

## CHAPTER ONE

# The "Facts" of Life: Beauvoir's Account of Reproduction

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Giving birth has long been interpreted as a merely natural or biological process that, for this very reason, has only a negligible ethical and philosophical significance. A wolf makes another wolf; a human being makes (or remakes himself as) another human being. What does the *re-* signify in the word *reproduction*, if not this endless process of repeating the individual in the species, ceaselessly producing more of the same? In the *Symposium*, for example, Plato contrasts the carnal reproduction of children with the spiritual production of ideas and works of art, the latter of which are "lovelier and less mortal than human seed" (Symposium 209c). In this view, procreation is a less noble and more transient form of artistic or intellectual creation; the lover of wisdom secures for himself a greater fame than those who "turn to woman as the object of their love, and raise a family, in the blessed hope that by doing so they will keep their memory green, 'through time and through eternity'" (208e). If the difference between giving birth and creating a work of art or philosophy is simply a matter of leaving behind more or less enduring monuments to oneself, then Diotima's question is apt: "[W]ho would not prefer such [spiritual] fatherhood to merely human propagation" (209c)?

My guiding question in this chapter concerns the hierarchy between cultural production and natural reproduction, articulated in this passage from Plato but prevalent in the history of Western philosophy. Must we understand reproduction starting from the model of production? And if we concede that reproduction is a natural process in which one might be unintentionally involved, without prior choice and even without an immediate awareness of another existence taking shape in one's body, then in what sense can birth be understood as an event with ethical significance? Why should we expect reproduction to be any more philosophically interesting than digestion or respiration? Furthermore, if reproduction "happens" to men and women differently, then

does it condemn women in particular—as the sex who bears the fetus in her body, sometimes at the expense of her own health or comfort—to an existence overtaken by nature, condemned to repeat itself for the sake of the species?

Beauvoir takes up these and other questions in *The Second Sex*, with an ambivalence that has led some of her critics to conclude that Beauvoir herself viewed reproduction as a stumbling block for feminism.<sup>1</sup> In the section called “The Data of Biology,” Beauvoir describes the female as “the victim of the species” (Beauvoir 1952, 18). Women’s capacity to gestate a fetus seems to condemn her to an existence not quite her own: “First violated, the female is then alienated—she becomes, in part, another than herself” (19). This sense of alienation seems to make woman in particular the instrument of a larger force, to which her individuality is forced to submit: “The species takes residence in the female and absorbs most of her individual life; the male on the contrary integrates the specific vital forces into his individual life” (21). Worst of all, the woman may become an instrument for the social reproduction of values and institutions that contribute to her own maternal servitude; pleased with the attention and respect she gains as a mother, she may support the very practices that confine her value to motherhood.<sup>2</sup> It would seem, then, that for Beauvoir the only way to women’s freedom is the way *beyond* maternity; reproduction is incompatible with the vision of an independent, self-transcending, and free individual.

While there is no shortage of textual support for this reading of maternity in *The Second Sex*, it nevertheless overlooks the wider context in which these remarks arise. Throughout *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes the contingency of biological “facts” and their dependence on social sanction for their power and authority:

But in truth a society is not a species . . . for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subject rather to that second nature which is custom and in which are reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature. It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfilment. (Beauvoir 1952, 33)

In this sense, there can be no *purely* biological account of the reproductive body; the “victim of the species” is also—if not primarily—subject to the social conventions that construct her as a victim, and present this construction as women’s biological destiny.

One of Beauvoir’s central tasks in *The Second Sex* is to distinguish between woman’s biology—especially her reproductive capacity—and her social or psychological identity. While I may be born female, this category does not already define the woman I will become: “No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society” (Beauvoir 1952, 249). And yet the fact remains that only female bodies (and not all female bodies) can become pregnant. To the extent that my embodied

situation shapes my existence in significant ways, the possibility of pregnancy will play a role in the social and personal experience of being a *woman*, and not only in the biological life of the female. Much depends on the way the "facts" of life are interpreted.<sup>3</sup> How do we distinguish between the female who is born and the woman she becomes without neglecting the sense in which women are also female? Furthermore, how do we account for the sexual specificity of pregnancy without implying that women can be known by their reproductive capacity alone?

