

The Erotic as a Philosophical Category

Simone de Beauvoir: author; that is how she wished to be known. Belatedly she accepted the title feminist. She never took up the name philosopher. Declining to call herself a philosopher, Beauvoir earned a degree in philosophy, taught philosophy, wrote what she referred to as metaphysical novels and left us with a group of writings, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, "Must We Burn Sade?," and *The Coming of Age*, that can only be classified as philosophical. Knowing, perhaps, that we would take note of these things and take to calling her a philosopher, Beauvoir warned us away. Her philosophical works, she said, were not original; they merely echoed Sartre's thought.

Having read her letters, we know that Beauvoir is not a trustworthy narrator when it comes to self-portraits. Having read her philosophical works, I find that she is not a reliable source when it comes to assessing her philosophical voice(s). Reading her rather than taking her at her word, I find Simone de Beauvoir taking up the legacies of the continental tradition as she enters a three way conversation with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

As I track the trajectory of Beauvoir's philosophical works, I discover both a consistency and a development in her thought. From *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* to *The Coming of Age*, the philosophical focus is ethical, the method is phenomenological and the commitments are existential. Between *Pyrrhus et*

Cinéas and *The Coming of Age*, however, Beauvoir's attention is more and more drawn to the specifics of the historical, concrete situation and her thesis of ambiguity becomes more complex. It attends more to the body, the flesh, and the other; it establishes the erotic as a philosophical category; it redeploys the meanings of risk, the gift, generosity, and joy to create an ethic of erotic generousities.

In part, the developing complexity of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy reflects the insistent presence of what I call Beauvoir's muted voice; for beginning with *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and continuing through *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir's dominant "existential" voice is infected/rendered ambiguous by a voice that challenges the idea of the autonomous subject and the ethic of the project. Though it speaks in measured tones and appears on the margins of the text, this muted voice is not, I think, marginal. Listening to/for it is crucial for understanding Beauvoir's place in the philosophical and feminist fields and critical for understanding her legacy to philosophy and feminism.

Attentive to Beauvoir's two voices, this reading brings Beauvoir's muted voice into relief as it tracks the ethical tensions produced when Beauvoir's muted and dominant voices intersect. Tracing the development of Beauvoir's muted voice I discover that though it is wrong to read her merely as echo of Sartre, it is also a mistake to read her without reference to Sartre. More surprising (perhaps) I discover that Beauvoir cannot be read without reference to Husserl and Hegel, and that she should not be read without reference to Merleau-Ponty and the Marquis de Sade.

The next chapters of this book explore the soundings of Beauvoir's muted voice and the intersections of Beauvoir's two voices by closely reading Beauvoir's philosophical texts. This chapter sets the scene of that reading by identifying the basic categories of Beauvoir's thought and by sketching the philosophical horizon that frames/sustains Beauvoir's reflections.

Cartesian Roots

As a phenomenologist, Beauvoir's roots are Cartesian. Agreeing with Descartes that the individual subject is the proper philosophical point of departure, Beauvoir, like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, follows Husserl to retrieve the lived body for philosophy. Where Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty save us from Cartesian dualism and solipsism by appealing to the experiences of perceiving subjects, Beauvoir saves us by appealing to the possibilities of the erotic subject. For Beauvoir, retrieving the lived body for philosophy means more than retrieving the full meaning of perceptual experience—it requires according philosophical significance to the lived erotic.

Beauvoir's Cartesian roots set the challenge of her ethical thinking. Descartes' epistemological question: How do I as this instance of consciousness escape solipsism? becomes for Beauvoir the ethical question: How do I as this individual subject recognize the failure of egoism? In the process of answering this question, Beauvoir restores the body to consciousness and consciousness to the body in ways which go beyond the phenomenological challenge to Descartes' dualism. With Beauvoir, twining consciousness and body means more than recognizing the legitimate meanings of perceptual experience. It involves retrieving the erotic dimensions of the lived body.

