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**Margaret A. Simons, Ed.,** *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006. xi + 316 pp. Notes, list of contributors and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-253-34722-X; \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 1-800-842-6796.

Review by Alison S. Fell, University of Leeds.

Before her death in 1986, Simone de Beauvoir was rarely taken seriously as a philosopher. As Margaret Simons notes in her introduction to this timely and stimulating collection of essays devoted to Beauvoir's thought, "Beauvoir's philosophical work was held in such low regard that by the late 1960s her name had largely disappeared from American histories of French existential phenomenology" (p. 1). If her philosophical writings were discussed, it was always in relation to those of her lifelong partner and intellectual collaborator, Jean-Paul Sartre. From this perspective, she was seen to be of interest either as an eyewitness to a "great man's" life and thought, or, in the case of her literary works, as a writer of "textbook illustrations" of Sartre's philosophical concepts.[1] Such attitudes betray a gendered assumption that originality of thought is the "natural" accomplishment of men, while women function as their devoted followers and defenders. As Edward Fullbrook summarises in his chapter focusing on the relationship between Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, "Belief in Sartre as the source of the couple's ideas voiced in common predates the time when the words *woman* and *philosopher*, even less the words *woman* and *major philosopher*, could be comfortably conjoined. Credit for these ideas accrued wholly to Sartre as part of *normal social process*" (p. 43).

Since the late 1980s, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in Beauvoir studies and, in particular, a new engagement with her philosophical writings. This volume attests to this changing climate: many contributors do not feel it necessary to act as apologists for Beauvoir's philosophical credentials, and most do not view her work primarily through the optic of Sartrean existentialism. Rather, the strength of the volume lies in the fact that contributors re-read her work from a wide variety of philosophical perspectives. Beauvoir's thought is placed in dialogue with that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Heinämaa), Heidegger (Bauer), Rousseau (Bergoffen), Hegel (Mussett), Foucault (Hengehold), Levinas (Tidd), Derrida, Irigaray and Cixous (Murphy), as well as Sartre (Fullbrook, Gothlin). These dialogues produce rich and sometimes surprising insights; they also succeed, once and for all, in cutting the ties that bound Beauvoir's thought and writings irrevocably to those of Sartre in a pairing that usually saw her defined as a paler imitation of the "true" philosopher. Instead, the volume as a whole succeeds in shedding new light on the originality and scope of Beauvoir's philosophy (as well as, importantly, on some of its inconsistencies and paradoxes). Margaret Simons, the founding editor of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, who has played a vital role in bringing Beauvoir's philosophy to a wider audience, is to be congratulated for having edited another valuable addition to Beauvoir studies.[2]

The first essay in the volume, by French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, offers a powerful rejoinder to critics keen to construct a "sanitised" version—reflecting their own worldviews—of Beauvoir's thought. Le Doeuff reminds us that "To establish a dialogue with a body of work, whether it be written or artistic, requires first of all that you see it as exterior to our subjectivities, beyond our fantasies, as the unforeseeable that it is" (p. 13). Based on a keynote address given in 2001 at the Ninth International Simone de Beauvoir Conference in Oxford, Le Doeuff's essay is particularly sensitive to the temptation amongst feminist critics to treat Beauvoir as "an imaginary mother who should magically have told the world to be just as we expected it to be" (p. 13) or as a "terribly disappointing icon or saint" (p. 14),

rather than as woman who, whatever her faults as an individual, left behind an oeuvre that has the capacity to stimulate and to provoke—or, to borrow Le Doeuff's words, to produce “creative shocks” in the mind of the reader (p. 16).

The subsequent essays pay heed to Le Doeuff's advice, and offer careful and thought-provoking engagements with Beauvoir's thought. Sara Heinämaa shows how both *The Second Sex* and Beauvoir's autobiographical writings reveal a sustained interest in and acceptance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the body. For Heinämaa, Beauvoir's understanding of woman as a “becoming” rather than as a fixed essence only makes sense if we grasp her commitment to the phenomenological conception of the body “not as a thing but [as] a way of relating to things, a way of acting on them and being affected by them” (p. 31).

