Article

Tracing the Influence of Simone de Beauvoir in Judith Butler's Work

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Abstract: Beauvoir's existentialist ethics relates to and informs eminently contemporary accounts of feminist ethics in the Western continental feminist canon. To date only a few scholars have emphasized this connection. In this work, I show the centrality of Beauvoirian philosophy to contemporary philosophical discussions by elucidating the influence of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics on Judith Butler's feminist philosophy. While I acknowledge other possible influences, especially by French philosophers, on Butler's work, I find it important to emphasize Beauvoir's contributions as they have not received the attention they deserve. My paper shows how Beauvoir's account of agency as an ambiguous becoming reverberates in Butler's theory of gender performativity developed in her early writings. I consider Butler's theory of gender performativity to have existentialist roots based on the existentialist perception of the subject as a becoming that never coincides with itself. I also discuss how Butler takes on some basic ethical questions which Beauvoir already accentuates in her writings. I focus on three main points of intersection between the two philosophers, which are vulnerability and interconnectedness, violence and inevitability of ethical failure, and finally the ambiguity and opaqueness that come with situated ethics.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir; Judith Butler; existentialism; gender oppression; gender performativity

Beauvoir's existentialist ethics relates to and informs eminently contemporary accounts of feminist ethics in the Western continental feminist canon. To date only a few scholars have emphasized this connection. One of them is Karen Vintges, who argues that although Beauvoir's philosophy "already encompasses all the elements of contemporary feminism- so much so that it can be taken as its paradigm," it still does not get the attention it deserves [1]. Ann V. Murphy also discusses underestimation of the influence of *The Second Sex* on contemporary feminist theory (in [2]). In this work, I show the centrality of Beauvoirian philosophy to contemporary philosophical discussions by elucidating the influence of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics on Judith Butler's feminist philosophy. While I acknowledge other possible influences, especially by French philosophers, on Butler's work, I find it important to emphasize Beauvoir's contributions as they have not received the attention they deserve. As Meryl Altman observes, " . . . so many people—including many feminists—still cite and credit Foucault, or Bourdieu, or Lacan, or Judith Butler, for key and groundbreaking ideas (such as the social construction of gender) where they could, should, cite Beauvoir." [3] (p. 9). In what follows, I turn to Judith Butler's feminist philosophy, analyzing it as a contribution to feminist ethics that is influenced by Beauvoir's existentialist ethics. In the first section, I show how Beauvoir's account of agency as an ambiguous becoming reverberates in Butler's theory of gender performativity developed in her early writings. I consider Butler's theory of gender performativity to have existentialist roots based on the existentialist perception of the subject as a becoming that never coincides with itself. In the second section, I discuss how Butler takes on some basic ethical questions which Beauvoir already accentuates in her writings. I focus on three main points of intersection between the two philosophers, which are vulnerability and interconnectedness, violence and inevitability of ethical failure, and finally the ambiguity and opaqueness that come with situated ethics.

1. Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity and the Problem of Personal Agency in Butler and Beauvoir

The Second Sex presents an existential phenomenological analysis of women's lack of freedom and oppression as a universal problem. In addition to analyzing women's current situation, the book also stands as a feminist manifesto. It promotes the idea of women's liberation and offers prescriptive guidance for carrying out changes in the situation of women. In the last section of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir radically argues that it is impossible to "free" women from patriarchal oppression; only women can achieve their emancipation. She confers a considerable degree of personal agency to women in overcoming gender oppression. In addition to being a situated and embodied being, for Beauvoir woman is a subject who constantly transfigures herself and has the capacity to transcend the given order of the things.

