Reconsidering Forms of Dependence in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

M. J. C. Mylène Freeman

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Department of Politics, University of Virginia

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Mylène Freeman

Considered a foundational text in feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second* Sex (1949) is read as a call for women's independence from structural oppression. Alongside her accompanying disparagement of women's emotional dependence on men and disinterest towards motherhood, the text has not typically been looked to as a resource for thinking about an ethics of dependence. Yet recent Beauvoir scholarship has increasingly focused on her understanding of ambiguity, especially as articulated in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). That is, Beauvoir understands human existence as embodied freedom, which must act already with others. This aspect of her philosophy seems to conflict with a view that *The Second Sex*, published two years later, is strictly calling for a life of independence.

The objective of this paper is to think through the different ways in which descriptions of dependence are employed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. In particular, I examine the language describing debilitation and handicap on which she draws to explain the situation of women. I inquire into Beauvoir's use of dependence, its relation to the importance of authenticity and responsibility in her approach to activity, and ask what it means for her to code the woman in this way. In unpacking her descriptions, I seek to argue that Beauvoir's nuanced understanding of the moral freedom resulting from responsible interdependence can actually be a helpful source for understanding care as important to human existence free from oppression. I contend that Beauvoir's philosophy allows for recognizing all human existence as potentially in need of care, and inevitably over the course of our lives. Failing to do so, turning away from this moral activity, is a source of oppression. That is, attempting to avoid the ambiguity of existence is itself creating

problematic dependence. It therefore can be argued that Beauvoir's philosophy in *The Second Sex*, in articulating different forms of dependence, indeed suggests the foundation for an ethics of dependence.

Examining how Beauvoir discusses the woman's dependence, this paper must untangle the ambiguous difference between reliance on others as a "handicap" to freedom rather than as a freeing act. Sometimes it seems Beauvoir argues that freedom looks like individual independence. However, it is not necessarily possible or desirable for us to consider ourselves as separately autonomous from others. Instead, Beauvoir can provide resources for thinking through how dependence is not opposed to freedom. For her, freedom is fundamentally a collective act. It is generated between us, relationally, and therefore involves blurring the discrete boundaries between individuals without needing to lose ourselves in others completely. Individuals are not discretely independent, for Beauvoir, since part of the meaning of ambiguity is that my moral freedom depends on being with others. This nuance suggests that forms of dependence could actually open up possibilities for freedom that are otherwise obscured. Approaching the issue in this way, there are possibilities for acts of freedom within relationships of dependence.

Situating Dependence

The introduction to a collection of feminist perspectives on care and dependence (Kittay & Feder 2002) opens by asking the reader to think beyond Beauvoir's analysis of the situation of women as dependent on men, which limits their freedom and equality. Here, Beauvoir is understood as concerned with acting autonomously despite a condition of dependency, but her work is not recognized as a resource for thinking about what justice requires in dependence itself. That is, it is

worth examining what moral responsibilities exist within relationships of dependence. This question is considered central in feminist theories of dependence addressing traditionally feminized care work. Caregiving to dependents, it is argued, is important and valuable work that has been sidelined and devalued as a result of a model of masculinized independence as self-sufficiency. The moral political actor is conceptualized as independent in this way, making issues of dependency peripheral to citizenship. Rethinking and reconceptualizing dependence, and calling attention to problematic understandings of independence, is therefore part of the work undertaken by scholarship thinking about the importance of care work, and articulating it as part of alternative moral frameworks.[1] My purpose is not to disagree with these normative objectives. I argue here that the above interpretation of Beauvoir too quickly dismisses her as a resource for thinking about care. In light of new scholarship on her ethics, and upon re-reading *The Second Sex*, her conceptualizations of dependence and independence do not so easily map on to this gendered binary which values seeking independence and condemns dependence.

What do we mean when we talk of a dependent person? Dependence implies some kind of relation between distinct persons, one who is dependent and that which is depended on, an uneven relationship defined by reliance. It describes reliance on things – goods, commodities – or people, directly or as means to an end, and so dependence itself means different things depending on the relation being defined. At an individual level, these ends might be anything from simply desired and wished for, seen as what is part of a good life, or they may indeed be absolutely crucial to life itself. It might be emotional affective, aesthetic, or simply a tool. And which of these depended on

[1] For example, I think here of, among others: Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993; and Kittay 1999.

things or people are deemed necessary, sufficient, or which are fully just extraneous is a matter for much normative debate.

Sometimes dependence is deemed (whether socially, personally, scientifically) necessary; other times, it is read as a sign of personal failure and weakness. In psychology, it identifies a "tendency to rely on and seek attention, care, or help from close others […] the need for affection, reassurance and approval" (Yanay, 220). Fraser and Gordon (1994) find in their genealogy of the term dependence in Western usage that it has become understood as a moral/psychological condition describing the individual, one that is pathologized, feminized, and racialized; welfare dependence becomes opposed to the ideal citizenship of economic independence and rationality. Lacking material self-sufficiency thus becomes considered morally reprehensible, and subordinates the cared for as morally inferior.

In an examination of discourses surrounding the care for older people, for instance, independence as self-sufficiency is constructed as necessary for a good life. As a result, ageing is perceived as an inferior state of life, is feared, and the care home acts as a symbol of loss of personhood and rejection. This inevitable dependence resulting from the normal course of life is associated with becoming a burden (Weicht 2010).

The need for care is inferred as resulting from a person's dependence, where this condition is treated as an imperative requiring the moral response of care (Kittay 1999). This sets up a dichotomy of care-giver and cared-for, where one is presented as a healthy, independent actor and the other as dependent and passive (Weicht 2010). It is in being measured according to the

idealized standard that certain bodies are considered disabled, ill, frail, weak, etc. and as a result are deemed dependent and in need of care. Furthermore, this dichotomization obscures the care-giver's vulnerability, such as the denigration of care as work and the well documented pervasive violence towards care-workers.

Yet care and dependence are part of everyone's life. Eva Kittay and Ellen Feder (2002) see some relations of dependence as "inevitably so" while others the result of social construction, but maintain that everyone has relationships of dependence at some point in their lives: in being cared for in youth, disability, illness, or old age, or in caring for others. By this view, the need for care should be considered neutral and normal, eliminating the need for a dependent/independent dichotomization (Weicht 2010).

