

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Simone De Beauvoir on Justification and Oppression

Michelle Kosch

New York University, New York City, New York, USA

Correspondence: Michelle Kosch (mk10678@nyu.edu)

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir's ethical theory as presented in the works of 1944–47, and applies core concepts drawn from it to the interpretation of *The Second Sex*.

In the period from 1941 to 1946, Beauvoir wrote two novels,¹ two monographs,² and three short essays³—today seldom read—whose main aim was to articulate a view of the foundations of ethics and to display its practical application. The relative neglect of these works in the secondary literature on Beauvoir⁴ and historical work on existentialism⁵ would be surprising even if, as has sometimes been said, they bore little relation to Beauvoir's profoundly influential work, *The Second Sex*.⁶ It is still more surprising given the current broad agreement that, in stating in the Introduction that the analysis in *The Second Sex* relies on

“existentialist ethics,” Beauvoir could be referring only to the works of these 5 years.⁷ In fact, aspects of *The Second Sex* that have proven resistant to elucidation are easily clarified when considered in light of these works.

Beauvoir's theory of the foundations of ethics has considerable interest apart from this later application. But the aim of this paper is to establish the narrower claim that even readers interested specifically in Beauvoir's feminism would do well to pay more careful attention her ethical writings. The secondary literature

¹ *Le Sang des autres*, written 1941–43, published 1945; *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, written 1943–45, published 1946.

² *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, written 1943, published 1944; *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, written 1945–46, published 1947.

³ “Idéalisme morale et réalisme politique” (November 1945); “L'Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations” (December 1945); “Oeil pour oeil” (February 1946)—all originally published in *Les Temps modernes* and reprinted in Beauvoir (1948/2008).

⁴ Arp (2001) remains the only monograph dedicated to these ethical writings, though at least two others are now in progress. The three essays and *Pyrrhus and Cineas* were published in English translation for the first time only in 2004. The novels and *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* are (at the time of writing) still available only in their first, deficient, post-war translations.

⁵ Beauvoir's ethical works are treated in some depth by Webber (2001). Before its publication, most surveys of existentialism either did not mention Beauvoir at all (Grimsley (1955); Harper (1948); Harper (1972); Kaufmann (1976); Lefebvre (2001); Macquarrie (1972); Molina (1962); Mueller (1964); Patka (1962); Schrag (1961)), or mentioned her only as someone who repeated, applied, documented, or popularized Sartre's thought (Barnes (1959, 113, 122, 127, 132, 134–137, 141, 386), though Barnes does point out differences between the two and acknowledges that “Beauvoir is more than Sartre's interpreter” (14)); Heinemann (1954); Kingston (1961, especially the discussion of values in Ch. 8 and his quotation of *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* as textual evidence that Sartre held a particular view on page 181); Miller (1979, 165); Novack (1966, Ch. 2); Olafson (1967, xv); Olson (1962, 61); Verneaux (1964, see below); Warnock (1970, Ch. 2)). Verneaux (1964, my translation) is typical: “One must not expect to find in Simone de Beauvoir the least thought of her own. Her role in the existentialist school is not to create, but to vulgarize (which she does brilliantly), to defend the doctrine, and, finally, to apply the theory to practice. This is why, if one seeks to give oneself an idea of Sartrean moral philosophy, it is to her rather than to Sartre that one must turn.” The few sources prior to Webber that acknowledge Beauvoir's distinctive contribution to the movement are Grene (1959, Ch. 5), Mahon (1997, Ch. 6–7), Oaklander (1992, Ch. 6), and Stenström (1966, Pt. 2, Ch. 1). Most anthologies of existentialism published in the 20th century likewise include no writings by Beauvoir.

⁶ Written 1946–49, published 1949.

⁷ This is accepted in some form by a number of interpreters, for example, Arp (2012, 260, 265), Bauer (2001b, 137), Bergoffen (1997, 45–112), Daigle (2005, 170), Daigle (2006, 121), Kirkpatrick (2024, 18–19), Kruks (1995, 82, 90), Lundgren-Gothlin (1996, 136, 149–151), Mahon (1997, Ch. 9–11), Pettersen (2007, 57), Scarth (2004, 51), and Scholz (2000, 30). But (as I will explain) none presents an analysis of these ethical writings adequate to solve the interpretive problems concerning *The Second Sex* that I discuss in Section 4. Some have been explicit about finding them unhelpful. LeDoeuff (1995, 64) denies that there is anything to be learned from them for understanding *The Second Sex*. Bauer (2001b, 140) describes them as “marked by a certain vagueness, an imprecision of thought that disqualifies them [...] from serious independent philosophical consideration.” Others treat them as derivative of Sartre (for example Moi 2008, 170–171), although there exist no works of Sartre from which they might plausibly have derived. Most who have written on *The Second Sex* make no reference to them at all.

contains a variety of incompatible interpretations of Beauvoir's account of oppression, many of which can be ruled out by conjoining explicit definitions of that concept in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* with a proper understanding of the concepts (justification, recognition, transcendence, an open future) drawn from her ethical thought that figure in those definitions. This understanding of Beauvoir's account of oppression as a general phenomenon can then be used to clarify the central concepts she uses to describe women's oppression in particular (objectification, othering, immanence), likewise topics of considerable dispute in the secondary literature. The substantive upshot is a more coherent and unified understanding of several of Beauvoir's most well-known claims about women's oppression in *The Second Sex*.

I begin with a brief examination of the context of origin of Beauvoir's ethical thought in Section 1, then explain the theory itself in Section 2. In Section 3, I describe the generic concept of oppression, and in Section 4, its application to the situation of women in *The Second Sex*.⁸

1 | Origins

In a series of journal entries written in occupied Paris in January 1941, Beauvoir describes her “haste to finish” the novel she has been working on for nearly 4 years, *L'Invitée*, which “rests on a philosophical attitude that is no longer mine.”⁹ She describes a new project, a novel whose topic would be “the *individual situation*, its moral significance and its relation to the social.”¹⁰ The context of these remarks, in the entry in which they occur, is the description of two philosophical orientations between which she felt torn: “the universal point of view of Hegel and Marx,” on which “individuality as such has no meaning”—which, she fears, “seems [to strip] all meaning from life”; and the point of view that she associates with Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Kafka, in whose terms one can make sense of the “idea of personal

salvation.”¹¹ The basic plot and characterization of the novel that would become *The Blood of Others* is sketched in the final entry.¹² The main new influences to which she points in these entries are Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Hegel (all of whom she had read intensively in 1939 and 1940).¹³ These new influences were incorporated into a philosophical orientation dominated by Kant, Leibniz, and Descartes (whom she had been teaching in high school for nearly a decade) and Marx (whom she had first read around 1930–31).¹⁴ All of these philosophical influences were, in turn, brought to bear on a problem that had its source in her early religious upbringing, the problem of how an individual's life could, as she said, be “justified.” Beauvoir had become an atheist as a teen, but the problem of individual salvation had remained with her.¹⁵ As a mature philosopher, she continued to take the aim of justification to be the core of any moral orientation. “To be moral is to seek to establish [*fonder*] one's being, to transform into necessity our contingent existence.”¹⁶ She took moral concern to be a basic element of human experience revealed by phenomenological analysis. “Moral concern does not come to man from without. He finds within himself the anxious question: to what end? (*a quoi bon?*)”¹⁷

In these entries, Beauvoir describes her commitment to the “existential idea that human reality is nothing other than that which it makes itself be, that toward which it transcends itself.”¹⁸ Heidegger is the unambiguous point of reference for “existential” at this point in the 20th century, and Beauvoir indeed accepts much of Heidegger's conception of what it is to be the kind of beings we are.¹⁹ To “exist” is to be practically engaged in projects in a world in which one finds oneself always already affectively rooted and cognitively oriented, amidst entities already imbued with practical significance. It is to find one's projects constrained but not determined by one's situation, to be aware that pursuit of certain projects might result in an existence that would be genuinely one's own, whereas pursuit of others might result in one's own self being lost. It is to be the kind of entity for which its own existence (in this sense) is a matter of inescapable concern.

⁸ The material in this paper was developed over several years and has been much improved by comments from audiences at New York University, Universität Potsdam, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Freie Universität Berlin, KU Leuven, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, UCLA, the 2024 Eastern APA, and from participants in seminars at Cornell and Johns Hopkins. I am especially grateful for comments on those presentations and on earlier drafts of this material from Sabina Vaccarino Bremner, Daniela Dover, Dina Emundts, Manon Garcia, Don Garrett, Jonathan Gingerich, Anja Jauernig, Béatrice Longuenesse, Daniele Lorenzini, Esther Neuhann, John Richardson, Sigrún Svavarsdóttir, David Velleman, Rivka Weinberg, Hannah Winckler-Olick, and an anonymous referee for this journal.

