beauvoir positions to accept and, in most cases, reject as her thought matures. Among those authors Beauvoir mentions are Claudel, Cocteau, Mauriac, Gide and Rivière. I will discuss their works and then illustrate how her engagement with these works contributes to her developing understanding of the erotic.

Beauvoir’s Early Intellectual Influences

Claudel: Beauvoir's First Major Erotic Influence

It is unclear who introduced Beauvoir to Claudel. In *Memoirs*, she claims that Jacques first introduced her to Claudel, Cocteau and Gide.⁹¹ Yet, in *Diary* she seems well-acquainted with Claudel

⁸⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, ed. Marybeth Timmermann and Margaret A. Simons, trans. Barbara Klaw (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 166.

⁸⁹ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 120–121.

⁹⁰ In a later section of this chapter, I will detail Beauvoir and Jacques’ relationship.

⁹¹ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 186.

before she mentions having discussions with Jacques about him. In fact, the opening lines of her diary quote Claudel's *L'Echange*.⁹² Moses Nagy claims that Beauvoir was introduced to Claudel through Beauvoir and Zaza's professor, Robert Garric.⁹³ In any case, it is clear that it was Beauvoir who introduced Zaza to Claudel. Beauvoir claims in *Memoirs* that she "was lending [Zaza] scandalous books. [Zaza's mother,] Madame Mabile...didn't trust Claudel, whom Zaza liked because he helped her to reconcile heaven and earth."⁹⁴ Both Beauvoir and Zaza engage with Claudel during a very formative time in their religious understandings. As Beauvoir comes into a loss of faith, Zaza attempts to understand her faith in such a way that it follows her own diverging development. Although Zaza never loses her faith completely like Beauvoir, she does go through a period of wrestling with her faith. In this way, then, the shape of their encounter with Claudel is different.⁹⁵ Nagy claims that "Simone quotes [Claudel] because she 'knows' him and it is chic to quote someone from the opposite camp. Zaza 'thinks' Claudel because she loves him and thus there is a complicity between them."⁹⁶ I contend that this difference between their two engagements with Claudel has significance because I see Zaza as one of Beauvoir's significant early intellectual influences. In light of this, it becomes important to consider how Zaza's engagement with Claudel affects Beauvoir's.

First, an introduction to Claudel. Paul Claudel, born in 1868, was a French writer whose works explored, among other themes, religion and eroticism. Claudel's conversion into Catholicism played a prominent part in his life and writing. In a telling biographical moment, Claudel attempted

⁹² Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 53. It is also interesting to note that Beauvoir writes *Memoirs* after she has completed *The Second Sex*, where she devotes an entire chapter to Claudel. It could be the case that her memory of being introduced to these texts was influenced or affected by her writing about these authors.

⁹³ M. M. Nagy, "The Unusual Story of an Enduring Friendship: Simone de Beauvoir et Zaza Mabile (Lacoin)," *Claudel Studies* 22, no. 1–2 (n.d.): 15.

⁹⁴ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 220.

⁹⁵ Guillemine de Lacoste, "Zaza's Way: Sacrificial Victim or Alternative Role Model?," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 9 (1992): 74.

⁹⁶ M. M. Nagy, "The Marvels of a Tragic Life : Zaza Mabile (Lacoin) and Claudel," *Claudel Studies* 22, no. 1–2 (n.d.): 65.

to become a clergyman, but was rejected after an affair he had with a woman named Rosalie. It is clear that Claudel's expression of the tension between eroticism and religion was a major influence on both Beauvoir and Zaza's burgeoning understandings of these two themes. Importantly, also, this tension in Claudel's work leads to his negative portrayal of the role of women in these two spheres, as well. It is clear that this affected Beauvoir's understanding of her position respective to Jacques.

For Claudel, the central challenges and redemptive aspects of the erotic can be paralleled in the journey of religious faith. Because, as Claudel critics claim, Claudel saw his physical eroticism as counter to the asceticism required by Catholicism, he sought to reconcile his erotic urges by understanding faith through the lens of the erotic. For example, in his play *Partage de Midi*, the character Mesa makes a correlation between the suffering of Christ and his own suffering in romantic encounters. Mesa claims that these experiences of romantic suffering have "enabled him to grasp the nature of the Passion of the Christ, hence the meaning of Love divine (Agape) and its redemptive efficacy..."⁹⁷ Christ died and experienced extreme suffering for the sake of humanity. Likewise, a believer suffers the temptations (and subsequent denial) of earthly eroticism for the sake of God. What this amounts to is a fundamental stance that a person must deny himself for an Other more important than himself. Not only is this an externally imposed imperative but it is also a *chosen* maxim. As Claudel understands this, a person must deny himself. So experiences of suffering in erotic relationships serve as exercises in such self-denial. It is also clear here that there is a serious rift between the body and the spirit inherent in this view. The erotic is physical. So denial of physical pleasure leads to higher-level personal enlightenment.

If men hold the privileged place in heterosexual relationships, then, if one follows Claudel's logic, women must deny themselves and focus their efforts toward the well-being of their male

⁹⁷ Ibid.; Paul Gifford, *Love, Desire and Transcendence in French Literature: Deciphering Eros* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 161.

partners. The other side of the imperative of women's self-denial in Claudel's world is their position as temptresses. Those seeking religious faith--and as Claudel writes them, these seekers are always men--are seeking to rid themselves of the desire for physical pleasure, for God supersedes such physicality. Because women are the agents of temptation in such a positioning, they are portrayed negatively. Viewed through this Catholic religious lens, women are the agents of men's downfall. As Ann Bugliani writes, for Claudel, "the love a man bears a woman is often referred to as a sickness or disease which brings him suffering and saps his energy."⁹⁸ In his *Tete d'Or*, Claudel notes that women are one of the three things that contribute to the fall of men. Female characters in Claudel's work are often veiled, suggesting that women are deceptive and secretive. Combined with Claudel's notion that the complications of the erotic relationship are a metaphor for the complications of devotion, we can see that women, veiled temptresses that they are, are the ultimate stepping stones for a man's entrance into the realm of religious faith. So, while women present challenges for men in relationship, ultimately, their role is to enable the betterment of their male partners. Perhaps it is even the case that women *must* do this in order to overcompensate for the fact that they tempt men in the first place. In this way, they sacrifice their own freedom or in order to assure the transcendence of their mates.

Beauvoir clearly paid attention to the values asserted by Claudel in his writings. In *Diary* she describes Claudel as the kind of writer who "bring[s] something better than an affinity: a response and a sense of calm."⁹⁹ And in an entry dated on October 15, 1926, she rejoices in how Claudel "always brings [her] answers."¹⁰⁰ In the first entry of *Diary*, Beauvoir transcribes the following quote from Claudel's *L'echange* [The Trade]: "You say that you do not want to give me pain and suffering,/"

⁹⁸ Ann Bugliani, *Women and the Feminine Principle in the Works of Paul Claudel* (Studia Humanitatis, 1973), 49.

⁹⁹ August 13, 1926; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 64–65.

¹⁰⁰ October 15, 1926; *Ibid.*, 119.

but it is that which I expect from you and that is my role.”¹⁰¹ Included in a list of quotes, without accompanying narrative, it is not entirely obvious about whom Beauvoir refers to as "you," but it is not logically remiss to assume that this "you" is Jacques. As Beauvoir's romantic interest, Jacques is then the person who is supposed to impose suffering upon Beauvoir, and Beauvoir should not only expect this, but should desire it, as it is her "role."

Throughout *Diary* Beauvoir often references Claudel when she writes about Jacques. In her August 19, 1926, entry she quotes Claudel's *Sainte Therese*: "Superior need has its object, the desire which is more necessary than life."¹⁰² Here she takes the Claudelian idea of relating to her lover in the position of genuflection. Originally, she quotes Claudel in service of her position relative to Jacques. Jacques is the object of her 'superior need' and, thus, her desire for him is more necessary than her own life. In the same passage, she also quotes Claudel's *Feuilles de saints*: "The only thing that releases one from Justice, is to be love's captive!"¹⁰³ As their relationship, and her understanding of how she fits into the relationship, is unparalleled (not that of two equal partners), she appears to struggle with its injustice. Using Claudel's logic, she reasons that her feelings must be wrong. Perhaps she intuits that her feelings about this arrangement don't accord with the true nature of love. Giving into being a 'captive' of love releases one from the injustice inherent in a particular understanding of what it means to be a woman in love with a man. A woman who plays her "role" relinquishes such feelings of injustice. She gives herself over to what love entails.

Later, however, in a November 13, 1926, entry, Beauvoir expands her understanding of the *Sainte Therese* quote. She writes:

¹⁰¹ This is part of an undated section that comes before Beauvoir's first dated Diary entry (at least for the ones that we have that have been translated into English). I assume, as I suppose we all are to assume, that these quotes pre-date the dated entries that follow them. *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰³ Aug 19 1926; *Ibid.*

I could not foresee such a sentimental crisis. Evidently it truly exists, this 'need greater than its object' discussed by Claudel; it's not that I don't see Jacques as he is. Only in hours of feverish anxiety, my desire no longer has any common measure with his veritable value. (Besides, what do I mean by his veritable value? The one he should normally have for me?) All of it is very relative. It is impossible to seek the reason for the great impulses of the soul; it suffices to know they have a reason in themselves and not outside of themselves.¹⁰⁴

She revisits her captivity in love. Although originally she internalizes this idea, she appears to want further clarification of its logic. Is Jacques really worthy of being such an object of desire? She couldn't have known prior to her experience with him that he would be. Could it possibly be the case that she has idealized Jacques? She decides “No.” There is no way to reason about her feelings for Jacques. Because sentiments about 'value' are relative, there is no way to adequately explain why Jacques maintains this particular position. He just does.

Margaret Simons argues that Beauvoir's reliance on the works of Claudel to understand her relationship with Jacques is also due to the influence of her teacher, Professor Jeanne Mercier. In conversation with Mercier, Beauvoir recalls Claudel's injunction that a woman should abandon herself to her lover.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, in an entry from November 17, Beauvoir rejoices in being able to discuss her and Jacques' relationship with Prof. Mercier. She writes:

I needed someone who would understand *everything* as she did and who esteems me and loves me *for* what I am (in spite of it). I needed it to start liking myself again. Only, while showing me my riches, she increased my ardent desire for *him* to come take them--but also my strength to go carry them to him.¹⁰⁶

Here, again, we can note the mixed messages Beauvoir receives about her relationship with Jacques. While asserting Beauvoir's value, Mercier, at the same time, correlates Beauvoir's independent strength with how these strengths should function for Jacques. Beauvoir wants to offer

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 178.

¹⁰⁵ Interpretation from Margaret A. Simons “Beauvoir’s Early Philosophy: 1926-27” in *ibid.*, 34–35.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 182.

these “riches” in service of Jacques, as, it is clear, she feels it is a woman's duty to do, highlighted by the fact that she wants to go and "carry" her riches to Jacques.

Zaza, as a mutual reader of Claudel, also communicates her internalization of these values in her correspondence with Beauvoir. Guillemine de Lacoste cites passages in Zaza's letters to Beauvoir where she speaks of her relation to Claudel. In one letter, Zaza recounts her relationship with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, her lover, in Claudelian terms. She writes that she expects that she will have to encounter suffering through Merleau-Ponty, but that she "she accepts this possibility joyfully."¹⁰⁷ Again, this idea of suffering through her lover is one that Zaza invites, much like Beauvoir. It is clear that both Beauvoir and Zaza, her close friend and intellectual partner, reinforce such ideas upon each other.

Zaza's adherence to Claudelian doctrine is also bolstered by her faith. In *Memoirs*, Beauvoir transcribes a passage of one of Zaza's letters to her:

“When I compared my faith with the usages of my childhood, and the Catholic dogma with all my new ideas, there was such a disproportion, such a disparity between them that I felt I was standing on the edge of an abyss. Claudel was a great help to me and I can never tell you how much I owe to him.”¹⁰⁸

In writing this to Beauvoir, Zaza thanks Beauvoir for introducing her to Claudel. She also illustrates a more unquestioning adherence to Claudelian values. Not only on the matter of relationships does Zaza rely on Claudel's works, but also in matters of understanding the paradoxical aspects of her religion. Zaza holds to these values and sees Claudel as a source of reconciliation. Both women are seeking answers to the questions of faith, but Zaza embraces the paradoxes, whereas, as we know, Beauvoir goes on to fully reject them. Claudel's writings allow Zaza to do this. And this religious and erotic impasse contributes to Beauvoir's conversion.

¹⁰⁷ Qtd. in Lacoste, “Zaza’s Way: Sacrificial Victim or Alternative Role Model?” 78.

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. in Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 253.

I will return to the theme of Beauvoir's turning away from such Claudelian values, but here I would like to turn to a discussion of some of the other authors with whom Beauvoir claims engagement during this period of her life. I see Claudel as the writer with the most influence upon her thought about the erotic during the time. As many of the themes we find in Claudel are also echoed in the writings of other authors, I will now turn to some of them. These authors are Jacques Rivière, François Mauriac, André Gide, and Jean Cocteau. As I see Rivière and Mauriac's contributions as connected, I will discuss them together. I will discuss Gide and Cocteau in their own sections.

Rivière and Mauriac: Love and Faith

The personal life of novelist and critic Jacques Rivière (1886-1925) was also a source of inspiration for the ideas Claudel expressed in his writings. In a committed relationship with a woman named Isabel, Rivière began a passionate friendship with another woman named Yvonne. These two relationships caused much stress in Rivière's life, for, while he was not passionate about Isabel, he did love her. His struggle to navigate his conflicting feelings about these two women resulted in his attempt to resolve this struggle through his writing. When Rivière became a German prisoner of war in 1914, he began working on a piece of writing that would provide this resolution. Writing about his experience with Yvonne "enabled him to consider the whole situation in a larger perspective and recognize the limitations of this relationship when compared to his expanding union with his wife."¹⁰⁹ This piece of writing became the novel *Aimée*.

Published in 1922, *Aimée* tells the story of a man who, much like Rivière, marries a tranquil woman whose love provides for him a peaceful life. But because he believes he must suffer in a more passionate sort of love, he seeks out another woman. At this point, he meets Aimée, whom he repeatedly describes as hard, cold and selfish, and, even though she is not as interested in him as he

¹⁰⁹ Karen D. Levy, *Jacques Rivière*, Twayne's World Authors Series (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 86.

is in her, he becomes more and more obsessed with her. He decides that he loves her and the story goes on to tell how she torments him. Karen Levy describes *Aimée* as "not really a novel at all, but rather a monologue or a thinly veiled autobiographical portrait of a still adolescent aspect of Rivière's mentality."¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is *Aimée* to which Beauvoir refers throughout *Diary*. In her October 9, 1926, entry, Beauvoir writes: "I would like to ask for your forgiveness for all that has been selfish in my love; I often wanted to be loved more than to love. That is definitely over. I understand the great renunciation of love that Rivière mentions in *Aimée* and its heartbreaking sweetness."¹¹¹ Again, it is clear that here she is referring to Jacques. This line of reasoning falls much in line with Beauvoir's Claudelian idea of renunciation in love. What, we should ask, is being renounced? When she uses *Aimée* as her reference, we can assume that she is taking on the position of the lover with her love unrequited, attempting to justify the silence and rejection of the longed-for one. What is being renounced, then, is the self and the self's desires. Here, she reasons that her love has been "selfish"--too concerned with the self--and that it is her responsibility to give up this self without requiring that her lover's self be also given to her. Yet, she is to find joy and pleasure in this renunciation. This "heart-breaking sweetness" is what it means to love.

We can also draw the conclusion here that Beauvoir's understanding of her position in this relationship, as it is informed by Rivière, is also tinged with gendered expectations. Though perhaps even more caustic, in *Aimée*, Rivière, much like Claudel, paints women as cold and deceitful. Women disrupt the peace of men. Men, then, must fight against the manipulation of women. In recognizing this and taking responsibility for this, a woman asks for forgiveness. Her plea for forgiveness takes the form of an offering of herself. So again, in referencing *Aimée*, Beauvoir also shows a kinship

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 109.

toward such an idea--that a woman tortures and distracts a man and that, while her role is, on the one hand, to cause such suffering, it is, on the other hand, to attempt to alleviate such suffering.

There are also two volumes-worth of correspondence between Rivière and Henri-Alban Fournier (1886-1914) that Beauvoir reads along with both Jacques and Zaza. Despite saying in *Memoirs*, "I was disappointed with the second volume of letters between Rivière and Fournier: the fevers of their youth were extinguished by trivial worries, spite, bitterness..."¹¹² Beauvoir's *Diary* paints a very different picture of her engagement with the correspondence between the two. Borrowing the volumes from Jacques before sharing them with Zaza, Beauvoir reads the second volume before the first and quotes from both extensively.

In her November 2, 1926, entry, Beauvoir includes excerpts from both men's letters. While she does not interpret these excerpts, I believe that they provide insight into her thinking at the time. She says with regard to Rivière's viewpoint in the letters, "He is so strong before life because he accepts to suffer and to face up to things; it is for that too that I am so self-sufficient, even in my desire, and behind this strength are such treasures of sensibility."¹¹³ Again, this connection between suffering and desire is highlighted in Beauvoir's thought. While she goes on to say that she appreciates Fournier's wrestling with notions of love, she self-identifies more with Rivière's thought. She claims to love and be satisfied by Fournier in the same way that she loves Zaza or Jacques, but she loves Rivière as she loves herself, "with severity and lucidity, with security, with the same intimacy."¹¹⁴ Yet Fournier is still integral to her thinking since she loves him in the same way that "one might prefer others to oneself."¹¹⁵

¹¹² Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 263.

¹¹³ Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 160.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The theme of resignation runs throughout the Rivière-Fournier letters. While Fournier appears to have a more optimistic sense of love, both see love and suffering as intertwined, integral to the experience of life. Fournier writes to Rivière: "I am weary of wanting love and of wanting life.... What I call my love is more or less than that--and that is why I do not know if I must call it my love or myself."¹¹⁶ And in another passage, Fournier says, "One resigns oneself to love as one resigns oneself to life."¹¹⁷ This is a very internalized way of understanding the experience of love. The lover takes on the onus of the negative aspects of life and love. So it is not so much that one suffers in love *through* other people, but that other people point one to the suffering inherent in one's own lived experience.

Rivière, on the other hand, in this letter exchange, asserts, "My desire must be exclaimed."¹¹⁸ So while there is still here the attitude of love being something to suffer through as one must suffer through life, it must be expressed and must be endured. It must be externalized. He asserts at one point, "*One must not seek happiness!* Indeed, we have other things to do. To accept all things is not to decide not to suffer from them any longer. No, it is to want to love them even when they tear you apart because they have the holy privilege of existence."¹¹⁹ Here, he displays a similar attitude toward love as the one that he describes in *Aimée*. Suffering is not something that one should be afraid of, but rather something that one should embrace as a part of life. It is interesting to note that Rivière never seems to talk about happiness, openness, or generosity in love. His view of love is negative, full of enduring pain.

¹¹⁶ Qtd. in *ibid.*, 159.

¹¹⁷ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Letter from Rivière to Fournier qtd. in *ibid.*, 156.

Later in his life, when Rivière converted to Catholicism, his take on religion was closely associated with his experiences in relationships with women, especially Yvonne. In 1914, while a prisoner of war, Rivière writes in his notebooks: "I found with God the intimacy that corresponded to that which I had found with [Yvonne]."¹²⁰ Rivière draws a parallel between torturous, passionate love and the difficult path to God. In both one is compelled toward and repelled by the lure of some manipulative Other. So the nature of erotic love and religious belief are, at the least, complimentary, and, at the most, intertwined.

French writer François Mauriac (1885-1970), who was also Catholic, espoused this same notion--that passion and belief are intertwined. Reviled by many of his critics for "a continual preoccupation with sexual relations, a barely concealed delight in the crude physical detail, which borders on obsession," Mauriac was a writer of both religious treatises and novels.¹²¹ Beauvoir quotes Mauriac throughout her relationship with Jacques, using Mauriac's words to attempt to understand the changing nature of their relationship, both with regard to romance and religion. For Mauriac, interestingly, "religion is translated not simply into concrete but into physical terms. [For him], 'passion' and 'belief' are made of the same stuff... [even though] there is generally a conflict between the two, a conflict which is never resolved because he does not wish to resolve it."¹²² Indeed, Beauvoir takes up this theme of conflict when she notes, "Mauriac's and Claudel's Catholicism, for which Jacques has not completely lost his liking, how it has marked me and what a place remains in me for it! And yet, I know that I will no longer know this..."¹²³

¹²⁰ Qtd. in Levy, *Jacques Rivière*, 91.

¹²¹ Martin Turnell, *The Art of French Fiction: Prévert, Standahl, Zola, Manpassant, Gide, Mauriac, Proust* (New York, New York: New Directions, 1959), 309.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 288.

¹²³ July 10, 1927; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 279.

Beyond the struggle with her religion, Beauvoir also draws on Mauriac as she transitions through her relationship with Jacques. In her diary entry from August 1926, she quotes the following verse:

Am I loved? Do I love?
Did I love? I don't know.
I know that I am never weary
Of feeling tenderness for myself.¹²⁴

During her confusion about whether or not Jacques is merely being unclear about his feelings of love for her, or whether he is, in fact, not in love with her at all, she finds solace in the notion that she can comfort herself. As she comes to further understand her conflicting feelings about Jacques's complacency and her love for him, she reads Mauriac's *Goodbye to Adolescence*.¹²⁵ She writes in an August 16, 1926, diary entry, "This 'heavy heart' from out of adolescence, hang it somewhere in ex-voto. Forget it, so that another spring will gush forth in us from farther away, a more secret water, more contained, richer, also more bitter."¹²⁶ This engagement with Mauriac is important to Beauvoir's understanding of love at the time. As we can see, she uses these writers as sounding boards for this theme of suffering in love. When she quotes Mauriac here, she attempts to understand her own need to believe that she must sacrifice and suffer for her love. Not only the love that she feels internally, but also for her love interest, for Jacques. This has been a gradual development and continues as the *Diary* progresses.

Gide: The Provocateur

For Beauvoir, André Gide (1869-1951) served as more of a provocateur against whom she could evaluate her burgeoning radical beliefs, both about love and about religion. Known most

¹²⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹²⁵ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 219.