Feminist disability theory challenges this assumption that some lives are inherently vulnerable while others are invulnerable by debunking the idea of the body as stable. That is, the ability/disability system impacts, or at least is always potentially impacting, everyone's life. Being disabled depends on and is produced through a particular relationship with exclusionary built environments and norms. Thus, rather than understanding disability as a static category of identity, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues it is more useful to think of it in terms of a spectrum: rather than a "minoritizing view" which understands disability as a condition of particular people and stigmatizing certain bodies, a "universalizing view"[2] of disability makes it "an issue of continuing,

[2] Here, Garland-Thomson is quoting Eve Sedgwick's distinction between minoritizing and universalizing views from *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick uses these terms to draw out different ways of conceptualizing the homo/heterosexual binary of sexual identity – as a salient descriptor for a distinct minority group of persons, and as referring to the sexual desire "in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (Sedgwick, 1).

determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 517).

This reveals disability as "the most human of experiences, touching every family and — if we live long enough — touching us all" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 517). Not just our variation from the imagined "normal" but also our dependence and need for care shift throughout life — childhood, maternity, old age, accidents, sickness, etc. — because "identity is always in transition" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 522-3). Thinking about our bodies in this way, as porous and in constant metamorphosis, shows how disability is not outside the norm, nor is it indicative of something that is somehow "wrong." Instead, it is "perhaps the essential characteristic of being human" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 522). Disability theory is a helpful resource for thinking about dependence because it challenges the naturalization of bodies as either capable (independent) or incapable (dependent).

As its contrast, independence is rife with positive normative connotations. It is used to mean anything from being free from outside control, as in not subject to another's authority (thinking of the concept of self-sovereignty); less strongly, it might mean autonomy, i.e. being uninfluenced or uncaptured by outside forces; as well as meaning self-sufficient in the sense of being able to fulfill one's own needs, without the need for assistance, "accomplishing things on the basis of one's own efforts in response to one's own interests and in an attempt to reach self-fulfillment" (Yanay, 220). Independence is therefore seen as a route to freedom, again linking it with good citizenship. For example, Iris Marion Young argues that self-sufficiency and autonomy are problematically conflated in social policies modeled on the idealization of independence. Young maintains that autonomy is indeed desirable, but given the reality of inevitable dependencies as a social fact, tying

it to self-sufficiency is not only unrealistic but risks putting those in need of care in positions of subordination, as less-than complete citizens (Young 2002; 2003). This idealization is so strong that social policies of care are designed with the goal of producing eventual independence (Weicht 2011). It is this idealization of independence as self-sufficiency that works to pathologize those lives that are particularly marked, or times of our lives that are marked, by reliance on others.

At first, it does seem like Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* (TSS) idealizes independence. Her disparaging of "dependence" is evident. She says of the woman[3] that "the system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite" (TSS, 721). That is, the conditions of her oppression exist and persist through this parasitic dependence that characterizes womanhood. Throughout, Beauvoir argues that the woman's embodiment limits her possibilities. Her view of overcoming immanence seems to posit a kind of active self-sovereignty. She criticizes the woman for seeking herself through others, becoming dependent on others for her self-definition, and argues that the woman's situation makes her "handicapped" (TSS, 736) as an individual. This suggests that freedom for Beauvoir would require a discreteness of individuals, that is, to be definable without reference to our social situatedness or to the others in our lives.

Further, she clearly articulates active engagement as necessary for freedom in her writings. Beauvoir's transcendence is established as being connected to activity and specifically to movement (Veltman 2009; Shabot 2016), and by extension to ability and strength. As Sara Cohen Shabot (2016) explains, "[a]n existent *is* nothing other than what he does […] He is measured by

[3] Throughout this paper, I purposely use the terminology "the woman" and "the man," reflecting her original French phrasing of *la femme* and *l'homme*. This formulation is what I see as most appropriate to the social concepts to which Beauvoir refers. "One is not born, but rather becomes…" In using this phrasing, Beauvoir is referring to the binary embodiment of the social practices and understandings which define the masculine and the feminine.

his acts" (Shabot, 270). Beauvoir insists we must be active, engaging in the world, in order to set ourselves and others free (Kruks 2012). Her philosophy sees "autonomy [as having] to be attained through one's own actions [and] that any woman can escape her destiny of dependence through her own efforts. [By contrast,] Shifting one's responsibilities onto another […] is immoral," constituting a flight from freedom (Yanay, 227-8). This active independence then is linked to our own effort and ability, making it a question of personal will over our embodiment in the world. Through this linking of morality and freedom to active embodiment, Beauvoir's philosophy appears to model self-sovereign independence as necessary for moral action.

> "The individual who is a subject, who is himself, endeavours to extend his grasp on the world [inclining towards] transcendence. He is ambitious, he acts. But an inessential being cannot discover the absolute in the heart of his subjectivity; a being doomed to immanence could not realize himself in his acts." (TSS, 684)

Shabot points to how Beauvoir's view is problematic because the conception of freedom she puts forward is one that is linked with activity, and critical of passivity by connecting it "to irresponsible or immature tendencies," requiring doing over being (Shabot, 271). As irresponsibility is linked with dependence, this contributes to understanding Beauvoir as advocating a model of independence as self-sufficiency and self-sovereignty.

Yet even while we strive for independence, as socially embodied beings, we cannot actually define ourselves without others. Indeed, for Beauvoir, liberation "can only be collective" (TSS, 664). This means that theorizing the atomized individual's pursuit of transcendent activity as isolated from others misses her point about our embodied existence.