⁹ Beauvoir (1990a, 362).

¹⁰ Beauvoir (1990a, 363). All translations in this paper are mine. Since there exists no critical edition of Beauvoir's works, I have chosen the editions figuring in the Intelix database, Beauvoir (2011), as the standard for page references (with details for those editions given in the bibliography).

¹¹ Beauvoir (1990a, 362).

¹² Beauvoir (1990a, 367–368).

¹³ Beauvoir (1990a, 362, 367–368), Beauvoir (1990b, I: 77, 283; II: 162, 172, 214), and Beauvoir (1960/1986, 363–364, 483, 561–562).

¹⁴ Beauvoir (1960/1986, 56). Notably, none of the inspiration for the new ideas in these entries is attributed to Sartre; and that is no surprise, for there is no evidence that the theory she would go on to develop owes anything to Sartre's ethical thinking at the time. Sartre had been mobilized in September 1939 and was a prisoner of war at the time these entries were written, and since the couple were apart for most of this time, we have epistolary evidence of Sartre's lack of influence over Beauvoir's development of these ideas. In the fall of 1939, Sartre had sent her a text containing a partial theory of action drawn largely from Heidegger's *On the Essence of Ground*, describing it as the beginning of his “*morale*.” She wrote in response: “I don't at all see how a transition could be made to a practical ethics. To this point it remains formal, like the Kantian good will that Kant defines as the will to be a good will. [...] I just wonder how you proceed from there. What ought I to take up, when I take up my freedom? What do I do with this freedom?” (Beauvoir 1990b, I: 350–351, letter of December 14, 1939). This is a fair, indeed perhaps an overly charitable, response to Sartre's text, which can be found at Sartre (1983, I: 469–473, letter of December 9, 1939). It is unsurprising, then, that the only reference to Sartre in these entries concerns certain ideas they had shared that she now proposes to repudiate: “I understand what was wrong with our anti-humanism [...]” Beauvoir (1990a, 361–362). Sartre would not publish a work of ethics until Sartre (1946, delivered as a lecture in October 1945). The first works from the projects Beauvoir sketches in these entries were completed in 1943, published in 1944 and 1945.

¹⁵ In her first volume of memoirs she writes, “in my earliest childhood I wanted my entire life to be justified by a kind of necessity” (Beauvoir 1958/2004, 215; cf. 64, 75, 143, 146), and the theme of personal justification is prominent in the journals she kept as a university student (Beauvoir 2008, 267, 277, 348, 450, 491, 546).

¹⁶ Beauvoir (1948/2008, 64). Note that her four ways of referring to this aim—*se fonder*, *se nécessiter*, *se justifier*, *se sauver*—are coreferential. The terminology of “establishment” comes from Corbin's translation Heidegger's *On the Essence of Ground* (Heidegger 1938), which Beauvoir read in spring of 1939. Beauvoir adopted Corbin's translations of the texts for which they were available, and *fonder* is his translation of Heidegger's *stiften*.

¹⁷ Beauvoir (1947, 101–102).

¹⁸ Beauvoir (1990a, 361).

¹⁹ “Human reality” is Corbin's translation of *Dasein* in Heidegger (1938). As she explained in a later interview, “‘human reality’ [...] is a Heideggerian term. I was infused with Heidegger's philosophy, and when I speak about human reality, that is, about man's presence in the world, I'm not speaking about human nature, it's completely different” (Simons 1999, 94).

Evidence from these entries and other sources suggests that Beauvoir had come to the events of the second half of 1939 and of 1940 already committed to the view that the essence of beings like us is to exist in this Heideggerian sense, and that individual justification is to be found in and through one's projects. The beginning of the war disrupted the social fabric in which she had been embedded and thereby demonstrated to her its importance. Heidegger's conception of the other as an anonymous source of pre-interpretations that might tempt the individual away from the hard work of an existence that would be his own was, she now thought, incomplete. Likewise incomplete was her own earlier conception (now part of the "philosophical attitude that is no longer mine") of the other as a threat whose gaze had the power to impose unwelcome interpretations and so as "in a sense [...] the enemy."²⁰ A new idea had begun to form in the exodus from and return to Paris in June 1940²¹: "Metaphysical solidarity, which is a new discovery for me who used to be a solipsist."²² Her intensive study of Hegel that July was motivated by a desire to understand on a philosophical level the historical events through which she was living, to understand her own individual fate in world-historical terms.²³ That hope was disappointed.²⁴ What she found instead was a resource for building out the new account of the individual's relation to the social: "An idea that struck me very strongly in Hegel: the demand for *recognition* by one another on the part of consciousnesses—can serve as the basis for a social view of the world—the only absolute being this human consciousness."²⁵

In these entries, Beauvoir describes being faced with a choice between Hegel and Heidegger.²⁶ But the elaboration of the idea of metaphysical solidarity over the succeeding 5 years would lead to a view quite different from any advanced by either. A solidarity among subjects seeking justification and able to find it only through one another, this idea would form the foundation

of the existentialist ethics on which the analysis in *The Second Sex* relies.

2 | Justification

When Beauvoir approaches the topic of justification²⁷ in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*,²⁸ she seeks to answer two questions. First, which possibilities are genuinely my own?²⁹ Second, through actualization of which (own) possibilities could my existence as a whole be justified?³⁰ In answering the first question, she explicitly rejects Heidegger's idea that some orientation toward my own death could have anything to say about what is my own.³¹ Instead she offers an answer more Kantian in spirit: what is my own is that in which my agency is engaged, is the project I actualize.³² In answering the second question, she begins by ruling out several answers offered by the tradition: that projects can be justifying in virtue of being oriented toward ends whose value is part of the fabric of (mind-independent) reality;³³ that projects can be justifying in virtue of being commanded by a divinity;³⁴ that practical reason alone suffices to ground a mind-dependent but nevertheless objective order of values that would render projects oriented toward certain ends justifying.³⁵ She offers instead an answer that is original, so far as I can tell, in the history of moral philosophy: justification is to be sought through engagement in joint projects that encompass the cooperation of unknown others in a future that cannot be determinately foreseen. The argument for this answer occupies much of the second part of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*.

It begins from two observations. The first is that once an end is posited, a project undertaken, certain actions and attitudes immediately disclose themselves as valuable or valueless in light of it.³⁶ In the context of some determinate project and holding it fixed, it

²⁰ Beauvoir (1990a, 365). This had been the central theme in her first published novel, *L'Invitée* (1943).

²¹ Beauvoir (1990a, 298–327) and Beauvoir (1945/1984, 181–194). Simons (2008) and Sulieman (1996) also point to these journal entries and the importance of Beauvoir's wartime experience for the development of her moral theory, though neither interprets that theory as I do.

²² Beauvoir (1990a, 362).

²³ Beauvoir describes spending several hours a day in the Bibliothèque Nationale studying Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Logic* with the aid of Wahl (1929) beginning in early July of 1940 (Beauvoir 1990a, 339–350).

²⁴ Hegel's explanation of the individual's fate in world-historical terms amounted, she would conclude, to the individual's dissolution rather than its salvation. Cf. Beauvoir (1944/1986, 34, 54–58, 96–97, 117) and Beauvoir (1947, 13–15, 20, 25, 27).

²⁵ Beauvoir (1990a, 361; cf. 365).

²⁶ Beauvoir (1990a, 362).

²⁷ I explain Beauvoir's concept of justification in terms similar to those in this section in Kosch (in press, §1).

²⁸ Beauvoir (1944/1986). This text is foundational to any interpretation of Beauvoir's ethics, though considerable assistance is lent by its companion novel, *The Blood of Others* (Beauvoir (1945/1984)), and by the other novel of this period, *All Men are Mortal* (Beauvoir (1946/1996)), as well as the three essays published in *Les Temps modernes* in winter 1945–46 reprinted in Beauvoir (1948/2008). *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir (1947)) must be approached with this context in mind. Although (as I argue in Kosch (in progress)) the two texts advance the same view, the later text contains passages (for instance, at Beauvoir (1947, 25, 102, 110)) that are easily interpreted as asserting either that freedom is an objective value or that supporting others' freedom simply per se is a constitutive end of agency. Such passages seem to contradict the denials elsewhere in that very text (as well as in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*) that there exist objective values or morally substantive constitutive ends. These apparent contradictions have been noted; what has not been noted is that every one of these passages is, taken in context, best read as asserting the view advanced in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. That the later text might be misunderstood in this way will not have occurred to Beauvoir, simply because the earlier text was well known to her intended readership. But in the Anglophone world, the reception of these texts was set on its head by the history of their translation: *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* was published in English in 1948, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* only in 2004.