My response to these questions turns on Beauvoir's interpretation of the body as a *situation* with both biological and cultural aspects. My body is not simply a discrete organism moving indifferently through the world, driven by its natural instincts or biological "programming." Whatever else it may be, my body is also the starting point for a world; it forms the material basis for my experience of things and my interaction with Others. From this perspective, sexual difference matters not because it determines my natural destiny, but because my embodied, sexed, and gendered perspective on the world informs my understanding: "For, the body being the instrument of our grasp on the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another" (Beauvoir 1952, 29). The body is my starting point for a meaningful world; but the meaning of my own body is not fixed in advance, nor is it completely up to me to decide. The natural and the cultural are not opposed in the experience of the body, but rather interwoven: "In the human species nature and artifice are never wholly separated" (476). From the moment I am born, my body is interpreted by Others who draw upon their own experience of the world, which in turn draws upon "that second nature which is custom" (33). In this sense, my starting point is never an absolute beginning; it enters a world that is already under way by the time I arrive.

As a situation, the body is always open to interpretation by oneself and others. This is both its danger (since my own preferred interpretation can be contested by others) and its promise (since no interpretation, however bleak, is absolutely incontestable). Where the body is understood as a situation to be interpreted, it remains open to a future of possibility; the task of interpretation is never completed, so "we can never close the books" on the meaning of sexual difference (Beauvoir 1952, 30). The ambiguity of this embodied situation informs Beauvoir's account of maternity:

The bearing of maternity upon the individual life, regulated naturally in animals by the oestrus cycle and the seasons, is not definitely prescribed in woman—society alone is the arbiter. The bondage of woman to the species is more or less rigorous according to the number of births demanded by society and the degree of hygienic care provided for pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, while it is true that in the higher animals the individual existence is asserted more imperiously by the male than by the female, in the human species individual "possibilities" depend upon the economic and social situation. (Beauvoir 1952, 31)

On the one hand, “society alone” decides the value and significance of maternity; but, on the other, “it is true” that the female experiences reproduction differently from the male, and that her individual existence is more threatened by subordination to “the species.” To say that the body is always interpreted in light of its a particular historical and existential situation is not to imply that the body is interpretation “all the way down.” Moira Gatens argues for the importance of the material, factual aspect of bodies in *The Second Sex*: “To maintain, as Beauvoir does, that the capacities of the body—understood in naturalistic or biological terms—always require interpretation, is not equivalent to maintaining that the body is itself an interpretation or pure social construction” (Gatens 2003, 273). Rather, Beauvoir’s analysis suggests “an interactive loop between bodies and values” (Gatens 2003, 274), which I now seek to elaborate in the particular context of maternity. Given the intertwining of bodies and values in maternity, how do we account for women’s experience of maternity as a biological burden or an ethically significant gift—or both?

In what follows I will explore two possible interpretations of the ethical significance of maternity in Beauvoir’s work. The first approaches reproduction from the perspective of existential ethics, focusing on the possibility of experiencing birth as a project and a choice. For the most part in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that this possibility is more open to men than to women, such that maternity appears mainly as a failed project, an unchosen submission of one’s individuality. The second approach rereads *The Second Sex* in light of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; it reconsiders the existential emphasis on individual transcendence and develops the ethical richness of ambiguity between self and Other, transcendence and immanence, activity and passivity, in the experience of maternity. In *The Second Sex*, it might seem that pregnancy threatens the freedom of the individual by burdening her with an Other who interferes with her projects and even alters her experience of her own body; but a different view of freedom emerges in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. As Beauvoir explains, “An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to one another” (Beauvoir 1964, 18). Here, the freedom of the self is not opposed to the Other, but rather *requires* the freedom of Others to whom it is nevertheless ambiguously bound. From either perspective, Beauvoir’s text does not claim to tell the meaning of reproduction *as such*, but rather to describe the predominant experience of pregnancy in different situations. As I will argue, the experience of maternity as a failed project or an unchosen submission is not a biological fact, but rather a “truth” produced by the particular situation of sexist oppression. This reading is substantially informed by the social and temporal structure of oppression as described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. On the basis of this reading, I argue that the way beyond women’s oppression involves a reinterpretation—and not a repudiation—of maternity as an ethical situation.