Descartes' dualism degrades all bodies. Bodies, according to Descartes, are the source of perceptual confusions, mistaken thinking and self-misunderstanding. Today, we have little trouble recognizing the unhappy implications of this extreme dualism: the alienation of self and world, the loss of perceptual richness,¹ the distortion of subjectivity.² We have, however, had great trouble disentangling ourselves from the legacy of

¹ See for example Marjorie Green, *Descartes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

² See for example Susan Bordo, *The Flight To Objectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

Cartesian thought: the idea that perception is the fundamental activity through which we encounter the world and the other.

It is not immediately obvious that focusing on perception ties us to the Cartesian tradition. It sounds counterintuitive. It sounds less counterintuitive, however, when we recall that Descartes referred to perceptions of the mind as well as perceptions of the senses and allowed that the former but not the latter could be trusted to be truthful (e.g., the wax example). If Descartes rejects sense perception, shouldn't embracing it eject us from his trajectory? At first, in the hands of Husserl, it seems to. For in Husserl's phenomenology, it is through perception that the body is retrieved for subjectivity and it is through perceptual consciousness that the embodied other is recognized as a subject within a world that is not exclusively mine.

Husserl

Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* present the epoché as the methodological heir of Descartes' radical doubt. Countering Descartes' degradation of the body and its perceptions, Husserl calls on us to ground our philosophical investigations in the phenomenological givenness of embodied perceptual experience. He moves the body from side to center stage. The phenomenological route to philosophical truth is not grounded in a doubt that severs consciousness from its body but in a bracketing of the prejudices of the natural attitude which blind us to the fullness of experience. It is as embodied perceivers that we experience the world and it is as embodied perceivers that we discover the presence of the other and the necessary relationship that exists between us.

The world, Husserl reminds us, is always experienced by us from some place or other. As we can never be in more than one place at once, and as there is no privileged place, we each need the perspective of the other (the view from the other side) to complement and fill out the meaning of the world as seen from our particular place. The possibility of trading

places is a crucial ingredient of world constitution. Thus, according to Husserl, perceptual experience reveals the necessary embodiment of the subject and the necessary intersubjectivity of the world.³ The other's experiences of the world are imbedded in and necessary to mine.

Two things emerge from Husserl's reworking of Descartes' *Meditations*. First, by appealing to the phenomenological clarity of bodily perceptual experience rather than to the natural light of reason's clear and distinct ideas, Husserl counters Descartes' degradation of the body and its perceptions. Second, by attending to the essential embodiment of perceptual experience, Husserl challenges idealist and empiricist accounts of experience. The subjective point of departure is aligned with the idea of transcendence in immanence such that the subject/object dichotomy is dissolved as the distinction between the subject and its other is preserved. At least, this is Husserl's claim.

What should be noted, however, is that the embodied subject discovered by Husserl is a one dimensional being. It is a perceiver modeled on the ideal of the scientist. Each embodied subject is said to have its own habits and style but these appear to be irrelevant to the activities of world constitution. The phenomenologically discovered embodied other, though different from me, is interchangeable with me. Philosophically, that is, as perceivers, our differences are a matter of indifference. Complementarity rules. Conflict is absent.

That embodied subjects are sexually desiring embodiments goes unnoticed. That bodies in the lived world of everyday experience cannot easily exchange places, that our experience is vertically and hierarchically positioned as well as horizontally and spatially situated goes unsaid. That as often as not we experience and respond to each other violently is passed over in silence. Reflecting on this silence, we begin to

³ For more on this see Elizabeth A. Behnke, "Edmund Husserl's Contribution to the Phenomenology of the Body in *Ideen II*," *Study Project in the Phenomenology of the Body Newsletter*, 2:2 (Fall 1989), pp. 15-18.

notice that a phenomenology grounded in the category of perception may elude Descartes' dualism without eluding the Cartesian bias that the subject is first and foremost a knowing subject. We begin to notice that affirming the body within the context of the Cartesian project of truth may not get us to the realities of the lived body and may not alert us to the full complexities of subjective embodiment and the self-world-other relationship. Husserl's epistemological other may (or may not) solve the problem of solipsism; it does not, however, speak to the question of the ethical other.