²⁹ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 13–36, 60–64). She takes this to be the central question of Division II of *Being and Time*. The term Heidegger uses—*Eigentlichkeit*—has connotations suggesting belonging to a person (*eigen*) and being appropriated (*zum Eigen gemacht*) that are lost in the French translation "*authenticité*" (which Beauvoir uses in later works, but not here).

³⁰ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 36–60, 67–123).

³¹ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 61–62).

³² Beauvoir (1944/1986, 16–17, 19, 57).

³³ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 29, 90–91, 120).

³⁴ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 42–43).

³⁵ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 48–49, 91, 101); cf. Beauvoir (1947, 27). Eshleman (2009, 81) takes Beauvoir to defend a principle similar to Kant's formula of humanity, and Webber (2018, Ch. 10) takes her to be a constitutivist of a broadly Korsgaardian variety, although his reconstruction has her argument different in its details from Korsgaard's. Dover and Gingerich (2024, 181) understand Beauvoir as seeking to ground the normativity of morality not in agency per se but nevertheless in "contingent yet universal features of human life." Such interpretations are faced with challenges from texts in which Beauvoir denies that there could be any simple, substantive, action-guiding imperative that would be universal in the Kantian sense of being normative for all human agents (for example, Beauvoir (1944/1986, 48–49, 91, 101); Beauvoir (1947, 27)). I place my interpretation in the context of these other interpretations in Kosch (in progress).

³⁶ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 15, 91–92, 108).

is easy to justify other details of one's practical engagement in the world. The second observation is that the question of existential justification arises at the higher order level of reflection upon which projects to undertake and (at certain junctures) whether to continue projects in process.³⁷ Projects need not have been embarked upon and might be abandoned at any time; they aspire to completion, but once complete will lose their ability to bestow value on their components. Reflection discloses the contingency and transience of projects, and so of project-internal value. It thereby undermines the agent's unreflective confidence that her projects are worth undertaking, leading her to wonder how any project could have any role in justifying her existence. "Why not rest right away?"³⁸

What we want, in wanting justification, is for there to be a sense in which our projects will have some necessity that is recognizable from this reflective standpoint. There is no world-given, no God-given, and no practical reason-given sense in which they could be necessary. But Beauvoir points out that there is a fourth option: there are other agents, also engaged in projects, and our projects might be necessary for *their* projects.³⁹ She concludes that uptake by others is a possible source of justification in this sense. "An object is grasped as having had to be what it was only if a singular choice flows back from the future towards it. This very reality that we throw into the world will not be saved unless another establishes a future that envelops it in surpassing it."⁴⁰ These sentences state a necessary condition ("will not be saved unless"). In looking for justification, however, we are looking for a sufficient one. To explain how uptake in another's project can provide a sufficient condition, Beauvoir next asks us to notice three ways in which something we have done might be necessitated (in this sense) by what others go on to do.

Another person might make use of the outcome of some project of mine as a mere fungible means to some unrelated end of theirs. That would be a way for my project to be necessary for their project, but it would not be the right way. What we want is to be "necessitated in our singularity."⁴¹ The actions that went into the production of the product, and the agent of those actions, would not be justified in their singularity were the product to serve as a mere fungible condition of possibility for the pursuit of an unrelated project, since the product is, precisely, fungible in that role.⁴²

Another person might make use of the outcome of some project of mine as a foil or negative example; or they might take it as inspiration for some further production that would be related to it and a descendant of it but that would, because of other features or a changed context, be something I could never endorse.⁴³ That also would be a way for my project to be necessary for theirs, but again, not the right way. Although the product would not be fungible in that role, its meaning would be changed, and

the actions that constituted the original project would take on a different, perhaps an opposed, value. I might, in contemplating this result, wish I had never performed them.

If the outcome of a project is to continue to justify the actions, and by extension the agent, that created it, its use in a future project must be such that the value of the components of the original project is retained. For that to be the case, the future project must remain the same in relevant respects, must be an extension or expansion of the original project. "[T]he project through which the other confers necessity on me must also be my project."⁴⁴ There would in that case be an intuitive sense in which the original project is kept alive: it is incorporated as a component in a larger project that "envelops it in surpassing it." This is a way completed individual projects and their elements might retain their value beyond their completion, consistent with a view on which value exists only within projects.

Beauvoir illustrates this idea with an example from the history of philosophy:

It would be wrong to believe that success consists in tranquilly attaining an end. Our ends are never anything except new points of departure. Once we have led others to this end, it is at that point that everything begins. From here, where will he go? I cannot content myself with the idea that he always goes somewhere: he would have gone somewhere even without me. I want it to be *my* project that he prolongs. It is for each to decide how far his project can extend without being destroyed. Would Kant have recognized himself in Hegel? Would he have regarded the Hegelian system as his negation? To respond one would have to know what, in his eyes, was the essential truth of his philosophy. But in any event his project did not extend to infinity. If Kant had wanted simply philosophy he would not have needed to write; philosophy already existed regardless. He wanted *a* philosophy born from a philosophical development that was his own. We want to be necessitated in our singularity, and for this we need singular projects. We depend on the freedom of the other: he can forget us, ignore us, use us for ends that are not our own.⁴⁵

What Beauvoir here describes Kant doing is undertaking a project, the critical philosophy, in the hope that it might receive the kind of reception by other, future philosophers that would amount to them joining, and continuing, the original project.

³⁷ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 119, cf. 9–12).

³⁸ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 9).

³⁹ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 65).

⁴⁰ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 102).

⁴¹ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 118).

⁴² Beauvoir (1944/1986, 117–118).

⁴³ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 106, 118).

⁴⁴ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 106).

⁴⁵ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 117–118).

When we think about why people write books of philosophy, this seems a fair characterization. Books can serve as doorstops, kindling, projectiles—but writing a book for the sole purpose of producing a physical object that might serve in some such role is not a project anyone has ever taken on. Books can serve as examples of how not to do philosophy, or as inspiration for hateful extremists with views diametrically opposed to their author's—but writing a book in the expectation that it will serve in some such role is not a project anyone has ever taken on. The aim of the writer of works of philosophy is to begin or to redirect a conversation in which these works will remain alive as contributions, and carry their authors' perspective into the future, incorporating it into a larger development.

What is special about open-ended projects that encompass the cooperation of unknown others in a future that cannot be determinately foreseen is that they cannot be “surpassed” in reflection. The inventions of future free agents, inhabiting a future context changed by the actions of other free agents, are unpredictable. This unpredictability makes all but the shortest-term social ramifications of our actions opaque to reflection. But this limitation of reflection need not be accompanied by any limitation on the extendability of any project. To say that Kant might have seen Hegel's project as a continuation of his own is not to say he could have predicted any part of it. Reflection's capacity to undermine the value-conferring capacity of projects is overcome by the gap between the indeterminate capacity for fruitfulness of some projects, and reflection's own limited capacity to portray their demise.⁴⁶

One might worry that no project could be unsurpassable in reflection unless it could surpass temporal limits entirely.⁴⁷ In responding to this objection, Beauvoir asks us to note two things. The first is that the objection presupposes an aspiration to a justification external to human existence and such that existence as a whole could rest upon it.⁴⁸ She has explained, in the negative argument in the first half of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, why she takes that aspiration to be unfulfillable. Her aim is to articulate a conception of justification on a human scale, in order to block the conclusion that, absent absolute justification, every project is pointless.⁴⁹ The second thing she asks us to note is that even were it possible to create a product whose lifespan would be literally infinite, there would be no point in doing so. Kant's project did not “extend to infinity” because no project could maintain to infinity its ability to attract partners who would be partners in the *same* project, while remaining sufficiently determinate that it might justify anyone in their singularity.⁵⁰

One might worry the bar for having an existence that is justified should be somewhat lower than producing the *Critique of Pure*

Reason. With this Beauvoir agrees, and if we focus on the form of project she has in mind, we can see that examples abound: environmental conservation; social activism; the creation of many small businesses and family farms; legislation; education at any level; the cultivation of certain kinds of relationship; even the pursuit of sports or hobbies (unless these are genuinely only fungible means to the end of preserving health or passing time).⁵¹ All such projects typically do incorporate the aim, or at least the hope, of their own extension into the future through the uptake of future agents. The intuition that it would become meaningless to engage in any of these activities in the knowledge that the human race would soon cease to exist is widely shared.⁵² Beauvoir offers an explanation for this intuition.