The problem of personal agency under oppressive conditions emerges often in contemporary feminist scholarship. The move from the independent, fully self-contained Cartesian ethical subject of traditional ethics towards a more interdependent and socially constructed ethical subject received serious critiques from some feminists. Mario Moussa discusses the postmodern critiques of subjectivity and asks, "if it is therefore true that nothing like an autonomous Cartesian "I" exists, then how is it possible for the political agent to instigate action?" [4] (pp. 255–256) For Moussa, if we cannot formulate a self that exists independent of social construction, then we cannot claim any political action to be generated by the subject. Ann Ferguson asks, "If personal identities are socially constructed by gender, race and ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, how are social change and moral responsibility possible?" [5] (p. 116) Linda Alcoff also argues for the impossibility of any feminist politics if gender were to be a social construct [6] (p. 43). Susan Hekman presents a more sophisticated articulation of the problem by pointing out to the reluctance among feminists to accept the constituted subject, despite their deep interest in the question of how social, cultural, political, and discursive structures shape the female subject [7]. This problem seems to present an insurmountable dilemma in modern feminist scholarship, because the socially constructed subject is often depicted as devoid of agency. On the one hand, feminists are trying to come up with an account of oppression that explains how a variety of structures such as social, political, etc., contribute maintain oppression by manipulating the subjects to act in accordance with the demands of the oppressive structures. On the other, they are trying to formulate a theory of liberation, where the oppressed has some awareness of the oppressive structures and the agency to change those structures. Nonetheless, Beauvoir's account of self offers substantial resources for solving this dilemma. Butler takes up those resources and develops an account of self that is both free and socially constructed. The main ethical and political question that guides both Beauvoir and Butler's theory of subjectivity is the possibility of emancipation. They both acknowledge that the very conditions of opposition to the oppressive social order are contained within the contradictions in the intelligible forms of existence imposed on its subjects by hegemonic structures. My goal here is certainly not to erase the meaningful distinctions and divergence points in Butler's and Beauvoir's thinking. I aim instead to show that some of the complex questions in feminist ethics have already been prefigured by Beauvoir with valuable potential solutions.

For both Butler and Beauvoir, the possibility of radical social and political transformation is threatened by accounts of the subject with limited or no agency under oppression. While their accounts of personal agency do not give up on the idea of social construction, they do not strip the subject of her autonomy. Beauvoir shows that the ethical ambiguity of the human condition stems from the truth that the subject is never fully socially constructed nor is it fully autonomous. As I will detail below, Butler echoes Beauvoir when she argues that the subject's being socially constructed and having personal agency does not constitute a straightforward contradiction. Being born into a certain situation and being shaped by it does not necessarily rule out the subject's freedom to respond to that situation in different ways. However, neither of those philosophers denies the intricate interplay between

personal agency and the influence of social structures on the subject; nor do they dismiss the notion of socially and historically constructed subjectivity as incapable of providing a proper ground for emancipatory political action.

There are multiple ways that feminists have grappled with seeming tensions between personal agency and social construction. On the one hand, some feminists have argued that the claim women choose "becoming women" may lead to victim blaming and feelings of guilt and inadequacy in some women who were not able to stand up against the enforcements of the patriarchy [8,9]. However, as I will argue using Butler and Beauvoir, we can conceive of an account of responsibility that does not necessarily imply that the doer is blameworthy for her choice and action. On the other hand, perceiving women as victims of the patriarchal system who have no personal agency leads to more serious problems; such a view leaves no way out of patriarchal oppression. In addition to this strategic purpose, we also run into a theoretical difficulty when we deny agency to the oppressed. If we say women have no option but to obey the demands of the patriarchal culture, then we cannot explain the behavior of women who have chosen to rebel against those demands.

This overview brings us to Butler's theory of gender performativity, which understands gender identity as a continuous dynamic process that is shaped historically and culturally. Butler first introduced the notion of gender performativity in a 1988 article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," two years prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*. The article mainly discusses the relationship between phenomenology and feminism, yet it also presents the concept of performativity as a crucial one for a theory of gender. In this essay, Butler sets her task as showing that gender identity is "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" [10] (p. 520). Expanding on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir's phenomenological theories of the body, Butler argues that the body is a site of meaning construction and materializing possibilities. She writes,

> The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. [10] (p. 521)

Gender is constructed through a variety of actions which according to Butler bears resemblance to performative acts within theatrical contexts [10] (p. 521). Although the possibilities one realizes by their actions are constrained and to some extend determined by social, cultural and historical conditions, every subject presents a unique combination and permutation of these possibilities and hence has her unique style of performativity. The peculiarity of performativity for each subject facilitates emergence of new possibilities both for the subject itself and other subjects since acts are shared experience and collective action for Butler [10] (p. 525). Nevertheless, there have always been cruel punishments for the one who dares to perform unwarranted improvisations [10] (p. 531). Performing a gender, therefore, is always an originative act despite the social, cultural, and historical impositions and limitations. The distinction between performativity and expressivity is also an important point made in Butler's 1988 essay. Butler criticizes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of expressivity within the context of a gender theory. She argues that phenomenology presupposes the agent prior to its acts. She argues,

> The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real

or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. [10] (p. 528)

According to the theory of expressivity, what is expressed represents something of the pre-existing self. Hence, expression of gender would imply that the self is already gendered prior to its performances of gender. Therefore, Butler concludes that phenomenological theories of expressivity are essentialist in general and can be considered as gender essentialist with respect to gender theory. She states that "this implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known [. . .]" [10] (p. 528).