## TAKE 1: BIRTH AS A PROJECT

Beauvoir announces her perspective of existentialist ethics in the introduction to *The Second Sex*:

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. . . . Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. (Beauvoir 1952, xxviii)

While the past confronts me with its burden of given conditions and factual constraints, the future opens up a field of possibilities in relation to which even my past may be transformed. Through my projects, I transcend the present moment and orient myself toward an open future in which I *am* nothing other than what I *choose to become*. The project of femininity is contradictory because the woman—"a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (Beauvoir 1952, xxviii). As the Other of man, woman's individual existence is defined in advance as the negation or lack of masculinity; even her potentially transcendent activities are directed toward the goal of passivity and immanence.<sup>4</sup> The feminine woman is a subject forced to masquerade as an object to be valued by men, and even by other women. But while the framework of existentialist ethics allows Beauvoir to challenge any notion of a fixed feminine essence, it poses problems for a feminist interpretation of birth; reproduction resists conforming to the structure of a freely chosen project. Beauvoir claims that "in any case giving birth and suckling are not *activities*, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no lofty affirmation of her existence—she submitted passively to her biologic fate" (57). While we may contest Beauvoir's verdict on parturition and breast-feeding [recalling that even Freud sees the latter as an activity (Freud 1965, 143)] we may still take Beauvoir's point that birth involves an irreducible element of passivity. In giving birth, my body and even my own future are bound to an Other in ways that are not for me alone to decide. Even when I am explicitly trying to become pregnant, I cannot *make* myself so, nor can I choose the particular child who grows inside me.<sup>5</sup> Does this resistance to choice cast a shadow over women's reproductive capacity, setting a limit to women's transcendence? Or does it open a different, less virile, and more thoroughly intersubjective approach to existential ethics?

Beauvoir claims that, in most animals, the female of the species bears a greater reproductive burden than the male. The pregnant body is like a hostage to the fetus, taken over by someone other than herself whom she did not consciously choose, but with whom she is in the closest proximity. Unlike the

male, she is forced—at least in the absence of decent reproductive choices—to nourish this child with her own body before and after birth, sometimes at great expense to her own health. By contrast, the male body seems to transcend itself in coition, losing nothing essential with its ejaculation of sperm. With this brief gesture, the male creates something outside of himself, something “other” that will outlive his own mortal body without making an immediate claim on his autonomy. This bodily detachment from the gestating child would seem to make possible a more abstract and “free” relation to parenthood as a project freely undertaken rather than a process undergone in passivity. The child whom the male helps to create—and whom, thanks to the laws and conventions of paternity, he can then call “his own”—does not nest inside his own body. It does not change his shape, disturb his sleep, or kick against his skin. Indeed, the male of the species need not even claim this offspring as his own; he has the freedom to “choose” or deny parenthood, while the biological mother of the child is obvious for all to see.

Beauvoir considers the possibility that differences in male and female sexuality might produce different relationships to the process of reproduction and even different configurations of individuality and community:

Immediate, direct in the female, sexuality is indirect, it is experienced through intermediate circumstances, in the male. There is a distance between desire and satisfaction which he actively surmounts; he pushes, seeks out, touches the female, caresses and quiets her before he penetrates her. . . . This vital superabundance, the activities directed toward mating, and the dominating affirmation of his power over the female in coitus itself—all this contributes to the assertion of the male individual as such in the moment of living transcendence. (Beauvoir 1952, 20)

While this preference for transcendence in the male may be cultural as much as it is natural, nevertheless the implication here is that men have a better chance than women of experiencing reproduction as an active project that enhances their individuality—and, moreover, that this experience is clearly preferable to the passivity of bearing a fetus in one’s body. As in Plato’s *Symposium*, reproduction would be a more carnal and ultimately less reliable form of transcendence—but only for the man. For the woman, even this carnal transcendence would remain difficult. As Beauvoir describes it, birth can leave a woman exhausted, misshapen, malnourished, emotionally unstable, and possibly even dead (Beauvoir 1952, 24). Pregnancy does not always accommodate itself to the women’s own projects; it does not admit a bodily distance between self and other, or between the maker and the made, by virtue of which the reproducing woman could rise above her “product.” It would seem that, while production conforms to the will of the producer, reproduction happens despite the one whom it nevertheless requires.