The fundamental nature of our relation to other human beings—metaphysical solidarity—is defined by the ability we have to anchor one another's individual projects in larger cooperative projects.

This is my situation before the other: men are free, and I am thrown into the world amongst these foreign freedoms. I need [others], because as soon as I have surpassed my own ends, my acts collapse upon themselves, inert, if they are not carried toward a new future in new projects [...]. But if my transcendence were, through other men, to prolong itself always farther than the project I form in the present, I would never be able to surpass it.⁵³

This is not a relation in which others are potential means to individual ends of ours; nor is it one in which we are potential means to individual ends of theirs.⁵⁴ Instead it is a relation in which we are potential joint agents of a shared larger project. Like many in the tradition beginning with Fichte and extending through Hegel and Marx to Mauss and much of early 20th century anthropology and social theory, Beauvoir sees the relation to the other in joint action as distinct from the relation to the other in unilateral action of one upon another. The co-agency relationship is one of mutually transparent subjects; the agent-patient relationship is one in which both parties are to some degree objectified and mutually opaque.⁵⁵ Beauvoir's general term for this relation is “communication.”

Consideration of the general features and the necessary conditions of joint projects that could expand into an indefinitely open future and thereby surpass reflection, coupled with an account of what it is for a project to be one's own and an account of practical reason that is novel and interesting in its own right, provide the foundation for the practical philosophy

⁴⁶ Beauvoir (1947, 170, 178).

⁴⁷ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 119).

⁴⁸ Beauvoir (1947, 21–23, 120, 219–221).

⁴⁹ Beauvoir (1947, 100–102, 178). See Eshleman (2009) for a nice articulation of this.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 121) and Beauvoir (1947, 168).

⁵¹ One example among many she offers: “Dances, songs, and regional costumes” allowed “the peasants of the past” to “transcend their situation” (Beauvoir 1947, 131).

⁵² See Scheffler (2013) for an investigation of this intuition that has some commonalities with Beauvoir's. Compare Beauvoir (1944/1986, 65, 110) and Beauvoir (1946/1996, 388).

⁵³ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 110).

⁵⁴ This seems to me a mistake in Webber's reconstruction (Webber (2018, Ch. 10)).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Beauvoir (1943/1980, 328–329). For an expanded discussion of this relation, see Kosch (in press, §2).

Beauvoir called “existentialist ethics.” The practical application of that ethics is explored in the extended thought experiments that shape the two novels, in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*, in the three essays of 1945–46, and in *The Second Sex*. The last is the application of existentialist ethics that has had the broadest influence. The power of its analysis is widely acknowledged; but its precision can be fully appreciated, and certain longstanding criticisms of it rebutted, only when its relation to this practical philosophy is fully spelled out.

3 | Oppression

On the account just outlined, justification would seem to be a futile aim for a great many individuals, both historically and in the contemporary world.⁵⁶ This might appear a shortcoming of the view. Beauvoir takes it to be, instead, an indictment of the current state, and most historical states, of society. These are states in which all or some individuals are prevented, by circumstances or by the action of other individuals, from engaging in the kind of project that might aspire to expand into an indefinitely open future. When the prevention is the work of circumstances, it is a misfortune. When it is the work of other individuals, it is oppression. This is how Beauvoir defines oppression in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*:

It is this interdependence [among agents seeking justification] that explains how oppression is possible and why it is vile. We have seen that my freedom requires, in order to actualize itself, that it open onto an open future. It is other men who open the future to me and it is they who, constituting the world of tomorrow, define my future. But if instead of permitting me to participate in this constructive movement they oblige me to consume my transcendence to no purpose, if they maintain me below the level they have mastered and from which new conquests will be undertaken, then they cut me off from the future, make me an object. Life aims both at perpetuating itself and at surpassing

itself. If it does nothing more than maintain itself, living is no more than not dying, and human existence is no different from an absurd vegetation. A life does not justify itself unless its self-perpetuation is integrated into its self-surpassing, and unless this surpassing has no limits other than those the subject sets for himself. Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who build up humanity by casting it in front of itself, and those who are condemned to march hopelessly in place, to support the collectivity and nothing else. Their life is pure repetition of mechanical gestures, their leisure barely sufficing for the replenishment of their strength. The oppressor nourishes himself on their transcendence and refuses to prolong it by free recognition.⁵⁷

Beauvoir discusses a variety of examples of oppression in the works of the 1940s: the exploitation of workers characteristic of capitalist societies,⁵⁸ colonial exploitation of indigenous populations,⁵⁹ slavery,⁶⁰ racial segregation in the United States,⁶¹ and the gender system.⁶² She takes mechanisms of oppression to be varied and socio-culturally local. The proletariat is oppressed when his life activity is entirely consumed in the reproduction of itself. Nations are oppressed when they are prevented from accessing material or social technology that would enable them to escape a subsistence economy. Women are oppressed when poor education, a restrictive division of labor, constraints on freedom of movement, and the hegemony of an ideology denigrating their capacities combine to block their participation in the political, cultural, and scientific life of their society. What unites these disparate systems in one category is their effect on their victims: the projects they are able to undertake cannot “open onto an open future.”

Many interpreters of Beauvoir do not see her as defining oppression, as a general phenomenon, in any way at all.⁶³ Among those who do, one finds three general types of account: those on which to be oppressed is to occupy a (sufficiently) low social status⁶⁴; those on which to be oppressed is to be subject to characteristic

⁵⁶ Beauvoir (1947, 114).

⁵⁷ Beauvoir (1947, 116–117). We know that the “open future” onto which “freedom” must open “in order to actualize itself” in this passage is not the agent’s own individual future, but instead the future beyond her lifespan, because Beauvoir has by this point in the text made this meaning of “open future” explicit at several points. One such passage: “[F]reedom cannot will itself without aiming at an open future. It is necessary that the ends it gives itself not be able to be transcended by any reflection. But only the freedom of other men is able to prolong them beyond our life. I have tried to show this in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. Every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense, always wills it, even if he is a tyrant. What he [sc. the tyrant] lacks is only to take on, in good faith, the consequences of such a will. Only the freedom of others prevents each of us from being frozen in the absurdity of facticity. (Beauvoir 1947, 100–101).” See also Beauvoir (1947, 46, 85–86, 88–89, 95, 161, 168).

⁵⁸ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 49), Beauvoir (1947, 28–30, 119), and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 16–17, 83, 155).

⁵⁹ Beauvoir (1947, 120, 178, 194, 196) and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 15).

⁶⁰ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 72, 103), Beauvoir (1947, 54), and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 16–17, 83).

⁶¹ Beauvoir (1947, 54, 125–126, 178), Beauvoir (1948/1956, 42–43, 96, 186, 208, 212, 230), and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 12, 16–17, 21, 169).

⁶² Beauvoir (1949/2004); cf. Beauvoir (1947, 54–55, 68–69, 194, 197).

⁶³ This is often because their exclusive focus is the oppression of women and their accounts of that do not generalize. Moi, for example, takes Beauvoir to be proposing a new theory of sexual difference in *The Second Sex* (according to which although everyone is split and ambiguous, women are more split and ambiguous than men) and a theory of oppression on which “the social oppression of women [...] mirrors or repeats the ontological ambiguity of existence” (Moi (2008, 175–176)). This is not a theory of women’s oppression that could easily generalize to other forms. There are of course aspects of women’s oppression that are not present in every form, just as there are components unique to racial or colonial oppression. Beauvoir’s rich description in *The Second Sex* is evidently full of these. What is important to see is that the core conception of oppression applies across all the forms of it Beauvoir discusses.

⁶⁴ Some of these accounts take the relational fact of non-recognition as foundational. Lundgren-Gothlin (1996, 79) writes: “Because Beauvoir attaches such importance to the struggle for recognition, her exploration of the origins of oppression tends to be Hegelian and idealistic rather than Marxist and materialistic.” Wilson (2006, 90–91) argues that *The Second Sex* articulates a conception of human dignity as a relational concept that depends on how a person is regarded by others but that is nevertheless distinct from mere social prestige. Bauer (2001b, 218) defines oppression as “institutionalized and insidious inequalities.” Kruks (2012, 89) proposes a conception of oppression on which it has “three ‘ideal types,’ or modes,” with each having “a different core dynamic: asymmetrical recognition, indifference, and aversion.” See also Andrew (2003, 33, 36) and Langer (2003, 97–98).

distortions of subjectivity or of self-relation⁶⁵; and those on which to be oppressed is to be constrained or deprived of (material or social) resources.⁶⁶ There is considerable overlap between these accounts, as one would expect, but the first sort typically point to texts in which Beauvoir describes the oppressed as being denied recognition, and the latter two typically point to texts in which Beauvoir describes the oppressed as lacking freedom. “Freedom” is ambiguous in all of the texts under discussion, referring to the disposition to project and to disclose the world (“ontological” freedom, a descendant of Kantian spontaneity); to self-conscious embrace of one’s freedom in the ontological sense, and with it responsibility for one’s projects (“moral” freedom, a descendant of Heideggerian authenticity); and to the capacities and opportunities necessary to accomplish something one sets out to do (“power”).⁶⁷ Some self-relational interpretations point to the second, moral freedom, as what the oppressed lack; all material constraint interpretations point to the third.