¹²⁶ Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 67.

widely for his controversial relationships, Gide was a writer who believed, foremost, in acting with authenticity against establishments that sought to limit freedoms. Founder of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Gide came to be widely known as a French literary critic. His unconsummated marriage to his cousin and a long-standing romantic relationship with Marc Allegret, who was only fifteen years old when they became lovers (Gide was 47), among other scandals, were cause for controversy in French circles at the time.¹²⁷ Indeed, Beauvoir references this scandal in *Diary* when she writes, "Gide! He probably does a lot of harm as everybody maintains, and Massis' article has in fact convinced me. But me, I owe everything to him! Can't a doctrine that is bad in itself contain some excellent directions?"¹²⁸ Here she references an essay written by Henri Massis, where Massis, seeing Gide as a major figure in the fight over the minds of French youth with regard to politics, religion and the intersection of the two, writes against Gide's stance toward Christian values.¹²⁹

Beyond his life choices, Gide's writings also relay this sort of antiestablishment sentiment. Thematically, Gide was concerned with the idea of an adventurer who journeys in the face of resentment and resistance from the dominant moral status quo. In a diary entry from September 24, 1926, Beauvoir quotes Gide: "Woe betide you if you say your happiness is dead because you had not imagined it in that form--and because you will only accept a happiness in conformity with your principles and wishes...for each thing has a *special and different* value."¹³⁰ It is clear here that Gide rails against the 'conformity' of the principles of his time. He wants to encourage his readers to find and put their own personal happiness above that which is deemed societally correct and necessary. He

¹²⁷ Naomi Segal, "Andre Gide and the Making of the Perfect Child," in *From Goethe to Gide: Feminism, Aesthetics and the French and Germany Literary Canon, 1770-1936*, ed. Mary Orr and Lesley Sharpe (University of Exeter Press, 2005).

¹²⁸ August 13, 1926; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 64.

¹²⁹ Most likely, Beauvoir is referring to the essay about Gide in *Jugements II*, although Massis also wrote against Gide in other publications. Henri Massis, *Jugements: 2. Série*, La Critique (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et cie, 1924).

¹³⁰ Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 94.

encourages his readers to recognize their personal worth and value and to put their individuality ahead of what may be experienced as societal resistance.

This lesson, during the time that Beauvoir develops her understanding of herself and of her place in the world, is something that she latches on to wholeheartedly. Again, during this time, Beauvoir struggles with her loss of belief in the teachings of Catholicism, and, at the same time, with her love for Jacques and his feelings toward her. As she takes on these tasks for herself and also (because she views this as a requirement of loving Jacques) for Jacques as well, she writes in *Memoirs*:

[Jacques] kept complaining that he didn't believe in anything; I kept racking my brains to provide him with objects he *could* believe in; it seemed to me a sacred task to work hard for one's own development and enrichment; this was the sense in which I took Gide's precept: 'Make yourself indispensable'!...¹³¹

Not only does this point to a developing articulation of what will become a fundamental part of existential ethics (the responsibility one has, in the face of a meaningless world, to create meaning for oneself--the fundamental project), but it also illustrates how Beauvoir uses Gide to reconcile her notions of love. She sees herself, as someone who loves Jacques romantically, as the person who must make sure that he retains his faith and stability in the world. It could also be the case that in urging Jacques to heed Gide's advice and to make himself indispensable, she simultaneously tries to make herself indispensable to Jacques. So, ironically, although Gide is, more than likely, urging his readers to make themselves indispensable to the world on their own behalves, Beauvoir understands this as an injunction to be a help-mate to the man she loves.

Another aspect of being indispensable is to make sure that one pushes oneself to the limits to attain happiness. Beauvoir writes in *Diary*: "a lot of Wilde can be rediscovered in André Gide, especially this idea never to deny oneself, to go to the very depths of one's desire. One cannot be

¹³¹ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 217.

more deliciously immoral."¹³² Additionally, while writing about coming to understand her own sexuality in her adolescence in *Memoirs*, Beauvoir quotes herself during that time as saying, "The worst kind of debauchery, provided that it be a defense, a provocation, provided it be the means used by Gide to find spiritual nourishment, moves me deeply."¹³³ Here we find that Gide leads Beauvoir into an early engagement with the notion of the connection between the erotic and the ethical. Pushing oneself to the limits of one's desire is "deliciously immoral." We should question here whether this 'immorality' should be taken at face value. By describing that which is 'immoral' as 'delicious,' Beauvoir views ethical action in a particular light. When this 'deliciously immoral' characterization is coupled with her quote from Gide, we see that Beauvoir understands the complexity of these ethics. She claims that indulgence in the flesh can be used as a means to achieve some type of spiritual fulfillment. We might even say that the erotic gives way to the ethical. Immersion in, and a purity with regard to, the experience of the erotic can lead to a type of spiritual transcendence. Here, she also establishes a connection between the physical aspect of love (the particular experience of the erotic) and its further implications.

Indeed, in the same passage, she writes, "I was on the verge of admitting the truth to myself: I was fed up with being a disembodied spirit..."¹³⁴ Writing against the notion that the erotic is not integral to an ethical understanding of love, she muses, "Either physical love was identified with love itself, in which case it becomes self-explanatory, or it was a tragic fall from grace..."¹³⁵ Here, again, Beauvoir attempts to integrate her understanding of love as an entirely disembodied concept and an understanding of her burgeoning sexuality. This may also be related to her conversion into atheism.

¹³² November 13, 1926; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 178.

¹³³ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 308.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Since faith and Christianity focus on the spirit as opposed to the body (i.e., "the pleasures of the flesh," etc.), as Beauvoir explores her own sexuality, she may have questioned how one can be both a body and a spirit in the context of the erotic. Indeed, she goes on to say in *Memoirs*, "Current notions of sexual morality scandalized me both by their indulgence and their severity."¹³⁶ She is not disturbed by Gide's writings when she is supposed to be shocked by the artistic production of those who do not uphold conventional understandings and standards of sexual morality. It is clear from this that Beauvoir's intellectual engagement with Gide is central to her burgeoning disgust with conventional (both secular and religious) understandings of sexuality. Because Gide serves as such a controversial figure for Beauvoir, he allows her to stretch and expand the environmental cues she receives.

Cocteau: Musings on Reciprocity

One of the most interesting passages in *Diary* occurs when Beauvoir responds to a quote by Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). Amongst other things, a poet, novelist, and filmmaker, Cocteau is an artist whose work remains contemporarily relevant.¹³⁷ James Williams describes Cocteau's project as primarily concerned with examining the aesthetics of "an ethico-erotic engagement with questions of the self and Other."¹³⁸ Of all of his roles, Beauvoir most responds to Cocteau as a literary critic, calling him one of the "three great critics" she can name (the other two being Gide and Wilde).¹³⁹ Of all the authors who are influential in Beauvoir's early thoughts on the erotic/love, she appears to have the most sincere admiration for Cocteau. In reaction to reading Cocteau's lecture, "D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie," in September of 1926, Beauvoir describes characteristics of

¹³⁶ Ibid., 190.

¹³⁷ See Margaret Crosland, "Introduction to Jean Cocteau," in *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings*, 1st British Commonwealth ed. (New York, New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972).

¹³⁸ James S. Williams, *Jean Cocteau, French Film Directors* (New York, New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 16.

¹³⁹ November 2, 1926; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 154.

Cocteau that, one might venture, are ones that she would want to be used to describe her, both then and in the future:

His profound seriousness veiled by gaiety, his solid good sense, his very sincere simplicity.... I admire him for his disdain for public opinion; that he seeks neither to flatter nor to annoy, thanks to a rare sincerity; for his faith in the work that is his, a faith not founded on foolish pride, but on the consciousness of efforts he views, novel without being paradoxical...I like him for the ardor that he puts into his efforts, the union of his private life and his artistic life; for the profound seriousness that he brings to his admirations, his ideas, to his life, while rejecting academic seriousness...I like him because he has felt all the lassitude, the nostalgia, the disgust, and with an admirable sobriety, exactly expressed them.¹⁴⁰

While Beauvoir most often cites Cocteau in the context of his criticism as read both by her and by others, a line he writes in *Le Potomak* is the springboard for a long passage in *Diary*, where Beauvoir expounds upon her understanding of a woman's place in a relationship. Though Cocteau was openly gay,¹⁴¹ the quote upon which Beauvoir chooses to muse betrays her obsession with the notion of a woman's place in a relationship. She introduces the quote as such:

However--except of course during still rather frequent hours of weakness--I do not ask [others] to unburden me of myself or to give me a new reason to live. I sometimes attain a true coldness in this proud joy of feeling at the very heart of suffering that after all I do not need anyone to bear it.¹⁴²

Here she speaks more about her general feelings with regard to people in her life. While this appears to be a statement of independence, it is both indicative of Beauvoir's wavering back and forth on her understanding of a woman's position and belies the lines that are to follow: "One must not be confused. I am not, not at all selfish in my affections; I would consent to all sacrifices for the happiness of the other, even to that of not being loved by him; truly, I completely contradict this stupid verse 'To love, for a woman, means that one loves her...' --Cocteau."¹⁴³ After declaring so

¹⁴⁰ September 6, 1926; *Ibid.*, 81–82.

¹⁴¹ This may complicate our ability to read into his intentions— how much we should attribute this line to Cocteau's personal beliefs or whether we should just view this as a line from his earliest novel?

¹⁴² October 1926; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 125.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

strongly her independence and pride at being able to bear her burden alone, she then declares how she has the strength to bear the burden of unrequited love. Not merely that she can bear it, but that she takes pride in her ability to bear such love. This, it seems, is an interesting blind spot in her understanding of herself. While she appears to believe that Cocteau's quote is "stupid" because she does not think that a strong woman should have to be loved in order fully to love her beloved, she denies the notion of reciprocity.

She comes close to acknowledging her blind spot as she continues to her response to the quote:

I am pleased to love without being loved; I desire only to give. But precisely, I have very little need to receive, to hang on to someone else, hence, a certain hardness (purely intellectual). In reality, there are in me two very different moments: the one in which I simply suffer and love--the one in which I no longer suffer, in which I still love but in knowing it and controlling it. I cannot reduce them; in the first case my sensitivity alone is at stake.¹⁴⁴

After positioning her lack of received reciprocity in love as a virtue, she then goes on to think about it a little further. It moves from a virtuously subservient stance and returns to a statement of independence. It seems that Beauvoir does not desire to receive in love because she is afraid of losing herself to another person. She does not want to become dependent on the love of another, so she chooses not to expect reciprocity in love. Further still, though, as she thinks about it more, she realizes that her feelings toward this notion of reciprocity are twofold and paradoxical. The moment in which she "simply suffer[s]" in love is met by the moment when she knows she should exert control over her will to be involved in such a relationship of inequality. What is interesting is that in the face of her knowledge of such inequality, she chooses the former, to suffer, because only her "sensitivity," her emotions, are at stake in that case. In the second case, her understanding of her own intellect and very volition would be compromised if failure were to occur.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Emerging Themes

At this point, it is helpful to amalgamate the themes that emerge from my discussion of Beauvoir's intellectual influences. As I see it, a few important themes emerge that point not only to Beauvoir's early engagement with the concept of the erotic, but also to her subsequent conversion into what will become her stance disposition toward the erotic. I want to argue that it is only within the context of her engagement with these early ideas that we can fully understand how she develops her later views. In this way, any discussion of Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic is necessarily incomplete that does not acknowledge this early engagement.

A very important theme is that of religious faith, and especially Catholicism. The writers with whom Beauvoir engages during this time are all in some way responding to their experience with religion. Whether the writers, during their writing tenure, wrote about converting into or out of religious faith, they all wrestle with the doctrines and teachings of Christianity. With Claudel, this emerges as an exploration of how to reconcile faith with actions that appear to go against faith, especially with regard to what it means to love. Rivière and Mauriac, both Catholic, write about how their faith informs their outlook on their love relationships. Gide's homosexuality influences his outlook on the purpose and stringency of faith.

What come of these various attitudes toward faith by the writers Beauvoir chooses to cite are similar attitudes toward a few things. One of these is the way women's existence is to be understood. Claudel sees the challenge of faith as akin to that of the challenge of loving. The way women tempt men is similar to the way the world tempts the religious seeker to stray from that which he knows is righteous. Because women play this role, they have an obligation to fight against their own wiles and serve their partners, helping them to achieve righteousness. Rivière's own experience with being tempted by a woman led him to write against women and their abilities to lead men off the path. He,

like Claudel, sees a woman's duty as leading a man both away from and toward goodness. Mauriac, though not as blatantly as Rivière (at least according to the references Beauvoir makes of him), also understands religious faith in terms of passion. Gide's anti-Catholicism, ironically, does not relieve him of an understanding of women as those who should sacrifice themselves for men.

As a whole, it appears that part of Beauvoir's ambivalence about her faith during the time is also a part of her struggle against her understanding of herself as a woman in love. As women are portrayed by these writers, their duty is to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of their partners. This mandate toward self-renunciation appears again and again, and Beauvoir internalizes many of these messages. During this time, she sees her obligation toward Jacques as that of aiding him in his journey toward manhood and struggles with his own reconciliation. While at times this appears to tire her, she quickly reconfigures her attitude toward her resistance and attempts to convince herself that it is a strength. She quotes these writers while attempting to convince herself of the strength and obligation she has to fulfill this role for Jacques.

Beyond even renunciation, an idolization of the merits of suffering also emerges from Beauvoir's chosen writers' articulations of faith. Claudel and Rivière both speak of suffering as a virtue that one must encounter and learn to bear in life. The one who suffers fully accepts the challenge God has set out for him and his life is made more valuable through this process. This suffering, again, is not without gendered expectations. While men do indeed suffer, it is women who must suffer more. Both writers cleverly correlate this suffering with the suffering of Christ, who suffered for others and received salvation by very virtue of this suffering. In this way, they color suffering as a strength; thus while they sentence women to pain, they also extol their fortitude. Suffering becomes a sacrifice that only those with the means to do so can and must offer. Beauvoir appears to fully accept her ability to offer her happiness as a sacrifice. She does indeed interpret it as

a strength and wants to become stronger, not only so that she can bear the weight of Jacques's ambivalence, but also so that she can bear her own.

This leads to another important theme that emerges from Beauvoir's early engagement with these writers. None of the writers advocate for reciprocity in love. If the woman suffers, it is to relieve the man's own suffering. This process, however, is not reciprocal. In all of the writers Beauvoir mentions, the male character is never called upon to relieve the suffering of the woman. This is important because it is clear that during this time Beauvoir attempts, with trepidation, to better understand herself. This is a painful and confusing process for her, yet she never mentions Jacques as attending to her process, save a few literary recommendations (which she takes very seriously and interprets as Jacques's investment in her growth) and a word here or there that the confused Beauvoir uses as confirmation of Jacques's interest in her. It appears that Beauvoir accepts this inequity and thinks it her obligation to deal with it.

One way that Beauvoir appears to reconcile the apparent lack of reciprocity in her relationship is to assert her independence in the face of it. Indeed, she also seeks guidance from these writers concerning how she should understand this independence, as it is merged with a simultaneous desire to be of use for/to the Other. Especially influential to her on this point are Gide and Cocteau. In the work of both of these men, she finds an emphasis on the individual's power and duty to assert herself. When she writes of Gide and Cocteau, she does so in the context of one who wants to understand what it means to be both independent, with one's own burdens to bear, and one who feels that she must also bear the burdens of others. It is this theme that offers us an entrée into what I am calling Beauvoir's early conversion. When she calls upon Gide and Cocteau to assist her in her understanding of her own independence, she comes most near to realizing the lacunae in her view with regard to romantic love.

We see glimpses of this in a theme that is less overt, but still important: that of her attitude toward the erotic. Again, Gide is most cited during these moments. We might assume that Gide's own homosexuality made it so that he had to confront intimately societal mores concerning sex. In a certain sense, this may have led him to a depth of understanding not afforded to those who were heterosexual during the time. This also aligned him, societally, with what was considered deviant. It was Gide's articulation of his deviance to which Beauvoir most strongly responded. As an early interlocutor, with Gide's assistance, Beauvoir formulates her own attitudes toward sex and sexuality. Though not yet sexually experienced, Beauvoir is able, through Gide (and, no doubt, in part to the other aforementioned writers) to confront the lessons she was taught about sex. We see that she uses Gide as a foil for these lessons and emerges from this use with an early comfort in the power and complication implied in sexuality. When she writes of the possibilities sex holds for enlightenment and self-exploration (we may even say growth), she illustrates a precocious attitude toward sex that will continue throughout her life and philosophy.

Beauvoir's Student Conversions

It is clear, then, that Beauvoir's engagement with these writers sets the foundation for how she will approach certain themes in her writing and in her life. It is only through analysis of these earlier autobiographical writings that we are able to understand Beauvoir's intellectual development on the matter of the erotic and ethics. Without recounting her relationships with Zaza and Jacques, we are unable to see how she begins to formulate her ideas. It is only in response to these situations that Beauvoir comes to take a stand on such matters. Without them, we would be tempted to attribute her eventual views to the influence of Sartre. Using this method, however, we can see that her ideas were developed pre-Sartre. We can also see how her biographical experiences, even at this very early stage, play an important role in her philosophical views. Even further, the

autobiographical information is itself so intricately tied to her philosophical views that separating the two in an attempt to formalize/ systematize Beauvoir's philosophy is an incomplete effort.

One of the most pervasive conversions in Beauvoir's early writing is from religious belief to atheism. Even though the beginning of *Diary* clearly shows that Beauvoir has been toying with this idea for a while, *Memoirs* presents this conversion with more of a before-and-after narrative arc that occurs after the time that she describes in *Diary*. In *Dairy*, Beauvoir closely considers the reason behind faith. She presents the following logic:

If religion is true, upon seeking it honestly with your reason, you cannot find it to be false. If it is false, you can find it to be true. And that is why before the number of people who are not believers and those who are believers, the first impress me more.¹⁴⁵

As she comes to terms with her own agency, Beauvoir presents the idea of faith as one that involves an understanding of human choice and decision making. Those who believe cannot choose otherwise because faith implicitly involves an absence of choice, but those who do not believe are the only ones with absolute choice. This ability to choose is important to Beauvoir because she sees the choice as that which defines human experience. She writes, "I myself am not satisfied--the earth's uselessness weighs on me, I would like a 'superhuman exigency,' and yet for human things to be justified."¹⁴⁶ As such, Beauvoir appears to be looking for a way to reconcile the metaphysical with the earthly. As she references Pascal's wager, she muses:

I would want to believe in something--to meet with total exigency--to justify my life. In short, I would want God. Once formulated as such, I will not forget this. But knowing that this noumenal world exists, that I cannot attain, in which alone it can be explained to me why I live, I will build my life in the phenomenal world, which is nevertheless not negligible. I will take myself as an end.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ July 20, 1927; Ibid., 288.

¹⁴⁶ August 6, 1927; Ibid., 304.

¹⁴⁷ May 21, 1927; Ibid., 262.

Because there is no way to have absolute knowledge of the noumenal, Beauvoir decides that she must deal directly with that which is phenomenal because this is of what her experience is comprised.

Another important aspect of her turn away from religious belief is the foundation it lays for Beauvoir's future philosophy. We see here that Beauvoir describes a very existential attitude toward God. This foreshadows much of her discussion about God in *Ethics of Ambiguity*. If human agency and choice are the most fundamental values, then religious belief itself must be based on such a choice. Beauvoir is clear here that there is no inherent meaning in the world and no God-like figure to provide meaning and, thus, a human life must be based on human experience. As such, ethical decisions must be made and justified in *this* world. As this so closely echoes the same logic Beauvoir presents in *Ethics*, it offers yet another clue in the puzzle of Sartrean attribution. It is clear that Beauvoir has formulated this idea independent of her relationship with Sartre. As such, this is yet another critical area where scholars should be careful not to ascribe Beauvoir's ideas to Sartre.

Beauvoir's religious conversion is closely connected with another of her emerging preoccupations, that of despair. She writes in *Diary*:

Since I saw that no God was waiting for me on the incomprehensible route where I was seeking total Exigency, the reason for the world, and for my life, and since I exhausted the bitterness of the great metaphysical sorrow without seeking, as others do, to make each of the moments of my human life divine, let me peacefully turn instead towards this human life, with such poignant uncertainty. Let me not forget the great emptiness.¹⁴⁸

Here, Beauvoir points out that many have to deal with the situation of their lives and she recognizes that the way people sometimes do this is by creating a god for themselves or adopting the god of others. It is clear, even now (she also revisits this theme and her judgment of how often and in what forms this kind of bad faith takes in *Ethics of Ambiguity*) that Beauvoir disdains this method of dealing

¹⁴⁸ June 3, 1927; *Ibid.*, 267.

with the ambiguity of life. She also, in this same passage, manages to justify *why* she is losing her faith in God. In her search and during the time of her crisis in faith, she finds no answers and no infinite being there to provide such answers, so she decides to consider closely what is 'human.' She finds strength in the emptiness because she recognizes it as a fundamental part of her lived experience. She goes on further to say:

I do not desire to believe. An act of faith is the greatest act of despair that could be and I want my despair to preserve at least its lucidity. I do not want to lie to myself. Besides, this infinite God saves me only as a *person*; and it is my entire individual that I want to save.¹⁴⁹

Here again, she treats the idea of despair as one that is not only inherent in human life, but furthermore, something that one must take up for oneself. She claims that she wants her despair to be clear and focused since she can recognize that she is more than a soul to be saved by a Catholic god.

Importantly, Beauvoir's questioning of her faith, as has been mentioned, occurs alongside that of her friend Zaza's. But as Beauvoir transitions out of religious faith, Zaza takes another path. Citing Beauvoir's reckless influence, Madame Mabelle tries often to discourage Beauvoir and Zaza's friendship. Zaza resists at first, but as time moves forward, Zaza appears to give in to her mother's wishes. At one point, Madame Mabelle sends Zaza to Berlin in order to create a distance between the friends. As this happens, Beauvoir becomes more and more frustrated with her friend's ambivalence.

Beauvoir writes in *Memoirs*:

When [Zaza] was not with me, she could write about her difficulties and her dislikes and I felt I was her ally; but in fact her attitude was an equivocal one: she still retained all her love and respect for her mother, and remained loyal to her background. I could no longer accept such a division of personality.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ July 10, 1927; *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 287.

As such, Beauvoir converts out of the former form of her friendship and loyalty to Zaza. This becomes especially clear when Madame Mabile disrupts the engagement of Zaza and Merleau-Ponty, resulting in Zaza's psychological deterioration and eventual sudden, mysterious death.