Temporally, the pregnant body “assumes transcendence, a stirring toward the future, the while it remains a gross and present reality” (Beauvoir 1952, 467).

To produce is to make something new; to reproduce is to make more of the same, binding the future to the present and past. Beauvoir describes this temporal difference in sexual terms; while the man injects creativity into time with his contribution to reproduction, the woman merely maintains its continuity:

To maintain is to deny the scattering of instants, it is to establish continuity in their flow; to create is to strike out from temporal unity in general an irreducible, separate present. And it is true that in the female it is the continuity of life that seeks accomplishment in spite of separation; while separation into new and individualized forces is incited by male initiative. The male is thus permitted to express himself freely; the energy of the species is well integrated into his own living activity. On the contrary, the individuality of the female is opposed by the interest of the species; it is as if she were possessed by foreign forces—alienated. (Beauvoir 1952, 22)

Excluded from warfare and confined to the inglorious task of raising children, women become the instruments of continuity while men grasp hold of the future on the strength of their own actions. Here, the father would seem to introduce separation and individuality into an otherwise continuous relation between mother and child; he interrupts the flux of "life" to make novelty and initiative possible.<sup>6</sup> While this alteration offers freedom and transcendence for the male, it traps the female of the species in immanence, offering her no way out of embodied, factual existence. With each successive pregnancy, the mother is "plunged anew into the mainstream of life, reunited with the wholeness of things, a link in the endless chain of generations, flesh that exists by and for another fleshly being" (Beauvoir 1952, 467). Precisely because the male body is not directly implicated in the process of reproduction—because he exists in and for himself, rather than by and for another—he seems to have a greater chance of viewing birth as a form of creative self-expression. To Beauvoir, the implication of female flesh in the very process of reproduction suggests a lack of autonomy on the part of the pregnant woman; even if a woman looks forward to childbirth and finds a kind of dignity or power in her capacity to give birth, "this is only an illusion. For she does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her; her flesh engenders flesh only, and she is quite incapable of establishing an existence that will have to establish itself" (468). Where authenticity is tied to my free engagement in projects, it would seem impossible for women to have an authentic experience of giving birth, except perhaps with the help of reproductive technology that lets her achieve a more distanced, disembodied relation to birth. But would the female experience of reproduction become authentic only to the extent that it approximates the male? Here we reach a stumbling block: not with reproduction as such, but with the existential interpretation of birth as a project of transcendence.

The interpretation of pregnancy as a failed existential project does not allow the pregnant woman to appear as anything more than the pawn of impersonal, natural forces. By implication, any relation with the mother becomes a

nonhuman, amoral relation with a natural force that is trapped in immanence, but for this very reason also threatens to overwhelm the child's own transcendent individuality. For even the producer of intellectual genius has been reproduced; even the solitary existentialist has been gestated in the body of a woman. Not only does maternity itself resist interpretation as a project, but where existence is defined in terms of active, transcendent projects, then even my relation to the mother would seem to thwart my independence. Proximity to her body reminds me that I am not the origin of myself, that the freedom promised to me by the open possibilities of the future is also threatened by the facticity of the past. In this sense, the gift of birth is also the curse of death; from the moment I am born, I begin dying. The mother comes to symbolize both the source of all goodness and the source of all possible deprivation: "Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from which life wells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends" (Beauvoir 1952, 134). Where the mother is identified with the unending cycle of repetition that human projects seek to master, there remains little hope for an ethical relation between man and woman, or even between mother and child. Beauvoir explains: "Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will" (Beauvoir 1952, 134). In the mythic figure of Woman as Mother, birth and death are joined together in an endless circle from which the child must escape if he is to survive.<sup>7</sup>

If the child is understood to begin in this seductive but disabling unity with the mother, then we should not be surprised to hear that the fundamental project of existence is to transcend birth, to *produce* reproduction on my own terms, as if I had created myself from the ground up, as if I had given birth to myself. Only by repeating or reclaiming birth does the subject lay claim to an existence of *his own*, in which he is no longer trapped in the body of the mother. Of the child, Beauvoir writes:

He would like to have sprung into the world, like Athena fully grown, fully armed, invulnerable. To have been conceived and then born an infant is the curse that hangs over his destiny, the impurity that contaminates his being. And, too, it is the announcement of his death. . . . The Earth Mother engulfs the bones of her children. (Beauvoir 1952, 136)