Ambiguity and Authenticity

Recently, Beauvoir scholars have thought through this tension, that is, the way Beauvoir theorized ambiguous situatedness in her concept of moral freedom in contrast to her adamant support, and practice, of independence. Sonia Kruks's influential work (2012) explains Beauvoir's distinct understanding of existence as lived experience, which pays attention to the ambiguity of being embodied in the world while also free consciousness. This embodiment is consequently a site of both freedom and constraint, meaning that "social relations both support and yet may also foreclose individual freedom" (Kruks, 5). According to Kruks, Beauvoir sees "human existence as inherently ambiguous: as marked by the irresolvable antinomies of embodiment and consciousness, conflict and the interdependence of consciousnesses, separation and relation, violence and solidarity" (Kruks, 22). Kruks's understanding of this ambiguity is that it allows for "a self-critical, ambiguous humanism[,] aware of its own limitations and necessary failures" (Kruks, 22). Embodiment, the situatedness of our selves in the world, and the ambiguity generated as a result, means inevitably that failure "pervades" political action. Because of this, according to Kruks's interpretation of Beauvoir, it is affect and emotion which play a crucial role in the way we arrive at judgements for action, not an autonomous, rational, objective self.

Along these lines, Kristina Arp (2000) claims Beauvoir as a "precursor of the ethic of care tradition in feminist ethics" (Arp, 72). Rather than freedom being individual, Arp sees Beauvoir's ethical stance as being concerned with "nurturing and defending the freedom of others" (Arp, 73). Arp shows that, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir sees our relations with others as potential limits to action but not to freedom: instead, "my freedom depends on and presupposes" that of others (Arp, 73).

Arp admits there are lots of reasons to think of Beauvoir as against dependence: she sought a lot of independence in her own life and was deeply ambivalent about motherhood; as mentioned, *The Second Sex* seems to preach independence. Indeed, Arp says that it is precisely *emotional* dependence that horrified Beauvoir.

But, crucially, Arp argues Beauvoir was also critical of detachment due to fear of this dependence on others. To support this, Arp draws attention to the phenomenological aspect of Beauvoir's view, that we are always in situation. In other words, her understanding of the subject is *as situated*, which is brought to bear on her understanding of women's oppression. As such, she sees dependence also as a consequence of freedom. Without the dependence, we actually cannot realize our freedom (Arp, 76).

Shabot has also drawn attention to a similar problem, regarding Beauvoir's linking of freedom with activity and what this means for bodies and situations that would be considered immanent. For her, Beauvoir's understanding of freedom as active projects stands in contradiction with her understanding of the body as situated. Beauvoir's concept of moral freedom derives "precisely from the relationship with the other, from the connection with another subject" (Shabot, 272). Relationships are therefore necessary for moral freedom as it is through recognizing the other and their freedom, and vice versa, that we are free moral subjects. "[O]nly the other's recognition of my freedom can keep me from being objectified; only the other's freedom can make me a subject and save me from reification" (Shabot, 269).

According to Shabot, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir articulates a view which insists we can only be "meaningfully free" when our freedom is recognized by others who are themselves free. "[O]nly when the other, as a free subject, encounters me in my own freedom and reveals it can I see myself as possessing moral freedom" (Shabot, 272). For Shabot, Beauvoir's ethics therefore necessarily articulate a view of freedom that requires we recognize the freedom of others. Her ethics binds moral responsibility to freedom in this way, by insisting that freedom must "be recognised responsibly, consciously, authentically; as necessarily resulting from a moral act, in other words struggling so that the other can also be morally free by avoiding oppression" (Shabot, 274). By drawing on Beauvoir's understanding of the erotic, Shabot therefore shows that Beauvoir's ideas about how our lives are a creative, open, project also make it possible to see her advocating for care – and even the potential for her philosophy to find transcendence in maternity and pregnancy.

So where does this leave us regarding Beauvoir's disparaging of dependence? In attempting to unpack this tension, Niza Yanay (1990) looks at Beauvoir's personal understanding of dependence and independence by drawing specifically on her autobiographical works, where she identifies Beauvoir's sense of an ongoing struggle for independence as at the core of her experience as a woman (Yanay, 222). The struggle is between her conflicting desires for intimacy while attempting to escape the condition of dependence that Beauvoir sees as characterizing womanhood. Despite her outward appearance as independent, Yanay points to Beauvoir's internal struggle against her own "emotional dependence" and "her imperious need for other" (Yanay, 225).

Yanay reads the kind of emotional dependence that Beauvoir critiques as distinct from dependence as connectedness, intimacy, and needing others. Thinking through Beauvoir's understanding of negative dependence, Yanay argues that the first kind points to an experience of inequality bringing about an inhibition to what she calls the expression of one's true self (Yanay, 226-7). She therefore is interpreting Beauvoir as presenting a dual self in these works – an authentic, inner, true self versus the presented, external self. When we are faced with inhibiting social conditions that do not allow for the expression of authentic needs and emotions, she says we must then justify, rationalize and suppress them, "relinquishing" independence by being "untrue" to our authentic selves (Yanay, 230).

By reading her autobiographies, Yanay accordingly finds Beauvoir's critique of dependency as not about the desire for intimacy with another person but dependency as running away from, or suppression of, one's own authentic self, needs and emotions. This dependence Yanay argues is distinct from "the need to rely on, receive help from, and be influenced by another" (Yanay, 231). Instead, understanding independence as authentic self-expression, Beauvoir's meaning of negative emotional dependency "shifts from lack of self-reliance to suppression of self expression, and from struggles with separation to struggles with one's own truth and authenticity with respect to relations with others" (Yanay, 232). This therefore brings attention to the importance of authenticity of expression in our interpersonal relations when examining independence. When we are intimately related with others, there is the potential for different qualitative kinds of dependence according to whether they are approached with authenticity or in turning away from ourselves.

These nuances of Beauvoir's ambiguity and the need for authenticity developed in her other works are then a starting point from which we can reexamine dependence as portrayed in *The Second Sex*, specifically. Here, Beauvoir's critique presents us with the structural and relational failures of ambiguity, which, as I try to show, debilitate and handicap the woman. These are different than the need, or even desire, for others. Being situated means we are already dependent. Whether the resulting relation is oppression or freedom occurs in how we approach each other in the encounter. Through these nuances, I attempt to distinguish different levels (macro-structural and individual-relational) as well as kinds (authentic vs oppressive) of dependencies for Beauvoir, which I develop further in the following discussions.