Merleau-Ponty—Sartre—Beauvoir

When historians of philosophy decipher the influence of phenomenology on French thought, they take note of the ways in which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty take up Husserl's challenge to Descartes and rework Husserl's concepts of the epoché, intentionality, and the transcendental ego. They recognize the dialogue/dispute between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as crucial to the French philosophical scene. They do not notice Beauvoir's place in this conversation. We cannot, however, fully understand the legacy of Husserl's phenomenology without attending to Beauvoir's role in the French appropriations of Husserl.

The contrast between Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's relation to Husserl can be marked in several ways. First, where Sartre defined himself chiefly in relation to the early Husserl of the *Ideas* of 1913, Merleau-Ponty took Husserl's later, unpublished works as his point of departure.⁴ Second, where Sartre took up Husserl's theory of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty directed his attention to Husserl's "wild flowering world and mind."⁵ Third, where Sartre, taking up Husserl's idea of philosophy as a science and pursuing Husserl's search

⁴ Margaret Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1982), p. 13.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 181.

for certitude identified consciousness with the project of lucidity, Merleau-Ponty, attending to the implications of Husserl's attack on the subject-object split, pursued the thought of ambiguity. Fourth, where Sartre, concerned with moral and political questions introduced Hegelian desire into Husserl's intersubjective world, Merleau-Ponty, staying closer to Husserl's epistemological concerns, only marginally attended to the question of the ethical other.⁶

Beauvoir publicly inserted herself into the Sartre-Merleau-Ponty debate in her essay "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism." Maintaining her position as the non-philosopher whose only philosophical voice is Sartre's, Beauvoir identified Sartre as Husserl's rightful heir. She accused Merleau-Ponty of distortion and plagiarism. According to Beauvoir, the Sartre Merleau-Ponty attacks is a pseudo-Sartre. The ideas that Merleau-Ponty claims for himself are really Sartre's.

Reading Beauvoir's essay "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism" we are led to identify Beauvoir with Sartre. (That of course is what she wanted us to do.) Reading this essay, however, we discover that the Sartre portrayed there is not a familiar Sartre. According to Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty is guilty of substituting a caricature of Sartre for the real thing. Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir says, misreads Sartre to produce a pseudo-Sartre. According to Beauvoir, the ideas presented by Merleau-Ponty as his own are really Sartre's and the ideas presented by Merleau-Ponty as Sartre's are misrepresentations. Thus when Merleau-Ponty claims that his ideas (which are actually Sartre's) refute Sartre's (which are actually not Sartre's) he demonstrates the superiority of Sartre's thought. If the plot of this essay sounds convoluted, its message is not: Merleau-Ponty is a disengaged Sartrean—a philosopher who refuses to take up the political implications of the ideas of ambiguity and situated existence.

Michael Yeo, "Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions," *Merleau-Ponty: Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 41–42.

If readers of the "Pseudo-Sartreanist" essay have trouble accepting Beauvoir's claim that reading Sartre as a philosopher of the subject, and reading 'the look' as his paradigm of intersubjectivity amounts to a deliberate distortion of Sartre's thought; if they have trouble identifying the real Sartre with the philosopher who insisted that everything comes from the situation; if they do not recognize Sartre as a philosopher who rejects the idea of pure freedom/consciousness; they can perhaps be forgiven for finding Beauvoir's attack on Merleau-Ponty little more than a woman's defense of her beleaguered man. If, however, we give up the idea that Beauvoir is Sartre's woman, we may see what Sonya Kruks sees: that the idea of situated freedom (attributed to Sartre in the "Pseudo-Sartreanist" essay) is Beauvoir's idea, and that this idea is as indebted to Merleau-Ponty's thought of ambiguity as it is to Sartre's idea of engagement.⁷

Read from this perspective, "Pseudo-Sartreanist," like *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, uses Sartre as a cover. Here, it is Beauvoir, not Merleau-Ponty, who might be accused of pseudo-Sartreanist. Her strategy, however, differs from the one she attributes to Merleau-Ponty. Rather than appropriating Sartre's thought for herself, she camouflages her voice in his. I leave it to her biographers to analyze her motives. My interest is in deciphering Beauvoir's philosophical voices. Given this interest, the "Pseudo-Sartreanist" essay is of interest because it provides an entry into Beauvoir's thought and some clues to the Beauvoir, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty relationship. For if we find it difficult to follow Beauvoir in reading the look out of Sartre's philosophy and if we are reluctant to agree with Beauvoir's claims regarding Sartre's emphasis on the situation, we discover that Beauvoir's unique reading of Sartre shows us the difference between Sartre and Beauvoir and reveals the affinities between Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty.