To be born to an Other is—at least in this context—to be doomed to passivity, contingency, and death.<sup>8</sup>

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre takes this idea to its limit, arguing that even my own birth is a kind of retrospective choice, in the sense that I alone decide the significance that birth will hold for me:

Someone will say, "I did not ask to be born." This is a naïve way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity. I am responsible for everything, in



fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. . . . Yet I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable, for this fact of my birth never appears as a brute fact but always across a projective reconstruction of my for-itself. I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* being born. (Sartre 1956, 556)

While Sartre acknowledges that "I am not the foundation of my being," he argues that this very fact compels me to *assume* my own foundation, as if I had chosen it for myself. The opacity of my birth calls not for a recognition of its strangeness but for a "projective reconstruction" in which I decide the meaning that this undecidable, potentially meaningless fact will have for me. For Sartre, birth is tantamount to abandonment; "I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant" (Sartre 1956, 556). This responsibility is inescapable, since whether I find my existence joyful or hateful, my subjective response remains the final arbiter of its meaning. Sartre explains: "We are taking the word 'responsibility' in its ordinary sense as 'consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or object.'" (530). Precisely because I am author of my own existence, "everything that happens to me is mine" (530). I make the facts of life my own by "making myself," by "stamping" any given situation "with my seal" (531). Responsibility for my existence derives precisely from this *ownness*, from this act of self-production; I made myself by choosing my relation to birth, and *therefore* I am responsible for my own existence.

But precisely here, in this proud assertion of self-authorship, the significance of my birth to a mother is reduced to the status of raw material waiting to bear my stamp. If my birth is a project undertaken in retrospect, then reproduction in the body of a woman is at best a condition for my own self-production and at worst a factual hindrance to my own existential freedom. From this perspective, an ethical relation to maternity would seem impossible. Either the child authors its own existence, in which case the mother hardly matters as an Other who *gives* birth; or else the mother authors the child, in which case (presuming she is able to achieve the transcendence necessary for such a project) the child could not be any more responsible or free than a product or a work of art. But is there not something important to be learned from the sense in which birth is *not* chosen, but rather given by an Other? This gift need not appear to the child as a humiliating insult to its freedom, a passivity to be overcome; nor must it appear to the mother as a failed project, tainted by biological processes that alter her body and resist conforming to her will. As Beauvoir herself writes, "The close bond between mother and child will be for her a source of dignity or indignity according to the value placed upon the child" (Beauvoir 1952, 33). The same could be said for the

value placed on the mother, and for the interpretation of birth itself. In the next section, I will take a different approach to the relation between mother and child, reinterpreting the value of embodied ambiguity not as a threat to freedom and responsibility, but as their very condition.

#### TAKE 2: BIRTH AS AN AMBIGUOUS SITUATION

While the existentialist perspective is by no means absent from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is significantly modified by an insistence on the intersubjectivity of freedom.<sup>9</sup> For Beauvoir, “it is other men [and women] who open the future to me,” sketching out possibilities which I alone could not have imagined for myself (Beauvoir 1964, 82). Freedom requires a sense of the future as open and indeterminate, a time whose significance is decided neither by facticity nor by my own subjective projects and choices. Rather, freedom requires a plurality of Others in relation to whom the future becomes meaningful as a horizon of incalculable possibilities; precisely because I am not the only one in the world, I do not know what the future will bring. Others may respond to my projects in unforeseen ways, or their own projects may implicate me in dramas I could have never anticipated. In this sense the solitary, isolated individual of existentialist literature may be unrestricted by Others, but he is not for this reason free: “No man can save himself alone” (62). Freedom becomes significant only in a social and ethical situation that sustains ambiguity rather than resolving it through a final arbiter or author of meaning. This ambiguity of intersubjective life suggests a horizon beyond my own narrowly subjective view; it keeps the temporality of my existence open beyond the future sketched out by my own projects. Beauvoir argues that, because my freedom arises through a collaboration with Others, I cannot be truly free if there are Others who remain oppressed; “[t]o will oneself free is also to will others free” (73). This is not to say that my freedom is therefore guaranteed by the existence of Others, nor even by my desire for the Other’s freedom. For other people can also exclude me from full participation in the world, cutting me off from an open future and reducing my singular existence to a static function of my race, my class, my sex. The ambiguity of existence is also a risk; it suggests that the meaning of one’s life “is never fixed, that it must be constantly won” (129). The Other is indispensable for my freedom, but the Other can also become my oppressor.