While Edward Fullbrook reiterates his thesis, first articulated in his and Kate Fullbrook's *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (1993), that Beauvoir's contribution to Sartrean existentialist thought was much greater than was usually claimed to be the case, Nancy Bauer's lucid chapter positions her reading of Beauvoir's use of Heideggerian *Mitsein* (being-with-others) in relation to the work of two contemporary Beauvoir scholars, Eva Gothlin and Debra Bergoffen, both of whom are also contributors to this volume. [3] Bauer builds on Gothlin's view that *Mitsein* is “an ontological basis for imagining that women's demands for recognition from men might ultimately issue in a sort of reciprocity between the sexes” (p. 84). Yet while Bauer accepts Gothlin's view that *Mitsein* can be “the fount of our opportunities [...] for genuinely reciprocal recognition” (p. 87), she also argues that it “endlessly provides me with the means, the cultural resources, to hide my ambiguity from myself [...]. What the other's free judgement can dramatize to me is the extent to which my struggle for recognition is in essence a struggle with myself: I struggle to avoid exploiting our being-with one another to get another person to provide me a false, fixed picture of myself” (pp. 86-87).

The chapters by Debra Bergoffen and Andrea Veltman both offer re-appraisals of two much-discussed aspects of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: marriage and the transcendence/immanence dichotomy. Beauvoir is famous for her dismissal of the patriarchal institution of marriage that claimed to be women's “destiny.” Bergoffen moves beyond this dismissal of the institution of marriage to suggest that Beauvoir's conceptualisation of ambiguity in her thought allows us to imagine a version of marriage liberated from its patriarchal history and thus as an ethical and erotic bond that recognizes individuals as “interdependent rather than autonomous” (p. 110). Veltman's chapter similarly nuances pre-existing interpretations of *The Second Sex*, contending that critics have been too quick to label Beauvoir's use of the concepts of transcendence and immanence as “outmoded, primarily metaphysical [...] masculinist and classist” (pp. 114-15). Veltman's counterargument postulates that Beauvoir does not turn to the transcendence/immanence opposition because she is “male-identified”, but in order to call for a “world in which more people confront real opportunities to participate in transcendence activities” (pp. 127-28).

Eva Gothlin's chapter focuses on ambiguity, a central and recurring theme in Beauvoir's thought. Contrasting Beauvoir's conception of desire as connected with intersubjectivity with Sartre's image of desire as sadistic/masochistic, Gothlin concludes that for Beauvoir, feminine desire and female embodiment are fundamentally ambiguous: “In the authentic sexual relation, the ambiguity of the human reality is concretely lived [...]. Woman is closer to this experience, according to Beauvoir, since feminine desire is an appeal to the other, not an instrumental subject-object relation” (p. 142). Julie Ward also concentrates on intersubjectivity, exploring the representation of friendship in Beauvoir's writings. Ward takes an episode in *The Prime of Life* in which Beauvoir and Sartre observe a woman tending to a small cat that had become trapped as a kind of “psychological motif” for Beauvoir's personal and philosophical grappling with the question of intersubjectivity: “the story may be read as an allusion to Beauvoir's longstanding aim for a relationship of mutual equality—one that allows for true reciprocity and mutual subjectivity” (p. 149). Ward turns to Beauvoir's analysis of the lesbian in *The Second Sex* to

conclude that whereas Sartre's system led to an impasse, Beauvoir "solves the problem of fundamental conflict between subjects" (p. 159). Suzanne Cataldi's contribution also turns to Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity in relation to women's desire and embodiment in her discussion of Beauvoir's treatment of frigidity, comparing statements in *The Second Sex* with scenes from her novels. Cataldi argues that in Beauvoir's writings frigidity signifies the unjustness of unequal power relations as much as it does a state of bad faith, and can thus be seen as a form of "cultural protest", serving a feminist aim (p. 175).

In her fascinating chapter, Laura Hengehold considers Beauvoir's self-other relationships from the perspective of Foucault's conception of the "parrhesiastic contract," a "mutual commitment between two or more people to speak frankly and to risk hearing the truth from one another" (p. 178). Hengehold responds to Le Doeuff's exploration of emotional autonomy in Beauvoir's works, considering both Beauvoir's autonomous and attached female characters in relation to their "parrhesiastic" practice. She concludes that Beauvoir's writings reveal the necessity of erotic and emotional risk in order for women to become "agents or transcendent subjects of truth rather than recipients or immanent objects of truth" (p. 194). Like Gothlin, Stacy Keltner explores Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity. Keltner is particularly interested in the historical dimension of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, in which Beauvoir claims "that there is something about late modern society that makes the evasion of ambiguity more difficult than in the past" (p. 202). Unlike the ethical and political theories of the Western philosophical tradition, Keltner argues that Beauvoir's conceptualisation of ambiguity attempts to offer concrete, ethical solutions for the dilemmas of the present, using the example of Beauvoir's references to the French situation under German occupation. Also considering Beauvoir's writings from an historical perspective, Karen Vintges's essay considers the extent to which Beauvoir's ideas can still be seen to be relevant for twenty-first-century feminism. After tracing the history of the controversial and mixed reception of *The Second Sex* amongst post-1960s feminists, Vintges argues that Beauvoir's concepts "outline some contours of a feminism for the future" (p. 222), focusing in particular on what closer scrutiny of *The Second Sex* can tell us about the links between equality and difference.