On the interpretation I am proposing, the oppressed per se lack neither ontological nor moral freedom; nor do they lack power in an unspecified sense. The freedom they lack is freedom from circumstances that close the future to them. That is, they lack freedom to pursue projects plausibly aiming at justification. Since those projects may require material resources, oppressive situations may (but do not always) involve a lack of resources. Since those projects are social in nature, inability to pursue them will also be a social characteristic of the oppressed. Those who cannot pursue them will lack recognition, but this lack will not be *sui generis*; instead, it will result from the absence of accomplishments that would merit recognition, an absence brought about by some combination of material, social, and internalized psychological constraints. The oppressed will occupy a para-social status in which they are cut off from whatever aspects of social life allow projects that can aspire to a grip on the future. They will be constrained to the activities of perpetuating life, barred from integrating these into any self-surpassing movement.

This characterization, coupled with the conception of the moral orientation described in Section 2, explains Beauvoir’s conviction that the victim of oppression always has all-things-considered reason to revolt against it.⁶⁸ From an existentialist perspective, it

is the most profound harm its victim could suffer. Revolt takes one of two forms: mere refusal or positive action.⁶⁹ Initiators of, or contributors to, a liberation movement revolt positively against their oppression in what may at the same time be a project aimed at justification.⁷⁰ Mere refusal is not per se a project aimed at justification, though it is sometimes the only authentic option, since failure to negate their situation in one or the other way—complicity in their oppression—is from this existentialist perspective a moral failing of the highest order.⁷¹

This characterization also explains Beauvoir’s claim that to act as an oppressor is, *ceteris paribus*, to harm oneself as well as one’s victim.⁷² That engaging in oppression is not per se a path to justification follows directly from the definitions of justification and oppression. The situation in which an oppressor places his victim is one in which the victim cannot act as an interlocutor who might carry his oppressor’s project into an open future, because his own future is closed. Oppression thus shrinks the pool of possible partners in open-ended cooperative projects. This is Beauvoir’s explanation of the pro tanto value of the freedom of others, from any agent’s perspective. “Only the freedom of others is capable of necessitating my being. My essential need is therefore to have free men before me.”⁷³ “Respect for the freedom of others is not an abstract rule [but instead] the primary condition of the success of my effort.”⁷⁴ It is also the foundation of her egalitarianism. “In order that my appeals not be lost in the void, there must be in my environment men prepared to hear me. What is needed is that men be my peers.”⁷⁵ Only peers are able to take up and to surpass.

Oppression for its own sake being strictly pointless, Beauvoir must explain the motivations of oppressors in a way that does not appeal to the end of justification properly understood. Like its mechanisms, oppression’s motivations are various. One important set of motivations arises from the difficulty and uncertainty of justification itself. Beauvoir sees a widespread desire to flee the risk of rejection that real peer relations pose and to substitute for the difficult work of communication some easier project that would appear to approximate it.⁷⁶ These desires can motivate oppression directly, or they can motivate other behaviors that produce oppression as a side effect.

⁶⁵ Bauer (2001b, 81) calls the view “that men are subjects and women are objects and that ending the oppression of women requires that they become subjects” the “standard interpretation,” though she herself defines oppression differently. Garcia (2021b, 125) defines oppression in terms of alienation: “the common characteristic of all oppressions is alienation—the transformation of the oppressed into an other that is irreducibly different from the self.” Compare Garcia (2023, 204, 207). Green (1999, 189) sees woman’s situation as one that prevents her from distinguishing herself from her own subjective experience of the world; accounts on which the oppressed per se lack moral freedom, or that define oppression as alienation from one’s ontological freedom, also fall into this category (for example Arp 2001, Ch. 6; Knowles 2019, 253; Simons 1999, 88, 177, 179).
⁶⁶ That oppression can involve a deprivation of material freedoms is a natural understanding and is a component of some relational accounts (for example, Kruks 2012, 91). Arp, who reads Beauvoir as defining the situation of being oppressed as that of lacking moral freedom (Arp 2001, 120–123), takes the development of moral freedom to rest on the exercise of certain powers, a view that allows her to agree that to oppress someone is to deprive them of powers to undertake particular actions. Women are oppressed because they are (materially) “prevented from becoming aware of their freedom [sc. in the ontological sense]” (Arp 2001, 142). Pettersen (2007, 60) agrees. Langley (2024, 6) understands oppression in terms of deprivation of capacities and opportunities in general. Mahon (1997) understands it as being prevented from accomplishing one’s goals.

⁶⁷ Following Arp (2001, 142).

⁶⁸ Beauvoir (1947, 114, 117, 120–121) and Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 414–415).

⁶⁹ Beauvoir (1947, 45–46).

⁷⁰ This is Beauvoir’s typical characterization of French resistance activities, for instance at Beauvoir (1945/1984, 222). See also Beauvoir (1947, 114) and Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 414–415).

⁷¹ Although ignorance of one’s oppression excuses non-revolt by outright preventing it, oppressed people aware of their oppression are at fault if they do not revolt: “as soon as liberation appears as a possibility, not to exploit this possibility is an abdication of freedom, abdication that implies bad faith and is a positive fault” (Beauvoir (1947, 55–56); cf. Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 27; II: 414–415)).

⁷² “All men have an interest in [its] elimination—the oppressor just as much as the oppressed, as Marx himself says—because everyone needs for all men to be free” (Beauvoir (1947, 119)).

⁷³ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 96).

⁷⁴ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 112).

⁷⁵ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 115); cf. Beauvoir (1944/1986, 104).

⁷⁶ Pyrrhus and Cineas diagnoses a series of moral errors as arising from efforts to avoid risk and difficulty, for example at Beauvoir (1944/1986, 70, 75, 78, 102–104, 107, 118–119); and cf. Beauvoir (1948/2008, 33): “If existentialism is disquieting, that is not because it despairs of man, but because it demands from him a constant tension.”

The cases she describes in which the flight motivation leads directly to oppression have a common structure. Oppressed individuals are incentivized to perform a recognition of their oppressors that responds to no actual merit. They are not in fact partners whose uptake could expand any project into the future, precisely because their oppression closes the future to *them*. But their oppressors find comfort in the simulacrum of justification produced by this performance of uptake. The phenomenon can take place at the social level, with the creation of subordinate castes to whose members are attributed contradictory features corresponding on the one hand to their function as givers of recognition, and on the other to their lack of freedom to embark on meaningful projects of their own.⁷⁷

The flight motivation can lead indirectly to oppression in a number of ways. Some strategies for avoiding the risk and difficulty of actual cooperation involve the accumulation of reified substitutes for recognition—property, titles, summits, awards—the amassment of which becomes the goal that replaces the pursuit of partnership in projects of communication.⁷⁸ These strategies need not involve the oppression of any individual or group; but in the presence of other social factors, they may lead to it. The accumulation of property, for example, can function as a simulacrum of justification and may, given certain forms of economic organization, lead to the impoverishment of a class that is, thereby, oppressed. The oppression of that class does not serve directly the distorted object of their oppressors' ambition; but it need be no less complete for being a side effect.