Beauvoir appears to interpret Zaza's life as a counter to her own. While Beauvoir comes into a rejection of religious faith, Zaza strengthens hers. As Beauvoir begins to question the messages she receives about a woman's place in society and in love, Zaza struggles to fit into the roles that have been laid out for her. While Beauvoir converts out of her subordination to Jacques, Zaza becomes ill as a result of complications relating to her relationship with Merleau-Ponty. Beauvoir appears to foreshadow the pitfalls of Zaza and Merleau-Ponty's relationship when she writes in her diary, "Danger, ah! The danger of love when one believes that something is higher than love! Naturally, one seeks compenetration, the creation of a 'we' that is neither me nor you....I have no other god but myself."¹⁵¹ Here, Beauvoir displays the way in which her loss of religious faith connects with her frustration concerning relationships. One's belief in God makes loving another human difficult because, de facto, there is another entity that is more important than the human love itself. So those who still have faith, like Zaza, have no room for "compenetration" with their lover because they already have this kind of relationship with a god. Beauvoir, who has no god other than herself, is frustrated by such a situation, and frustrated that women she knows assume this situation. In this way, Beauvoir transitions out of her empathy with Zaza's chosen situation. As such, Beauvoir ends *Memoirs* with the following quote: "We had fought together against the revolting fate that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death."¹⁵²

While her complicity with Zaza wanes, Beauvoir's understanding of her relationship with Jacques is also redefined. Throughout this relationship, Beauvoir remains unclear of his feelings

¹⁵¹ May 21, 1927; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 1:263.

¹⁵² Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 360.

toward her. As she questions her faith and the societal conventions with which her developing interests are coming at odds, she becomes dissatisfied with Jacques. In October 1926, Beauvoir cites Claudel in the following entry about Jacques: "I repeat ... this beautiful expression from Claudel too, 'and if you had had to bring me joy, was it worthwhile for me to learn to suffer?' Thank you for not bringing me joy."¹⁵³ We can see here that Beauvoir is coming to notice how the level of joy she receives from loving Jacques does not compensate for the amount of suffering she experiences on behalf of him. Indeed, in an entry written in May 1927, Beauvoir writes:

In a while, tomorrow, wearied or recaptured by his charm, I will cry out to him and ask for forgiveness. But no, I must not be ashamed: my *self* does not want to let itself be devoured by his. It's awful! I didn't do anything this year (in terms of my own thoughts) for the image of a calm life next to him convinced me so strongly of the uselessness of an effort in any other direction, but when I have this life, when I am there, established, I will do even a lot less. But this is the supreme defeat! Oh, it's not a matter of success, of a brilliant intellectual future that I would so willingly sacrifice for him! But of what I *am* and what he will keep me from being. Why? Well, because I will think like him and nothing will sustain me, and I will not know what I want.¹⁵⁴

Beauvoir questions what a future with Jacques might look like. She conjectures that such a relationship would be one in which she would absolutely lose sight of her own projects and the future that her self might otherwise have in store.

These fearful ruminations cause Beauvoir to change her attitude toward Jacques. She writes:

Why should I insist on Jacques being different from other men? The only thing was, if he was the same as all the others--and I know that in many respects he was inferior to a great number of his sex--what point was there in putting him above the rest? My indulgence was finally turning to indifference.¹⁵⁵

Here, she first questions her positioning of Jacques as superior to any other man and then reasons that she must have put him on a pedestal because she could not bear the thought of loving a man who was merely equal to other men. In thinking further, she slights Jacques by noting her knowledge

¹⁵³ Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 109.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 318.

that he has characteristics that were actually inferior to other men. And with that, she comes to the realization that even this questioning of Jacques' position with respect to other men illustrates that she has become indifferent to him. Even further, this leads her to question the exceptionality of all men: "I am so sure that the one who would truly be all, understand all, profoundly be the brother and equal of myself does not exist! There are only men."¹⁵⁶ So disgusted with Jacques is she that she generalizes this disgust such that she, ironically, provides a negative assertion of her ideal partner.

And, finally, in October 1927, Beauvoir renounces her love for Jacques altogether: "I no longer love Jacques. He has my affection, forever. Will he ever find my love again? ... No, I will never love again. Nobody is great enough to be loved."¹⁵⁷ It is clear, then, that Beauvoir has converted out of her feelings toward Jacques. It is also important to note that in this, as in each case of Beauvoir's conversions, she juxtaposes her experience with her intellectual understanding. As her ideas move away from those established by her earlier influences (the aforementioned authors), so do her feelings for Jacques. As such, her autobiographical writings provide clear insight into her philosophical preoccupations.

In this way, the devolution of Beauvoir's relationship with Jacques occurs in tandem with her intellectual conversion on the matter of the erotic. In so doing, she revisits the authors who influenced her former views on love. In October 1926, she writes, "Ah! Claudel and what he said about love, 'everything, always'... 'Ah, let it stay a bit in the distance'....I reread these quotes and it is all of my soul that repeats them. Peace descends."¹⁵⁸ Here, Claudel justifies her growing distance from a love founded on her own personal suffering. She finds peace in her rejection of such love. And in 1927, the development is more clear. In July, she writes, "I was superstitious about life.

¹⁵⁶ August 2, 1927; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 300.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

Hypnotized by Rivière, Fournier, Jacques, I didn't know how to surpass them. That is why, rereading my notes, I noticed that I was at a virtual standstill."¹⁵⁹ Referencing Mauriac in August, she questions further whether her former understanding of love (with regard to Jacques) was a part of the period of adolescence Mauriac writes about.

I do not know if he will ever say, 'I love you.' I do not know, if he said it, how I would respond to it....At least I know what suffering is; I will never suffer more; it is not possible. But I will also never love more, never as much. I have really hung him as a commemorative plaque in 'this heavy heart of my adolescence.' What is truly going to spring forth from this more secret and more bitter spring that Mauriac promises me?¹⁶⁰

Her use of the phrase "commemorative plaque" here is telling. Jacques stands as a trophy of sorts, a token of a period of her youth where her understanding of love is wrapped up in suffering. Still, Jacques serves as a diploma, an official statement of her matriculation through this particular set of beliefs about love. Though the new phase will be bitter in its own right, she has emerged from a false consciousness regarding her belief that love implies mutual suffering and co-dependency.

Beauvoir's experience with Jacques leads her to a radically different stance on what she expects from a lover. She asks herself in an August 1, 1927 diary entry, "...after all, what is loving? Feeling dominated? It is too late now; I can no longer feel dominated (except perhaps in my flesh but I scorn that)."¹⁶¹ Here, she takes a much firmer stance on her position with regard to love. She articulates more clearly how she is aware of her previous submission to the idea of Jacques. She asserts that she no longer has any interest in a relationship based on domination. She longs, rather, for "someone strong, good, simple! Someone who will be [her] living rule, near whom it will be easy

¹⁵⁹ July 29, 1927; *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁶⁰ August 19, 1927; *Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁶¹ Editor's note says here: "The comment, "It is too late now; I can no longer feel dominated" is highlighted in brown ink in the margin and Beauvoir has written "What denial! 1929" "*ibid.*, 298.

to follow [her] law."¹⁶² It is interesting here that Beauvoir asserts her desire for a partner whose living rule will allow her to follow her *own* law. It is as if she desires that her future lover and she have the same law, such that adhering to his rule will not be a function of domination from some outside source, but rather an adherence to her own values, mirrored in the rule of her partner. As such, she questions, again, the purpose of a relationship and the role she must take. She writes, "I dream of immense sacrifices, but I have nothing great enough to give it as a useless gift."¹⁶³ While this appears to be a statement Beauvoir might have made during her years of devotion to Jacques, there is a slight shift here in the way she articulates the notion of sacrifice. Rather than sacrifice meaning that one must give one's self entirely to the Other, she identifies sacrifice in a relationship as a "gift." This is important, since a gift is a freely given gesture that should be received in a spirit of gratefulness, not expectation. By proclaiming that she will no longer engage in giving a "useless" gift, Beauvoir acknowledges that that which she offered Jacques was received in the same spirit with which it was given.

Another important facet of what Beauvoir expects from a relationship in the future is intimately tied to her intellectual production and developing love for philosophy. In July of 1927, she writes, "A passionate, boundless research. No love will eclipse this. If I marry, my philosophy will have to be taken with me. This is essential, so much so that in order to possess it, I would almost accept not getting married. No, because love is from life, and my philosophy must be from life."¹⁶⁴ Here, Beauvoir presents an early engagement with a topic that will become the point of much controversy, both biographically and intellectually --that of marriage. Here she is not focused on the ethical complexity of the institution of marriage, but rather with the extent to which a

¹⁶² August 2, 1927; *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁶³ October 3, 1927; *Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁶⁴ July 29, 1927; *Ibid.*, 296.

marriage could occur that would honor her engagement with philosophy. Philosophy has become so important to her that, in this passage, she toys with the idea that she would refute marriage altogether if she could not do philosophy simultaneously. Finally, though, she asserts that marriage and philosophy may not be antithetical to each other, since both needs must occur in the context of living. What might a relationship look like that allows for a simultaneous engagement with philosophy? In answer to this question, she describes her motivation behind wanting to write: "I must write my book to assert *myself*. And I would so like to see once again (past are the indecisive days when I confront all a bit fearfully), my dear, my very dear male friend, my living conscience."¹⁶⁵ So the impetus to write is one that Beauvoir views as an assertion of her selfhood.¹⁶⁶ As such, her relationship must be connected to such an assertion and her partner must be intimately connected to this self-assertion.

Interestingly, though, Beauvoir's new attitude toward what she expects from a partner includes a necessary sort of oneness with said partner. During the Jacques period, Beauvoir took on the attitude that her partner's needs and overall development came before her own and in this way the relationship was hierarchical. This hierarchy displayed a kind of necessary separation between the two parties in the relationship. In a relationship that is structured such that one partner genuflects to the Other, the one who does the genuflecting is positioned as inferior to the Other and in this way there is a fissure in the melding of their relationship. In *Memoirs*, Beauvoir quotes her own diary entry: "It's only too obvious that in those moments when I loved [Jacques] the most there was always a deep division between us which I could only overcome by denying myself; and so I had to

¹⁶⁵ September 29, 1927; *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁶⁶ This is especially interesting when juxtaposed with Vintges' notion of "writing the self." Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion*.

take up arms against my love."¹⁶⁷ This separation is clearly a vestige of the previously discussed understanding of Christian values regarding relationships. And just as Beauvoir converts out of her internalization of these messages, she also converts out of desiring such an unequal positioning in a relationship. When she converts out of this, she comes to think of an erotic relationship as one that comprises a type of one-ness, such that there is absolutely no separation between the partners. She writes such assertions as, "So many people have thus never known love! I mean unique love, which is neither desire nor routine affection, where one loves only oneself, because for me, somebody who distinguishes between two loves has not known either of them" and "I think love is purer and less strong in the beginning of an affection because the other has not yet been penetrated with you enough for one to love oneself in him. More pure does not mean more beautiful. The penetration of one by the other is the juicy fruit of familiarity..."¹⁶⁸ Repeatedly, Beauvoir expresses a desire for her lover and herself to meld into one entity. This represents a radical conversion—from her former attitude concerning the composition of a partnership to a new one. She goes so far as to declare, "To love is to identify with the object that one loves; it is to want oneself in the other."¹⁶⁹ This is an extreme sense of identification--one's lover is not only a person from whom one expects understanding, but also one whose identity one expects to fuse with one's own.

Beauvoir also converts from her attitude toward a different sort of melding: that of the sexual union. She describes this aspect of her relationship with Jacques:

...it was curiosity, and sensuality that made me want to discover the resources and secrets of my body; I waited without apprehension and even without impatience the moment when I would become a woman. It affected me in a rather round-about way: through Jacques. If physical love was only an innocent game, there was no

¹⁶⁷ The location of this quote is in question, as it does not appear in *Diary*. It may appear in the second volume of *Diary*, which is not included in this dissertation since it has not yet been translated into English. Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 346.

¹⁶⁸ May 28, 1927; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 266.

¹⁶⁹ May 20, 1927; *Ibid.*, 261.

reason why he shouldn't indulge in it; but then our conversations ought not to carry much weight with him beside the joyous and violent delights he had known with other women; I admired the pure and lofty tone of our relationship; but in fact it was incomplete, insipid, lacking in body, and the respect Jacques showed me was dictated by the most conventional morality; I was assigned the thankless role of the little girl cousin, of whom one is quite fond...¹⁷⁰

It is the lack of sensuality in the relationship between Beauvoir and Jacques that further confirms her dissatisfaction. While Jacques is open about his sexual relationships with other women, at a period when Beauvoir is coming to wonder about her sexuality, his flippancy in exploring this matter with her causes Beauvoir to reconsider the depth of their relationship.

But Beauvoir understands that this absence is a symptom of a certain kind of lack. Along with her intellectual rejection of her society's morals about erotic life, Beauvoir develops a stronger desire to reject such morals with regard to her body. She writes in *Memoirs*:

Here I think lay the roots of my anguish. I knew almost nothing of physical reality; in my class of society it was masked by conventions and rituals; these tedious formalities bored me, but I didn't attempt to seize the root of existence; on the contrary, I found escape in the clouds; I was a soul, a pure, disembodied spirit; I was only interested in people's souls and spirits. The advent of sexuality destroyed this angelic concept; it suddenly revealed to me, in all their dreadful unity, sexual appetite and sexual violence.... Poverty, crime, oppression, war: I was afforded confused glimpses of perspectives that terrified me.¹⁷¹

Giving more credence to her sexuality coincides with Beauvoir's acknowledgment of the body, its pleasures and its torments. Her social class' stigmatization of the sensual is yet another reason to rally against its hypocrisy. Interestingly, as Beauvoir articulates it here, sexual desire does not present itself without the concurrent possibility of sexual violence. As such, sexuality becomes the gateway to other ethical concerns. These ethical concerns-- "poverty, crime, oppression, war"--reveal the dirty side of life that Beauvoir's social milieu goes to lengths to hide or ignore. In this way, this

¹⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 290.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

sexual conversion provides an integral entree into Beauvoir's future interest in such ethical issues and eventually to her articulation of a disposition toward the erotic.

Enter: Sartre

Beauvoir's turn away from and conversion into the aforementioned values leaves her despondent about the possibility of finding a mate who matches her new ideals. While it is clear that this conversion represents a positive development in Beauvoir's engagement with herself and her world, the new expectations that come as a result appear to her impossible to realize. In an August 1, 1927, entry into *Diary* she writes, "...the one who would fulfill everything doesn't exist."¹⁷² And later, in the same entry, she opines about this non-existent lover: "I can love him with emotion, passion, as an 'other,' but to chat amiably, but to live together, will this be possible? So few things in common. It is imperative for him to be everything for me, for me to forget myself for him. If I think of myself, I suffer, for he loves me so little for my differences! For my weaknesses, not for my strength. Love of a child and a dreamer. *But a man's intelligent love?*"¹⁷³ Editor's notes to this entry read, respectively, "Beauvoir underlined the words in the last sentence in brown ink and wrote and underlined in the margin, 'Sartre--1929'"¹⁷⁴ and "Opposite this last paragraph, 'not for my strength,' is written in brown ink in the margin. 'Absolutely right all of this--and in reversing the terms we have what Sartre knows how to be for me.'"¹⁷⁵ And so enters Jean-Paul Sartre, the man who is to fulfill the "everything" Beauvoir imagines.

The two meet as a result of a study group, where the members came together in preparation for the *agrégation* in philosophy. While Beauvoir begins a relationship with Rene Maheu (who she

¹⁷² August 1, 1927; Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student Vol. 1*, 299.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

refers to as Herbaud in *Memoirs*), she becomes endeared to Sartre's willingness to engage her seriously in philosophical discussions. She writes in *Memoirs*, "I was staggered by this generosity, for these sessions didn't teach him anything, and he would give of himself for hours without counting the cost."¹⁷⁶ She begins to notice how he is different from love interests of her past. When their fondness for one another is expressed, each to the other, Beauvoir is excited by the possibility of engaging with a man unlike those with whom she had previously engaged.

And then, I had been given a great chance: I suddenly didn't have to face this future all on my own. Until then, the men I had been fond of--Jacques, and to a lesser extent Herbaud--were of a different order from my own: they were detached, changeable, rather incoherent, stamped with a sort of fatal charm; it was impossible to communicate with them without reserves.¹⁷⁷

Sartre is indeed a different sort of creature.

Sartre widens the range of possibility, the very range that Beauvoir mused was merely a hoped-for ideal. Sartre appears to Beauvoir to be a partner who assumes all the characteristics of the lover she previously described as her "living conscience." He prizes the idea of freedom. He is able to engage and challenge her philosophically. He does not assume a pre-formed idea of Beauvoir's identity, nor does he disavow the possibility of Beauvoir's growth and development. Indeed, he encourages Beauvoir to clarify her self-hood. She writes:

Whenever other people made attempts to analyse me, they did so from the standpoint of their own little worlds, and this used to exasperate me. But Sartre always tried to see me as part of my own scheme of things, to understand me in light of my own set of values and attitudes.... Whatever happened, I would have to try to preserve what was best in me: my love of personal freedom, my passion for life, my curiosity, my determination to be a writer. Not only did he give me encouragement but he also intended to give me active help in achieving this ambition.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 335.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

The two will embark upon the journey together. The instantiation of Beauvoir's conversions have taken on an embodied reality: "Sartre corresponded exactly to the dream-companion I had longed for since I was fifteen: he was the double in whom I found all my burning aspiration raised to the pitch of incandescence."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 345.

CHAPTER 4:
THE WAR YEARS:
THE ETHICAL CONVERSION

Perhaps describe a love affair in this perspective.

Several stages—Youth—(2) [*sic*] the individualistic idea: if *I* do not prefer *myself*, then who will prefer me?—(1) [*sic*] the relationship with God, understood as consciousness by whom my being is recognized—and the collapse when the belief in God ceases. Sudden nakedness of the world, and man is no longer anything but an ant. Then attempt to resort to oneself.

(3) Sad hardness of heart—inability to found oneself alone.

(4) A love affair—unhappy

(5) consciousness that this love was yet another means of saving oneself. Broadened individualism and transition to the social.

-- *Wartime Diary*, "ON THE NOVEL," 1941¹⁸⁰

In the last chapter, I discussed Beauvoir's conversion to a position that rejects subsuming her selfhood to her lover, Jacques, through her reflection upon various authors and her eventual relationship with Sartre. In this chapter, I would like to discuss Beauvoir's second conversion: out of a solipsistic worldview into an ethical one. In order to do this, I will be tracing Beauvoir's development with regard to both the concept of ethics and her lived experience of the erotic in her autobiographical writings. I will be drawing from her personal journal, *War Diaries*, her autobiography, *The Prime of Life* (published in English in 1960) and her letters to Sartre, compiled in the volume *Letters to Sartre*. From these writings, I will attempt to paint a sketch of Beauvoir's conversion to the ethical in order to argue that it is upon this conversion (which responds to the first conversion as outlined in Chapter Two) that Beauvoir's later interest in ethics and development of the disposition toward the erotic is built.

¹⁸⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, The Beauvoir Series (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Beauvoir's Solipsistic Turn

The "Marcelle" story in the novel Beauvoir works on during the War Years, *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, ends with the following two bold sentences: "For the second time [Marcelle] had the wonderful revelation of her fate. 'I am a woman of genius,' she decided."¹⁸¹ Marcelle has gone through the experience of losing herself to the project of her lover and has come to the realization that she is the project that she has been searching for. While Beauvoir writes this as the words of a character in her novel, this egoistic assertion might well be understood as Beauvoir's own revelation following her love affair with Jacques. After subsuming her consciousness to that of another, Beauvoir writes Marcelle retreating into her own consciousness. This form of solipsism becomes a counter-reaction to a sense of lost consciousness in an erotic relationship—it represents a kind of withdrawal from the world of the Other. Beauvoir describes her own adoption of this attitude in her *Wartime Diary*: "A consciousness that bears witness to the world, but is withdrawn from the world, and that can conceive the idea of being able to completely annihilate itself without fear—I remained like this for a long while."¹⁸² The ability to annihilate one's own consciousness can be understood as a means of exerting ultimate power over the Other. If one is able to view the world as that of one's own creation, then power rests wholly in the self—"because I hold the power to create and observe the world's machinations, I am able to control the actions of others and even myself to the extent that even the destruction of my own consciousness is feasible for me, as it reinforces the truth that I am the ultimate creator of this world." It is also interesting that Beauvoir describes this revelation as Marcelle's "second," for it hearkens back to the tension in Beauvoir's early diaries between giving herself wholly to the cause of Jacques and dedicating herself to the development of her Self. This

¹⁸¹ Simone de Beauvoir, "Marcelle," in *When Things of the Spirit Come First: Five Early Tales* (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 45.

¹⁸² September 16, 1939; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 64.

break with Jacques and the resulting solipsistic attitude represent a second, more extreme, revival of obsession with the self, and, ironically, an eventual step toward an ethical attitude. In *Wartime Diaries*, she reflects upon this solipsistic period: "I realized that I had a certain philosophical bad faith that made me readily confuse being and value.... That's why I contended that the other's consciousness *did not exist* for me under the pretext that I did not valorize it—and in a sense I deeply felt the contrary."¹⁸³ Because I exist, I hold ultimate value and can confer value on others. If I do not recognize the existence of others, I can convince myself that they do not exist.

Beauvoir's particular case of solipsism is complicated by her relationship with Sartre. During this period, she and Sartre have been coupled for approximately a decade and in an interesting psychological move, Beauvoir has come to understand them as sharing one consciousness. Throughout *Prime* she describes her relationship with Sartre as one in which there is no separation of self between the two of them. In essence, they are the same Self and thus there is no positing of self-Other distinction present in their relationship. As such, Sartre is included and implicit in Beauvoir's solipsism. In *Wartime Diary*, she writes, "It's the difference between an object 'put between parentheses' and an object posited absolutely.... I feel so strongly how between Sartre and myself these parentheses are absurd—I don't believe I will feel it for a long time to come."¹⁸⁴ Here, Beauvoir likens her and Sartre's relationship to an object that must be posited "absolutely," as opposed to bracketed, because of its unquestionable reality. Since Beauvoir cannot bracket her and Sartre's relationship, she asserts that the two of them form the same consciousness, the only entity able to bracket out the rest of the world. Indeed, she reiterates this idea in a letter to Sartre dated

¹⁸³ February 7, 1940; *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸⁴ This refers to the philosophical method of "bracketing" in the work of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, the work of whom B was just coming into understanding. In the phenomenological method, the "natural attitude" is "bracketed" ("put in between parentheses")—essentially, suspended in order to uncover the reality of any particular object. The thought is that our beliefs and attitudes impede our ability to access phenomena in their purest sense. October 7, 1939; *Ibid.*, 93.

October 8, 1939: "When I say we're as one, however, it means we're beneath reflection: our love is realized through our every action and every word.... My love, we're as one. I feel that I'm you, moreover, as much as you're myself."¹⁸⁵ Thus, their unity is not a phenomenon that can be affected by the natural attitude and is one that appears to Beauvoir as "beneath reflection."