⁷ Sonia Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom," *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 79-96.

Reading Beauvoir's review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* provides other clues. Written in 1945, Beauvoir's "La Phénoménologie De La Perception de Maurice Merleau-Ponty" compares the thought of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty without appearing to pass judgment. Here Beauvoir, presenting us with a more familiar Sartre, contrasts Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject with Sartre's "naked" *pour-soi*. She notes that Merleau-Ponty's temporally and spatially lived body make for an opacity of the subject and a relationship between consciousness and the world that precludes Sartre's thought of consciousness as an absolutely free negating activity and rejects Sartre's account of the *pour-soi-en-soi* opposition.

Given that her essay is a review of Merleau-Ponty's work not Sartre's, we expect Beauvoir to attend more to Merleau-Ponty's thought than Sartre's. But comparing this review to the later "Pseudo-Sartreanism" essay which also purports to be a review of Merleau-Ponty's work, several things are striking. Not only does this earlier essay give Sartre the minor role of the philosopher whose work is at odds with Merleau-Ponty, it also positions Sartre as a philosopher of extremes. Indeed, if we read Beauvoir's description of the abyss that separates Sartre's *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, we are tempted to suspect Beauvoir of accusing Sartre of reintroducing the subject-object cut which it was the merit of phenomenology to heal.

In this 1945 essay it is Merleau-Ponty, not Sartre, who is the philosopher of the concrete. Here it is Merleau-Ponty, not Sartre, who in attending to the realities of embodiment discovers the limits of freedom. Here it is Merleau-Ponty, not Sartre, who gives consciousness the ability to transform itself from a hole in being into a hollow within the fold of being. Here it is Merleau-Ponty's, not Sartre's, thought that has important implications for the problems of the human condition, especially the problem of sexuality and language.

The Sartre Beauvoir embraces in "Pseudo-Sartreanism" sounds very much like the Merleau-Ponty she approves of in the earlier 1945 essay. Perhaps Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have

exchanged positions. Perhaps Beauvoir has transposed their names. Perhaps ... perhaps ... perhaps. Beyond the perhapses there is this: Beauvoir's constant affirmation of consciousness as embodied and permeated by a situation not of its making but for which it is somehow responsible; Beauvoir's consistent rejection of the concept of lucidity for the ideas of opacity/ambiguity; Beauvoir's continuous demand that epistemological investigations be linked to ethical considerations.

One of the striking things about this review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is the way it begins and ends by linking morality and epistemology. Beauvoir introduces us to phenomenology by situating it within its cultural, historical, and intellectual horizon. This horizon is dominated by the idea of a universal moral law and the concept of scientific objectivity. Both have the same effect: a negation of subjectivity and a divorce of subject and world. Modern morality requires that we subordinate our unique sense of rightness to prescriptions of moral duty. Modern science requires that we substitute a cold world of independent objects for the lived world of objects at hand. Beauvoir insists that modern science and morality are contested by our lived experiences of personal uniqueness and world intimacy. According to Beauvoir, the merit of phenomenology is that it pays attention to this contest and restores us to the lived/living world. Epistemologically, phenomenology allows me to rediscover the world as my home. Ethically it gives me the right to say "*Je suis la.*"

The unique merit of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, according to Beauvoir, is its account of the lived body. Here Beauvoir pays special attention to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the illusions of amputees and is interested in the case of the man who could live but not represent his body. What interests her most is Merleau-Ponty's account of the difference between the body as a way of inhabiting and having a world and the body as an object in the world; for according to Merleau-Ponty, the body as an object is a secondary reality. It is superimposed on the body as lived and can therefore be severed

from it. The body as lived, however, is primordial. It cannot be taken from me—it is the way I express and realize my existence.