The criticism Butler is directing at Merleau-Ponty and Husserl stems from the challenges immanence creates with respect to thinking of difference and it has been a topic of discussion among many phenomenologists [11–13]. Anne van Leeuwen elucidates the critique as follows:

> Phenomenology is ostensibly committed to the immanence of philosophical inquiry; yet, insofar as it is also committed to a transcendental method, broadly understood as an inquiry into the conditions of that which shows itself within the domain of immanence, phenomenology is ostensibly recalcitrant to a thinking of difference (i.e., the other, the contingent, the new). That is, according to its materialist critics, phenomenological inquiry inevitably domesticates difference insofar as it asserts the existence of a relation of heterogeneity and identity between phenomena and the conditions of their appearance. As a result of this gesture, phenomenological inquiry appears to ineluctably co-opt and contain the emergence of difference within the purview of sameness or identity. [12] (p. 475)

Not surprisingly, Butler exempts Beauvoir from this criticism. She argues that Beauvoir reinterprets the phenomenological tradition by rejecting the idea of gender as a stable identity [10] (p. 519). For early Butler, Beauvoir's concept of gender is consistent with understanding it as a performative act that is created perpetually through one's acts. The reality of gender is dependent on these continuous acts [10] (p. 527). We cannot talk about gender prior to these acts of performance. Talking about expressivity of gender, as Merleau-Ponty and Husserl allegedly lead us to do, implies the existence of gender identity prior to these acts of performance. For Butler, "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self'" [10] (p. 528). That is why she claims that feminist theory should go beyond an "expressive model of gender" [10] (p. 529).

Such an account coincides with Beauvoir's account of female subjectivity under patriarchal oppression in *The Second Sex* discussed at the beginning of this section. Beauvoir considers the female subject as both constructed by the patriarchal oppression and active agents who have the capacity to perpetuate or change patriarchal oppression. As Butler puts it, By scrutinizing the mechanism of agency and appropriation, Beauvoir is attempting, I believe, to infuse the analysis with emancipatory potential. Oppression is not a self-contained system which either confronts individuals as a theoretical object or generates them as its cultural pawns. It is a dialectical force which requires individual participation on a large scale in order to maintain its malignant life [14] (p. 41).

For both Butler and Beauvoir, the category of gender is beyond the dichotomy of voluntary choice versus determinism. In addition to ontological reasons, these philosophers also have ethical and political motivations to postulate such a theory of gender. Individuals are products of social, historical, and cultural conditions as much they are producers of them. The main goal for both philosophers is to develop a viable ethical theory that can adequately address oppression as an ethical and political problem.

In her 1988 essay, Butler not only distances herself from the phenomenological idea of expressivity, but also from some versions of post-structuralism. She argues that gender "is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some poststructuralist displacements of the

subject would contend" [10] (p. 526). Going back to the analogy she draws between gender performance and theatrical performance, Butler maintains that even though there is a script for the subject, it could be interpreted in many different ways. In the same vein, the play cannot be performed solely based on the text, there always has to be some interpretation by the performer. In addition to *Gender Trouble*, the concept of performativity plays an important role in *Bodies that Matter*, *Undoing Gender*, and *Excitable Speech*. In these books from the 1990s, Butler historically analyzes gender performativity as regulated by a system of compulsory and reproductive heterosexuality [15] (p. 150). Nevertheless, the ontological status of this gendered body is limited by the acts it performs. For Butler "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" [15] (p. 45). Hence, femininity and masculinity are not natural attributes for men and women; they instead result from certain practices.

To support this claim, Butler discusses the example of drag. Butler recalls that in her younger years while watching a drag queen in a gay bar, she realizes that drags "could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would" [16] (p. 213). In performing femininity in a male body, drag not only complicates the idea of heterosexual coherence but also shows that gender is construction. Butler writes that "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" [15] (p. 87). This also shows us that gendered meanings can be subverted and proliferated or, to put it in Butlerian terms, what drag does creates serious gender trouble.