This is indeed an absurd type of solipsism. In her "Introduction" to *Wartime Diary*, Margaret Simons describes this state with regard to the character Françoise of Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay*:

Given the extent of Françoise's denial of the self, her initial position might be described as combining elements of solipsism (only-self) with elements of an analogous position that might be termed solaltrism (only-other). While solipsism claims that the self is the sole existent and source of knowledge, solaltrism claims the same for the other.¹⁸⁶

Simons takes this term from Catherine Keller's *From a Broken Web* and goes on to explain it further in her work, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Here, however, she is clear to state that the problem of solaltrism appears not only in Beauvoir's fiction, but also in Beauvoir's description of her lived experience. She writes:

If solaltrism is foreign to the philosophical tradition, which has been largely shaped by men writing of their own experiences, it is not foreign to the experiences of women. The feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, in her analysis of a woman's moral voice, has argued that as much as 'latent egocentrism' is the 'potential error in justice reasoning' that characterizes moral development in men, so 'a tendency to see oneself as selfless' by defining oneself in others' terms is a 'potential error in care reasoning' characteristic of women (Gilligan 1987, 31). Gilligan also sees the desire for abdication of the self in fusion with the Other as setting the stage for a 'conflict of self and other' that she terms 'the central moral problem for women, posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood' (Gilligan 1983, 71). Thus, Beauvoir's concept of the opposition of self and Other, which has been traditionally attributed to the influence of male

¹⁸⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, Quintin Hoare, and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, Kindle Edition (New York, New York: Arcade Pub., 1992), 2291–2294 Kindle Location.

¹⁸⁶ Margaret A. Simons, "Introduction," in *Wartime Diary*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, The Beauvoir Series (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 15.

philosophers including Hegel and Sartre, has origins instead in her own experience...¹⁸⁷

Beyond further clarifying this situation, seemingly peculiar, but perhaps familiar to women more generally, Simons reiterates the importance of the connection between Beauvoir's theorizing and her lived experience. It appears that, as is evidenced by this case, it is nearly imperative to read Beauvoir's philosophy through her lived experience.

So it is for Beauvoir that her particular case of solipsism also includes this solaltristic attitude. However, her belief in the singularity of her and Sartre's consciousness begins to quake when the effects of others' actions put it into jeopardy. Beauvoir must face the situation about which she conjectured in the past: she must face the possibility of the annihilation of "her" consciousness. This begins with the introduction of Olga Kosakiewicz (referred to as "Kos" in both *Prime of Life* and *War-time Diaries*) into the Beauvoir/Sartre duo in 1935. Olga, once a student of Beauvoir's in Rouen, moved to Paris and formed a threesome relationship with Beauvoir and Sartre. While this was a part of the agreed-upon structure of their relationship,¹⁸⁸ the experience of dealing with Sartre's relationship with Olga disrupts the shared unity of consciousness assumed by Beauvoir. "Suddenly I found it impossible to take [Sartre's] opinions or tastes or dislikes casually, since they outlined a

¹⁸⁷ Lewis Gordon notes that the description of those who take on such a solaltristic attitude may also apply, more generally, to those who are oppressed in ways other than gender. As such, we might say that solaltrism is, rather being solely gendered, a phenomenon that is an effect of oppression *qua* oppression. If this is the case, then perhaps Beauvoir's solaltristic attitude, though she experienced it as gendered, is another example of how her lived experience led to her ethical ideas about oppression. Lewis Gordon, comment to author, March 28, 2014. Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 232.

¹⁸⁸ B recounts in *Prime of Life*, the arrangement of her and Sartre's "morganatic marriage": "He explained the matter to me in his favorite terminology: 'What we have,' he said, 'is an essential love; but it is a good idea for us also to experience contingent love affairs.' We were two of a kind, and our relationship would endure as long as we did: but it could not make up entirely for the fleeting riches to be had from encounters with different people. How could we deliberately forego that gamut of emotions—astonishment, regret, pleasure, nostalgia—which we were as capable of sustaining as anyone else? We reflected on this problem a good deal during our walks together." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life* (New York, New York: Lancer Books, 1973), 23.

system of values, and that system contradicted my own," she writes in *Prime of Life*.¹⁸⁹ Though she acknowledges that, despite her sense of their unity, she and Sartre did not always agree upon ideas, the reactions and opinions he proffers concerning Olga surprise Beauvoir. She begins to understand Olga as an Other with the ability to confer power on *her*. "When [Olga] stood apart from me she looked at me with alien eyes, and I was transformed into an *object* that might be either idol or enemy."¹⁹⁰ This experience brings about a very important phase in Beauvoir's intellectual development, one to which, we might say, she responds for the rest of her writing career.

The experience of the Other as enemy compromises one's belief that he/she is the center and creator of his/her world. In order to maintain the illusion that you are the entity empowered with the ability to dictate the motion of the world, there must be no disruption of your authority. When the Other is confronted as something that views the self from the outside, one must deal with the consequences of this. Famously, this confrontation has been described as a type of struggle between consciousnesses. We seek to maintain control over our world. The Other puts this sense of control in jeopardy by doing things that we do not like or things that go against what we would have willed for them to do. Suddenly, the blinders are lifted and we have to deal with what it might mean to be in a world peopled with these others who defy our will and our wishes. Even more than that, they present the challenge of how we are to go about fulfilling our visions of the world. How is it that we can pursue our individual, self-interested projects if the Other is there, staring at us, challenging our intentions, thwarting our efforts?

For Beauvoir in particular, this confrontation with the enemy that is the Other appears most poignantly in the situation of relationships. Because Beauvoir was able to handle the feeling of love that she had for Sartre by not turning him into an Other, she was able to escape having to think of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 289.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 312.

him as separate from herself, as able to compromise her consciousness in the same way that any Other might. This is one method of dealing with feelings of love. But, importantly, this method is premised upon a foundationally solipsistic attitude. If I, alone, exist in the world, then the Other with whom I am in love must also exist alone in the world *as me*. There is no possibility for acknowledging the Other-ness of this loved one, since the love itself does not appear to/feel like it is alien to the world that I have created. As such, one logical reaction to this situation of love is to subsume the Other's Other-ness into my own. Again, this seems to work fine until some Other apart from my and my lover's self-duo resists such a notion. The break happens in a twofold manner: first, there is the disruption from the outside of the person who initially challenges my consciousness; secondly, there is my lover's reaction to this Other, a reaction which might defy our oneness. So the conflict that ensues is a response to this double disruption. This must lead to a struggle of consciousnesses, as I attempt to assert my being upon yours, in reaction to your doing the same thing to me. Beauvoir writes, "Hence also the character of *struggle* comprising people's relationships, each seeking to realize his being...each fighting and having to fight for his being."¹⁹¹ I am engaged in a constant battle of wills, mine against yours and yours against mine. And even in the case of the erotic, this struggle continues unless the Other's alterity is reevaluated.

Another situation altogether also leads Beauvoir to a confrontation with this situation of the Other. When Sartre and Beauvoir's other male lover at the time, Jacques-Laurent Bost, are forced into military service during World War II in 1939, Beauvoir must also deal with the converse situation of her solipsism/solaltrism, being abandoned by the lover(s) with whom she supposes she shares her consciousness. While the case of another's challenge to the self-duo relationship might also be seen as a type of abandonment, a *literal* abandonment presents a different sort of challenge. Beauvoir writes of dealing with the early days of Sartre's military service: "I felt abandoned in an

¹⁹¹ ON THE NOVEL 1941?; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 322.

indifferent and hostile world; perhaps it's because I was barely aware of other people's consciousness that his consciousness was such an absolute for me and that this morning the world seemed absolutely empty to me, as if I had been thrown into a mineral solitude.”¹⁹² Since she viewed Sartre as sharing her own consciousness, we would assume that losing his presence would have a negligible effect on her ability to maintain belief in herself as the center of her world. If we share one consciousness and that consciousness is a unified entity, then it should not adhere to the laws of physics, as such. It should not lose mass upon the physical absence of a member of this self-duo because, in essence, the addition of Sartre's consciousness did not *add* any mass to Beauvoir's own solipsistic consciousness; it only reinforced the mass it already comprised. As such, there should be no change should Sartre not be present in Beauvoir's world.

This is not, however, how Beauvoir experiences Sartre's absence. She experiences his not being there as a loss, an abandonment. She feels that she has been thrown into a world that she must confront alone. Along with this sense of solitude comes an additional realization of the existence of others who people the world in which she finds herself. She must confront these other consciousnesses with her own, and there is something about the injustice of this that also serves to reinforce the idea of the Other as enemy. For, after all, wasn't it this world peopled with Others that caused her lover to abandon her? At this point in her thinking, Beauvoir does not have a politically driven contempt for these others that have allowed this situation to come to pass—she understands the war as affecting only the makeup of her very immediate social circle. So she is upset with the war to the extent that it has taken her lovers from her, not to the extent that it represents a massive instance of injustice for unnamed others. Given this, still, the machinations of other people have caused a disruption of her sense of having absolute control over her world, the world.

Hegelian Response to Solipsism

¹⁹² February 11, 1940; *Ibid.*, 253.

No matter the eventual reaction, in Beauvoir's world at the time, the self always initially confronts the Other in the mode of conflict. Beginning with Beauvoir's first published novel, *She Came to Stay*, this becomes one of Beauvoir's philosophical preoccupations, extending even as far as *The Second Sex*. Arguably, Hegel is the first and most influential intellectual resource Beauvoir relies on to describe this phenomenon. She describes her initial encounters with Hegel in a diary entry on July 6, 1940: "I worked on Hegel with Wahl's book on the unhappy consciousness and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; at the moment I understand almost nothing. I decided to go to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* every day from two to five o'clock and work on Hegel."¹⁹³ The next day, she reports:

I found a passage that I copied and that would work marvelously as the epigraph for my novel. I still have great difficulties understanding, especially when reading selected passages, but I'm beginning to see something emerging. As a result I feel the desire to study philosophy, to finish my novel, and the desire also, alas, to talk with Sartre.¹⁹⁴

As we can see from the entries, Beauvoir comes to a somewhat late encounter with Hegel, but his influence is swift and integral. She credits him, at the time, with a renewed desire to study philosophy. And even though it is clear that Beauvoir has already begun her novel, and thus had the plot for the novel pretty well solidified, she finds in Hegel a perfect correlate for the theme that she wants the novel to explore. Thus, further explication of Hegel is necessary.

In the *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel gives an account of his theory of consciousness.¹⁹⁵ Included in this work is a section that outlines the confrontation of consciousnesses. Ironically, although Beauvoir was not familiar with Hegel's work at the time, the process through which she comes to recognition of the consciousness of the Other closely follows that which Hegel describes

¹⁹³ Ibid., 304.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 306.

¹⁹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, "The Phenomenology of Mind," text, accessed March 28, 2014, http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hegel/phenomenology_of_mind/.

in the section called "Self Consciousness" in the *Phenomenology*. The situation begins with one consciousness assuming its own individual existence:

Self-consciousness is primarily simple existence for self, self-identity by exclusion of every other from itself. It takes its essential nature and absolute object to be Ego; and in this immediacy, in this bare fact of its self-existence, it is individual. That which for it is other stands as unessential object, as object with the impress and character of negation.¹⁹⁶

But, according to Hegel, though he describes this as the experience of self-consciousness, this situation does not represent an authentic consciousness because in order for consciousness to exist as self-consciousness, it must in some way recognize the self-consciousness of the Other. Thus, he argues, "Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and hence its own certainty of itself is still without truth."¹⁹⁷ In this phase, self-consciousness cannot exist because it treats itself as if it were *not living*, as if it were not a part of that of which life is made, the mess of the "particularity of existence."

When a self-consciousness finally confronts the Other in a manner that is not like an object, the opportunity for conflict arises. One way of dealing with coming face to face with the Other, Hegel claims, is to sublimate the Other into the self:

Self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness; it has come outside itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other.¹⁹⁸

In this reactionary and narcissistic moment, the self both loses itself and assumes itself as Other. This is reminiscent of how Beauvoir responds to her relationship with Sartre. She does what Hegel describes: recognizes herself as constituting an Other *for* some Other and thereby sublates the Other's consciousness, in effect understanding this Other as sharing the self's own consciousness.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., para. 186.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

An authentic confrontation of consciousnesses, according to Hegel, occurs in concert with the willingness to engage in the struggle of self-consciousness:

Consciousness finds that it immediately is and is not another consciousness, as also that this other is for itself only when it cancels itself as existing for itself, and has self-existence only in the self-existence of the other. Each is the mediating term to the other, through which each mediates and unites itself with itself; and each is to itself and to the other an immediate self-existing reality, which, at the same time, exists thus for itself only through this mediation.¹⁹⁹

Thus, it is only in the recognition of the Other as other that self-consciousness is able to assert itself as self-consciousness. This is important because it speaks to the futility of solipsism. If no other exists in one's world, or, on the other hand, if others exist only as objects in one's world, the very project that the solipsist asserts is failed. One cannot be the sole conscious creator of the world one inhabits. Likewise, sublating the consciousness of the Other is a failed project not only because this is a false relation to the Other, but also because it collapses back into the solipsism it falsely pretends to subvert.

Thus, consciousness must engage in struggle with the Other. This struggle provides the very condition upon which consciousness can assert itself as consciousness. In her *Wartime Diaries* Beauvoir quotes two passages from this section of the *Phenomenology*. The first passage Beauvoir quotes in her *Diaries* (which comes from a later part of the *Phenomenology*) is as follows:

"Inasmuch as it is the other who acts, each consciousness pursues the *death* of the other.... The relation of the two self-consciousnesses is therefore determined as follows: They experience themselves and each other through a struggle to death. *They cannot avoid this struggle since they are forced to raise their certainty of self to the level of truth, their certainty of existing for itself; they each must experience this certainty in themselves and in the other.*" Hegel.²⁰⁰

Beauvoir does not include the sentence that precedes this quote, which adds important context to the passage: "The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person;

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., para. 184.

²⁰⁰ Qtd. in Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 270.

but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.”²⁰¹ Here Hegel sets up the importance of the struggle to death that in action asserts life itself. If one does not engage in the struggle of consciousness, she is not willing to put her very life on the line. A person who chooses not to do this, may indeed still be a personhood, but not one with an authentic self-consciousness. Thus, this struggle to annihilate the consciousness of the Other is a necessary struggle because a consciousness must be willing to risk its own existence in order to assert the merit of its existence. The solipsist does this in jest—because she is the only worthy existent, the annihilation of her consciousness occurs at her own hand. When another consciousness is added to this equation, however, the risk of the annihilation of consciousness becomes far greater, since it is not the self who holds ultimate power, but rather another consciousness who may assert power over one's existence. But Hegel's point is that this heightened risk is the only manner through which consciousness can exist for itself. The situation of *my* consciousness being jeopardized and my struggle to keep this from occurring raises my selfhood to the level of truth. I am truly acknowledging the existence of my own consciousness and the consciousness of the Other only when I understand the threat to my existence as seriously grave.

The second quote Beauvoir includes in the *Diaries*, however, represents the point at which Beauvoir begins to critique Hegel's thesis. Though it occurs in the *Phenomenology* chronologically prior to the first passage she quotes, it reads as follows: "Each self consciousness must pursue the death of the other since it risks its own life in the process, since it does not value the other more than itself; the essence of the other appears to self-consciousness as other, as external, and it must surpass this exteriority." Hegel, *Ph.* P 143-150"²⁰² This is the initial reaction that leads to an authentic confrontation with the Other. We recognize the Other as external to ourselves, i.e., not just an

²⁰¹ Hegel, "The Phenomenology of Mind," para. 187.

²⁰² Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 270.

aspect of our own consciousness. This realization, if taken seriously, leads us to desire the death of the Other since, as Hegel asserts, we do not "value the other" more than our own selves. Another aspect of this realization is our acknowledgement that the Other also experiences us as exteriority. Later in *Wartime Diaries*, Beauvoir contemplates this situation, especially as it is related to intimate relationships. She writes:

Relationships between people—how each one can be only exteriority, facticity for the other—and is, therefore, in the wrong and overrun by his being for others—and can never reach the other except in his exteriority. This precludes him from taking a *moral* point of view on the other in his actions (from the other's point of view), but only the point of view of facticity.²⁰³

Here, Beauvoir takes Hegel's insight one step further. She makes the connection between our inability to reach the Other except through his exteriority and the possibility of ethics. She questions whether this precludes us from being able to take an authentically moral stance toward the Other. Can we reach and account for the consciousness of the Other if we only experience the Other in his exteriority?

While it would be a stretch solely to credit Beauvoir's engagement with Hegel with her changing her mind about the recognition of the Other, in the *Wartime Diaries*, we are afforded an account of Beauvoir's engagement with Hegel regarding this matter. Fortuitously, the very situations, as recounted in *Wartime Diaries* and *Prime of Life*, that challenge Beauvoir's solipsistic worldview become the situations that lead Beauvoir to reevaluate her position on the Other and guide her to a reevaluation of her position on the importance of ethics—how she deals with the absence of her lovers Sartre and Bost, her relationships with her female lovers, Kos, Sorokine, and Vedrine, her growing frustration with the war, the solace and assistance she receives from other people in wartime. With regard to the Hegelian idea of the confrontation with the Other, Beauvoir considers, "Another aspect of the consciousness of the other: in a sense it is the enemy. But then again,

²⁰³ ON THE NOVEL 1941? ; *Ibid.*, 322.

nothing has value except through it (Hegel)... If the meaning of the value of these consciousnesses disappears, then the value of mine does not exist either. A profound Hegelian idea on the *mutual recognition of consciousness*.²⁰⁴ Here her emphasis is less on the struggle and more on what she begins to consider the more important insight gained from Hegel—that it is only through the Other, despite this engagement being characterized by contention, that the existence of the self achieves importance (and, in the words of Hegel, "truth"). My consciousness only has value insofar as it is recognized by the Other and vice versa. So while the Other can be understood as enemy, this does not represent the sum total of my engagement with the Other. If this thesis can be preserved, there may be the possibility for me to understand my engagement with the Other outside of this struggle.²⁰⁵

On January 9, 1941, she writes:

One idea that struck me so strongly in Hegel is the exigency of mutual recognition of consciousness—it can serve as a foundation for a social view of the world—the only absolute being this human consciousness, exigency of *freedom* of each consciousness in order for the recognition to be valid and free: recognition in love, artistic expression, action, etc. At the same time, the existential [*sic*] idea that human reality *is* nothing other than what it *makes itself* be, that toward which it transcends itself. This brings about the metaphysical tragedy of fascism—it is not just a matter of stifling an expression but of absolutely denying a certain being, a matter, really, of confusing the human with its animal, biological aspect. And according to the other idea of Heidegger that the human species and I are the same thing, it's really *I* that am at stake.²⁰⁶

Here she begins with the Hegelian thesis of the mutual recognition and then asserts that the consciousness of the Other is of the utmost importance because it is "the only absolute." From there, she highlights an aspect of this mutual recognition that Hegel does not prioritize: freedom.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ There is a possibility that this interpretation of Hegel is a misinterpretation. Robert Williams, in "Hegel's Ethics of Recognition," claims that Hegel affirms mutual recognition in principle, but not in practice, so while B understands Hegel to be suggesting that we must engage in mutual recognition in practice, this may be her own projection of Hegel. Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997).

²⁰⁶ January 9, 1941; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 319.

The insight is that not only is recognition of the consciousness of the Other the condition for one's self-consciousness, but this recognition only becomes valid as a *free* engagement. While Hegel asserts that the struggle to death is necessary, he does not acknowledge the importance of the free choice to enter into this relationship of struggle. As such, the necessity of entering into engagement with the Other in the mode of struggle is put into question. Because freedom may be defined as the ability to choose, it opens us up to be able to choose how we are to engage with the Other once we have truly recognized the Other in an authentic manner, a manner that understands that it is only through the recognition of the consciousness of the Other that we are able to exist as subjects. Beauvoir couples this insight with the assertion that a human being is a transcendence, an entity that seeks to exist beyond itself. In this sense, a human being is only that which he makes himself be. In this way, Beauvoir turns her former solipsism on its head: the human being creates her reality through her choice, but in order to make the choice, the choice must be made freely and with recognition of the Other. Because fascism denies others their freedom of choice and also is a mode of engaging with other human subjects in such a way that does not recognize the consciousness of other subjects, it is a denial of mutual recognition. Beauvoir reads this through Heidegger, who makes the stronger mutual recognition claim that I am the same as the entirety of humanity. So again, if the consciousnesses of individual members of the human family are not recognized, then I am not acknowledged as a consciousness. This puts me back in the place where I am only an object in the consciousness of others. And thus I am not human. And so, it may still be the case that recognizing the self-consciousness of the Other is the only way to ensure one's own self-consciousness, but it may not be necessary that the recognition must concurrently imply struggle.

We can see, then, how Beauvoir begins to challenge the necessity of struggle in recognition. This is the beginning of Beauvoir's philosophical ethical turn. In addition to her thoughts about how this is related to the situation of fascism, she is also curious about how to illustrate this insight in her

writing. During this time, Beauvoir has completed her work on *She Came to Stay* and considers the subject matter of her next novel. She writes on January 29, 1941:

I would like my next novel to illustrate this relation to the other in its existentiel [*sic*] complexity. It's a beautiful subject. *To suppress* the other's consciousness is a bit puerile. The problem gets back to the social, etc. but must start off from an individual case. I must find a subject-object relationship; perhaps simply a case of unrequited love.²⁰⁷

She claims that in this new work, she wants to describe how it is to mutually recognize the Other, while acknowledging that one must respect the freedom of the Other. We can see here that her idea of how we must engage the Other has radically altered. She refers to the suppression of the Other's consciousness as "puerile." And even more importantly, she asserts that in order to adequately describe this situation in her novel, she must begin with an individual case. She gestures here toward the way in which the social challenges the thesis of the suppression of the Other, but proffers that it *must* start off from an individual case.

Beauvoir's Wartime Theoretical Engagement

I have already described Beauvoir's disinterest in ethics in Chapter Two. In her early life, Beauvoir was very clear that the subject of ethics held no interest for her. Simons notes in her "Introduction" to *Wartime Diaries*, Beauvoir "gave such scant attention to moral philosophy that students in her 1937-1938 classes were left unprepared for questions on moral philosophy in the national examinations in philosophy."²⁰⁸ Beauvoir herself speaks to her inadequacy at teaching ethics to her students in *Prime of Life*. "When, about the middle of the year, I embarked upon ethics things went awry," she notes with humor.²⁰⁹ Beyond her disinterest in teaching ethics, Beauvoir was also not interested in discussing ethics in her intellectual conversations within her social circle. Sartre

²⁰⁷ January 29, 1941; *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁰⁸ Simons, "Introduction," 9.