This 1945 essay is one of the few places where Beauvoir's affinity for phenomenology as distinct from existentialism is apparent. As one of the places where we see Beauvoir's ethical concerns expressed without reference to Sartre, it allows us to see *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as other than the ethics called for by *Being and Nothingness* and lets us read *The Second Sex* as other than an existential feminism. Given Beauvoir's insistence on the relationship between phenomenology and ethics; given her claim that Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the lived body provide a fruitful ground for an analysis of sexuality, language, and the general human condition; and given her interest in the relationship between the lived and represented body, we are prepared to attend to the phenomenological ground of *The Ethics of Ambiguity's* discussion of intentionality. We are prepared to read *The Second Sex's* discussion of woman's body and its distinction between sex and gender as a rethinking of and challenge to Merleau-Ponty's ideas regarding the relationship between the lived and represented body. On the one hand, *The Second Sex* might be said to reject the idea that the represented body is superimposed on the lived body, if by superimposed we mean artificially appended. On the other hand, the liberating moment of *The Second Sex* may be said to be grounded in the hope that as superimposed, woman's represented body can be jettisoned as women's lived bodies are allowed to speak.

Reading Beauvoir's review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, the "Pseudo-Sartreanism" essay and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, together, we appreciate the way Beauvoir insists on linking epistemological analyses to ethical issues. We are also tempted to see her as the Hegelian synthesizer of Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's dialectical oppositions. Whether we assign Beauvoir the role of harmonizer or equate her thought with Sartre's, however, we make the same mistake. We give Beauvoir the role of the philosopher by making her a *woman* philosopher—a philosopher who stands by her

man or a philosopher who brings peace to the quarreling men. If, taking our cue from both of these reviews, we attend to Beauvoir's undecidability regarding Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and if we ask about her relationship to Husserl and Hegel before ascertaining her relationship to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, then we are in a position to discover Beauvoir the philosopher—an independent voice in a three way conversation.

Merleau-Ponty

As Merleau-Ponty traces the development of Husserl's thought, he sees Husserl redefining the activity of constitution from "the project to gain intellectual possession of the world" to "the means of unveiling a back side of things we have not constituted."⁸ Taking up the image of the hands that touch each other of *Ideas II*, Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea of the flesh and explores the carnal realities of the lived body. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty finds our subjective and intersubjective lives inexorably twined; and like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty refers our experience of the other to "the thickness" of things, and to the experience of the body. Things, Merleau-Ponty says, "... have the right to many other witnesses besides me;"⁹ "... the fully objective thing is based on the experience of others and the latter upon the experience of the body."¹⁰

As the experience of feeling and being felt, of hands touching each other, captures the ambiguity of embodiment, the experience of the handshake, the double touching of self and other that blurs the subject-object and noesis-noema distinction, captures the intersubjectivity of our givenness to each other. With Merleau-Ponty as with Husserl, embodied perceiving entangles us in the world with the other and gives us a world of reciprocal intersubjectivity.

⁸ *Signs*, p. 180.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Rejecting Hegel's fight to the death struggles of subjects that claim a monopoly on Being, Merleau-Ponty develops the notions of the flesh and reversibility; the one blurring the boundary between my body and the world; the other puncturing the barriers between myself and the other; both pointing to an always immanent but never realized coincidence that speaks the "ultimate truth" of the intertwining.¹¹ Thinking the flesh and reversibility, Merleau-Ponty comes to the thoughts of sexuality and the erotic.¹² The perceiving subject is sexed; perception has an erotic structure. Sexual life, Merleau-Ponty tells us, expresses an original intentionality that endows experience with vitality and fruitfulness. Calling on the name of Freud, Merleau-Ponty refuses to assign sexuality a peripheral role in human life. Insisting that sexuality permeates our existence and that the flesh, reversibility, and ambiguity of the body is preeminently experienced in sexual experience, Merleau-Ponty writes:

the importance we attach to the body and the contradictions of love are therefore related to a more general drama which arises from the metaphysical structure of my body which is both an object for others and a subject for myself ... sexual experience ... [is] an opportunity ... [for] acquainting oneself with the human lot in its most general aspects of autonomy and dependence.¹³