Beauvoir takes up gender in a very similar way in *The Second Sex*. She shows a variety of ways in which one becomes woman. The sections 'The Narcissist', 'The Women in Love', 'The Lesbian', and 'The Mother' are examples of different ways women choose to perform their genders. Nevertheless, 'The Lesbian' seems to be the one that troubles the category of gender the most. For Beauvoir a lesbian life could be lived in a variety of ways. As Butler puts it, for Beauvoir as well "the body is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" [10] (p. 521). Gendered bodies present a variety of "styles of flesh" and some of these styles are in the form of gender-bending performativity in Butler's terms [15] (p. 190).

Beauvoir ends the chapter, Sexual Initiation, which is right before the section, The Lesbian, as follows "Not all women agree to give their sexual problems the one classic solution officially accepted by society. Thus, must we envisage those who choose forbidden paths" [17] (p. 416). The lesbian life is a choice and to make this clear Beauvoir starts the next chapter, The Lesbian, by dismantling the stereotype of the lesbian as having short hair, wearing a hat and lacking feminine characteristics as a result of a hormonal problem [17] (p. 417). The Lesbian, Beauvoir tells us, is not lesbian as a result of her hormonal abnormality, but simply as a result of her choice of how to live her body and sexuality. Hence, it is wrong to assume that only "masculine" women are lesbian and all "feminine" women are heterosexual. Their sexuality is independent of their anatomical structure; it is a chosen performance.

Butler acknowledges Beauvoir's influence on her theory of gender performativity in her 1986 essay titled "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex". Beauvoir's famous declaration "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" stated one of the most significant distinctions in feminist theory, that is, the distinction between sex and gender. Beauvoir tells us that gender is an acculturation taking place as the body interacts with social and cultural norms. In addition to pointing out the distinction between gender and sex, Butler credits Beauvoir for another major contribution to feminist theory, which is her emphasis on the role of the subject as the active participant in the process of acquiring a gender. As is well known, for Beauvoir, one is not solely passively rendered a woman, but rather becomes a woman. This implies a contribution from the subject in the making of their gender, rather than a simple imposition of the cultural norms. As Butler puts it, "Gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense,

gender is a process of constructing ourselves" [14] (p. 36). Butler defines this process by using existentialist terminology such as a "project" and by using Sartrean terms such as assuming "a certain corporeal style and significance."

While Butler acknowledges this distinction between sex and gender Beauvoir postulates in *The Second Sex*, she rejects the distinction in *Gender Trouble* on the basis that it posits rather than proves a relation between the two phenomena [15] (p. 9). Whether Beauvoir makes a distinction in *The Second Sex* between sex and gender has been put into question by feminist scholars. Moira Gatens, for example, states that Beauvoir's views about sexual difference are more complex and nuanced than the binary distinction between sex and gender allows [18] (p. 267). As Gatens discusses, the claims Beauvoir makes about biology in the "Biological Data" section of *The Second Sex* have been taken up in two radically different ways [18] (pp. 270–276). The first camp took Beauvoir to make essentialist claims about the body, while the second one argued that she had a social constructionist view. Both camps, however, focus on a particular set of statements that support their interpretation at the expense of leaving the ones that contradict their interpretations out. Gatens classifies Butler as belonging to the social constructionist camp due to Butler's emphasis on the statements in *The Second Sex* that highlights the body as a situation that can be shaped [18] (p. 275)[1].

As Toril Moi argues Beauvoir's conception of the body has been widely misunderstood mostly due to readings of *The Second Sex* through the lens of the 1960s sex/gender distinction [19] (p. 5). Toril Moi shows us that Beauvoir " . . . took no interest whatever in the problematic distinction between sex and gender: she managed without it" [3] (p. 9). Moi writes "For Simone de Beauvoir our bodies are an outline or sketch of the kind of projects it is possible for us to have but it doesn't follow from this that individual choices or social and ethical norms can be deduced from the structure of the human body" [19] (p. 40). According to Moi, Butler's position holds that if a theory defines sexual difference based on the potential reproductive function of the body, then it cannot avoid serving the repressive sexist ideology. [19] (p. 41). Moi continues by noting that "Yet the whole of *The Second Sex* is evidence to the contrary" [19] (p. 41).

Perhaps reading Beauvoir with a dualistic paradigm in mind would be quite unjust to Beauvoir given that her work rejects and overcomes such dualities. Drawing on Tove Pettersen, Dorothea Olkowski shows that Beauvoir's work clearly repudiates the binary logic of the Law of Excluded Middle [20]. By providing textual support from the section "Biological Data" in *The Second Sex*, Olkowski skillfully shows that Beauvoir's philosophy rejects a priori binary structures or hierarchies outside of culture [20] (p. 220). Olkowski's exploration of the masculine nature of the Law of Excluded Middle particularly in relation to Sartre's writings also helps us appreciate the nuanced differences in Beauvoir and Sartre's work [20] (pp. 217–220)[2].