²⁰⁹ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 111.

joined her in this disinterest. She says by way of explaining their position, "We regarded any existing situation as raw material for our joint efforts, and not as a factor conditioning them: we imagined ourselves to be wholly independent agents."²¹⁰ It was because of their understanding of themselves as individuals who were able to control and mold their own circumstances that Beauvoir and Sartre felt there was no need to discuss ethics more generally. This also hearkens back to Beauvoir's solipsistic view during that time period. There is no way for a solipsist to be ethical since the very notion of ethics implies the existence of others and how we *ought* to act toward these others.

Beauvoir also connects this disinterest in ethics to her socioeconomic class. Although both she and Sartre had some cursory class-consciousness insofar as they acknowledged the plight of those in the working class, they did not see themselves as needing to be involved in the work on behalf of the struggle of others. Because they understood themselves as able to assert their agency in circumstances that they faced, and, furthermore, that other people also possessed this keen sense of agency, they did not think of ethics as tantamount to their experience of the world. She writes, "In this respect our morality remained bourgeois and idealist. We fondly supposed that we were representative of mankind as a whole; and thus, all unknown to ourselves, we demonstrated our identity with the very privileged class that we thought to repudiate."²¹¹ So, despite their disgust with the hypocrisy of their social class, they did not manage to be self-critical about how their views fell into the same paradigm.

It would stand to reason that if Beauvoir and Sartre had some kind of interest in the circumstances of those in the working class, they would understand the need to *do* something about it. As Beauvoir describes, their disinterest in ethics extended to their disinterest in politics, in the

²¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹¹ Ibid., 49.

institutions set up to instantiate the ethical mandates of any particular society. They understood their contribution to the world to revolve around their dedication to literature. She states:

We did not envisage contributing to this change except by the way of books: public affairs bored us. We counted on events turning out according to our wishes without any need for us to mix in them personally. In this respect our attitude was characteristic of that general euphoria affecting the French Left during the autumn of 1929.²¹²

So their attitude reflected not only their social class, but also their "political affiliation" during that time. Although they held liberal views, they did not acknowledge that holding said views may also have implicated them in taking some kind of action that accorded with those views.

The shift toward understanding the value of ethics and the political is one of the, if not the, most important philosophical shifts Beauvoir undergoes. It is this turn that goes on to characterize the theme of her writing for the rest of her life. I have already discussed some of the lived situations that contributed to her dismissing a solipsistic view. These same situations also proved to affect her attitude toward the ethical and the political as well. In addition to the changing circumstances brought about by WWII, in her *Wartime Diaries* and *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir describes some of the philosophers with whom she finds herself in dialogue, with regard to their views about the individual and her place in history. As we have seen previously, during this time, Beauvoir reads Hegel in more detail in order to understand his system. While her initial engagement with Hegel focused on his concept of the Other, as she reads Hegel further and her experience during wartime affects her views, she begins to look more closely at Hegel's account of history. In addition to Hegel, Beauvoir makes reference to Heidegger during this time and it is through her engagement with these thinkers that we are able to trace her burgeoning conversion to the ethical.

Hegel's Account of History

²¹² Ibid., 14.

In July of 1940, Beauvoir writes, as I have mentioned, of visiting the Bibliothèque Nationale to work on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. At this time the War is in full swing and Beauvoir turns to Hegel out of a desire to engage herself in some kind of philosophical task in order to have a project about which to concern herself. However, Hegel's philosophy also becomes instructive for her understanding of her personal experience. The ethical stance that she and Sartre had taken prior to this time, in its essence, was a rejection of the idea that individuals are an integral part of the development of history, at least in a Hegelian sense. "No one possessed the necessary equipment to grasp the over-all pattern of this new world then coming about, which could not be understood at all except in its totality. Nevertheless I carried my rejection of History and its dangers to extraordinary lengths," she writes.²¹³ Because Beauvoir viewed herself as an individual consciousness that had the power to confer meaning on the world, the idea that History had the power to impose uncontrollable circumstances on persons, was one to which Beauvoir was initially very resistant.

But as she begins to engage more closely with Hegel, Beauvoir comes to see how Hegel's view of history speaks to the circumstances that she now experiences. "I went on reading Hegel, and was now beginning to understand him rather better. His amplitude of detail dazzled me, and his system as a whole made me feel giddy. It was, indeed, tempting to abolish one's individual self and merge with Universal Being [*Geist*], to observe one's own life in the perspective of Historical Necessity..."²¹⁴ The system that Beauvoir refers to here is described most clearly in Hegel's posthumously published lectures on *The Philosophy of History* (originally published in 1937). Most famously, it is in this work that Hegel offers his account of the development of history.

One of Hegel's projects in this work is to give an account of "philosophic history." As these lectures were given after *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel shifts focus here and he now wants to

²¹³ Ibid., 438.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 564.

describe the movement of history and proffers that history has taken the form of development with regard to increasingly complex instantiations of freedom. The eventual teleology of world history is Spirit's recognition of itself. He writes, "...we can say of world history that it is the exhibition of the Spirit, the working out of the explicit knowledge of what it is potentially. Just as the germ of the plant carries within itself the entire nature of the tree, even the taste and shape of its fruit, so the first traces of Spirit virtually contain all history."²¹⁵ In this way, history is always in the process of realizing its potential. In a particularly poignant passage, Hegel writes:

The principle of *development* also implies that there is an inner determination, an implicitly presupposed ground that is to bring itself into existence. In its essence, this formal determination is Spirit, which uses world history as its theatre, its property, and the field of actualization. Spirit does not toss itself about in the external play of chance occurrences; on the contrary, it is that which determines history absolutely, and it stands firm against the chance occurrences which it dominates and exploits for its own purpose.²¹⁶

As well as attempting to explain the meaning of what would be considered unjust or unjustified acts or moments in history, this passage also reinforces the importance of Spirit. Spirit moves according to the principle of development, exploiting chance occurrence in its wake. History develops in accord with the determination of Spirit.

It is this description of the development of Spirit that has led some readers of Hegel to suggest that the agency of the individual is absent in his account of world history, a criticism that is also often leveled against Marx, whom Sartre famously went on to describe in Hegelian terms. It would appear that this is also Beauvoir's interpretation, as is evidenced by her stated attraction to the idea of abolishing "one's individual self." While the individual, insofar as he is an aspect of history, is determined by history's movement, Hegel's account is slightly more nuanced. It is by virtue of the fact that history only exists as such because of the actions of individuals that the acts of individuals

²¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Leo Rauch, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History: With Selections from The Philosophy of Right* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Pub. Co., 1988), 21.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

hold importance. "This imponderable mass of wills, interests, and activities—these are the tools and means of the World Spirit for achieving its goal, to elevate it to consciousness and to actualize it," Hegel writes.²¹⁷ As such, Spirit utilizes individuals in order to reach its teleological end. This, however, does not negate the importance of this "mass of wills," at least to their particular selves. Hegel terms the situated desires and conscious goals of individuals their "passions." He explains, "This may be called the *Cunning of Reason*, that it allows the passions to work for it..."²¹⁸

So it is that individuals place importance on their particular passions, all the while unaware that Spirit is using them for its aims. However, it is important to emphasize that without these passions, Spirit would have no means to develop. Thus, it is imperative that individuals perceive their desires and goals as important. "But in the course of world history itself, conceived as being still on the march, the pure end-goal of history is still not the content of need and interest, and although need and interest are unaware of the end-goal, the universal is still implicit in particular goals and fulfills itself in them."²¹⁹ So while it is not the case that, as Beauvoir claims, the individual, in assessing her life, observes her lived experience in the context of historical necessity since this drive is "unconscious," Hegel does contend that human lives are subject to the development and teleology of Spirit.

Beauvoir's turn to Hegel's account of the philosophy of history during this period in her life stands to reason. On the one hand, she feels herself at the throes of history, having to deal with the situation of the war over which she has no control; at the same time she is reevaluating her understanding of the Other. Having contemplated the struggle inherent in recognition, Beauvoir has

²¹⁷ Ibid., 28.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

already taken up what she understands to be an important portion of Hegel's philosophy. She writes in *Prime of Life*:

...because of the difficult period I was going through, I was occasionally tempted by dreams of that calm and neutral state in which being and nothingness coincide. From an intellectual viewpoint this confrontation of the individual and the universal was the merest cliché but for me it was as original and actual an experience as my revelation concerning the existence of rational awareness in others. I considered making it the theme of my next novel.²²⁰

Indeed, one can draw a connection between Hegel's account of history and his account of mutual recognition. The master/bondsman portion of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* remains one of the most controversial portions of the text, as interpretations of the passage's intent and centrality in Hegel's system differ widely. Some scholars suggest that the section be viewed as a metaphor for both the self-consciousness of individuals and the self-consciousness of Spirit. As such, Spirit undergoes a process of recognition with itself, just as consciousnesses undergo the process of recognizing one other. In this way, history works itself out much like reason. Much like the individual consciousness encounters the consciousness of the Other and they struggle unto death, so, too, does history move. But unlike the struggle unto death that consciousness undergoes, there is a definite resolution in History, at least as Hegel understands it: 'The end of History' is the telos of the historical.

Beauvoir appears to take up this notion that the struggle unto death is a type of microcosm of the movement of history. In *Prime* she writes of an early attitude of wanting to engage historical necessity "...with a detachment that also carried implication concerning [her] attitude to death."²²¹ The connection she attempts to make here is one that centers on her desire to evade the dangers of confrontation. When one confronts one's individual sense of agency with regard to history, one

²²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 565.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 564.

must take up the responsibility for this agency (and the possible failure this also implies) or one must consider oneself as a part of historical necessity, such that one abandons responsibility for how one's actions affect the course of history. The failure implicit in the latter attitude is intimately connected to consciousness of one's own death. As such, it is comforting to understand oneself as detached from the process of history since this also implies detachment from realization of one's own death. This might be one reason why Beauvoir comes to abandon Hegel's account of history. She becomes less interested in trying to evade her position in history and trying to evade consciousness of the responsibility of having to deal with eminent death.

This aversion to evasion also connects to Beauvoir's abandonment of the necessity of struggle in recognition. Beauvoir turns from her solipsism into recognition of the Other because she comes to acknowledge that in order to have true self-consciousness, one must recognize the consciousness of the Other. In this sense, she comes to accept that danger that recognizing the Other implies. One's consciousness is placed in jeopardy by the Other when one recognizes the Other—but this is the only way that one can form a true self-consciousness. So we have to take up this danger if we are to have valid self-consciousness. We become, in some sense, responsible for ensuring the validity of our consciousness, especially when this process of recognition is coupled with the concept of freedom. Likewise, when we decide not to subsume our consciousness into the blind movement of history, we take up the responsibility that our actions entail. Beauvoir's questioning of Hegel illustrates her growing need to be responsible for her own individual actions. Thus, an emphasis on both freedom and responsibility, with regard to both recognition and understanding of history, take center stage in Beauvoir's understanding of herself, especially as it relates to others.

Beauvoir's Turn from Hegel to Heidegger

With regard to history, at least, Beauvoir sees her new need to be responsibly reflected more in Heidegger than in Hegel. Her transition from a Hegelian to a Heideggerian account of history is recounted in *Wartime Diary*. As the War roils on, Beauvoir contemplates her place as an individual in the face of a history she cannot control. She writes:

Hegel or Heidegger? Why would my individual destiny be so precious if consciousness can transcend itself? I can't decide. At times it seems to me that the Hegelian-Marxist universal point of view deprives life of all meaning. Then again I think that perhaps individuality as such has no meaning and that wanting to give it one is a delusion. The idea of personal *salvation*—but why that idea? (Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Kafka, etc.) Does it have meaning? Where is the truth and where is the delusion? Do we need only to *think* that it has meaning?²²²

It is clear, then, that as Beauvoir moves from her affinity with Hegel into a newly developing encounter with Heidegger, she attempts better to understand how she fits into her historical moment. While it was comforting for a time to think of her place in history as merely playing into a kind of historical dialectic, since this, in a sense, relieved her of personal responsibility, as she comes more and more to consider how her actions and the actions of others are intertwined, she desires an account that will accommodate this new interest. Beauvoir tells Sartre of reading Heidegger in *Letters to Sartre* on July 7, 1939: "several hours yesterday constituted excellent circumstances for reading Heidegger, whom I've almost finished and managed to understand — at least superficially. In other words, I know what he means but can't check out the difficulties, though I'm aware of heaps of them."²²³ It is not clear with what work of Heidegger Beauvoir begins her studies, but at the time of her writing, it is most likely that only *Being and Time* was translated into French and widely available.

²²² January 21, 1941; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 320.

²²³ Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 687–688 Kindle Location.

As such, we can assume that when Beauvoir speaks of Heidegger's understanding of history, she is referring to his account as presented in *Being and Time*.

Scholars differ somewhat on how they understand Heidegger's view of history. His lecture "The Concept of Time" was published in 1924, three years before *Being and Time*. Daniela Vallega-Neu quotes the Heidegger lecture: "Philosophy will never discover what history is as long as it analyzes it as an object, in terms of a method. The enigma of history lies in what it means to *be* historical."²²⁴ Here, Heidegger focuses on how subjects *are* within history *as* historical subjects, as opposed to trying to understand how history moves outside of or beyond subjects themselves. In this way, we could understand Heidegger to be suggesting that history is important to us as subjects insofar as we want to understand ourselves *as historical subjects*, not as we want to understand history beyond our lived experience of this history. This appears to speak to Beauvoir's newly articulated turn from wanting to understand history abstractly to wanting to understand her individual place in it as she goes about daily life. She wants to better understand how she as an individual experiences history, how these experiences are important in the here and now and not in some abstract way. This loss of the abstraction places more weight on our individual actions and gives us more responsibility as subjects. If we think of ourselves as relating to the historical in a more immediate manner, then it might be the case that we have a greater level of responsibility.

While the exact importance of history to Heidegger's overall account of being is, at this point, ambiguous (not to mention our lack of information regarding the commentators with whom Beauvoir engages in her pursuit of understanding Heidegger), we can gather a general Heideggerian theory of history. Contra Hegel, for Heidegger, it is not the case that history is seeking some kind of

²²⁴ Qtd. in Daniela Vallega-Neu, "Rhythmic Delimitations of History: On Heidegger and History," *Idealistic Studies* 38, no. 1/2 (2008): 92.

ultimate resolution. There is not the Spirit behind history, compelling it to move forward into some teleological end. Timothy Clark writes:

The overall shifting of epochs is not liable to human control, nor can there be any sort of logic of the transitions from one epoch to another, nor, certainly, can they be said to progress. Heidegger argues that the 'sequence of epochs in the destiny of Being is not accidental, nor can it be calculated as necessary' (TB: 9)... There is no underlying rationale or motive for history. Of course, various contingencies and events can be traced, to, say, how the Roman world supplanted the Greek—as Heidegger writes such things are 'not accidental'—but that is not to find some hidden law of history. Ultimately, like human existence itself, it is without a 'why' (has nothing we might recognize as meaning): it happened because it happened.²²⁵

As we can see, this is a very different stance toward the meaning of the historical than that which we get from Hegel.

It should be clear, then, insofar as Heidegger's account of history disregards Hegel's narrative interpretation, that Heidegger sees himself as responding directly to Hegel, on this matter and crucial others.²²⁶ Scholars divide Hegel's writing into two major periods: that of *Phenomenology* and post-*Phenomenology*. Gadamer suggests the Heidegger responds primarily to Hegel's first major period:

In the mid-twenties, Heidegger was testing his mettle not only against Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but also his *Logic*. It should not surprise us that he preferred the former to the latter. Like the rest of us, he always felt that there was a vague convergence of the later Husserl's 'genetic' phenomenology with the early project of Hegel's which is presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Thus the only confrontation with Hegel that was made public was devoted to the 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology*.²²⁷

This places Heidegger in direct relation to Hegel, and more specifically in relation to Hegel's earlier period of writing. As such, Beauvoir is correct in placing Hegel and Heidegger in conversation with one another. Beauvoir sees her conflicting feelings about her place in history as being typified by these two philosophers.

²²⁵ Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, 2nd ed, Routledge Critical Thinkers (New York, New York: Routledge, 2011), 34.

²²⁶ I believe this is important to note because most often Heidegger is viewed as responding directly to Husserl.

²²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Heidegger and the History of Philosophy," *Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 64 (1981): 441.

Beauvoir is particularly concerned with the position of the individual with respect to history. Because Heidegger's account of history does not follow the Hegelian teleological model, it is important to understand why Beauvoir may have interpreted Heidegger as suggesting that the meaning of individual experience is more typical of our experience of history than some overarching narrative. Gail Soffer clarifies:

Heidegger develops his account of scientific history in the spirit of the Nietzschean concern that history be relevant to 'life.' A familiar centerpiece of this account is his distinction in *Being and Time* between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. *Geschichte* is the lived, existential-phenomenological historicity of man, grounded in care, Being-towards-death, and the fore-structures of the understanding. *Geschichte* appropriates the past out of the 'destining' (*Geschick*) of cares and concerns rooted in lived temporality and community, and with an eye towards transformation of the present into the future. (45) By contrast, *Historie* is a reflective, scientific objectification of *Geschichte*. (46) In its usual, inauthentic form, it reduces the past to an object of idle curiosity or aesthetic contemplation, robbing history of its transformative, future-oriented destining power...²²⁸

This harkens back to the description of history that Heidegger suggests in "The Concept of Time." In his delineation of *Historie* and *Geschicht* from *Being and Time*, Heidegger seeks to make clear how one understanding of the movement of time (*Geschichte*) is more authentic than the other (*Historie*). *Geschichte* characterizes an experience of history grounded in the lived and oriented toward the future. In this sense, it connects to Beauvoir's idea that Heidegger is more focused on how the subject experiences history in the individual sense. Within this framework, our lives are a part of history only insofar as we experience living them (not to the denial of the past or the future).

What bearing might this have, then, on what we take to be the meaning of our lives? Apparently Beauvoir believes that her understanding of Heidegger's account of history holds weight for how the individual understands his own life relative to history. She writes in *Prime*, "Heidegger had convinced me that 'human reality is accomplished and expressed in each separate living

²²⁸ Gail Soffer, "Heidegger, Humanism, and the Destruction of History," *Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 3 (1996): 548.

entity.”²²⁹ Here, again, she uses Heidegger to bolster her view of the importance of the individual's lived experience, such that one's own experience holds importance for the totality of human reality. Every human individual, as an individual, and thus part of history, contributes to the whole. In this, she underscores her aforementioned stance. This interpretation is imperative to Beauvoir's conversion into the ethical, but we would be remiss to follow Beauvoir's interpretation wholeheartedly. Soffer cautions:

...here we need to be careful. For Heidegger himself frequently rejects the idea that history is to be interpreted by projecting one's own private or local *Weltanschauung* unto the past, characterizing this as willfulness and subjectivism. Even as early as *Being and Time*, he denies that truth in the sense of unconcealment is determined by the aims, wishes, or will of the individual. (59) Thus if the Nietzschean conception means that authentic history is to be created either out of the arbitrary, artistic free choice of the individual, or that it is determined by his personal or cultural world-view and interest, then this conception does not correspond to Heidegger's own self-understanding.²³⁰

In this Soffer suggests that Beauvoir's interpretation of Heidegger may be incorrect. It is not the case that the individual's own experience *is* history, according to Heidegger.

So what are we to make of Beauvoir's misinterpretation of Heidegger here? It seems clear that in the struggle between Hegel and Heidegger, Beauvoir elevates both Hegel and Heidegger to an almost animated level. So it is not so important to my account here *that* she misinterprets these philosophers in whatever way she does, but rather *how* she misinterprets them. Since this is a transitional period in her intellectual and social life, Beauvoir desires intellectual influences that will reflect to her what she should make of her experience and developing relationship to ethics. Maybe even more than misinterpretation, we could say that Beauvoir presents a simplistic understanding of these philosophers, such that they serve her needs at her points of conversion. So these authors prove important our understanding of Beauvoir's conversions, not only because they give us a guide

²²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 566.

²³⁰ Soffer, “Heidegger, Humanism, and the Destruction of History,” 549.

whereby to understand her articulation of certain concepts, but they also, again, ground Beauvoir in historical intellectual lineages which we can see that she clearly incorporates and responds to in her thinking. Thus, we see Beauvoir making more of her experience here than just mere observation—rather, she is learning how to shape her experience such that her intellectual understanding of the experience becomes inseparable from her lived experience of the experience. In this way, she takes what she needs and discards the rest because she is in the process of formulating a theory of her own.

This positioning of Hegel and Heidegger is particular to Beauvoir's formulation of her account of individual with relation to history and to others. As such, these two figures become fundamental to Beauvoir's wrestling with the ideas involved in understanding and formulating an ethics:

Sophism. In a sense, certainly, only the individual point of view is true: but with respect to my individuality alone, and only as I *experience* it, not as I think it. I cannot think the masses and claim to think them as *subject*—that's the error Levy makes when he says that one dead or a million dead is the same. Only *my* death is unique, and I cannot really live the death of *an* other as *my* death. That's the false Kantian universalism of the subject. A social thought must deliberately take men as object.²³¹

Here, although this insight comes during the time that Beauvoir turns away from the Hegelian model of history, it does seem that this insight hearkens back to her earlier revelation concerning the importance of understanding the Other *as* other. I cannot "live the death of *an* other as *my* death" because the Other is not I. So while Beauvoir here argues both for the importance of the subject's lived experience and our inability to live the subjectivity of the Other (thus, "A social thought must deliberately take men as object"), she does not suggest that we *objectify* the Other. Rather, we must understand that our own experience is primary. Any ethical theory must take this seriously. We can

²³¹ January 29, 1941; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 321.

engage in authentic recognition of the Other, but we must not collapse the subjectivity of the Other into our own.

This line of reasoning also connects to Beauvoir's growing obsession with the notion of death. Here, she further attempts to consider the meaning of ethics and how one's individual life might be connected to the lives of others. She builds a logical connection between the notion of death and its relation to ethical action in the same section in which she discusses Heidegger:

The hope of maintaining one's very *being* is the only reason for which I think it is worth accepting death. It's not a matter of having 'reasons for living'—it's not a matter of life, but of something more than that. To make oneself an ant among ants, or a free consciousness facing other consciousnesses. *Metaphysical* solidarity that I newly discovered, I, who was a solipsist. I cannot be consciousness, spirit, among ants. I understand what was wanting in our antihumanism.²³²

Beauvoir tries to reconcile her former understanding of her connection to others who exist in the world. Prior to the happenings of the War, it was clear that Beauvoir and Sartre did not consider important the breadth of their connection to others. The thought of death, then, arises not only out of Beauvoir's growing older, but also out of possibilities that have now been opened up to her through Sartre's engagement in a war in which he might die. Beauvoir wonders how one should understand the specter of death that looms over the lives of us all.