On this reading of Beauvoir, transcendence is not clearly preferable to immanence; the ambiguity of existence involves “both perpetuating itself and . . . surpassing itself” (Beauvoir 1964, 82). My freedom is grounded in facticity, and transcendence necessarily refers to the immanence of a situation that can be transformed but never completely overcome. Oppression attempts to deny this ambiguity, splitting transcendence from its conditions and reserving the privilege of freedom for a select few. “Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support

the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures" (83). This temporality of oppression vividly recalls Beauvoir's account of reproduction, in which the world is divided into two sexes: the men who transcend and the women who are doomed to immanence, defined in advance by their natural capacity to reproduce the species and maintain its continuity. It also recalls her description of women's work in the home as a series of endless tasks whose effect is simply "marking time: [the housewife] makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present" (Beauvoir 1952, 425). The analysis of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* allows us to read these descriptions of women's reproductive labor in a different light; rather than illuminating a natural or ontological truth about women, they point to a situation of sexist oppression, in which the ambiguity of women's existence is denied and even cited as a source of their "natural" subordination to men. Of course, "one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature" (Beauvoir 1964, 83). Women's enslavement to the species, then, might be already an effect of social and political oppression rather than one of its root causes. Where the future of women *as women* is blocked in this way, it would be no surprise if her most sexually specific experiences appeared as an endless repetition of the same. The point is not only that women's bodies appear immanent, repetitive, and unfree under patriarchy; it is that they appear inevitably and *unambiguously* so, with no possibility of a different or indeterminate future. Given Beauvoir's analysis of oppression, the most compelling path of resistance would not be to claim transcendence for oneself, thus gaining access to the realm of those who "enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself," but rather to enhance and empower the sense of ambiguity between transcendence and immanence, freedom and facticity, surpassing and perpetuating.

This empowerment implies a temporal and ethical existence whose significance remains open and indefinite, whose meaning "must be constantly won." For Beauvoir, the oppressor

defends a past which has assumed the icy dignity of being against an uncertain future whose values have not yet been won; this is what is well expressed by the label 'conservative.' As some people are curators of a museum or a collection of medals, others make themselves the curators of the given world; stressing the sacrifices that are necessarily involved in all change, they side with what has been over against what has not yet been. (Beauvoir 1964, 91)

A woman who is reduced to her reproductive capacity is oppressed in this sense: not because reproduction itself makes her unfree, but because the meaning of her life has been defined in advance by one of its many aspects. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes: "Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming. . . . What gives rise to much of the debate is the tendency to reduce her to *what she has been*, to *what she is today*, in raising the question of her capabilities" (Beauvoir 1952, 30; my emphasis). In reducing the becoming of

woman to a static form of being, sexist oppression denies women the possibility and the risk of an open-ended future; it restricts her existence to the “reality” of past and present, in relation to which birth may appear as a failed project of transcendence. Ironically, the very ambiguity of pregnant embodiment that posed problems for its interpretation as an existential project also suggests a possibility for *resisting* oppression and holding open a future of becoming for women, whether or not they decide to reproduce. In what follows, I explore the possibility of understanding pregnancy as “the strange ambiguity of existence made body” (Beauvoir 1952, 685) in order to shed a different light on the ethical significance of birth.

In *The Second Sex*, the pregnant woman feels “the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence” (Beauvoir 1952, 467).<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to say where the pregnant woman ends and the gestating child begins, yet the very possibility of alienation in pregnancy suggests that there is always already a difference between mother and child even in the midst of ambiguity. Beauvoir writes:

Tenanted by another, who batters upon her substance throughout the period of pregnancy, the female is at once herself and other than herself; and after the birth she feeds the newborn upon the milk of her breasts. Thus it is not too clear when the new individual is to be regarded as autonomous: at the moment of fertilization, of birth, or of weaning? (Beauvoir 1952, 19)