The Structure and Practices of the Woman's Handicap

The Second Sex's key contribution is widely seen to be Beauvoir's understanding of the structural oppression of women. The woman is defined by situation, not by inherent characteristics. She navigates and imagines her own possibilities as embodied within the social, historical context. "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (TSS, 283). In this text, she argues there is no destiny to being woman; rather, the meaning, experiences, and practices attached are elaborated by society as a whole. "Within the human collectivity nothing is natural, and woman, among others, is a product developed by civilization" (TSS, 761). That is, what it means to be a woman is embedded in and is itself produced by the social context in which that woman exists. This is why Beauvoir argues there are conflicting and contradictory social expectations of what femininity entails. In discussing these feminine norms, she seeks to expose how the understanding of womanhood becomes constrained and how women are therefore undermined as active individuals structurally in both social context and institutions.

My purpose here is to discuss how it is this structural oppression which largely renders the woman dependent. By my reading, in doing so, Beauvoir clearly links embodiment to debilitation through this situation. She often calls on imagery which marks the woman as debilitated, mutilated, and handicapped within the world and thereby unable to authentically pursue her projects, or free creative action.

The use of these terms points to the limitations resulting from the woman's deemed inferiority in her social situation, rather than inherent objective traits of womanhood. These are nonetheless described as bodily – that is material rather than social – limitations. The macro-structural conditions, for Beauvoir, mark the woman by physical debilitation, limiting both her activity and moral responsibility.

Prompted by this observation, I again turn to the feminist disability theory articulated by prominent scholar, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in order to think through this move of Beauvoir's. Indeed, Garland-Thomson is particularly helpful because she says that it was the ideas she encounters in *The Second Sex* which first inspired her to articulate disability as socially constructed. This denaturalizes disability, making it not a fixed and given state of the body, but a meaning system.

> "What *The Second Sex* showed me I could do—indeed, authorized me to do—was to both acknowledge and cultivate an ambivalent relationship with my various identities. It made me understand that I inhabited a marked position within the gender and ability systems, but also that I was located within social systems, such as race and sexuality, where I occupied an unmarked position." (Garland-Thomson 2014)

Garland-Thomson recalls that it was in reading Beauvoir that she realized one "becomes disabled," as one "becomes" woman. She explains: "The idea that culture, discourse, and social relations—

rather than the rightness or wrongness of our bodies—make us who we are and who we are understood to be was an intellectual lightning bolt for me" (Garland-Thomson 2014).

Thereafter Garland-Thomson articulates feminist disability theory as a critique of the way certain bodies are stigmatized and made into being inadequate, inferior and the like through a "culturally fabricated narrative of the body" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 517). That is, rather than being a biological descriptor of the body, disability is ideologically produced. A system built through the production of the binary of ability/disability, its ideology informs and structures attitudes, policies, and the built environment.

The concept of disability, according to Garland-Thomson, "pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment" (Garland-Thomson 2001, 517). It therefore produces an image of the normal human and acts to police departures from this standard, identifying which lives are deemed full of potential and worthy of being lived, as opposed to those that need to be cared for, fixed (healed/accommodated) or eradicated to prevent suffering (Garland-Thomson 2001, 520-21).

Symbolically linked to the division of masculine/feminine, the binary ability/disability becomes paired with terms that characterize full or incomplete humanhood, assessing how bodies compare to the normal, marking abnormalities as unable to live full and happy human lives. These understandings serve to denigrate and marginalize those bodies that do not measure up. These

terms “police variation and reference a hidden norm” from which particular bodies are measured against and deemed to depart (Garland-Thomson 2001, 519).

Thus, Garland-Thomson seeks to expand humanness through conceptualizing disability as fluid, arguing it is an essential component of being human. It is dynamic and relational because “[w]e become disabled when what seemed to be the unremarkable and familiar bodies that we inhabit encounter an unsustaining environment” (Garland-Thomson 2014). This is what she calls a “misfit,” that is, “when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it,” thereby materially creating disability through the relation between the body and world (Garland-Thomson 2011; 2014).

It follows that the comparison, differentiation, and marking of human bodies is what has legitimated “an unequal distribution of resources, status and power within a biased social and architectural environment” (Garland-Thomson 2001, 517). The devaluation of “bodies that do not conform to cultural standards” acts in concert with the legitimization and attribution of value to those that do. Feminist disability theory’s target is therefore the “exclusionary attitudinal, environmental, and economic barriers” (Garland-Thomson 2001, 520) which produces uneven relationships to power by valuing certain forms of humanness above others. Garland-Thomson’s extension of the kind of structural oppression we encounter with Beauvoir to understand disability contributes to seeking a rethinking of what is considered human and a livable life.

For Beauvoir, the evidence of this structural oppression is the limited potential of the woman’s character, which Beauvoir argues is a result of her already expected lack of potential. In Beauvoir’s

account, it is a situation of denied transcendence that explains the "character" of the woman, what she described as "her convictions, values, wisdom, morality, tastes, and behavior" (TSS, 661). Even though the qualities Beauvoir says are esteemed — she cites heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, and creation — she considers as rare regardless of gender, she argues men are at least socially understood as having the *possibility* of achieving these. By contrast, the woman's potential is already limited: she is automatically seen as excluded from having access to the most valued qualities of being human. Beauvoir frequently illustrates this using imagery invoking debilitation. For example, she says of the woman that: "Her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (TSS, 645). That is, for Beauvoir, the woman's possibilities — those that she imagines for herself and that are imagined for her — are limited not by nature but by the situated meaning of womanhood itself.