So it is that we may choose to accept a situation that puts us in danger of death if we place ourselves in that situation such that it preserves the meaning of our lives, preserves what we take to be the most dignified state of being. In this way, the idea of maintaining the dignity of our lives, of allowing for the greatest possible state for us to exist, allows us to confront death. But Beauvoir points to even more here—she asserts that it is not merely the conditions of our lives as they exist (our current reasons for living—think here about when people say things like, "I live for my children" or "The only reason I am living is to finish this dissertation"), but rather our very being,

²³² January 9, 1941; *Ibid.*, 320.

our existence *qua* existence in the world, that allows us to put ourselves in the face of danger or in the face of a very compromise of our own lives. So there is more to our existence and our valuing of our existence than just our daily lives and our recurring struggles unto death. Our existence has value merely by virtue of the fact that it is existence. In this way, solidarity (the concept of actively working on the behalf of others) takes on a metaphysical tone. We do not just act on the part of others because of our various intertwined interests, but rather we act on the part of others because we value *existence*.²³³ Indeed, she writes to Sartre on September 7, 1939, that she "needed people round [her], anybody, in order truly to feel immersed in a world event rather than some individual adventure — which would then have turned into a dreadful calamity."²³⁴

This is yet another challenge to the notion of solipsism because it highlights how solipsism, which appears to hold existence (or at least the existence of the self) as the highest value, is a misunderstanding of the notion of existence. Existence itself is not one's singular existence because existence itself does not hold value when it neglects the existence of others. Others are part and parcel of the mere concept of existence such that a singular existence is a contradiction in terms. So it is not the case that my existence supersedes the existence of others such that I create the world around me and am the reason behind the existence of others. Holding to this belief is what Beauvoir terms "antihumanist." Adhering to an idea that only one's own existence is real is a form of denying that which is human, our existence itself.

We can see, then, how Beauvoir's contemplation of her place in history leads her to further consider the relation she has with others. From Hegel, she gathered that the recognition of the consciousness of others is the only way to have true self-consciousness. Interestingly, this leads her to disagree with her understanding of Hegel's account of history, in which the value of individual

²³³ Karen Vintges further explores this idea of how the ethical is intricately connected to a heightened sense of the value of existence. Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion*.

²³⁴ September 7, 1939; Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 942 Kindle Location.

consciousnesses are subsumed into the machinations of History. She takes from Heidegger that history has value only insofar as it is peopled by individual consciousnesses. When combined with what she takes from Hegel concerning recognition (and coupled with her intuition that the recognition of consciousnesses is not, in total, contentious), Beauvoir considers the importance of others such that our understanding of existence is necessarily incomplete if we do not acknowledge these others. These insights are at the heart of Beauvoir's shift toward the ethical, since a deepened understanding of the value of others necessarily includes the question of how one might act such that one's actions affirm such an understanding.

Considering her additional interest in the importance that one's own experience has in the face of such a valuation of existence, I would like, in the next section, to further explore Beauvoir's lived experience during this period in her life. More specifically, I would like to posit that her erotic relationships (and her attendant understandings of these relationships) actualize her theoretical engagement with the concept of the Other. Not only this, but they concurrently lead her away from her solipsistic attitude into an ethical attitude. And furthermore, into an ethics that necessarily includes political engagement. As such, this transition from a solipsistic attitude to an ethical one constitutes Beauvoir's second significant conversion.

Beauvoir's Wartime Lived Experience

In the previous section, I discussed how Beauvoir's theoretical engagement with Hegel and Heidegger displayed her changing attitude toward ethics. As we saw, Beauvoir's theoretical engagement was mirrored by her lived experience during the time. In this section, I would like to focus on Beauvoir's lived experience in order to correlate it with her concurrent new theoretical interests. As she reflects in *Prime of Life*, "It was only when my experience cracked and showed faulty that I was able to step back and discuss it in perspective."²³⁵ In this, she asserts that her lived

²³⁵ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 732.

experience was fundamental to her theoretical revelations. This coupling of experience and theory is one of most important aspects of her philosophy. Here, I would like to present a chronology of the events of Beauvoir's wartime years and illustrate how they are related to her eventual conversion into the ethical, and specifically into a disposition toward the erotic.

Beauvoir describes taking Sartre to the train station to be shipped off to war in a subsequent letter to him:

I could see the minutes I was about to live swollen by those tears I'd just shed — and it gave the most extraordinary sense of a woman in wartime. And then, with a kind of bewilderment, I thought: "It's me, that woman! Me it's happening to." I looked at that from the depths of Space and Time, and for a moment something in me really escaped historicity.²³⁶

This represents the beginning of Beauvoir's "cracked" experience, in which her unsettled life leads to philosophical insight. In this moment, she both lives inside and outside of her experience. In *Prime of Life*, she describes the situation of living in Paris during wartime and identifying with the common experience such a situation implies. She writes, "All Paris was incarnate in me, and I recognized myself in every face I saw. I was stunned by the sheer intensity of my own presence: through some miraculous communal intimacy it extended my awareness till it encompassed every other living soul."²³⁷ The relationship between the individual situation and the experiences of vast others astounds her. It is only through her situation that she is able to recognize the commonality that she has with these others.

As we've seen, besides her relationship with Sartre, Beauvoir was also conducting a relationship with Jacques-Laurent Bost, a younger friend of the both of them, along with their relationship with Olga Kosakiewicz,²³⁸ a former student of Beauvoir's. In an attempt to lessen Olga's hold on their relationship, of which Sartre and Beauvoir were growing tired, they encouraged Bost

²³⁶ October 10, 1939; Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 2362 Kindle Location.

²³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 724.

²³⁸ Sometimes referred to as "Kos." in B's diaries and letters to Sartre.

and Olga to enter into a relationship with one another. Because of this, Beauvoir has to hide her relationship with Bost from Olga during the War. After Olga and Bost became romantically involved, Sartre had begun a relationship with Olga's sister, Wanda. In the course of the War, Beauvoir also maintains intimate relationships with two other women— Nathalie Sorokine and Bianca Bienenfeld²³⁹ (with whom Sartre was also in a relationship). While Sartre remained Beauvoir's biggest romantic and intellectual influence, her engagement with these other people during this time also served to bring her to important revelations. Indeed, I would be remiss to discuss Beauvoir's conversion into the ethical without also mentioning the influences that these other relationships had on her. As I would like to maintain that the erotic is an experience that offers us a unique site of opportunity for engaging in and understanding our ethical relations with others, it is important that I illustrate how such a connection between the lived and the theoretical functioned in Beauvoir's life.

I have already gone into detail about Beauvoir's solipsistic/solaltristic relationship with Sartre immediately prior to the War. It bears repeating, however, that this is the state away from which Beauvoir moves during her war years. Coming out of her engagement with Jacques and finding a partner whom she feels that she can subsume herself into makes Beauvoir want to think of her relationship with Sartre as that of one consciousness. In this wartime period, however, she realizes, because of their physical split from one another, that they do not, after all, share a consciousness. But she does not come to this revelation easily. On January 19, 1940, many months after Sartre's departure into the War, she writes to Sartre that he has given her "all that it's possible to give someone, my dear love. It's still the case that love's no symbiosis — but we'll weep over that some other day."²⁴⁰ In this we see Beauvoir's hesitant unwillingness to let go of the idea that she and Sartre

²³⁹ Bianca Bienenfeld became Bianca Lamblin once married. In *Prime of Life* and *Wartime Diaries* she is referred to as Verdrine.

²⁴⁰ Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 5466 Kindle Location.

are one whole. As she describes it as if she were mourning, it is clear that this is not an idea that it has been easy to discard.

Indeed, just a month later, she writes in her diary, of her love affair with Bost:

I was profoundly happy; this love seems to me as strong and full as possible and I was overjoyed to feel it as profoundly important in Bost's life. I consider Kos as a thing *in* Bost's existence, next to him—and myself, with Sartre, as constituting the very world where Bost lives, just as Sartre and he constitute the world for me, so that this war is really lived by us together, and that together we are awaiting *our* future.²⁴¹

While this description displays some kind of progression from an entirely solipsistic attitude, it is still clear that Beauvoir thinks of her own future in tandem with that of Sartre, and, here, with that of Bost. Other people (including Bost's girlfriend, Olga) factor as mere characters in the lives of she, Sartre and Bost. In this sense, Beauvoir still contends with what it means to consider other people whom she does not view as integral to her own individual life. Kos is merely a "thing in Bost's existence, next to him" because she is not considered to be a part of Beauvoir's constitution of the world. Beauvoir's entire world, even still at this point, is focused on the relationships that she has with her lovers, to the neglect and dismissal of the lives of others.

While it is less difficult to understand how Beauvoir is influenced by her relationship with Sartre, I think it is important to consider the ways in which the relationships that were actually more immediate to her lived experience affected her. While she was able to conduct a relationship with both Sartre and Bost while both were away at war via correspondence and occasional visits, in her everyday life, she had relationships with women. Her relationships with Sartre and Bost seem to have occurred or be occurring in her mind (because of their lack of physical presence), but these other relationships that she conducted with women constituted the majority of her daily life. As such, it makes sense that these daily, intimate relationships that she had with women also contributed to her conversion to the ethical.

²⁴¹ February 16, 1940; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 261.

Since her relationship with Olga had pretty much ended due to Olga's relationship with Bost, Beauvoir spends most of her time during the War Years with Bianca Bienenfeld and Nathalie Sorokine. During this time, Bienenfeld struggles with how to keep her hold both on Beauvoir and on Sartre, even though both are secretly plotting to break off their relationship with her. She demands much of Beauvoir's time and energy as she wrestles for her affections. Sorokine, on the other hand, Beauvoir finds interesting and vibrant. She is still a student and interacts with Beauvoir with a sense of reverence and awe. In comparing the interactions she has with both of these women, Beauvoir comes to learn a few things about how she herself theorizes erotic relationships.

She writes to Sartre:

What Bienenfeld doesn't understand, as I think I've already written to you, is that you have to take the other person into account even during an effusion of passion. You mustn't hand out passion to them like a slap. It must remain a gift made in order to be received, an expression of feeling, a gift granted to and intended for someone — rather than being a mere organic outburst. The Kos sisters, on the other hand, reject the gift — which is also a none [*sic*] too agreeable form of egoism. Sorokine's just exactly as she should be, and that's one of the things about her that attract me.²⁴²

Here Beauvoir describes her frustration with Bienenfeld in terms of the way she deals with the erotic. Beauvoir is uncomfortable with the way Bienenfeld interacts with her—she finds her pushy and overly aggressive. Instead of understanding this as an idiosyncrasy of Bienenfeld's lovemaking style, she sees it rather as a kind of ethical deficiency. Even passion, she suggests, must adhere to the tenants of gifting, of giving to others freely and without aggression and taking into account the needs and situations of the particular persons for whom the gift is being given. She compares Bienenfeld with the Kos sisters, who are not open to the gifting that ethical relations with others imply. Deeming their attitude a "none to agreeable form of egoism," Beauvoir hearkens back to her

²⁴² November 16, 1939; Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 3579–3581 Kindle Location.

own period of solipsistic relations with others. To not engage, not authentically interact, with others is as much an ethical breach as forcing oneself on others.

Indeed, more ethical revelations result from Beauvoir's erotic engagement with Bienenfeld, specifically. Writing again to Sartre about her, she offers, "I've also had the following thought about my relations with her: that the strength of a relation with somebody comes from the fact that you indicate yourselves together in the future (to use Heidegger's vocabulary)."²⁴³ Here, we can clearly see how Beauvoir's intellectual engagement with Heidegger is enhanced by her lived experience. She sees (desires) no future with Bienenfeld (perhaps due to her inability to conduct ethical relations with those with whom she is involved) and notes that the inability to perceive others as part of one's future disavows the possibility of ethical relations with these others. This interdependence, the individual as a projected end that must include the projected ends of others, becomes a huge aspect of her disposition toward the erotic.

She has more to say about how her relationship with Bienenfeld leads her to ethical insight on January 18, 1940:

But that ethical scholasticism of hers is irritating. She didn't understand at all, when I told her morality was above all an existential stance. Indeed, in the whole world she's the being most devoid of any existential feeling. That's what makes her into nothing but a little intelligent monkey — and what's separating us more and more. She doesn't in the least live her situation in the world.... Actually, I'd really like to go more deeply into these ethical questions with you. But I'm sure you're in agreement about rejecting that idea of a morality granted to acts from outside, through imitation of a norm...that being ethical is a matter of being. That you can't just 'do something rotten' with a pretty pout, telling oneself: 'After all, why not?' Nor can you be the least bit moral, when you're working for your own profit.²⁴⁴

As her disgust with Bienenfeld's attitude grows, Beauvoir draws the conclusion that our understanding of our being is intricately connected to our ability to engage ethically. How one

²⁴³ November 24, 1939; *Ibid.*, 3887 Kindle Location.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5435–5442 Kindle Location.

understands oneself as an entity in the world determines one's ethical stance. And furthermore, as existential beings, we are fundamentally connected to others in the world and thereby must also work toward their aims, not solely for our "own profit." She even suggests that she would like to further engage Sartre in ethical discussions. It is very clear, then, that Beauvoir's erotic relationships have greatly aided Beauvoir in the development of her own ethical tenets.

Indeed, she does engage Sartre in discussions of ethics via their letters during wartime. Throughout the War, we can trace a development of Beauvoir's interest in ethics that is tied to her firsthand experience of being at home during the War, especially through these letters. At first, we see her hesitantly suggesting that her experience and the experiences of others during the War have led her to rethink some of her and Sartre's initial stances. She writes on October 8, 1939:

Our stance does seem entirely correct to me — I mean, refusing to move in politics, but on condition we also accept everything without complaint as a cataclysm in which we have taken no part — it's correct and satisfactory when one's thinking of oneself, but for young people who haven't had time to lift a finger it's terribly unjust. We couldn't have done anything — don't feel any remorse for not having done anything — but I do feel remorse when I think it's someone else who'll pay for our impotence.²⁴⁵

Since she and Sartre were committed to philosophical engagement outside of the realm of ethics, she maintains that this commitment made sense to them during the time. Having come in contact with other people affected by the political turmoil of the War, however, she begins to display a sort of empathy and haltingly chides their previous noncommittal, what she refers to as their "impotence." She is beginning to understand how the actions and intellectual stances of herself and those in her circle have grave consequences for many.

Sartre responds by sending Beauvoir some of his initial thoughts on the question of ethics. In her *Wartime Diary* she writes, "Sartre's ideas on will and ethics seemed totally satisfying and

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 2258–2261 Kindle Location.

definitive to me. But I don't know how he is going to give a content to his ethics.”²⁴⁶ And thinking about it further, she suggests to him:

Only I'm greedy for the continuation — I can't at all see how the transition to practical ethics occurs. So far it remains formal — just like Kant's good will, which is defined by the will to be a good will. I find everything right line by line, I only wonder how you'll resolve it; what I must assume; and, when I assume my freedom, what I do with that assumed freedom.²⁴⁷

Here she pushes Sartre to situate his ethics in the lived experience. She appears dissatisfied with the abstract ethical theory he shares. She wants him to consider the ways in which ethics is tied to concrete action. For her, it is not enough that we acknowledge that we are free and that we take this to be an ethical foundation. Rather, it is imperative for the ethical philosopher to suggest how we might live out said freedom.

As she continues to challenge him, we get, yet again, a clear picture of how her lived experience affects her engagement with the ethical. She writes,

Weren't we saying that one couldn't have the same solidarity with the persecuted Jews of Germany which one would have with the Jews of France, and that the fact of being 'situated' necessarily also included frontiers? I'll think about it (but it seems to me that assuming this no more implies patriotism than assuming the war implies being a warmonger). In this case, it's a matter (or isn't it?) of attaining universal objects, ideas, works, etc. through a singular, historical position. What's now needed is to define the position, and limit it, and see what it commits you to.²⁴⁸

Here, we can lucidly see her toying with ideas concerning situatedness, which will become the cornerstone of her later ethical and feminist theory. At this point, she wonders about the relationship between an individual's situation and his/her ability to achieve solidarity. It is important that she has placed the situation first and foremost in her thought, being able to acknowledge both the limitations and implications that our situations have for our selves. We must, she seems to insist,

²⁴⁶ December 14, 1939; Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary*, 192.

²⁴⁷ December 14, 1939; Beauvoir, Hoare, and Le Bon de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, 4449–4452 Kindle Location.

²⁴⁸ January 8, 1940; *Ibid.*, 5177–5180 Kindle Location.

find a way to inhabit our particular situations while maintaining our ability to work toward and for the aims and interests of others who inhabit situations unlike our own.

In a letter to Sartre dated July 19, 1940, we can see a very clear development from her initial thoughts about her place in relation to others. Not only has she taken up the idea of the situation and of freedom, but she makes it clear that her new stance is indebted to her lived experience of the War. Her intellectual engagement with Hegel's account of history and relations with others also shines through this passage. What she has learned through her lived experience she here attempts to integrate with her study of Hegel. She writes of how she has changed her mind about the importance of ethics and how this has opened the gates for a type of optimism:

what meaning the viewpoint of universal life had: a viewpoint that excluded the limitation of death and the being-to-die character of life. It seemed to us then that such a viewpoint reduced everything to a kind of absurd indifference. But I no longer believe that. Basically, such a viewpoint is real And the combined influences of Hegel and events have caused me to adopt from within — for the first time in my life — this attitude, not too far away from Spinozism, that always used to be so alien to me. It's far more accessible and obvious through Hegel, of course, than through Spinoza. Thus I'm living not exactly cocooned in philosophical optimism — for my ideas aren't clear enough — but at least on a philosophical plane such that optimism is possible. I so wish we could make a comparison between your ideas on nothingness, the in-itself, and the for-itself, and the ideas of Hegel. For there are many analogies — although Hegel turns into joy that which for you is instead gloomy and despairing. It seems to me that both are true, and I'd like to find a point of equilibrium.²⁴⁹

Even further, we see here her suggesting the need for "equilibrium" between the joyful state of our being and the anguished attitude that we might take up when confronted with our freedom. As such, she positions herself as a mediator for what she obviously takes to be the ignorantly simplistic ethical theories of Sartre and the philosophical canon to which he is opposed at the time. Such positioning foretells the work that she will attempt in *Ethics*.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 7300–7307 Kindle Location.

Beauvoir's Wartime Conversions

We can see, then, that through a combination of her lived experience and her engagement with philosophy, Beauvoir has undergone yet another conversion. In *Prime of Life*, she describes it as follows: "Events had changed me; what Sartre used to call my 'divided mind' had finally yielded before the unanswerable arguments that reality had brought against it. I was at last prepared to admit that my life was not a story of my own telling, but a compromise between myself and the world at large."²⁵⁰ It is most interesting to note Beauvoir's use of deployment of the idea that reality itself provided her with "arguments." In describing her conversion as such, Beauvoir makes a poignant suggestion about the relationship between the lived and the theoretical. Just as a philosophical text can challenge, on the basis of argumentation, one's views, so, too, can one's experience provide argumentation for challenging one's views. Beauvoir speaks then of "compromise," further suggesting that the two must work together in order to provide a sufficient account of our being.

And, for Beauvoir, the conclusion of this account as experienced during the War Years is "that, whether we like it or not, we do impinge upon other people's destinies, and must face up to the responsibility which this implies."²⁵¹ So both experience and philosophy lead Beauvoir to center the importance of ethics in her thought. And not just any ethics. Beauvoir's new description of ethics implies a sense of responsibility for those with whom we inhabit the world. And this ethics necessarily extends to an interest and participation in politics. For, as Beauvoir notes in *Prime of Life*, "[Their friend Paul] Nizan had been right in his contention that there is no way of avoiding political engagement; to abstain from politics is in itself a political attitude."²⁵² So it is that Beauvoir's ethic of

²⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 584.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 733.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 432.

lived experience developed both from and into her disposition toward the erotic, which necessarily includes the connection between ethics and political engagement.

Conclusion

I have attempted thus far to illustrate how Beauvoir's experience during the War Years led her to a second conversion in her positioning toward the erotic, the Other, and ethics. She writes in *Prime of Life*, "It is impossible to assign any particular day, week or even month to the conversion that took place in me about this time. But there is no doubt that the spring of 1939 marked a watershed in my life. I learned the value of solidarity."²⁵³ Beauvoir transitions from a solipsistic (and solaltristic) attitude into one that recognizes the importance of valuing the Other. This transition occurs as a result of her experience with her lovers, whether they be away at war, as in the case of Sartre and Bost, or there with her in Paris, as in the case of her female lovers, and her engagement with the philosophy of Hegel and Heidegger.

Arguably, Beauvoir's newfound interest in the ethical becomes, as we have seen, her most important contributions to existentialism. While at this point in her development, Beauvoir's ethics remains nascent—it will be years until she writes *Pyrrhus and Cineas*—but we can get a sense of the seeds of what will become Beauvoir's ethics, and specifically Beauvoir's disposition of the erotic, which was the focus of Chapter Two. We can see even at this stage in her life that Beauvoir prioritizes the concepts of freedom, openness, acknowledgment of material and institutional conditions and the necessity for ethics to also imply a commitment to political, and some might say, liberatory engagement.

²⁵³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5: BLACK FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND THE EROTIC

Having discussed the importance of attending to Beauvoir's early autobiographical writings for a more robust understanding of the development of her disposition toward the erotic, I now want to turn to a discussion of black feminism and the erotic. I want to lay the groundwork here for a more careful consideration of the ways in which Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic that emerges from her early autobiographical writings and black feminism correlate.

We can locate much of black feminist output in black women's response to their experiences. While, as I have mentioned, we can generally view the project of feminism as one concerned with establishing the conditions that best allow human beings to flourish and fighting to change such conditions that do not, in the case of black feminism, these responses have been to many such circumstances that are effects of anti-black and anti-woman oppression. As such, examination of black women's experience is key to understanding black feminism. Indeed, as George Yancy notes, "Within the context of black feminist thought, then, which is by no means monolithic, there is an emphasis placed upon the *lived* texture of experience and how that experience, and the knowledge production that comes out of that experience, is fundamentally shaped according to historical and cultural location."²⁵⁴

When we attend to the lived experience of black women, we may note that the concept of embodiment is one that black feminists, and those who attend to antiblackness in general, pay special attention to. We might say even that black feminist thought articulates a special condition of the lived experience of blackness: that of overdetermination. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White*

²⁵⁴ George Yancy, "Philosophy and the Other of the Second Sex," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marciano, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 241.