Importantly, oppression can also have motivations other than avoidance of risk and difficulty. In fact, Beauvoir allows that projects aiming clear-sightedly at what would be genuine justification can sometimes involve oppression. The aim of winning the war and building a more free and equal postwar France is one source of examples.⁷⁹ Such circumstances occur when individuals and groups choose ends that are not jointly attainable. Because ends are freely chosen, conflicts of this kind are inevitable.⁸⁰ Metaphysical solidarity is universal; but actual cooperation is a substantive accomplishment in every case, its universal extension an object of aspiration.⁸¹

4 | The Second Sex

The three branches of Beauvoir's ethical project insofar as it concerns oppression—accounting for what is bad about oppression from the standpoint of its victim and for the reasons they have

to choose evidently costly revolt over complicity; accounting for the reasons even their ostensible beneficiaries have for reforming oppressive systems; and accounting for the motivations that can lead both oppressors and oppressed to disregard these reasons and participate in oppressive regimes—also structure the ethical dimension of the project in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir explains the connection between existentialist ethics and the account of women's oppression she aims to offer in this passage in the Introduction:

The perspective we adopt is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject posits himself as a transcendence concretely through projects; he actualizes his own freedom only by perpetually going beyond himself toward other freedoms. There is no justification of present existence other than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future. Each time transcendence falls back into immanence there is a degradation of existence to 'in itself', of freedom to facticity. This fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it. If it is inflicted upon her it takes the form of frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned with justifying her existence experiences this as an indefinite need to transcend herself. Now, the situation of woman is defined in a singular way by the fact that while she is, like every human being, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world in which men require her to assume herself as Other. They try to freeze her into an object and condemn her to immanence, because her transcendence will be perpetually transcended by another consciousness, essential and sovereign. The drama of woman is this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential.⁸²

The parallel to the passage defining oppression in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* quoted in Section 3 above is evident. Likewise evident is the centrality of the concept of justification in this description of the project: the woman is described as a subject who would seek justification, inhabiting a situation in which routes to it are systematically closed. But the literature on Beauvoir's account of women's oppression in *The Second Sex* seldom mentions the parallel, and one finds in it no account of why some projects but not others are potentially justifying.⁸³ This is unfortunate, because such an account would inform many points of interpretation, among them how to understand the

⁷⁷ Examination of these contradictions in the case of women specifically occupies the final section of the first volume of *The Second Sex*, but any subordinate caste can take on the same aura of mystery, and similarly contradictory characteristics, from the point of view of the oppressor (Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 311–313)).

⁷⁸ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 15, 97) and Beauvoir (1947, 176).

⁷⁹ See, for example, Beauvoir (1947, 138): "We've also seen that the situation in the world is so complex that it would be impossible to act everywhere at once and on everyone's behalf. To secure an urgent victory, one will have, at least provisionally, to cease to serve certain legitimate causes. One might even need to fight against them. Thus in the last war no antifascist party could hope for the success of the indigenous revolts within the British empire. These revolts were, on the contrary, supported by fascist regimes. Still, one could not blame those who, considering their own enfranchisement as the most urgent action, profited from the situation to obtain it. Thus it is possible, even frequent, that one finds oneself obliged to oppress, to kill, men who pursue ends whose legitimacy one oneself recognizes."

⁸⁰ Beauvoir (1944/1986, 48–49).

⁸¹ Beauvoir (1947, 26).

⁸² Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 26–27).

⁸³ Arp (2001, 136–137) asserts the importance of justification, and of Beauvoir's ethics, for understanding the project in *The Second Sex*; but justification in fact plays no role in her interpretation of Beauvoir's account of oppression. Mahon (1997, 1–8, 104) seeks to explain the ethical background of *The Second Sex*, but relies on *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Blood of Others*, and (puzzlingly) the first half of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, omitting all mention of justification. Bauer (2001b, 168–169) points out that the oppression of women figures as a central case in the discussion of oppression in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*; but she sees the account of justification in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* as aporetic: "So then we are still left with the question of what counts as 'justification' for my actions, and of how I know or decide that something I do is or was or will be justified" (Bauer (2001b, 144)).

major concepts Beauvoir uses in this passage to characterize women's oppression ("men require her to assume herself as Other [...] try to freeze her into an object and condemn her to immanence"), why complicity is characterized as a "moral fault," and why justification is unachievable by the means patriarchal oppressors employ. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly consider each of these topics.

In the Introduction, Beauvoir defines the position of "other" in general as that of outsider to a community, from the standpoint of a member of the community. She distinguishes "relative" from "absolute" others. A relative other is a member of some community that is not one's own—"relative" because individuals can travel and in other ways absorb the viewpoint of other communities, such that "we" and "they" can be seen to be relative terms. A non-relative or "absolute" other would be a member of no community accessible in this way, or no community at all.⁸⁴ Women fall into this second category. Dispersed among households, more closely tied to individual men than to other women, they do not form a community of their own. "Women [...] do not say 'we'."⁸⁵ Their alterity is therefore not relative. But neither are women members of the human community in general. This is the force of Beauvoir's description of their striving to overcome their oppression as "aspir[ing] to participate in the human *Mitsein*."⁸⁶ To be emancipated, for them, is to become genuine members of human society. Social integration is a condition of possibility of justification; without it, women are cut off from any future. To describe women as "absolute other," then, is to describe them as occupying a situation of oppression.

So much seems clear from the Introduction, and some interpreters agree that to be "absolute other" is to be excluded from society.⁸⁷ But others, drawing on the Myths section of the first volume, understand "Other" or "absolute other" to refer primarily to the phenomenon in which women are seen as uncanny, by turns seductive and threatening, hybrids of human subjectivity and inhuman embodiment of the natural world.⁸⁸ Another set of interpreters take "Other" or "absolute other" to have effectively the same meaning as "object," and see othering as a harm equivalent to the harm of objectification.⁸⁹ Another set

understands it as a distinct phenomenon, but a harm of the same general kind.⁹⁰

The characterization of "Other" drawn from the Myths section might seem to be in competition with the characterization drawn from the Introduction; but this conflict seems to me only apparent. The former describes an illusory way men *see* women, whereas the latter describes their actual situation. Women's oppression, like all oppression, is on Beauvoir's account a material-social situation. Oppression invites myth-making about its victims, and the resulting myths can reinforce the oppression by influencing behavior. But absent such behavior, the myths are just that. What makes women's situation oppressive is not that they are seen in this way, but rather that, in being cut off from society at large, they are cut off from any grip on the future and so from any justification.

Interpretations of objectification in later feminist literature, and also in some interpretive literature on Beauvoir, focus on the construction of women as objects of sexual desire and the internalization of this objectification in narcissistic self-objectification. Sexual objectification is on these views *per se* problematic and a direct contributor to women's oppression.⁹¹ Beauvoir's compelling description of the psychological harm caused to girls and women of being sexually objectified and made to internalize men's sexualized view of themselves has rightly been influential. But it would be incorrect, in my view, to understand women's oppression in terms of the accumulation of such individual psychological harms, in part because the harms themselves would be inexplicable in the absence of a social system by which women are made subject to unwelcome and pervasive sexual objectification. Such a system objectifies them in the broader sense I am defining here.

Beauvoir describes members of other oppressed groups as being made into "objects" or "things" where it is clear that their objectification has nothing to do with being made sexual objects.⁹² It is clear in these cases that to be made into an object is to be systematically excluded from opportunities to function as a *subject* in society, excluded from the class of potential partners in

⁸⁴ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 15–16).

⁸⁵ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 17).

⁸⁶ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 27). "*Mitsein*" is Heidegger's term for sociality. Beauvoir leaves it untranslated because Corbin had not translated the parts of *Being and Time* in which it occurs, and so there was as yet no accepted French term. There are two instances in the text of *The Second Sex* in which Beauvoir describes the male-female "couple" as an "original *Mitsein*," and it is in part on the basis of these passages that Bauer characterizes Beauvoir's view as one in which oppressed women are indeed part of the human *Mitsein*, but in an inauthentic way (Bauer (2001a, 144)). This seems to me a misconstrual of the Beauvoir's use of the term, most of whose instances describe women as excluded from the human *Mitsein*. See, for example, Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 99 and especially I: 105).

⁸⁷ For example, Lundgren-Gothlin (1996, 71–74).

⁸⁸ Melo Lopes ties this way of being viewed to incel violence and to dehumanization, writing "For Beauvoir, when men conceive of women as Others, they represent them as simultaneously human subjects and embodiments of the natural world. Women function then as *sui generis* entities through which men can experience themselves as praiseworthy heroes, regardless of the quality of their actions" (Melo Lopes (2023, 134)); and, "According to Beauvoir, the misogynist [...] sees women as paradoxical entities: as simultaneously human beings and as embodiments of inhuman 'Nature' [...] he misogynist is horrified of women because of their paradoxical and unnatural character" (Melo Lopes (2026, 104–105)). See also Mussett (2006, 283).