Central to Beauvoir's account of the woman is that she is not recognized as having subjectivity within a social framework where the man is defined as occupying the point of view of the Subject. Considered to be his binary opposite, the concept of the woman is necessarily constituted as the Other. In the first part of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that neither the biological, psychoanalytical, or historical materialist explanations provide satisfying answers as to why the woman is seen as different from the man. For her, a scientific description of bodies that fixes us already into male and female cannot explain why society values one over the other. These views are already situated in a world of values that does not interrogate this question. The historical materialist's explanation also falls short because it "failed to see that limits to her work capacity constituted in themselves a concrete disadvantage only from a certain perspective" (TSS, 66). For Beauvoir, interpreting the woman as the disadvantaged sex already implies a value judgement

about what constitutes an advantage. These perspectives are therefore inadequate because they already posit womanhood from a point of view where the woman is something Other, rather than questioning why she is posited in this way. "The value of muscular strength, the phallus, and the tool can only be defined in a world of values: it is driven by the fundamental project of the existent transcending itself toward being" (TSS, 68). The man is already automatically understood to have the ability to shape the world and he is the one who defines what it is that gives him this possibility. As his opposite, the woman is defined as incapable of acting in this way.

Examining the historical and mythological narratives that existed around her allows Beauvoir to reveal how the woman has been defined. What it means to be a woman is trapped and fixed into incongruent terms — mother, virgin, whore, nature, magic, muse, witch, feared, conquered, etc. — erasing her agency and individuality, her human ambiguity. Myths attempt to "summarize her as a whole" (TSS, 266) and, in doing so, "to express the totality of a situation it helps define" (TSS, 754). The woman's identities are produced in these unrealistic expectations about the roles she plays. Experience and free judgement are replaced by the static ideals provided by myths about femininity and masculinity, fixed into binary timeless essences that are locked in a perpetual battle with one another.

These narratives are multiple, contradictory, and unrealistic. What they have in common is that they continue to oppress and define the woman negatively, abstractly, as Other. They define her *without* her: "Women's entire history has been written by men…The problem of woman has always been a problem of men" (TSS, 148). The woman does not have the agency to authentically create a narrative about herself because she is not considered a potential author. It is this structure

that defines her, does not recognize her ambiguity, her capacity for moral action and failure, that identifies her as a problem, creating the debilitated situation of feminine embodiment.

The woman becomes a contradiction both when she is trying to conform to the male norm and when she rejects it. For Beauvoir, this "mutilates" her: "She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex" (TSS, 723). She becomes divided, "has trouble finding her balance" (TSS, 736). For Beauvoir, no one can resolve the contradictions involved in womanhood. All humans are ambiguous existents; when this ambiguity is denied, it constitutes oppression in Beauvoir's view (Kruks 2012). As a result of her situation and its contradictions, the woman will ultimately be disappointing to others and disappointed in herself. It is in this situation, being in constant tension as a contradiction, that Beauvoir describes womanhood as presenting itself as a handicap.

Even Beauvoir's figure of "the independent woman" has her freedom limited by this, her situation as a woman. While "[s]he seeks 'to build a career' the way others construct a happy life; she remains dominated, invested by the male universe, she lacks the audacity to break through the ceiling, she does not passionately lose herself in her projects; she still considers her life an immanent enterprise" (TSS, 740). In other words, because the independent woman pursues her activities not for themselves but as instrumental, Beauvoir's view is that they are not her own activity in the same sense that she describes the need for active, creative projects which allow for transcendence. Even this woman is, therefore, unable to truly become passionate about her own work. Beauvoir argues that regardless of her "independence," the woman is unable to pursue projects of transcendence because of her situation, that is, in "the world of men":

> "To do great things, today's woman needs above all forgetfulness of self: but to forget oneself one must first be solidly sure that one has already found oneself. Newly arrived in the world of men, barely supported by them, the woman is still much too busy looking for herself." (TSS, 740-1)

For Beauvoir, independent woman is still looking for herself elsewhere rather than authentically. Having gained her independence without her subjectivity being recognized means that she is "unsupported" within a "world of men" precisely because she is still systemically denied participation in and access to making the world around her, forcing her to still look at herself as she is externally defined instead of acting in the world authentically.

Thus, the woman's structural oppression means she feels herself limited and unable to pursue free, creative action, again, to be her authentic self. And her ability to challenge this situation is limited, situated, made dependent by her constraints. Beauvoir is clear that "justice can never be created within injustice" (TSS, 759). Since the concept of the woman is defined by a patriarchal society that treats the male view as neutral, as man's opposite woman is considered in relation to the masculine norm. In other words, so long as the masculine is equated with the neutrality of institutions, woman continues to be Other.

In continuing to look at her example of the independent woman, we see Beauvoir shows she becomes divided between her professional interest and her femininity rather than being free and autonomous. In trying to emulate a masculine way of being in the world, the woman would not cease to be a woman, which in Beauvoir's view results in further debilitating her: "She wants to live both like a man and like a woman; her workload and her fatigue are multiplied as a result" (TSS, 725). Working outside the domestic sphere, she is "not free from household chores" nor does the woman "escape the traditional feminine world; neither society nor their husbands give

them the help needed to become, in concrete terms, the equals of men" (TSS, 722). This is because the male point of view is still being treated as neutral. The woman cannot become the equal of the man by becoming masculine: society continues to see woman as the defining opposite of the man without recognizing it as a subject position. "Society does not see her with the same eyes; she has a different perspective on the universe" (TSS, 723). Her perspective is the exception to the universalized male norm. In stark contrast, the man's "vocation as a human being in no way contradicts his destiny as male" (TSS, 723). The man has far less trouble conforming to the expectations of society precisely because custom is "based on his needs as an autonomous individual" (TSS, 724). Human transcendence is itself socially defined in masculine (and ableist) terms.

Even while, according to Beauvoir's philosophy, all humans are free and capable of creative action, women are "required to render themselves passive and object-like[,] the purported Other to […] man who claims for himself the status of the "sovereign" subject" (Kruks, 16). In this way, the woman, as both subject and "prey," lives a mutilated life, as "continuously divided against herself" (Kruks, 17). This denial of responsibility to the woman presents itself as a pathologization of the woman, rendering her structurally dependent on the man.

As we have seen, then, the situation of the woman within a world where the Subject is the man is what explains this social fact of women's dependence for Beauvoir. Because of this, she insists rights are not by themselves enough and the woman's legal status is often disadvantaged in practice by habit and custom. The political and economic opportunities, power, and prestige are reserved for men and defined by masculine traits, while education is geared towards reproducing this

situation. "At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men" (TSS, 10). The ability to define institutions as one's own is a masculine project, making it inaccessible to woman because she is defined as Other to it, and therefore dependent on man.