Masks, notes of his experience as a black man in an antiblack world, "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance."²⁵⁵ In this, Fanon points to the idea that the black body always carries with it historical baggage on the mere basis of its appearance. This baggage makes it such that individual black bodies are imbued with meanings that are determined beyond the particular bodies themselves, to the detriment of the subjectivities contained within these bodies. Lewis Gordon explains, "Overdetermination saturates consciousness in the flesh with the quality of being a thing, a form of being-in-itself. With such weight, the black body is confronted by the lived-experience of its absence."²⁵⁶ While such overdetermination is a condition that applies to black bodies in general, black women's bodies are notably marked in this manner and black feminists have done well to call attention to this condition.

One of the most well-noted aspects of black women's embodiment has been the sexualization of black bodies. From exploring tropes like the mammy and the jezebel to contemporary discussions of black women and hip hop, black feminist intellectual production focuses on the ways in which black bodies are often encountered and read as sexual objects. As Hill Collins notes, black women's bodies have become "icons of hypersexuality."²⁵⁷ This objectification has served the purpose of denying the humanity and inner lives of black women and black people as a whole. The sexualization of the black body has not only affected the ways that black people are understood by those outside of the black community, but it has also had historical effects on intra-racial relations as well. A black woman's body, understood as an object in service of a master during the period of enslavement, for instance, cultivated an ambivalent relationship to black women's

²⁵⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, New York: Grove Press, 1967), 116.

²⁵⁶ Lewis R. Gordon, "The Black and the Body Politic: Fanon's Existential Phenomenological Critique of Psychoanalysis," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, Blackwell Critical Readers (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 78.

²⁵⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 30.

bodies on the part of both white and black men.²⁵⁸ As such, fighting against the devaluation of the black, female body is a fundamental aspect of the black feminist project as posed against both inter- and intra-communal politics.

As such, we might say that the erotic is a contested concept for black feminists. Because black women suffer at the hands of being their hypersexualization, sexuality might be viewed as a weapon that might only be used *against* black women. Thus, it may make sense to conclude that, the erotic is the type of tool that cannot be used to dismantle the master's house. In other words, is it dangerous to explore the liberatory possibilities of that which has been used to oppress you? Hill Collins speaks to this aporia:

Sexuality becomes a domain of restriction and repression when this energy is tied to the larger system of race, class, and gender oppression. But [Audre] Lorde's words also signal the potential for Black women's empowerment by showing sexuality and the erotic to be a domain of exploration, pleasure, and human agency. From a Black feminist standpoint sexuality encompasses the both/and nature of human existence, the potential for a sexuality that simultaneously oppresses and empowers. One key issue for Black feminist thought is the need to examine the processes by which power as domination on the social structural level--namely institutional structures of racism, sexism and social class privilege--annexes the basic power of the erotic on the personal level--that is, the construct of power as energy, for its own ends.²⁵⁹

Thus, we can note that while a disposition toward the erotic may indeed be a contested issue for black women, there is no need to dismiss its usefulness offhand. What is needed, rather, is to utilize the erotic's capabilities in a manner that acknowledges the complexities inherent in the erotic's application for and to black women.

²⁵⁸ "The historical oppression of black women and men should have created social equality between them, but even after the end of slavery when the white patriarch receded, maleness and femaleness continued to be defined by patriarchal structures, with black men declaring wardship over black women. In the black community, the norm of manhood was patriarchal power; the norm of womanhood was adherence to it, though both black men and women selected which aspects of these norms they would emphasize." Barbara Omalade, "Hearts of Darkness," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, New York: New Press, 1995), 373.

²⁵⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, v. 2 (New York, New York: Routledge, 1991), 166.

Three Black Feminist Accounts of the Erotic

In this section I would like to look at what may be considered the three most important black feminist discussions of the erotic and its relation to ethics. I have two aims in this section: 1) to illustrate the ways in which black feminists have a written history of attempting to think of the erotic through an ethical lens, and 2) to show where these accounts may have conceptual lacunae that might be addressed by Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic. I will first begin with a discussion of Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic as Power," which serves as, perhaps, the most direct and most influential engagement of the erotic in its connection to ethics in black feminism. I will then move on to a discussion of bell hooks' three-part series on love, women, and the black community that includes *All About Love: New Visions*, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, and *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Sexual Politics*.

Lorde's "Uses"

Lorde's "Uses" is quite possibly the most well-known black feminist discussion of the erotic. Lorde, a self-identified poet, wrote "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," at a point in her life when she was experimenting with the use of prose. In an interview with Jennifer Abod, she tells the story of the incident that incited her to write "Uses":

It came out of a response to someone who was finding great fault with me because of a group I was in at the time. I was supposed to present one Sunday—we'd meet every other Sunday—and I was supposed to present, and I was not prepared this Sunday because that night, Saturday night, I had been out dancing. And I had danced my lungs loose. And so I wasn't prepared. And the attitude, of course, was—from the group—not only, well you're not really prepared, but: how could you have chosen dancing rather than doing your presentation? And that's how I started looking at some of the themes in "The Uses of the Erotic." It came out of that, and it does describe in some very very central ways—deep sources of strength for me.²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ Jennifer Abod, "Audre Lorde: A Radio Interview," in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 160–161.

This illustration of the circumstances that led to the writing of "uses" sheds some light not only on the way in which Lorde views her conception of the erotic, but also on the importance of experience for the development of ethical views. Reacting to being chastised by others for what they perceived to be irresponsibility, Lorde was spurred to more pointedly examine the exclusivity of what is considered work, valuable activity and what is considered pleasure, the erotic.

More specifically, in "Uses," a speech she delivered at the Berkshire Women's History Conference in 1978, Lorde suggests a very specific way that women can use the erotic as a source of power in their own lives. She wants to say that the joy inherent in an erotic experience can serve as a type of bar by which to measure the use and fulfillment of other areas of life such as work and political activism. Understood as a quality intrinsic to women, this use of the erotic as power, Lorde asserts, is one major way that women can combat "euroamerican male" oppression.

In "Uses," Lorde describes the erotic in many ways. Undeniably, Lorde's erotic is viewed as a female quality. When she offers the erotic as a source of power, it is not only *for* women, but also *against* male power. This sense of the erotic being female is the only definite defining characteristic that Lorde makes in the text. She references the birth of the Greek god *eros*, from whence the term erotic came, terming it "the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony."²⁶¹ Throughout the essay, she refers to the erotic as "the sensual," as "a resource within each [woman] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place," a "nurturer or nursemaid of all [women's] deepest knowledge," "an assertion of the lifeforce of

²⁶¹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Zami; Sister/Outsider; Undersong*, vol. Sister/Outsider (Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993), 55.

women; of that creative energy empowered," "[women's] deepest and nonrational knowledge."²⁶²

And in an interview with Nina Winter she likens the erotic to midwifery.²⁶³

Lorde also asserts that the erotic has an important connection to the concept of joy. She writes:

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.²⁶⁴

As such, Lorde suggests that the erotic experience itself widens women's ability to experience joy. Through experience with the erotic, women learn how to meet other experiences in their lives with the same amount of openness. As this deepens one's ability to be satisfied with the everyday experiences, the erotic functions as an instrument that stretches one's orientation toward the world outside of the erotic.

In a similar vein, Lorde also wants to make a distinction between the erotic and what she terms the "pornographic." Much like how Beauvoir finds fault with Sade's erotic, Beauvoir suggests that there is a way to understand the erotic that is not truly indicative of the concept itself. Lorde writes, "Pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling."²⁶⁵ Here, Lorde clearly distinguishes the erotic from its bastardized form, that which engages in the erotic experience without truly acknowledging the subjectivity of the Other. Lorde also believes that this bastardization of the erotic is often purposeful. She writes, "There are frequent attempts to equate

²⁶² Ibid., 56, 53,56,55,54, respectively.

²⁶³ Nina Winter, "Audre Lorde," in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 21.

²⁶⁴ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 56–57.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 58.

pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical."²⁶⁶ In this way, she calls for the reclamation of feeling in the arena of the political.

Lorde furthers this thesis with the following:

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.²⁶⁷

Calling on the "sensual" as that which connects the spiritual to the political, Lorde appears to be arguing for the importance of situatedness and embodiment to both our understandings of our psychic selves and the projects that we pursue politically. It is for the preservation of our psychic selves in a world that does not understand these selves as viable that we engage in political work. She offers:

In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is not one of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.²⁶⁸

So the separation of the erotic from the political appears, for Lorde, to stem from fear of addressing the situation rather than the strength of objectivity, as some might suggest. In this sense, Lorde clearly aligns herself with the black feminist sentiment that the personal is political, as the erotic might be considered one of the most personal aspects of our selves.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 55–56.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 56.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

Lorde also suggests that the erotic is useful with regard to our political projects in that it offers us experience with the idea of the difference of the Other. She asserts, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between, and lessens the threat of their difference."²⁶⁹ As the erotic is a joyful experience, it shows us that we can experience joy with others, who are necessarily outside of ourselves. In this way, the erotic becomes an orientation that is not threatened by the Other's otherness. As such, it can offer us an opportunity to see how we can work alongside the Other for purposes, whether political or personal, about which we are both invested.

Ultimately, though, it must be noted that views the erotic as a source of power for women, as opposed to an ethic more generally. She believes that the joy, wisdom, and fulfillment found in an erotic experience serve as a benchmark for the same amount and quality of joy, wisdom, and fulfillment to be found in every other area of life. Lorde urges women not to suppress the erotic within themselves, due to the way it has been misappropriated by western, male society, but alternately to call upon it in times when decisions concerning one's work and overall well-being must be made. In this way the erotic combats "resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, [and] self-denial," as well as patriarchal, and even racial, oppression. The power resulting from the erotic and knowledge of the erotic can incite women to feel the strength needed to act, to change the world.²⁷⁰ Thus, the erotic becomes a means of self-empowerment.

The manner in which the erotic can be used to fight oppression provides insight into Lorde's particular understanding of power. She says, "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 58. There is significance in the notion of "feeling" in regard to action against oppression. Cf. Sartre's "Black Orpheus" and the notion of antiracism espoused by Lewis Gordon in *Bad Faith and Antiracism*. Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1999); See also Frantz Fanon's response to Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

provide energy for change.”²⁷¹ This points to Lorde's belief that oppressed people have power that can be utilized. She identifies a notion of personal power that includes economic power, political power, social power, spiritual power and psychic power. "When I speak of power, I am speaking of power on a continuum. That is to say, not merely personal power that concentrates itself *in*, but personal power which *moves* us.”²⁷² Power is viewed by Lorde as the force for movement and action. Lorde treats power much like the theory of conservation of energy, which holds that energy never disappears, but rather takes on different forms. Lorde urges women to use their power because unused power does not recede into a vacuum, but is often stolen by some in order to oppress others.

Hooks' Black People and Love

In the early aughts, bell hooks wrote a series of books about the subject of love in response to what she described as a growing culture of lovelessness to which she had become attendant. She writes, "I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.”²⁷³ Again, we see how a personal experience leads to the theorization of the erotic in the lives of black women. Hooks' reply took the form of *All About Love: New Visions* (2001), in which she discusses the theme of love in general, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), in which she explores the concept of love in the context of the Black community, and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002), in which she describes the relationship that women have to love.²⁷⁴

Throughout, it is clear that hooks is interested in love, and makes a distinction between love and the

²⁷¹ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 53.

²⁷² Ilona Pache and Regina-Maria Dackweiler, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 164–165.

²⁷³ bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*, 1st Perennial ed (New York, New York: Perennial, 2001), xi.

²⁷⁴ hooks, *All about Love*; bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, 1st ed (New York, New York: William Morrow, 2001); bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, 1st ed (New York, New York: W. Morrow, 2002).

erotic, but in all of these works, she addresses the ways in which sexuality is connected to love and the ways in which love is connected to the political.

Throughout the series, hooks makes it clear that one of the repercussions of living during a time of lovelessness is an unwillingness on the part of many to give a concrete definition to the concept "love." Hooks suggests that defining love does work beyond mere clarification: "When we intervene on mystifying assumptions that love cannot be defined by offering workable, useful definitions, we are already creating a context where love can begin to flourish."²⁷⁵ In order to begin this process, hooks offers a few working definitions of love. She writes in *All about Love*, "Echoing the work of Eric Fromm, he defines love as 'the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.'"²⁷⁶ Fromm's definition becomes hooks' working definition, although throughout the works she wants to discuss qualities that love also entails. "When we see love as a combination of trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility, we can work on developing these qualities or, if they are already a part of who we are, we can learn to extend them to ourselves," she writes.²⁷⁷

As her primary concern is with love, hooks appears very wary of conflating love with the erotic. Indeed, her perception of sexual love is complexly cautious. She writes in *All about Love*, "In her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, novelist Toni Morrison identifies the idea of romantic love as one 'of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.' Its destructiveness resides in the notion that we come to love with no will and no capacity to choose."²⁷⁸ This frustration with romantic love's insistence that love is not chosen is connected to hooks' definition of love. She argues, "The

²⁷⁵ hooks, *All about Love*, 13.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁷⁸ In this, hooks names the sort of love against which I am writing when I use the term "erotic" instead of romantic love. Hooks appears to take Toni Morrison as making a statement about the erotic, whereas I see Morrison's statement as concerning the type of courtly love that I mention in the Introduction to this project. Ibid., 170.

intensity of sexual intimacy does not serve as a catalyst for respect, care, trust, understanding, and commitment.²⁷⁹ In this, hooks is clear that sex between two people cannot be substituted for love in the larger framework of things.

But we should not take hooks' statement to be her final word on the subject of the erotic and its possible use. Later she writes, "Sexual pleasure enhances the bounds of love, but they can exist and satisfy when sexual desire is absent. Ultimately, most of us would choose great love over sustained sexual passion if we had to. Luckily, we do not have to make this choice because we usually have satisfying erotic pleasure with our loved one."²⁸⁰ Here, hooks simultaneously argues for and against the importance of the erotic in human life. While sex does not necessarily lead to love, sexual passion does have the power to heighten love. Further, she states, "We can only move from perfect passion to perfect love when the illusions pass and we are able to use the energy and intensity generated by intense, overwhelming, erotic bonding to heighten self-discovery."²⁸¹ If we correlate this with hooks' earlier definition of love that she borrows from Fromm, the suggestion here is that the erotic (in the context of love, for hooks) can be a source of the self's growth, which is indeed a sign of love.

Hooks' confusing ambivalence about the usefulness of the erotic appears to stem from her take on feminist engagement with sex, which she conjectures ceased to be productive because of an unwillingness to acknowledge failure. "To this day I believe that feminist debate about love and sexuality ended precisely because straight women did not want to face the reality that it was highly unlikely in patriarchal society that a majority of men would whole-heartedly embrace women's rights

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 175.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 178.

to say no in the bedroom.”²⁸² As such, hooks' focus is pointed toward the feminist implication that, just as sex is a positive right, it can also be viewed as a negative right. This right to opt out of having sex with male partners is the lynchpin of hooks' discomfort with sex as a feminist. She furthers this argument:

Brokenhearted heterosexual feminists did not want to testify publicly that men would support equal rights for women in every arena but the sexual. To offer this testimony would have necessitated admitting that male conversion to feminist thinking and practice was needed if we were truly to have a successful feminist revolution. And women were not eager to acknowledge publicly the ways feminism had failed to convert men to feminist thinking and practice.²⁸³

Hooks is also suspicious of the talk that feminists do seem to have about the subject of sex. Her focus here is on feminist preoccupation with BDSM during the nineties. "Self-proclaimed feminist thinkers have colluded with the patriarchal pornographic imagination's use of mass media to represent the sexual resubordination of women by men as cute, playful and harmless.”²⁸⁴ And further,

The rise in sadomasochism both in everyday life and in our intimate lives seem to be a direct response to the unresolved changes in the nature of gender roles, the fact that so much gender equality exists in the context of the same old oppressive patriarchy. Let's face the fact that it helps to eroticize domination if you feel you can't change it.²⁸⁵

Thus, particular modes of engaging in the erotic reify problematic patriarchal codes. In this way, sexuality should not be championed without a clear view of how sexual practices might often fall prey to the very systems that black feminists hope to fight against. As such, hooks proceeds to argue for more prominent discussion of love as opposed to sex. For hooks, "Sex gets more attention than

²⁸² hooks, *Communion*, 45.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

love from feminist women and everyone else because when we speak of love we have to speak of loss, of lack, of our failures of will and courage.”²⁸⁶

The potential usefulness of discussions of love lies in advocacy for what hooks repeatedly refers to as a "love ethic." Throughout her works on love, hooks suggests that this love ethic is essential to the success of any political movement. She shares, "When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic.”²⁸⁷ She argues that one of the failures of the antiracist movement, in particular, lies in its progressive dismissal of the importance of love: "As the quest for power subsumed the quest for liberation in antiracist struggle, there was little or no discussion of the purpose and meaning of love in black experience, in love in liberation struggle.”²⁸⁸ Her thesis is that black leaders (with the exception of Martin Luther King, Jr., and, at certain moments, Malcolm X, who she cites as vanguards of the love ethic) became preoccupied with pursuing power, to the neglect of cultivating a spirit of love in their communities.

Hooks advocates for a political ethic of love as she understands it described in the work of philosopher Cornel West. She writes:

Referring to the love ethic in his work *Race Matters*, philosopher Cornel West contends: "A love ethic has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections...Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community.”...Since our leaders and scholars agree that one measure of the crisis black people are experiencing is lovelessness, it should be evident that we need a body of literature,

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁸⁷ hooks, *Salvation*, xix.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., xxiii.

both sociological and psychological work, addressing the issue of love among black people, its relevance to political struggle, its meaning in our private lives.²⁸⁹

In continuing her use of West's language, hooks sees herself as contributing to scholarship concerning the political usefulness of love.

One of the characteristics of a love ethic is its commitment to hooks' aforementioned qualities inherent in love itself, "exemplified by the combined forces of care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility."²⁹⁰ Beyond its connection to hooks' definition of love, hooks also suggests additional dimensions of a love ethic. She writes, "A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well."²⁹¹ In this, hooks appears to suggest that a primary foundation of a love ethic is a respect and concern for the freedom of self and others. In advocating for a love ethic, one also then advocates for the free expression of human freedom.

This love of human freedom inherent in the love ethic also extends to loving our own identities. When writing particularly of antiracist struggle in *Salvation*, hooks contends, "Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life."²⁹² Hooks also suggests that loving blackness ought to be a public act:

We need to create the cultural space to talk about the love relationships we have that are fulfilling and satisfying. In some cases, we must see the sacrifice of privacy as a part of the anti-racist, anti-sexist resistance struggle wherein critical vigilance requires sharing our positive and negative stories. We can only decolonize our minds, let go of the images of lovelessness that daily bombard our psyches, by erasing those images and putting in their place representations of care and affection, of black women and men bound by everlasting ties of mutual love.²⁹³

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 4–5.

²⁹¹ hooks, *All about Love*, 87.

²⁹² hooks, *Salvation*, 66.

²⁹³ Ibid., 187.

Embracing the political usefulness of a love ethic entails discarding a belief that love be relegated to the sphere of the private. Since oppression and domination affect both the public and private lives of those against whom they are leveled, hooks suggests that returning love to the forefront of communal discussion will contribute to combatting these ills.

In this way, hooks views love and the love ethic for which she advocates as an essential tool in liberation. She avers:

Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth. Only love can give us the strength to go forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery. Only love can give us the power to reconcile, to redeem, the power to renew weary spirits and save lost souls. The transformative power of love is the foundation of meaningful social change.²⁹⁴

Thus, hooks begins the process of embracing a love ethic by committing her intellectual efforts to such an extended discussion of love. Just as loving blackness becomes a political act for Black people, loving love serves as an example of the political usefulness of love and a love ethic.

Hill Collins' Black Sexual Politics

The third major attempt by a Black feminist to discuss the erotic is Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Written in 2005, *Black Sexual Politics* discusses the concept of sexuality as it relates to Black people and its connection to racism in the United States. Her thesis is that antiblack racism cannot be understood without taking into account the politics of sexuality and how it has functioned historically to color perceptions of Black people, both men and women. Nor, she suggests, can Black people hope to fight against racism without also addressing the politics of sexuality.

Hill Collins defines sexual politics or the politics of sexuality as "a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame all men and women's treatment of one

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 16–17.

another, as well as how individual men and women are perceived and treated by others.”²⁹⁵ As such we can locate these ideas and social practices in many different areas. Hill Collins attempts to give a historical narrative of sexual politics as they have related to the lives of Blacks in the United States, beginning with slavery and ending in the contemporary moment, where Hill Collins suggests that Black people now face a "new racism," characterized by antiracist attitudes that are not blatantly so. She writes of this new racism:

What seems different today under the new racism is the changing influence of Black popular culture and mass media as sites where ideas concerning Black sexuality are reformulated and contested. In modern American where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African American youth, in particular, can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sports teams, and other community organizations to help them navigate the challenges of social inequality. Mass media fills this void, especially movies, television, and music that market Black popular culture aimed at African American consumers.²⁹⁶

In this sense the new racism comes from both within and without the Black community. As such, sexual politics must also be understood in this contemporary context. Whereas negative ideas concerning Black sexuality were previously countered by communal institutions, popular culture and media now complicate the efficacy of said institutions.

Antiblack racism, for Hill Collins, is intricately connected to gender dynamics and perceptions of Black sexuality connected to these gender dynamics. Hill Collins writes, "For both woman and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as 'freaks' of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent.”²⁹⁷ As such, sexuality would seem a

²⁹⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 6.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

contentious location to suggest a positive politics. These Westernized notions of Black sexuality are also rife in the contemporary context of the new racism and Hill Collins suggests that, despite the proliferation of Black sexual bodies, the Black community suffers from lack of a way to challenge popular notions of Black sexuality and use them as a positive politics. "Sexualized Black bodies seem to be everywhere in contemporary mass media, yet within African American communities, a comprehensive understanding of sexual politics remains elusive.... As a result, African Americans lack a vibrant, public discussion of the complex issues that the prevailing discourse on Black sexuality has raised for African American men and women."²⁹⁸

This is especially clear in the case of Black women's sexuality. Siding with general Black feminist ideology, Hill Collins suggests that "It is important to stress that *all* women occupy the category of devalued Other that gives meaning to *all* masculinities....Black femininity is constructed in relation to the tenets of hegemonic masculinity that subordinates all femininities to masculinity."²⁹⁹ Here she acknowledges that the erotic is of particular concern for women because of their status under patriarchy as "devalued" others. Yet she, like other Black feminists, suggests that racism compounds this idea of devaluation of women's otherness. As such, Black women and their sexuality suffer in a dual way from the patriarchal system.