Ursula Tidd's contribution adds to her important work on the self-other relation and ethics in Beauvoir's autobiography.<sup>[4]</sup> For Tidd, the outbreak of World War II and Beauvoir's experiences of occupation led her to begin an autobiographical project as a response to "an ethical imperative to bear witness for the Other", which relates directly to Beauvoir's philosophical belief that an ethical life requires "a recognition of the Other's experience as valid in its singularity as well as its universality" (p. 236). Gail Weiss's chapter begins with an account of the drowning of five children by a mother in Texas in 2001, and compares it with the fictional account of child-murder by a mother in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Weiss looks to Beauvoir's analysis of severe oppression in an attempt to understand these deaths as "failures of relation rather than failures of choice" (p. 242). She suggests that Beauvoir's preoccupation with the lived experience of oppression—revealed for example in her response, during her visit to the United States in 1947, to the Jim Crow laws—is productive in an understanding of behaviour in circumstances in which choice does not seem to be present. Weiss concludes that Beauvoir's analysis of oppression allows us to understand violent acts (such as the infanticide to which she refers) as the result not of one individual's choices, but as embedded within broader oppressive social relations.

Ann Murphy's chapter also concentrates on Beauvoir's treatment of violence in the face of (colonial) oppression, noting that "it is around the notion of violence that Beauvoir organises her thinking on the relationship between ethics and politics" (p. 262). In particular, Murphy is interested in the ways in which violence is linked with the themes of gift-giving and generosity in Beauvoir's writings. For Beauvoir (and Sartre), the giving of gifts can emerge as either an act of generosity or an act of violence and subjugation, depending on the context in which the act takes place. Beauvoir's philosophy, Murphy argues, thus insists on the interconnection of subjugation and generosity. In consequence, Murphy notes, Beauvoir was unable categorically to either embrace or reject altruism or violence as ethical political strategies. The final chapter in this volume, by Shannon Mussett, once again focuses on oppression, this time in a consideration of Beauvoir's adoption and adaptation of Hegel's master-slave

dialectic in her analysis of women's oppression in *The Second Sex*. Mussett argues that Beauvoir's woman in *The Second Sex* is 'exemplary of a Hegelian slave', who "inhabits the peculiar position of mediator between man and nature and between man and himself" (p. 276-77). Mussett goes on to suggest, however, that like Hegel's slave, work offers Beauvoir's woman a means of achieving freedom.

As my summaries of the chapters suggest, the contributors to this volume of essays often intersect in interesting ways with each other, considering key concepts of Beauvoir's philosophy—ambiguity, the self-other relationship, desire, (female) embodiment, violence and generosity—according to a diverse range of philosophical, cultural and feminist perspectives. Together, they form an indispensable addition to the existing scholarship on Beauvoir's thought, making a valuable contribution to the ongoing revisionist project to 'recover' Beauvoir's philosophical writings and ideas, and to introduce them to a wider academic audience.[5] The volume will be of interest not only to Beauvoir specialists, but equally to teachers and researchers in philosophy, women's studies and French studies.

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## NOTES

[1] Hazel Barnes, *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism* (London: Tavistock, 1961), p. 113.

[2] For a collection of Simons's essays on Beauvoir's philosophy, as well as three interviews with Beauvoir, see Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). See also Margaret A. Simons, ed., *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), the first volume of a forthcoming seven-volume English translation of all of Beauvoir's philosophical writings, co-edited with Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir.

[3] Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[4] Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[5] For other recent re-readings of Beauvoir's thought see Emily R. Grosholz, ed., *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Patricia Moynagh and Lori Jo Marso, eds., *Simone de Beauvoir's Political Thinking* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Wendy O'Brien and L. Embree, eds., *The Existentialist Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2007); Sally J. Scholz and Shannon M. Mussett, eds., *The Contradictions of Freedom: Philosophical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir's The Mandarins* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).

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