⁸⁹ See Bauer (2001b, 149–150), Bauer (2017, 150–152), Garcia (2021b, Ch. 6–7), Garcia (2023, 207–209), Green (2022, 30, 32), Hutchings (2001, 23), and Knowles (2019, 244). Bergoffen (2003, 252) takes Beauvoir to define "other" as "non-subject"; the analysis of rape in Bergoffen (2017) begins from this assumption. Arp (1995, 171–172) distinguishes othering from objectification, but her account of othering as the source of alienation does not differ markedly from accounts that trace this to objectification. Mahon (1997, 114) defines "Other" as 1. a separate existence, 2. that is hostile, and 3. that is inessential; he takes objecthood to be equivalent only to the third. Kruks (2017, 242) also seems to equate inessential other and object.

⁹⁰ Heinämaa (2003) understands othering as a kind of subordination not equivalent to objectification; Direk (2011) suggests that we understand othering as "abjection."

⁹¹ Bauer (2015, Ch. 4) understands self-objectification as equivalent to making oneself a sexual object, and suggests that it is problematic even in a society in which many feminist aspirations about roles open to women have been met. Garcia (2021b, 111) writes, "submission is the result of women's alienation, which occurs through their objectification, especially their sexual objectification." On her view, "patriarchy, that is, the social oppression of women, occurs through the transformation of woman into an absolute Other, whose function is to be an object of love and desire for men" (132). Melo Lopes (2021, 723) argues that women must abjure the temptation to objectify themselves and to conduct their sexual lives in a narcissistic way if they are ever to exit their subordinate position.

⁹² Beauvoir (1944/1986, 104–105).

joint projects aiming at justification.⁹³ When Beauvoir describes women's objectification in *The Second Sex*, she typically has this specific phenomenon in mind.⁹⁴ An interpretive problem arises here not only because Beauvoir uses the same term to refer to two phenomena, but also because the two phenomena overlap in the case of women's oppression. The slave's being made into an object (in the sense equivalent to his being oppressed) involves the constraint of his activities and social role to the provision of labor on command. The woman's being made into an object (in the sense equivalent to her being oppressed) involves the constraint of her activities and social role to the provision of sexual, reproductive, and ego-boosting services for men. That role involves her in being made, and making herself, into an object of sexual desire. But although being an object in this sexual sense is a characteristic feature of women's situation, it is not per se oppressive.⁹⁵ What is oppressive is the system that prevents women from functioning as *subjects* in society.

What it means to say that women are enclosed in "immanence" is another area in which clarity can be gained by comparing *The Second Sex* to earlier works, in which the term is used to describe various forms of oppression and where it is clear that enclosure in immanence means confinement to a situation in which the future is closed and justification out of reach.⁹⁶ Some interpreters deny that "immanence" (as used to describe women's oppression⁹⁷) names a single unitary property at all.⁹⁸ Others characterize the immanence/transcendence distinction as an extension of the in-itself/for-itself distinction of *Being and Nothingness*, and understand women's immanence in terms of embodiment, passivity, or failure to acknowledge (or even to exercise) ontological freedom.⁹⁹ Still others characterize the same distinction as one between kinds of activities: those whose effects are transient (and that are therefore repetitive) and those with enduring results.¹⁰⁰

The women described in *The Second Sex* do not lack, and do not universally fail to acknowledge, ontological freedom¹⁰¹; and an interpretation on which such a central concept has no fixed meaning even within this narrow context would be uncharitable. The account of immanence in terms of the division of labor is the most promising; but it has two shortcomings. First, it lacks a plausible explanation of why enclosure in immanence (so understood) should be, per se, bad in any way. The absence of such an account opens the door to an important class of feminist critiques of Beauvoir's analysis, which claim that it is biased in favor of masculine-coded pursuits over feminine-coded ones (is "masculinist," where this is understood to be an undefended assumption about superiority).¹⁰² Rebutting that criticism requires an account of what makes some pursuits better than others from a general human point of view.¹⁰³ On the interpretation presented in Section 2 above, Beauvoir has such an account, one from which it follows that housework and (assuming certain further constraints on what it takes for a project to be one's own) carework cannot be such projects.

Second, an understanding of immanence on which it is only the assignment of thankless and ephemeral tasks would reduce enclosure in immanence to a mere component of women's oppression, contradicting passages in which oppression and enclosure in immanence appear to be equated.¹⁰⁴ That an entity seeking justification should seek to avoid being burdened with thankless, repetitive tasks in order to focus on meaningful work does, of course, figure in Beauvoir's account of the gender-based division of labor. But other central elements of the system of gender-based oppression neither reduce to nor derive from the assignment of such tasks to women. The tight control of women's sexual and romantic behavior; barriers to their physical mobility outside the home; their exclusion from the highest levels of education; tutelage and related institutions; and above all the systematic denigration of the contributions to culture, science

⁹³ This is why Beauvoir writes that the oppressor "gains nothing" by the transformation of men into "things," and that he "becomes a man again only by turning to his peers" (Beauvoir (1944/1986, 104)).

⁹⁴ Examples include Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 16, 189–191, 266, 316; II: 38, 158, 345, 362). Kruks (2012, 38, 63) appears to me to agree with this characterization, as does McWeeny (2016, 158–159); cf. McWeeny (2017, 218).

⁹⁵ In fact, Beauvoir appears to take being, and making oneself, an object of desire to be an ineliminable element of sexual engagement, something even men would benefit from learning to do (see, for example, Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 154)). Interpreters like Ward and Anderson (2022) who seek resources in Beauvoir for a positive account of erotic objecthood find ample textual support.

⁹⁶ "The tyrant affirms himself as transcendence, and considers the others as pure immanence. [...] Of the ambiguous condition which is that of all men he retains for himself only the aspect of a transcendence capable of justifying itself; for the others, the contingent and unjustified aspect of immanence" (Beauvoir (1947, 143; and compare page 144, where she describes the enclosure in immanence of Jews, Blacks, and Indigenous people)).

⁹⁷ Beauvoir of course also uses the term "immanence" in other contexts, for instance, to contrast the worldly with the extra-worldly (Beauvoir (2008, 450) and Beauvoir (1944/1986, 41)); to contrast internality with externality (Beauvoir (2008, 233, 446), Beauvoir (1944/1986, 28–29), and Beauvoir (1948/2008, 29)); and to describe elements of stasis, maintenance, or physicality in everyone's life (Beauvoir (1947, 143); and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 187, II: 183)). Likewise she uses the term "transcendence" to refer to the divine or extra-worldly (Beauvoir (2008, 450)); to the subject's openness to the world outside the mind (Beauvoir (1944/1986, 29); Beauvoir (1947, 89), and Beauvoir (1948/2008, 28–29)); or to any surpassing of the given and so any action or project at all (Beauvoir (1944/1986, 26–27, 31, 54, 110, 114–115, 119–120, 122–123), Beauvoir (1947, 20–21, 89, 116–117, 140, 143), Beauvoir (1948/2008, 63), and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 60)). She also uses the term to describe a project's escape toward the future, that is, the aim of the person seeking justification, and so as the opposite of "immanence" as used in descriptions of oppression (Beauvoir (1944/1986, 44–45, 110, 121), Beauvoir (1947, 39, 116–117, 131, 143), Beauvoir (1948/2008, 56)), and Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 19, 26–27, 74, 82, 102–103, 178; II: 315, 357, 415, 451)).

⁹⁸ Moi (2008, 174) describes the concept as a "magnet" for "obsessional images": "darkness, night, passivity, stasis, abandonment, slavery, confinement, imprisonment, decomposition, degradation, and destruction." "Beauvoir's conception of immanence [...] undermines its own coherence by expanding the concept beyond rational limits." Ruonakoski (2020, 15) denies that immanence is a useful concept with a single coherent meaning but agrees that "Beauvoir's analysis of oppression as deprivation of transcendence is valuable." See also, for example, Fabijancic (2001, 449–452) and Lundgren-Gothlin (1996, Ch. 16).

⁹⁹ See, for example, Arp (2001, 138–144), Arp (2012, 268), Bauer (2001b, 205), Bergoffen (1997, 109, 146–148, 151), Cleary (2022, 253), Direk (2011, 51), Knowles (2019, 252), Lloyd (1984/1993, 88, 98–103), Mackenzie (2024, 144, 146–148), Mahon (1997, 108), McWeeny (2017, 219, 221), Morgan (1986, 122), Seigfried (1984, 426–427), Stone (2017, 125–128), and Zahra (2021, 97–98). Green (2022, 35) appears to equate immanence with flesh, though in Green (1999, 188–190), she had argued that we should understand "immanence" to refer to a kind of solipsism. The most extreme version of this view sees feminine-coded roles as containing no projects at all.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Deutscher (2006, 329), Langley (2024, 7), Veltman (2004), Veltman (2006), and Veltman (2010).

¹⁰¹ "Freedom is entire in each" (Beauvoir 1949/2004, II: 414).

