**Image not available**

Biography

# Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–1986)

*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Ed. Donald M. Borchert. Vol. 1. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. p515-517.
 Susan J. Brison

Full Text:

Page 515

## BEAUVOIR, SIMONE DE
## *(1908–1986)*

Simone de Beauvoir, French existentialist feminist, was born in Paris in 1908 and died in 1986, after a prolific career as a philosopher, essayist, novelist, and political activist. Her writings were, by her own accounts, heavily influenced by the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, her intellectual companion for half a century—a fact that led some critics to dismiss her as philosophically unoriginal. Even de Beauvoir, in a 1979 interview, said that she did not consider herself to be a philosopher. In her view, however, "a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre, someone who builds a grand system" (quoted in Simons, 1986, p. 168), a definition that would exclude most contemporary professional philosophers. Furthermore, as several recent commentators have argued, de Beauvoir seems to have underestimated her influence on philosophy in general and on Sartre in particular. While she

Page 516 /

incorporated Sartre's ideas, such as his existentialist conception of freedom, in her ethical and political writings, her critiques of Sartre's work in progress also helped shape his philosophy, which she then extended and transformed in significant ways.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), de Beauvoir attempted to develop an existentialist ethics out of the ontological categories in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In Sartre's view, there is no God and therefore no God-given human nature. Nor is human nature determined by biological, psychological, economic, cultural, or other factors. People are "condemned to be free," and in the course of existing and making choices, they construct their own natures (which are continually revisable). Although human consciousness is being-for-itself (the being of free and transcendent subjects), it vainly tries to turn itself into being-in-itself (the being of objects, things trapped in their immanence). De Beauvoir called this doomed attempt to synthesize the for-itself and the in-itself the "ambiguity" of the human condition, and she argued that ethics is both possible and required because of this inability of human beings to "coincide with" themselves. She attempted to ground ethics in individual freedom, asserting, "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (1948, p. 73), but her defense of this claim appears to slip Kantian and Hegelian presuppositions about human nature into a philosophy that denies that there is such a thing as human nature.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir moved beyond Sartrean existentialism in acknowledging certain constraints on freedom, including political oppression and early socialization, that Sartre did not recognize until much later. In her memoirs (1962), de Beauvoir recalled conversations she had with Sartre in 1940 about his account of freedom as an active transcendence of one's situation. She maintained that not every situation offered the same scope for freedom: "What sort of transcendence could a woman shut up in a harem achieve?" Sartre had insisted that even such a limiting situation could be lived in a variety of ways, but de Beauvoir was not persuaded. To defend her view, though, she would "have had to abandon the plane of individual, and therefore idealistic, morality," from which Sartre and de Beauvoir developed their philosophies (1962, p. 346).

In *The Second Sex* (1953) de Beauvoir continued to move away from a purely metaphysical view of freedom in developing an account of how the oppression of women limits their freedom. In arguing, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," de Beauvoir applied the existentialist tenet that "existence precedes essence" to the situation of women, but she was also influenced by Marxist accounts of the material constraints on our freedom to create ourselves. In addition, she described how the socialization of girls and the cultural representations of women perpetuate the view of woman as other, thereby limiting women's potential for transcendence.

Critics of de Beauvoir's feminism have pointed out tensions between her existentialist premises and her account of the relation between embodiment and oppression. Although, according to existentialism, anatomy is not destiny (nor is anything else), de Beauvoir's discussion of female sexuality at times suggests that women's reproductive capacities are less conducive than men's to achieving transcendence. De Beauvoir has also been criticized for advocating in 1949 (1953) that women assume men's place in society, although in interviews in the 1970s and 1980s she urged a transformation of both men's and women's roles.

Even de Beauvoir's critics acknowledge her enormous impact on contemporary feminism. Her analysis of what has become known as the sex/gender distinction set the stage for all subsequent discussions. In drawing on philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, history, and literature in *The Second Sex* and other essays, she anticipated the interdisciplinary field of women's studies. Her concern with autobiography, with self-revelation as "illuminating the lives of others" (1962, p. 8), prefigured the preoccupation of feminism with the personal as political. She also drew on a philosophical tradition as old as Socrates; her relentless scrutiny of herself and others exemplified, to an extent unmatched by any other twentieth-century philosopher, the maxim that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

In her fiction as well as in her essays and memoirs, de Beauvoir discussed numerous philosophical themes—for example, freedom, choice, responsibility, and the other—and she also explored the political issues and conflicts of the day, so much so that she has been described as "witness to a century." But she was more than a mere chronicler of events; she was a powerful social critic and an internationally known "public intellectual," whose influence will continue to be felt for a long time.

*See also* Existentialism ; Sartre, Jean-Paul .

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Francis, Claude, and Fernande Gontier. *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir*. Paris, 1979. A comprehensive bibliography of the publications of de Beauvoir from 1943 to 1977.



### WORKS BY DE BEAUVOIR

#### Essays

*Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. Paris: Gallimard, 1944.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library, 1948. Originally published as *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947.

*The Second Sex*. Translated by Howard M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1953. Originally published as *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.

*The Coming of Age*. Translated by Patrick O'Brien. New York: Putnam, 1972. Originally published as *La vieillesse*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

#### Fiction

*She Came to Stay*. New York: Norton, 1954. Translated by Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse. Originally published as *L'invitée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943.

*The Mandarins*. Translated by Leonard M. Friedman. New York: Norton, 1956. Originally published as *Les Mandarins*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.

#### Memoirs

*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Translated by James Kirkup. New York: Harper and Row, 1959. Originally published as *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1958.

*The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green. New York; Paragon, 1962. Originally published as *La force de l'âge*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

*Force of Circumstance*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Putnam, 1965. Originally published as *La force des choses*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.

*All Said and Done*. Translated by Patrick O'Brien. New York: Putnam, 1974. Originally published as *Tout compte fait*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

## WORKS ON DE BEAUVOIR

Bauer, Nancy. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Brosman, Catharine Savage. *Simone de Beauvoir Revisited*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

Card, Claudia. *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Dietz, Mary G. "Introduction: Debating Simone de Beauvoir." *Signs* 18 (1992): 74–88.

Gatens, Moira. "Woman as Other." In her *Feminism and Philosophy*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1991.

Le Doeuff, Michèle. "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism." Translated by Colin Gordon. *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 277–289.

Mackenzie, Catriona. "Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and/or the Female Body." In *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, edited by Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986.

McCall, Dorothy Kaufmann. "Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, and Jean-Paul Sartre." *Signs* 5 (1979): 209–223.

Simons, Margaret A. "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship." *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986): 165–179.

Tong, Rosemarie. "Existentialist Feminism." In her *Feminist Thought*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989.

Whitmarsh, Anne. *Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits of Commitment*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

***Susan J. Brison (1996, 2005)***

**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)
Brison, Susan J. "Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–1986)." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Donald M. Borchert. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. 515-517. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 6 Oct. 2013.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3446800184&v=2.1&u=dartmouth&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=0ff5aa04bc30714fde1e0d9b516a048b

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|CX3446800184