It is nonetheless striking that Beauvoir specifically uses the term *handicapée* to describe the woman in her relationships. Already in the introduction of *The Second Sex*, she is described as "handicapped" by her relationship to the man, causing her to be dependent on him: "woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal […] still today, […] woman is heavily handicapped" (TSS, 9).[4]

Beauvoir's view of oppression is that it exists in our everyday practices in addition to the macro-level structures. Looking at this micro-level now, the body is the site at which our engagement with others can be either freeing or harmful. Kruks argues Beauvoir's ambiguity carries with it this possibility of being dehumanized in these practices. Again, Beauvoir sees oppression as resulting from the fact that we are "paradoxical existents, embodied subjectivities" (Kruks, 22). Oppression occurs when this ambiguity is denied. "For oppression operates only through embodied subjects whose lives are shaped by a variety of structural phenomena" (Kruks, 22). This oppression manifests in embodiment, both in our own authenticity towards the world and within these relations with others, operating at this site to blur the distinction between oppressor and oppressed in everyday practices. Untangling Beauvoir's understanding of the handicapped woman requires

[4] For this particular example sentence in the original French, see Vol 1, p. 23. The French term *handicapée* can be directly translated as handicapped, disabled, or disadvantaged. In their 2011 translation, Borde & Malovany-Chevallier have chosen to use the word "handicapped" here.

us to understand this ambiguity about how the body is lived and made as a site of micro-oppression in our relationship with the world and others.

Beauvoir specifically uses this term "handicap" to discuss the inability for the woman to approach the world as an active agent within it. For example, in discussing "the independent woman," Beauvoir suggests that it is not that the "woman's physical makeup itself represents a handicap" but, instead, that "most ailments and illnesses that weigh women down have psychic causes […]"

> "Women are constantly overwhelmed by the psychological tension I have spoken about, because of all the tasks they take on and the contradictions they struggle against; this does not mean that their ills are imaginary: they are as real and devouring as the situation they convey." (TSS, 736)

We see here how womanhood becomes a physically manifested handicap in Beauvoir's account; the "devouring" manifestation of physical pain and handicap being linked, for Beauvoir, to the situation of inferiority. The most independent woman can be monthly bedridden with "the throes of pitiless tortures" while she would be capable of having active projects. For Beauvoir, the term handicap exposes the way contradictory norms and expectations weigh on the woman. She experiences her body as alien and uncontrollable, and this psychic misfit into the world is this experience of her physical debilitation within the masculine world. The handicap is not, does not begin with, the physical condition itself, nor the fact that she has to step away for a day in pain, but that her pain constrains her from being meaningfully active in the world. It is that we then define this woman by her menstrual pain and do not allow her to have projects that she becomes handicapped. Her body is debilitated because of her situation.

According to Beauvoir, while the man is measured by his acts, treated as the absolute, the woman is the inessential. She is defined only from the outside and is dependent on others for her meaning.

To be truly creative, the woman must be transcendent, able to posit herself as freedom, to challenge the human condition (TSS, 748). And while civic rights, the ability to work, and economic autonomy are necessary for freedom as independence, they are not by themselves enough to make a free subject. "When she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses the responsibility relative to the goals she pursues" (TSS, 721). This responsibility is key: it is not the atomistic subject but the embodied and dependent one who must grapple with the ambiguity of human existence as embodied freedom (Kruks 2012). I return to the importance of responsibility below. But in the world, the woman's "wings are cut" and her potential is "handicapped." The oppressed situation of the woman is one where she has no responsibility. Even the independent woman, then, in not being imagined as responsible in her ambiguity, therefore imagines herself to be incomplete and unable to be a moral agent.

Below, to expand on Beauvoir's descriptions of the woman experiencing herself as debilitated, I inquire further into her use of these terms and the way they are linked to various relationships as characterized by dependence – in particular, her marriage, her lover, and her child – to discuss why these kinds of intimate relationships are disabling in her view. Even though we saw that the "independent woman" is also presented as dependent, here, I look at how she describes the dependence as relational, emerging and manifesting in her personal, emotional relationships.

Taking Care as Responsible Dependence

In *The Second Sex*, we are presented with vast amounts of evidence that instead of being able to be freely intimate out of something like love or care, the woman's relationship with others

necessarily becomes one of dependence. By looking to others to define herself, the woman gives up her moral responsibility and authenticity; whereas "man gives activity, woman [gives] her person" (TSS, 246). It is here that freedom for Beauvoir seems to require independence from others in order to be active and creative. It is in her care and devotion to others as wife, lover, mother, that woman becomes dependent on another for meaning — not just legally, politically, or economically: by looking for transcendence through another, she loses her possibility of self.

Thus, Beauvoir narrates the married woman as "a parasite" on her husband, feeding off of him as a "bloodsucker," poisoning him with her weakness (TSS, 522-3). Here, she also compares her to a "slave," arguing that through the interiorization of her dependence, that is, her implication in her own oppression, her freedom is only illusory: "she *is* a slave even when she conducts herself with apparent freedom" (TSS, 522). She argues this is because marriage as an institution defines married woman through this relationship's success. Beauvoir's analysis is that in a society developed by man, the woman in a heterosexual marriage is unable to ensure its success herself. She is therefore made dependent on the man through marriage and must devote herself to preserve the relationship in order to continue to access projects, though always through her husband and not of her own action. In making the marriage her career, the married woman's dependence is described in revolting terms and contrasted with freedom.