¹⁰² See, for example, (Lloyd 1984/1993, 99) and Seigfried (1984, 426–435).

¹⁰³ I agree with much of Veltman's account. She identifies the transcendence/immanence distinction as normative (Veltman (2006, 127–128)), sees Beauvoir's critique of housework as an ethical one (Veltman (2004)), and connects the transcendence/immanence distinction to justification ("transcendence gives justification; immanence cannot" (Veltman (2010, 57; cf. page 70) and Veltman (2006, 120))). But she does not offer an interpretation of justification, and without that I do not see resources for a convincing rebuttal of this criticism.

¹⁰⁴ Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 310, 367, 382, 415, 456, 496).

and politics that some women have, despite all these barriers, still been able to make, all figure explicitly and centrally in Beauvoir's analysis of women's situation, and that situation as a whole is described as enclosure in "immanence."

My proposal is that we understand Beauvoir's claim that "men require her to assume herself as Other [...] freeze her into an object [...] condemn her to immanence" in the passage in the Introduction not as describing three distinct harms that each contribute to women's oppression, but rather as describing in three ways the same situation: that of exclusion from the community of potential co-agents of projects aiming at justification. On this interpretation, the use of these terms is consistent across texts and across depictions of the oppression of different groups, of whom objectification and confinement to immanence are typical.¹⁰⁵

A different area of disagreement in the secondary literature concerns the extent to which Beauvoir blames women for their own oppression.¹⁰⁶ I noted in Section 3 that she takes all oppressed people to have all-things-considered reason to revolt against their oppression, and views failure to do so as a moral fault. This would suggest that she should view women's complicity as a moral fault, and this is borne out by the passage from the Introduction quoted above, among many others. "Resignation is nothing but an abdication and a flight. For the woman there is no way out except to work toward her liberation."¹⁰⁷ But to blame women for complicity is not to blame them for their oppression, since although complicity plays some role in maintaining oppressive systems, its role is less decisive than many interpreters suppose. Because what is at stake is control of an array of institutional conditions of possibility of multigenerational joint projects, as well as the personal capacities developed in interaction with certain of these institutions, liberation is not merely a matter of (even widespread) refusal to be complicit. It is a problem of collective action that women must work together to solve over generations.¹⁰⁸

The motivation for patriarchal oppression, and the way in which it might be self-defeating from the point of view of oppressors, is also a problem on which the characterization of oppression in Section 3 can shed light. I distinguished there three configurations of oppressors' motivations: the flight motivation leading to oppression directly; the flight motivation leading to oppression indirectly; and the motivation to pursue ends of any kind in conditions of sufficiently deep conflict between projects. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes the patriarchal oppressor's motivation as twofold: women's "condition served the economic

interests of males, but it also suited their ontological and moral ambitions."¹⁰⁹ By "ontological and moral ambitions," she means to refer to the first configuration of motivations, in which some who wish to avoid the risk and effort involved in genuine pursuit of justification seek to oppress individuals in order to incentivize their performance of a simulacrum of recognition that corresponds to no actual merit. "Although he is incapable of actualizing himself alone, man in his relations with his peers is in constant danger. His life is a difficult undertaking whose success is never assured. But he doesn't like difficulty; he is afraid of danger." What he seeks is a "dream incarnate," a mythical creature able to provide recognition that could not be withheld and so would not have to be earned.¹¹⁰

There are no such creatures. But an actual woman, confined to a situation in which routes to her own justification are systematically closed, and simultaneously offered a vicarious substitute in the form of social uptake of the projects of her husband and male offspring, can be incentivized to impersonate one. That there can be vicarious justification of this kind is itself a myth.¹¹¹ But women, subject to the same motivations as men, are averse to difficulty and danger, and this aversion can motivate their complicity. For them too, there appear to be both economic and moral benefits to this arrangement. "Along with economic risk, she avoids the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its ends without assistance."¹¹² For them, too, the "ontological and moral" benefit is illusory.

The main motivation for specifically patriarchal oppression is, then, the production of a one-sided recognition that could not serve men's existential justification even were it sincere, because it would be the recognition of a partner whose own future is closed. Beauvoir's focus in *The Second Sex* is on harms to women. But as Garcia has shown, her account entails a corresponding account of harms to men.¹¹³ This is one of those harms: like the oppressor of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, who gains nothing from the transformation of his laborers into objects, the man gains nothing from women's oppression beyond a convenient route of flight from his own anxiety. So the moral/metaphysical motivations of patriarchal oppressors (and of the complicit) belong to the first configuration distinguished in Section 3 above; and this arrangement is a substitute for, not a route to, justification.

What of the economic motivations? For the man, the economic benefit involves freedom from the labor of maintaining the household; for the woman, freedom from direct reliance on the labor market. But although she identifies this exchange of economic benefits as being part of the gender system, and

¹⁰⁵ Beauvoir does not describe other groups as occupying the role of "absolute other," but this is for the sociological reason identified in the Introduction: the isolation of women is unique, insofar as other members of oppressed groups form communities and participate in a *Mitsein* of their own (Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 15–17)).

¹⁰⁶ For recent discussions, see Bauer (2015, 49–51), Garcia (2021b, especially Ch. 9), and Melo Lopes (2024).

¹⁰⁷ Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 415).

¹⁰⁸ Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 415).

¹⁰⁹ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 187).

¹¹⁰ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 188).

¹¹¹ This is a prominent message in Ch. 5, 6, and 12 of Beauvoir (1949/2004). Indeed although the section containing Ch. 11–13 is titled "Justifications" it clearly concerns attempts at mere simulacra of justification, as it describes women who "try to justify their existence in the midst of their immanence, that is, to realize transcendence within immanence." The upshot of the discussion is that this "effort—sometimes ridiculous, sometimes pathetic—on the part of the imprisoned woman to convert her prison into a glorious heaven, her servitude into sovereign freedom" necessarily fails (Beauvoir (1949/2004, II: 415)). For a more extended discussion of the impossibility of this kind of vicarious justification, see Kosch (in press, §3).

¹¹² Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 19).

¹¹³ "[M]en are stuck in a position where they seek recognition from women, but they construct women in such a way that the recognition women can give them is always incomplete and unsatisfying." For this reason, from an existential point of view the patriarchal male's situation is "an impasse" (Garcia (2021a, 190; cf. 198–203)).

recognizes that men typically benefit more from that system economically, Beauvoir denies that women's oppression is at bottom an economic phenomenon with an economic explanation.¹¹⁴ It makes sense, then, that this economic motivation would seem to fit in none of the three categories distinguished in Section 3.

One might think the patriarchal oppressor's motivation falls instead into the third category, of oppression necessary for the pursuit of one's own project genuinely aiming at justification. I see no evidence that Beauvoir accepts this possibility, and for good reason. Although there have surely existed isolated instances of couples' projects in genuine conflict (where they pursue opposed political or military ends, for instance), gender-based oppression as a system could be motivated in this way only if the projects that would be pursued by liberated women were to stand in systematic conflict with the projects pursued by men. But there is no evidence that they do.¹¹⁵

5 | Conclusion

My task in this paper has been a narrow one: to show how an elaboration of the aspect of Beauvoir's ethical theory that has been universally overlooked or misunderstood (namely its account of justification) can contribute to a better understanding of the aspect that has been most influential (namely its account of women's oppression in *The Second Sex*). I have given a brief overview of the structure of her ethical thought in Section 2. There is, obviously, much more to be said about each of the topics covered there. Showing the view to be an attractive contribution to the ethical landscape on its own terms would require much more than this brief discussion.

I have then explained, again in a summary way, Beauvoir's account of oppression, in Section 3. Here again there is much more to be said. One difficult question is how to understand her distinction between projects incorporating some form of oppression, constraint, or violence that are in some sense acceptable from an existentialist standpoint, and projects incorporating these that are not. But her account has more resources for explaining in a substantive way the intuitive unacceptability of certain such projects, even from the standpoint of their agents, than I have been able to canvass here.

Finally, in Section 4, I have applied this understanding to certain disagreements in the interpretive literature on *The Second Sex*, and argued that these are settleable with this background in mind. It is here that the paper connects most squarely with existing secondary literature, which focuses almost exclusively on *The Second Sex*. That it should do so is perfectly unsurprising, given the historical significance of that text. But I hope this paper may convince some to widen their focus.

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¹¹⁴ Beauvoir (1949/2004, I: 78–85).

¹¹⁵ The entry of women into the workforce does not actually cause a rise in male unemployment, for example, and the entry of women into the cultural sphere does not actually deprive male creators of opportunities for success. The sphere simply expands.

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