Even here, however, Merleau-Ponty holds the thought of difference at bay. Sexuality is treated as a generalized human phenomenon. Reading Merleau-Ponty we are barely aware of sex/gender differences. The idea of reversibility informs the idea of sexuality. Though Merleau-Ponty's subjectivity is carnal, it does not articulate the tensions of desire or live the temptations of possession and submission. If with Merleau-Ponty we

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: The Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 135–149.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 154–173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

are more than scientist-perceiving subjects, we are still subjects of the same¹⁴—hence the unproblematic nature of our intersubjectivity—hence our reciprocity.

Sartre

Sartre, reading Husserl with Hegel, challenges Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's thesis of reciprocity. Bringing Hegelian desire into the phenomenological scene, Sartre transforms the meaning of trading places. Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's shared world becomes Sartre's contested world. Now perceptual world constitution is contaminated by conflict. No longer ideal scientist/perceivers who see each other as completing their finite experiences; no longer confronted by objects whose thickness speak of their right to many perceivers; no longer subjects who approach each other with open hands; Sartre's embodied subjects, refusing their finitude and their ambiguity, insist on the absolute truthfulness of their existential place. The other as cohort perceiver is replaced by the other as menacing threat. The object as requiring the gaze of the other to fill it out, is replaced by an object that cannot support more than one look. The embodied subject recognizes the subjectivity of the embodied other in order to repress and exploit it. The other, like me, is the one for whom the world exists. But though it may be true that perceptually the world gives itself to me as the world of the "we," existentially I find this mode of givenness unacceptable. I want the world to be mine. I will accept you as a character in my script but not as a coauthor. In the name of my subjectivity I will refuse to recognize you as anything other than an object in my world. I use your perceivability and embodiment against you. I reduce you to a bodily quasi-object. As meaning giving subjects in an intersubjective world where we are each vulnerable to the power of the other

¹⁴ Emanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 101.

to define us, trading places becomes a matter of not getting caught at the keyhole.

As Sartre works through the phenomenological implications of Hegelian desire, the other is transformed from the one who reveals unseen dimensions of the world and the fullness of its/my ambiguity, to the one who invades my sense of ownness. I discover that there are some desires that can only be lived with, for, and/or against the other. I discover the other as the one who threatens my desire; the one who shows me my desire; the one who takes my desire from me; the one whose desire I wish to be.

Sartre's analyses of shame, pride, and the caress make it clear that solipsism is untenable, not only because I cannot experience the world as a world without invoking the presence of the other, but also because I cannot fully experience myself outside of the other's presence. For Merleau-Ponty this means that I and the other enfold each other as we reveal the ambiguities of selfness and otherness, for Sartre this means that the other has the power to define me. If Sartre's descriptions of bad faith insist that I am free to evade this power and am therefore responsible for succumbing to it, his portrayal of the look makes it clear that neither evasive action nor the determination to be free can eject me from the field of the threat of the other.

Between *Nausea* and Sartre's later writings the sense of this threat changes. In *Nausea* it is not the other as subject who threatens my place in the world, but the otherness of existence that threatens my sense of the world. Here Sartre, like Merleau-Ponty, seems to be picking up on Husserl's allusion to wild being. Relying on the sense of touch rather than the sense of sight, Sartre introduces us to a root of a chestnut tree as it intrudes upon Roquentin's neatly fixed subject-object world. Forced by the agitations of the strangeness of existence to live the epoché and bracket his everyday attitudes, Roquentin discovers the ambiguities of his existence. He does not, however, react to this discovery with pleasure.

Nauseated, Roquentin flees the ambiguities of existence for the clarity of the negress jazz singer's music.¹⁵

Like Roquentin, Sartre will prefer lucidity to ambiguity. He does not share Merleau-Ponty's marvel or taste for ambiguity. This is not to say that he will ignore the ambiguity of the human condition, but rather to indicate that he will approach this ambiguity as a contest between freedom and facticity rather than as an intertwining of the possibilities of our situated existence. From now on, it is the otherness of the other subject rather than the strangeness of existence that will elicit his interest.