The woman in love, to take another example, seeks to affirm her dependence in an attempt to regain some agency over her life. "Love, for the woman, is a supreme attempt to overcome the dependence to which she is condemned by assuming it; but even consented to, dependence can only be lived in fear and servility" (TSS, 707). Here, the woman attempts to "assume," i.e. in the

sense of taking on responsibility, through her desire for the other. But it remains an emotional dependence, rather than responsibility for her self. This is because the result of dependence is an inability to act for oneself, because "her for-others merges with her very being" (TSS, 707). Although it may seem to be freely sought, the relationship is in fact not entered freely by woman because it would require the ability to define oneself for oneself, rather than through another. That is, love becomes a harmful and total dependence because the woman is stuck searching for herself in another person. As "an inessential being," the woman seeks love because she seeks transcendence but cannot access it herself. She must instead seek it through the masculine, that which is designated "essential." Thus, she dreams

> "of surpassing her being toward one of those superior beings, of becoming one, of fusing with the foreign subject; there is no other way out for her than losing herself body and soul in the one designated to her as the absolute, the essential. Since she is, in any case, condemned to dependence, […] she chooses to want her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her to be the expression of her freedom." (TSS, 684)

In other words, this woman in love seeks to affirm her freedom by asserting her dependence on the object of her love as her own activity. Because the man is deemed capable of being an active Subject, the "[w]oman hopes he will give her possession both of herself and of the universe contained in him" (TSS, 687). Accordingly, in love, she seeks to identify with him and become one with him in order to give herself meaning: it is through his gaze that she is glorified and seeks to become active being (TSS, 690).

But this kind of love is not a path to freedom because she is thereby necessarily alienating herself: in trying "to see with his eyes […] the center of the world is no longer where she is but where the beloved is" (TSS, 693). The woman, unable to be active in the world, seeks to give her whole being to be the possession of a self that is the absolute (TSS, 694), hoping that her lover will be

her "liberating hero and savior" (TSS, 734) through which she will be able to find meaning that is otherwise foreclosed to her. She "gives up her transcendence: she subordinates it to that of the essential other whose vassal and slave she makes herself. It is to find herself, to save herself, that she began by losing herself in him" (TSS, 691). For Beauvoir, the woman in love therefore becomes defined by the myth of woman seeking to possess man's "virile force" in order to achieve her freedom through him, to "fill the void she feels in herself" (TSS, 234). Rather than approaching the relationship with the responsibility of being an ambiguous subject, she loses herself in her lover.

Beauvoir is critical because she argues it is not through sexuality itself that the woman will be able to fill the void; instead, she indicates that only a free being can approach the sexual relationship in a productive and active way. "Sexuality does not exist to fill a void; it must be the expression of a whole being" (TSS, 235). Since the woman who seeks transcendence through her lover is not whole on her own, she cannot be free through this relationship. "She wants to draw him out and absorb him till there is nothing left of him" (TSS, 235). Again, the woman is described in parasitic terms: she seeks to absorb his freedom but becomes dependent on his world rather than acting as herself for herself.

This question of losing self-actualization by looking for it in another returns in Beauvoir's discussion of the woman as the mother. For Beauvoir, motherhood is not a natural fact of womanhood, but instead another relation that must also be approached freely: "nature could never dictate a moral choice; this implies an engagement […] The relation of parent to children, like that of spouses, must be freely chosen" (TSS, 566). For Beauvoir, only a subject can make the free

choice to bear the weight of responsibility to care for another person. Usually we might think of the child as dependent on their parents, but for Beauvoir, the moral responsibility to care for a child cannot be assumed by someone who does not make the free choice to do so. The mother who does not approach the relationship with her child with responsibility risks instead of becoming dependent on her child for her self-definition. Motherhood as an end in itself is not enough to meaningfully fulfill a person or to be their affirmation of self.

> "Even in cases where the child is a treasure within a happy or at least balanced life, he cannot be the full extent of his mother's horizons. He does not wrest her from her immanence; she shapes his flesh, she supports him, she cares for him: she can do no more than create a situation that solely the child's freedom can transcend; when she invests in his future, it is again by proxy that she transcends herself through the universe and time; that is, once again she dooms herself to dependence." (TSS, 568)

In the mother's situation as Beauvoir describes it, caring for her masculinized child's future becomes her only meaningful activity. The success of the mother is when her child becomes free. And, now to be independent of her, the child must reject her. The mother herself cannot achieve freedom for herself through her children: when her project becomes them, they become a proxy for her activity, and her own success as an individual becomes dependent on the activity of another person. This dependence, Beauvoir makes clear, is the mother's doom.

Precisely because Beauvoir's philosophy does not understand us as rational, autonomous, "sovereign," consciousness, Kruks argues we are not "able to resolve ambiguities or eliminate conflicts through the 'correct' application of reason" (Kruks, 7). Indeed, according to Shabot, it is in attempting to approach the world in this way, by separating ourselves from it and imagining ourselves as "pure subjectivities" rather than materially embodied in the world, that we deny ourselves and others the possibility for freedom. Attempting to escape our dependence on others objectifies the world and denies our own ambiguity (Shabot, 273). Responsibility is necessary

because ambiguity is, as Kruks puts it, "the very stuff of life itself" (Kruks, 8). As there is no correct or predefined way to relate with others, the responsibility must be authentic, free, and active. Ambiguity cannot be eliminated from our lives – to be sure, in doing so, we cause further oppression. The inevitability of failure, then, does not excuse inaction, for Beauvoir; it underscores the importance of responsibility. This responsibility entails a positive dependence with others.

Indeed, as Arp explains, by "attempting to ascend to a timeless objective realm of universal truth" we are only attempting to escape from, to deny, our inevitable dependence on others (Arp, 77). The failure to recognize one's own situatedness as dependent on others for freedom is therefore what leads to the objectification of others, to oppression. In other words, while Beauvoir is critical of dependence as a refuge, actually sees this as "frightening," she saw dependence itself was nonetheless a social fact, a vulnerability to failure which cannot be permanently prevented or fixed.

Kruks, too, insists that Beauvoir's ambiguity necessitates we be responsible for our own failures towards others in our relations. Action implies "necessary failures," but it also creates opportunities for freedom. Our existence as an "ambiguous admixture of freedom and constraint" is not just as individually embodied freedoms, but it also defines and permeates our relations:

> "We are separate, individuated existences, yet our actions may acquire their meaning only through the presence of others. […] At the same time, because we are separate, free existences, our projects will often conflict. Desiring different ends, we will encounter others as impediments or as threats. Harms, including violent harms, as well as reciprocity, thus haunt the human world." (Kruks, 7)

In other words, it is the ambiguity of others, their embodied freedom, which has the potential both to create with me a relationship of care *and* a relationship of oppression. The failures and

dependence may be inevitable, but central to whether these are approached correctly or not, for Beauvoir, is this authenticity to oneself and responsibility to others.