The woman who gives birth is both herself and an Other, both altered by pregnancy and still maintaining a sense of difference from the fetus. Beauvoir draws attention to the strangeness of this situation, where an Other whom I have never met and about whom I know almost nothing, is nevertheless formed within my body, in closest proximity to me. While the child is mine to bear and perhaps to raise, he still remains unknown to me: “Everything he experiences is shut up inside him; he is opaque, impenetrable, apart; [the mother] does not even recognize him because she does not know him. She has experienced her pregnancy without him: she has no past in common with this little stranger” (Beauvoir 1952, 478). This strangeness need not signify alienation; as I will argue in my reading of Levinas, the otherness of the child opens a future that is not my own, and for this very reason makes an ethical response to birth possible.

On my first reading of *The Second Sex*, pregnancy seemed to disclose a future in which the pregnant woman herself did not figure, and in which she could only participate by dissolving herself into the “whole,” the “species,” the swelling rhythm of “life.” Beauvoir concludes: “Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself” (Beauvoir 1952, 26). A woman’s body may or may not be for her a reliable tool for mastering the world or attaining transcendence. And yet this ambiguity—in which woman *is* her body, but her body is *other* than herself—suggests a more complex sense of the embodied self than one might draw from the subject who uses his body as an instrument. Perhaps Beauvoir’s sense of a woman *being*, but not possessing or

controlling, her body—and her sense of pregnancy opening up a future that is not quite *her own*—can be understood not merely as a sign of alienation or absorption into the species, but rather as the possibility of incarnate Being-for-the-Other, of a feminist ethics *in the flesh*. This possibility requires a commitment to the freedom of Others, where freedom is understood not as the right to choose one's own birth but rather as the openness of an indeterminate, ambiguous, and intersubjective future.

At first glance it would seem that Beauvoir finds little, if any, promise in becoming "flesh that exists by and for another fleshly being" (Beauvoir 1952, 467). But could we not reconsider the significance of this flesh, and even the significance of prepositions such as "by" and "for"? Rather than understanding the maternal body as "plunged into the mainstream of life" (467), immersed in the continuity of the species, could we not find in this body that exists *by* and *for* another body the figure of a self who is born and gives birth, a body whose flesh signifies not the continuity of the species but rather the abrupt discontinuity of responsibility for an Other?<sup>11</sup> It is not clear that autonomy and projection are the best categories for feminist change, or for understanding what it means to give birth to an Other. The ambiguity of the pregnant body need not force the alienation of the self; it may suggest a different sort of transcendence, not *of* the self but *toward* the Other. It is not necessarily a bad thing to "deny the proud singularity of the subject" (151); such a denial need not amount to merely an assertion of our enslavement to the species.

It is certainly possible to interpret *The Second Sex* as a lament for the failed project of reproduction. But this interpretation would underestimate the ethical significance of ambiguity in Beauvoir's work, and even in her account of maternity. I have argued that reproduction is not best understood as a mode of production whose aim is to repeat the self or extend its existence beyond death, "through time and through eternity" (Symposium 208e). Rather, to give birth is to bring an Other into the world: a distinct self with her own future, her own embodied existence, and even her own capacity to reproduce. In this sense, birth introduces something—or someone—utterly and unrepeatably new into the realm of the familiar. The daughter has her mother's eyes, her father's smile, yet she is more than the sum of her parents and different from anything they might have made for themselves. Reproduction takes place in this ambiguous nexus between present and future, nature and culture, passive reception and active engagement. As Colette Audry writes of her son:

His life had germinated within me, and, whatever might happen, I had to bring this development to term, without being able to hurry things even if it meant my death. Then he was there, born of me; thus he was like a piece of work that I might have done in life . . . but after all he was nothing of the kind. (cited in Beauvoir 1952, 468)

The gestation of a child takes its own time; except in fantasy and mythology, there is no sudden moment of inspiration in which the child springs fully

formed from the head of its creator. But this duration of time, this slow germination, also takes on a life of its own, an otherness of which I am the facilitator but not the cause. There is nothing of which this new child is “the kind”; yet he or she nevertheless comes from me, emerging in time from my own body. This surprise, this upsurge of the strange in the midst of the familiar, marks an ontological but, more important, an *ethical* ambiguity that I will now explore in the work of Hannah Arendt.