In *Being and Nothingness* consciousness dominates facticity. The accounts of bad faith make it clear that our choices constitute the situation. I choose the meaning of my facticity. I am always free to usurp the look of the other. In the studies of Genet and Flaubert, Sartre reassesses the relationship between freedom and facticity. Here the subject subjected to the power of the situation is not accused of bad faith. The situation, now seen as setting the conditions of our (free) choices, is never, however, given the power to divest the subject of its freedom.

If freedom and facticity become more permeable as Sartre's thought unfolds, the idea of reciprocity never finds a comfortable home in Sartre's work. The characters in *No Exit* search for it; the group in fusion appeals to it; the caress longs for it. But Estelle, Inez and Garcin prefer the ploys of the look and bad faith to the risks of recognition; the group in fusion resorts to the blood oath of terror; and the caress is either relegated to the role of foreplay or sacrificed to the erotics of sadism or masochism.

The body, dismissed by Descartes, retrieved by Husserl, and rendered ambiguous and fleshed by Merleau-Ponty, becomes with Sartre an enactment of and a threat to my subjectivity. It is as embodied that I am a subject, but it is because

¹⁵ For more on this see, Debra Bergoffen, "Sartre: From Touch to Truth," *Alaska Quarterly Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1&2 (1984), pp. 123-133.

I am an embodied subject that I can be perceived as an object, and it is because I can be perceived as an object that I can become a thing in a world controlled by the other. Something lost. Something gained. Having recognized the entailment of subjectivity, the body, and desire, we have lost the clarity of the body-subject relationship. The body is now not only that through which I am a lived subject, it is also that by which my subjectivity may be taken from me.

The desire that Sartre interjects into the embodied subject is Hegelian desire, a desire seeking recognition but rooted in the demands of the fight to the death and destined for the oppressions of the master-slave relationship. Like Husserl's embodied subjects who are diverse but not other, and like Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous subjects whose reciprocity lies in their shared flesh, Sartre's desiring subjects live the desire of the same. Each desires the same thing, to be recognized as the source of the meaning of the world, to have power over others/all; and each lives this desire in the same way, the look.

Though Sartre like Merleau-Ponty addresses the question of sex, the effect of sexuality on lived embodiment goes largely unnoticed in his accounts of imperialist desire and bad faith. In the description of the man and the woman in the cafe for example, Sartre describes a sexual encounter without deciphering the relationship between the sex/gender status of his characters and the meanings of their interactions.

Beauvoir

Surveying the scene in the cafe, Beauvoir will decipher what Sartre passes over in silence: it is the woman, not the man who objectifies her body; it is the man not the woman who looks. He objectifies her as the target of his desire. She, not he, is said to be guilty of bad faith. Reflecting on this scene, Beauvoir has some questions for Sartre. Is it an accident that this first example of bad faith is a heterosexual affair? Is this bad faith dynamic dependent on the encoded sexuality of its characters?

Pursuing these questions Beauvoir discovers the concept of gender. The concept was revolutionary. It was not, however, born *ex nihilo*. Had we been paying attention to Beauvoir's philosophical voice, and had we seen her as participating in the French appropriation of Husserl, we might not have been so ill prepared for *The Second Sex*. It might not have taken us so long to situate it within the phenomenological-existential as well as the feminist traditions. For had we not been duped into hearing Beauvoir as an echo of Sartre and instead seen Beauvoir as a party to a three way conversation concerning the meanings of embodiment, the flesh, ambiguity, and the other, we might have noticed the relationship between Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty. We might, for example, have noted that a book that claimed to provide us with the ethics called for by *Being and Nothingness* was titled *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and that ambiguity was a word/concept prevalent in Merleau-Ponty's but not Sartre's vocabulary. More importantly, we might have noted the ways in which *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, attentive to Husserl's concept of intentionality, reworks the relationship between noesis and noema and transforms the phenomenological knowing/perceiving subject into an existential subject caught up in the contest between the moods of joy and anxiety. We might have seen how the line from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to *The Second Sex* pursues Husserl's notion of the life world to transform the phenomenological concept of horizon into the existential idea of the historical situation which permeates our freedom. Focused on the way Beauvoir, like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, was grappling with the legacy of Descartes, Husserl, and Hegel, we would have seen the ways in which Beauvoir took up this legacy, took stock of the debates between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and marked out a path that took up Sartre's moral concerns without ignoring Merleau-Ponty's insights regarding ambiguity, the flesh, and the erotic.