In answer to the complications of Black sexual politics, Hill Collins suggests that there may be viable antidotes to antiblack racism, especially with regard to the concept of sexuality. She first notes that discussions of sexuality in the Black community should be encouraged, especially in the context of the new racism:

In the context of a new racism, men and women who rescue and redefine sexuality as a source of power rooted in spirituality, expressiveness, and love can craft new understandings of Black masculinity and Black femininity needed for a progressive

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 187.

Black sexual politics. When reclaimed by individuals and groups, redefined ideas about sexuality and sexual practices can operate as sources of joy, pleasure, and empowerment that simultaneously affirm and transcend individual sexual pleasure for social good.³⁰⁰

Here, Hill Collins advocates for the joy and pleasure, reminiscent of the language used by both Lorde and Beauvoir, that may be found in the erotic once understandings of sexuality have been reimagined.

Hill Collins is clear, however, that there are definite challenges and reservations to the prospect of recapturing the erotic for political purposes. She writes:

Expressing individual agency and challenging the Black sexual politics that shape everyday life is complicated; linking the *individual* agency expressed in these social locations to a *collective* group politics may seem unattainable. The dialectical relationship between oppression and activism makes all politics difficult, including this one. A fundamental contradiction lies at the juncture where intersecting oppressions grounded in dominance confront a resistance nourished by expansive notions of care, eroticism, spirituality, and politicized love.³⁰¹

And later:

Not all pleasure is political, and not all forms of sexual expression signal the presence of honest bodies. Seeking pleasure can simply be self-centered, self-serving, and selfish...In a context in which popular culture markets pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, as the antidote to alienation, and does so by using Black bodies and race as proxy for danger, excitement, forbidden practices, and sex, African Americans must be careful in embracing any strategy that claims pleasure as *inherently* transgressive. Sexuality among African Americans must be understood in the context of structures of power (whether class, race, gender, or sexuality). Embracing 'pleasure' without a broader understanding of how sexuality articulates power relations of race, class, and gender, especially if the simple act of claiming pleasure is deemed inherently progressive, runs the risk of resurrecting stereotypes of Black people whereby ideas about Blackness remain culturally coded in the sexual.³⁰²

In these passages, Hill Collins appears wary of the feasibility of the erotic as a ground for political agency. This is because, she wants to argue, considering the context of oppression and domination in which Black sexuality has developed (that upon which she has focused for the

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 51.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 52.

³⁰² Ibid., 287–288.

majority of the book), it may prove impossible to extract that which has been harmful to and for Black people's sexualities from that which might prove useful. While, at one point Hill Collins suggests that sexuality may be a space of political agency, her hesitancy in the face of this suggestion is grave.

In the end, Hill Collins attempts to describe the form in which claiming the erotic as a source of agency might have to take. She argues, "Overall, African Americans certainly need to 'ready up for some honesty' in intimate love relationships. Doing so would enable individuals to tell the difference between the commodified sexuality and romantic love that are so heavily marketed within mass media and more complex notion of sexual autonomy and eroticism."³⁰³ What exactly comprises this "readying up for some honesty," however, remains unclear.

Finally, Hill Collins writes, "On a basic level, love relationships between two people constitute a community of two members...This politicized love is grounded in a type of commitment to self and others that comes from seeing Black humanity in the context of oppression, and recognizing that choosing to love in that context is a political act."³⁰⁴ So perhaps it is the case that Black people can recognize the correlation between a micro-community (their relationship) and a macro-community (their Blackness) and see the one as a direct extension of the Other. If Black people are able to conduct intimate relationships on the basis of honesty and acknowledgment of the larger systems of oppression that complicate their unions, they may also be able to extend this orientation toward furthering political aims for Black people more generally. In taking this bold, honest act seriously and with consciousness, Hill Collins appears to suggest that Black intimate relationships themselves may constitute sites of political action.

³⁰³ Ibid., 292–293.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 298–299.

Convergences and Divergences

There are both convergences and differences in these three black feminist accounts of the erotic. While none of them explicitly offers what we might term a disposition toward the erotic, as it has been described in the work of Beauvoir, they do offer insight into how such a disposition might figure in to Black feminist thought. While all three accounts offer useful insight into how and why the erotic might be useful, they differ in some important ways.

All three accounts appear to advocate for the erotic as an important source of liberation. While Lorde and Hill Collins make this clear, hooks is far more hesitant to name the erotic *qua* erotic as a kind of liberatory power. In this, she calls most poignantly calls our attention to the pervasive nature of patriarchy and antiblackness that might affect any attempt to view the erotic solely in an ethical light. Lorde calls our attention to the distinction between the erotic and the pornographic, while Hill Collins makes it clear that the erotic has played a very important part in the negative sexualization of the black body. This wariness is something that black feminism importantly adds to the discussion of the erotic, since it is by virtue of inhabiting situations that have always already been eroticized that black feminists can speak to the potential misuse of the erotic, especially as it is related to liberatory politics.

We might say that each account of the erotic presented in this section represents a progression from the previous account, in that each account fills in conceptual lacunae in the others. Lorde speaks of the erotic in essentialist terms, viewing it as a source inherent to women and for the use of women specifically. Lorde's essentialist understanding of the erotic and her suggestion that it be used as power render Lorde's account lacking in their liberatory usefulness. We would not want to say that the erotic is in any way inherent in women alone and rather than viewing the erotic as power, a disposition toward the erotic calls for us to engage others in an erotic *manner* rather than understanding the erotic as power in and of itself.

Although hooks applies her analysis generally, she also presents a focus on women and black people specifically. While this represents a more specific application of the concept than Lorde, hooks' account is plagued by her separation of the categories 'woman' and 'black person.' Because she focuses on these two categories separately, it is difficult to garner an account of her idea of the erotic as it speaks specifically to black women. Beyond this, hooks also displays a clear interest in a dualistic view of love/the erotic, which renders her unable to account for the full ethical possibilities of the erotic itself. Hill Collins furthers the work of Lorde and hooks with her focus on blackness, but also her clear attention to the situations of black women in particular.

All are clear to argue that for the inseparability of the private and the political. Lorde explicitly correlates the erotic with the political, hooks argues for her love ethic by noting that it is an imperative aspect of any liberatory social movement, and Hill Collins, in her very deployment of the term "sexual politics" notes how the erotic is always already connected to the political possibilities of blackness. As such, we might also conclude that black women's situatedness and historical experience provides them with a standpoint whereby it is impossible to argue that the erotic should be relegated to the bedroom. For black women, this has not been an option. As such, all three black feminists argue that what is most intimate to our lives must then be subverted and used for positive political action.

Interestingly, all three speak of the erotic's connection to the spiritual. This, too, appears to be a markedly black feminist way of engaging the concept. It is difficult to conjecture why this is the case. Even further, each writer's deployment of the term "spiritual" is ambiguous.³⁰⁵ Whatever the case may be, this also represents a clear divergence between a black feminist account of the erotic and Beauvoir's account, and one it might be important to attend to.

³⁰⁵ hooks' account here is maybe the most lucid, as she advocates for prayer and meditation in both the Christian and Buddhist traditions in her work. Neither Lorde nor Hill Collins makes clear that their concept of the spiritual might be connected to a particular type of theology.

With regard to how we might understand the erotic as properly ethical, none of these accounts describe it as such, although we might extrapolate an implicit disposition toward the erotic in all three. Lorde's interest in the erotic is in its usefulness as a source of power, specifically. But insofar as Lorde suggests the erotic as a type of benchmark, she calls our attention to the ways in which our interactions with others might be judged against our personal experience with the joy inherent in the erotic.³⁰⁶ However, this focus on the personal, individual experience with the erotic hinders Lorde's account, since it relegates the usefulness of the erotic to the subject's own experience, to the neglect of its connection to/with the communal. Hooks' ambivalence toward patriarchal sex renders her unable to advocate for a disposition toward the erotic specifically, but her explicit call for the use of a love ethic and her acknowledgment that sexuality may afford self-growth in the context of love, suggest that the erotic, if properly extricated from its patriarchal perversion, may indeed constitute an aspect of a love ethic. Hill Collins, though she shares the concerns of hooks, is clear to say that sexual politics implicates Black people's relationships toward themselves and others. Hill Collins wants to suggest that open dialogue and the acknowledgment of how systems of oppression affect the ability for Black people to engage in a positive sexual politics are the means whereby Black people might seize agency and relate to one another on a liberatory plane.

We might say, then, that while all of these black feminist accounts recognize the importance of the erotic, they still display ambivalence toward its liberatory usefulness because of the ways the erotic has historically been used against black women.³⁰⁷ My suggestion is that we not pause at the

³⁰⁶ Perhaps importantly, all three accounts also suggest that there is a connection between the erotic and joy.

³⁰⁷ Camisha Russell offers this similar criticism of Collins' approach: "Thus it appears that Collins' analysis of the 'new racism' would be enhanced by an abandonment of the 'repressive hypothesis.' The explicit adoption of an expanded notion of power and its operations in the discourse of sexuality as productive would both emphasize and support Collins' focus on the historically constructed and shifting nature of black sexuality, particularly as given to or forced upon black Americans by racist social structures." Camisha Russell, "Black American Sexuality and the Repressive Hypothesis: Reading Patricia Hill Collins with Michel Foucault," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marciano, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 213.

moment of ambivalence, but rather seek a way to make the erotic useful for black feminist liberatory aims.

CONCLUSION

Black Feminism and Beauvoir's Disposition toward the Erotic

In closing, as I would like to suggest how Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic could be useful to black feminists, I would like to highlight aspects of black feminist discussion of the erotic that share commonalities with Beauvoir's ethics. In so doing, I hope to draw affinities between Beauvoir's ethics and black feminism for the ultimate purpose of suggesting that a disposition toward the erotic may serve the project of black feminism.

Black feminist production faces some of the same challenges as Beauvoir's philosophical work, namely with regard to what scholars (and especially, in this case, philosophers) deem legitimate scholarly sources about the history and critical production of black feminism. As black women were kept from learning how to read and write under conditions of enslavement, written record of black women's experiences during that time is scarce. When we begin to see black women's accounts of their experience, they are in the form of letters, co-written autobiographies, and other accounts.³⁰⁸ In this way, we can note a clear affinity with how we understand the intellectual contributions of black feminism and how we understand the philosophical contribution of Beauvoir. I have used Beauvoir's diaries, autobiographies, and letters to make the case for a more robust understanding of the development of Beauvoir's ethical philosophy. My argument is that, similar to the case of black feminist intellectual production, we cannot duly understand the development of Beauvoir's ethics and the intellectual engagement that led to her later ethical philosophy without deferring to these sources. In fact, neglecting to do so encourages scholars to

³⁰⁸ Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, one of the first anthologies of about Black women and Black women's writing from slavery to the 1970s, notably includes bills of sale, letters, essays, speeches, newspaper descriptions, and poems, among other works. Gerda Lerner, "Preface," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner, Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

misrepresent various aspects of Beauvoir's contribution to philosophy, much as neglecting to cull various sources for early black feminist output denies the intellectual contributions of black women.

There is a further point to be made here. It is not only the case that our having to look to archival sources outside of the formal philosophical essay or journal article to trace the development of both Beauvoir's and black feminists' intellectual production suggests a responsibility for scholars of both, but also this illustrates the institutional factors that have led to such a requirement. On the part of Beauvoir, despite her being awarded a degree in philosophy, the question of her originality plagued her philosophical legacy for much time. For many years she was not included in the canon of existential philosophers because her ideas were viewed as originating in those of Sartre, her male partner. Such a misogynistic reading of the riddle of Sartrean influence displays philosophy's historical bias against women as intellectual innovators. On the part of black feminism, lack of access to formal education (due to a number of factors—the conditions of slavery, poverty, burdens of family life, etc.) has resulted in the difficulty we encounter when we search for the origins of black feminist thought.

Beauvoir finds situatedness to be a useful way of understanding the significance of our experience. As I am, in some sense, determined by my situation, I must be clear to acknowledge it. This idea is especially salient for black women, who come to being in an anti-black, anti-woman world. As such, the abstract concept of situatedness has never been abstract for black women. The effects of being historically located in a world that does not value one's particular situation are ever present for this group of people. So it is that black feminist intellectual production has always acknowledged this concept, even though it might not have used such terminology.

Furthermore, an ethics that does not recognize our inability to relieve ourselves of our situations for the purpose of determining an *ought* fails to fully account for the complexities of human ethical imperatives. Black feminism, in its very nomenclature, fully attests to the undeniability

of the situation. In so naming themselves, black feminists imply that it is necessary to work within and through the confines of our situations. This represents a fundamental impetus behind black feminism and black feminist ethics. Black feminists do not require that we shed our situations in order to achieve our projected goals, but rather, like Beauvoir, recognize the potential usefulness of what might be understood as a handicap to a ratiocentric ethics.

As we might understand embodiment as an inseparable element of our situations, it is notable that Beauvoir scholars consider Beauvoir's focus on the body one of her most important philosophical and ethical interventions. While the body has been reviled in the history of philosophical ethical theories, Beauvoir places extreme emphasis on the ways in which our bodies are elemental to our identities. This distrust and derision of the body has long been a theme of black feminist output. As such, it is not only black women's mere situatedness (which can be understood as being common to all human beings), but their markedness as embodied subjects that most affects the world's relation to their selves. And this appears to be an important parallel between Beauvoir's ethics and black feminism. Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic, as I have argued for it, is premised upon the erotic's ability to lead us to ethical relations. In this way, the fact of our sexuality is a conduit to our heightened understanding of ethics, not an obstacle.

Beauvoir suggests that this refusal to view the Other as a subject to be recognized is the primary means whereby subjects are oppressed. Denying the subjectivity of the Other produces the kind of solipsistic standpoint that Beauvoir herself had to convert out of. In naming and calling out those individuals, movements and institutions that overdetermine black bodies, black feminists implicate the problem of denying ambiguity.

This draws yet another parallel between black feminism and Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic. As an ethical theory, one might consider a disposition toward the erotic teleological, in that the focus is not on particular rules that one should follow in order to rightfully be considered

ethical, but rather one must direct one's actions toward the value of freedom. As such, different means may lead to the same end, and, thus, we are reminded that a disposition toward the erotic does not suggest particular moral prescriptives. Even further than this, a disposition toward the erotic rejects the notion of such moral prescriptives, as, in and of themselves, they are antithetical to taking seriously the idea of freedom.

This insight appears simpatico with the project of black feminism, as, in order to acknowledge the complexity of black women and the variation among black women, black feminists do not adopt the stance of arbiter of black women's behavior. Rather, black feminists acknowledge that there are multiple ways of going about achieving the same goals. This can be seen through the pure multitude of black feminist analyses of differing issues, from the place of black women in hip hop to such issues as abortion in the black community, which often turn around how we understand the concept of freedom. An attendance to the variegation of black womanhood falls in line with Beauvoir's non-prescriptive ethics.

As such, it is within the context of our most intimate experiences that injustice is felt most. So to assume that our relationships, our bodies, our beliefs are too idiosyncratic to warrant attentiveness and intervention appears erroneous. Indeed, it is on the very level of the most intimate, the erotic, where Beauvoir suggests we look to find abuses and revelations with regard to ethics. We have seen, in Beauvoir's accounts of the failure of her relationship with Jacques and others, for instance, how Beauvoir has reflected upon these lived experiences as they relate to her ethical philosophy. This is precisely how a disposition toward the erotic emerges as a celebration of what we might learn from that which is most personal. And the situation of our being persons and experiencing what is most intimate to our selves is situated by a complex web of institutional factors.

We might also note something very important about the possibility of conversion, which, as I have shown, is a major theme in Beauvoir's autobiographical writings and her philosophy. Hooks

remains wary of the usefulness of the erotic because of feminist failure to convert men into feminist ideas. Indeed, we can note how a disposition toward the erotic is premised upon the possibility of conversion. In this way, we might move past hooks' dismissal of the erotic. Beauvoir teaches us how we must always assert the prospect of the potential of others. We must not dismiss the erotic merely because of its failures, but be attentive to its possibilities. Black feminism must also include the convertive possibilities of both women and men, as this is integral to our understanding of human beings as ambiguous subjects.

Conclusion

In this project, I have transitioned from a discussion of Beauvoir's experience with regard to the erotic in her personal relationships to a discussion of how a parallel concern with the erotic appears in black feminist thought. I have argued that those interested in Beauvoir's ethics ought to look into her autobiographical writings because they give us very important insight into how she comes to her philosophical views on ethics and the erotic. Also, we must understand the philosophy that comes out of black feminism as being connected to the concept of lived experience. In this way, neglecting to attend to the lived experience of black women renders us unable to fully understand the potential of black feminist philosophy, especially as lived experience is inherent in the very conception of black feminism itself. And since this concept of lived experience is inherent in black feminist philosophy, if we are interested in black feminist thought on the concept of the erotic, we must look at how black feminist experience has led to black feminist theorizing about the erotic.

I have also argued that one of the issues that is particular to black women's experience is the concept of embodiment, which, as have seen, is also important to Beauvoir's philosophy. But black women experience their embodiment as overdetermined. This is because the history of the black body has rendered black female bodies always already sexualized. In this way, the concept of the erotic is perpetually present in the experience of black women. So when black women theorize

about the erotic, they come to the concept women whose bodies carry with them weight and connotation.

As such, black feminists cannot approach the concept of a disposition toward the erotic (or understand the potential usefulness of the erotic) without also bearing in mind the ways in which the erotic has served to further notions of their dehumanization. Advocating for a disposition toward the erotic on the part of black women is a potentially dangerous thing, since black women's sexuality is burdened by the way in which the Other has deemed them sexual objects to the detriment of their subjectivity.

It is the case, then that black women approach the erotic in a two-fold manner, always with the understanding that the erotic is essential to their lived experience as black women in a contested ways. As such, certain black feminists have historically fought *against* their eroticization in order to make the case for their being understood as proper subjects. At the same time, though, a few black women have suggested that it might be useful for black women to harness this erotic—that not doing so is actually more detrimental to their liberatory aims than doing so. I have analyzed such accounts from Lorde, hooks and Hill Collins.

Ultimately, though, these three theorists fail to account for some important aspects of Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic. In other words, Lorde's, hooks' and Collins' accounts have failed to be useful *enough*. A disposition toward the erotic, then, may be adaptable to black feminism and may be useful to black feminism because it allows black women both to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which their bodies have been historically overdetermined, while at the same time understanding that the erotic need not be understood as a weapon against liberation. Rather, it can be understood as a liberatory aid and an important tool for a group of women who have such a close relationship toward the concept of the erotic.

Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic allows us to understand how our experience is such that we approach the Other as a body and the Other encounters us, too, as a body. In this way, our bodies are already strife with historical meaning. But a disposition toward the erotic does not seek to relate to the Other solely on the level of the body, in other words, as mere object. Rather, a disposition toward the erotic values the ambiguous nature of human beings—our perpetual state of being always already both subject and object. When we relate to others with this consideration of our ambiguity in mind, we are not tempted to understand our bodies and the bodies of others as the total sum of an other's/our self's humanity. Rather, we understand that just as our existence is ambivalent, so, too, are these others with whom we must form relations.

If our goal is the liberation of the oppressed, then we must be willing to approach the Other in a manner that does not seek to capture or codify the Other's subjectivity, nor must we allow the Other to do the same to us. When we utilize a disposition toward the erotic, we understand the Other as essential to ourselves, to our projects. As we seek liberation and the eradication of oppressive circumstances, we must encounter others in the mode of appeal. We must appeal to these other embodied subjects and with our appeals, come the recognition of the historical meanings these very bodies carry.

The erotic, in our close relationships, are those moments in our lives, Beauvoir has shown, when we most readily engage the Other outside of the mode of opposition or contestation. We take joy in the Other's body and the Other's subjectivity. These moments allow us to recognize that relations with others need not be antagonistic. Rather, our ambiguities are opportunities to learn something very important—that the Other need not be our enemy. Our bodies offer us the opportunity to experience ideal ethical relations with one another that honor our need for these ambiguous others in order to pursue and complete our projects. Part of this understanding is that the freedom of the Other is necessary to our projects. So when we encounter others in the mode of

a disposition toward the erotic, we do so in the mode of joy and protection of the Other's freedom, since this is the only way that we can engage the Other such that we can offer appeals to take up our projects.

In this way, a disposition toward the erotic is inherently liberatory. Beyond this, it is ideal because it does not seek to rid the body of its meaning. It recognizes the historical meaning and weight that the body carries while also seeking the freedom of the subject housed inside that body. It recognizes that there is an inextricable relationship between the body and the subject. And it seeks the liberation of both, as it is impossible to engage the erotic in the manner that Beauvoir wants to suggest without doing so.

A disposition toward the erotic also allows us to recognize the problems with the overdetermination of the black body as it relates to the erotic and sexuality. It allows us to note instances in which the erotic is being engaged unauthentically or in the mode of capturing or antagonism. Beauvoir clearly illustrates this in her discussion of Sade (and even her autobiographical accounts of the failures in her relationships with such people as Jacques and Bienenfeld). So while there is danger in the erotic, there is also freedom. There is always, as Beauvoir asserts, the possibility of conversion. We are beings who have the ability to change our views and our attitudes toward our experiences. In this way, our relationships offer us a means whereby to convert into properly ethical relations with others. And as such, attending to and emphasizing a disposition toward the erotic allows us to focus on the free and free-ing possibilities of our selves.

In the end, the political project of black feminism shares the project of all other movements: the reimagination of the subject itself. While much feminist intellectual output has focused and continues to focus on historical analyses of black women's experience, the underlying aim is to break out of the oppressive structures that have situated such experience. Just as black feminism

recognizes that there are multiple methods of achieving the same goal, so, too, it recognizes that the meaning inherent in being a black woman need not remain static. Just a disposition toward the erotic aims toward the spread of a fuller and more nuanced account of the ways in which humans might inhabit their freedom, so, too, does black feminism look toward the possibility of blackness and womanhood (and all of the interlocking systems that are implicated in these identities) taking on new meanings, meanings not wholly determined by past and present oppression. The Combahee River Collective asserts, "We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."³⁰⁹ In this, black feminism illustrates perhaps its most important parallel to Beauvoir's disposition toward the erotic—the desire for championing of the free experience of our selves and others.

³⁰⁹ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 237.

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