It is on these grounds that Arp argues Beauvoir contributes to the ethics of care: because she has an understanding of what Arp calls *interdependence*. Drawing on Beauvoir's "concept of moral freedom, a moral ideal to be realized by accepting one's own freedom and actively engaging oneself with other free individuals," then we can imagine care through what Arp calls a *joint project*: "to be genuinely free, to achieve what Beauvoir calls moral freedom, the individual needs to interact with other genuinely free individuals in joint projects" (Arp, 79). These joint projects, which are committed to freely and authentically by each person, are what actually give meaning to the world. Relationships of care, if approached authentically and responsibly as joint projects are the stuff of moral freedom for Beauvoir.

Yet crucially, we cannot bear the responsibility of others for them – only our own. Trying to define the other on their behalf, or to find ourselves in them, refers again to the dependence that Beauvoir criticizes. Arp's interpretation of Beauvoir's form of an ethic of care is therefore that "we only have the responsibility to defend and nurture others' *freedom*; we are not necessarily responsible for what they do with that freedom" (Arp, 80). Arp thus argues that our responsibility is only for our own choices, but we are "not responsible for the *actions* of others" (Arp, 80). In order to live our own lives as embodied freedom, we must also have the moral responsibility to recognize the ambiguity of others as well. When I fail to do so, when I oppress the other by denying this, the deprived subjectivity also cannot recognize my own freedom (Shabot, 276).

Shabot suggests the potential to draw on the erotic as articulated in Beauvoir's philosophy to think about creativity that is not independent and active but, in its authenticity, is as much related to moral freedom as political action. This is because, in the erotic relationship, the ambiguity of our situation is revealed in both its blurring of the distinctions between ourselves and the world and between immanence and transcendence. It is a transcendence that is linked with the body, with the possibility of disclosure of our ambiguity by being free with others. For Shabot, Beauvoir saw eroticism as "playful, joyful and contemplative" which can be an opportunity to experience our body as a situation, and therefore this dependence can be linked to freedom and authenticity (Shabot, 280). This playful creativity that authentically and responsibly recognizes embodied existence with others is what Shabot calls *erotic freedom*, an embodied ethics of the erotic (Shabot, 282). In Shabot's interpretation of Beauvoir, "it is precisely our affective carnality, always open to and intertwined with the world and others, that enables us to be ethical subjects and that, moreover, prevents sexual reification" (Shabot, 281).

Prompted by Shabot's case for the erotic, I return once again to Beauvoir's assessment of the woman in love in order to draw out forms of freedom in dependence. The woman in love's dependence on her male lover is tied up with her desire to find her subjective meaning in the intimacy, rather than her desire for the intimacy of the relationship with another free being. According to Beauvoir, "[f]or the woman to be in love like a man — that is to say, without putting her very *being* into question, freely — she would have to think herself his equal, and be his equal concretely: she would have to commit herself with the same decisiveness to her enterprises" (TSS, 735). By her account, it is therefore not that someone cannot be freely in love. Rather, they must

have the ability to be authentic and creative, not searching for their authentic self elsewhere, in order to respect another person freely in this love.

> "Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other; neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world. For each of them, love would be the revelation of the self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe." (TSS, 706)

We can imagine, therefore, the possibility of a relationship of what Beauvoir here calls "authentic love" in the conditions where each person would be able to be for themselves as well as for others and recognize each other as having this ambiguous potential for failure and responsibility. In this relationship, there is a form of dependence on others in which we exist responsibly as our authentic, ambiguous selves, together. Thus Beauvoir concludes, "[t]he day when it will be possible for the woman to love in her strength and not in her weakness, not to escape from herself but to find herself, not out of resignation but to affirm herself, love will become for her as for man the source of life and not a mortal danger" (TSS, 708). Unpacking these nuances in different forms of dependence for Beauvoir allow us to see how crucial being with others and recognizing our ambiguity are to living meaningful lives. Drawing on this, then, we can return to other relationships to see what she insists has been missing. Regarding the mother, for example, recall Beauvoir's contention that the relationship between parent and child is an "engagement" (as in, a moral commitment to another) which "must be freely chosen" (TSS, 566). In other words, while as children we are "dependent" on our parents in the colloquial sense, the ethical relationship must be seen as one between ambiguous existents, responsibly both free and caring. Authentically giving and seeking care which recognizes ambiguity can thus be understood as a form of responsible dependence.

At the crux of Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity is the problem that "the world is not harmony, and no individual has a necessary place in it" (TSS, 658). We are dependent on others in order to not be objectified. But the person who is looking to another for their own meaning is not free, for Beauvoir. Our freedom does exist precisely through our existence with others: as being for others as well as being for self. That is, "recognizing each other as subject, each will remain an *other* for the other" (TSS, 766). This form of responsibility understands both our own limitations and dependence on others, as well as that the same condition exists for others. "A free individual takes the blame for his failures on himself, he takes responsibility for them" (TSS, 646). The freedom of being able to take responsibility towards others as persons who can fail is key to Beauvoir's ambiguity.

Beauvoir's critique of dependence is not therefore about being autonomously self-sovereign. It is in trying to own or inhabit completely someone else that we "handicap" them and ourselves. Structurally, in Beauvoir's account, the woman is not recognized as capable of this moral ambiguity. Even the creative woman is only able to address her constraints, not to be active: she has had to "spend so much negative energy freeing themselves from external constraints that [she arrives] out of breath" (TSS, 746). Yet the removal of constraints is by itself not enough to be a free subject: "one must first unequivocally posit oneself as freedom" (TSS, 748). From looking at the characterizations of dependence in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and its relation to ambiguity, authenticity, and responsibility, we realize there are forms of dependence that are actually key to being free as an embodied subject. It is in trying to own or inhabit completely someone else's future that we "handicap" them and ourselves. This, I think offers productive resources for an

ethics of care, and encourages us to think beyond dependence as an uneven relationship to an ambiguous one.

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