It was by confronting the question of the ethical other, insisting on the fundamental reality of desire, and remaining

attentive to the social/historical implications of the phenomenological critique of the subject-object dichotomy, that Beauvoir explored the relationship between the situation and embodied desire, and discovered the concept of gender. In introducing the concept of gender and examining the processes of gendering, Beauvoir may be seen as participating in the phenomenological-existentialist project of historicizing the embodied subject. Subjective embodiment, Beauvoir notes, is always sexed and gendered. Further, given current historical conditions, our bodies are sexed and gendered according to the categories of patriarchy—categories which pervert the meanings of desire and subjectivity and which undermine the conditions of the possibility of reciprocity.

Exploring the perversions of sexuality inherent in patriarchy's sex-gender codes, Beauvoir discovers that the imperialist perceiving subject described by Sartre's "look" is also an erotically embodied subject. As embedded in an erotic perceiving body, consciousness must now be scrutinized for the ways in which its perceiving/knowing activities are sexed, and for the ways in which its erotic desires situate it in the world. Beyond discovering the difference between sex and patriarchal gender, Beauvoir discovers that erotic experience disrupts (or at least has the power to disrupt) the perversions of subjectivity perpetuated by patriarchy. She explores the ways in which attending to these erotic disruptions refigure our understanding of the existential-phenomenological subject and direct us to an ethic of the erotic.

If we trace Beauvoir's philosophical development, we see that the specifics of Beauvoir's attention to the erotic, especially her concepts of erotic risk and generosity, are grounded in her unique interpretation of intentionality. At first, in the early work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir treads the path of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. She attends to the question of intentionality without attending to the question of the sexed body. Indeed, though it is always clear that Beauvoir's intentional subject is embodied, Beauvoir does not, in *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity, directly attend to the question of embodiment. For that, we have to wait for *The Second Sex*. Taken jointly, however, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* provide us with a unique vision of intentionality that takes up Merleau-Ponty's thesis of ambiguity and mood of marvel, and Sartre's analysis of the desire of the look, as it redeploys the phenomenological attention to embodiment from an attention to the movement and desire of the same to an analysis of the contesting desires of intentionality and to a critique of a patriarchal system that reifies the play of desire of intentionality by categorizing the otherness of sexual difference as the otherness of the subject and its inessential other.

In introducing the concept of gender and examining the processes of gendering, Beauvoir does more than politicize the dynamics of the look and bad faith, she discovers new meanings of embodiment. She discovers that though the body's perceivability marks it as a source of alienation, its vulnerability marks it as the source of subjective affirmation; for it is in recognizing my vulnerability and assuming it that I discover the link between risking the lived body and my subjective and intersubjective possibilities. Further, in identifying the erotic body as crucial to the dialectic of risk, recognition, and subjectivity, Beauvoir challenges phenomenology's vision of the subject. As embedded in an erotic perceiving body, consciousness must now be scrutinized for the ways in which its erotic desires situate it in the world.

Beauvoir's turn to the erotic directly challenges Descartes' notion of the body as a machine. Her challenge, however, goes beyond the phenomenological insistence on the concept of the lived body. It treads moral ground. Descartes sets moral and metaphysical investigations apart from each other. Beauvoir finds them essentially connected.

Beauvoir links the issues of morality and the body in her discussions of boredom and repetition. She raises the issue of boredom/repetition in three contexts: (1) her analysis of Sade's writings which, she says, degrade the erotic; (2) her analysis of marriage which, she says, in its current patriarchal