Butler knows Beauvoir does not want to reduce gender to cultural imposition or to a completely voluntary performance. If we take gender to be solely cultural imposition, we face the danger of seeing it as inscribed upon our bodies uniformly by patriarchal structures. If we take it to be a voluntaristic act, then we severely downplay the social patriarchal structures contributing to the making of gender. We can see a variety of ways in which gender is reproduced and this can only be explained by personal agency; thus, Butler poses the question "In what sense do we construct ourselves?" [14] (pp. 36–37) Butler argues that Beauvoir reconciles gender as a 'project' with gender as a 'construct' through her notion of ambiguity in her account of 'becoming'. For Butler, Beauvoir presents a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice in her understanding of gender "as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms" [14] (p. 37).

Butler expands this discussion by searching for the roots of Beauvoir's use of the verb 'become' in Sartre's 'exist.' Butler argues that Sartre's inapprehensible natural body transcribes into Beauvoir's always already gendered body in *The Second Sex*. Butler states that,

> The transitive form of 'exist' is not far removed from her disarming use of 'become', and Simone de Beauvoir's becoming a gender seems both an extension

and a concretization of the Sartrian formulation. In transposing the identification of corporeal existence and 'becoming' onto the scene of sex and gender, she appropriates the ontological necessity of paradox, but the tension in her theory does not reside between being 'in' and 'beyond' the body, but in the move from the natural to the acculturated body. [15] (p. 39)

For Sartre, the body is a medium of existence and it is surpassed in the subjects' struggle to transcend itself. For Beauvoir, the process of becoming a woman shows how a woman starts experiencing her body as her gender. However, there is no point where a woman –or a person- experiences herself as pure body-sex- independent of their gender. Sartre talks about the natural body but only in so far as to show that it is beyond the grasp of consciousness. Hence, for Sartre, the natural body is "inapprehensible" [15] (p. 39). In the same vein, Butler argues, Beauvoir uses the sexed body as a heuristic device that helps us explain gender. While I do not think Butler means that the sexed body is *only* a heuristic device for Beauvoir, it is important to note that we see a strong emphasis on the material conditions of female embodiment such as menses and pregnancy in *The Second Sex*.

Butler's theory of performative gender has been criticized for being a voluntarist theory. Elspeth Probyn, for example, takes Butler as saying that gender construction is a totally voluntary act. Hence, Probyn argues that according to Butler's theory of gender performativity "we can have whatever type of gender we want [. . .] and that we wear our gender as drag" [21] (p. 79). Vicki Kirby also points out the drag example as an unfortunate example since it implied that "different subjectivities could be chosen or tailored, to suit changing individual fancies" [22] (p. 86). Sara Heinämaa rightly rules out those critics by showing the context in which Butler presents gender to be a choice and performance. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler endorses Michel Foucault's critique of the Cartesian subject. This endorsement is also present in her 1986 essay on Beauvoir. Heinämaa argues that, far from adopting a voluntaristic conception of gender, Butler argues against it. According to Heinämaa, Butler sees Beauvoir as a Sartrean voluntarist, which is why Butler criticizes Beauvoir for her use of free will and consciousness detached from the body [23] (p. 22). While Heinamaa is correct that Butler is not a voluntarist, Heinamaa's intervention into the debate is somewhat unhelpful because her reading of Butler on Beauvoir is incorrect. Contrary to what Heinämaa claims, in her 1986 essay Butler does not see Beauvoir as a voluntarist. In other words, Butler's 1986 reading of Beauvoir essentially aligns with Heinämaa's reading of Beauvoir even though Heinamaa contrasts their two readings. Heinamaa's reading of Butler as using a voluntaristic conception of gender can be easily seen the in the quote below:

> If Simone de Beauvoir's claim is to have cogency, if it is true that we 'become' our genders through some kind of volitional and appropriative sets of acts, then she must mean something other than an unsituated Cartesian act. That personal agency is a logical prerequisite for taking on a gender does not imply that this agency itself is disembodied; indeed, it is our genders which we become, and not our bodies. If Simone de Beauvoir's theory is to be understood as freed of the Cartesian ghost, we must first turn to her view of bodies and to her musings on the possibilities of disembodied souls". [14] (p. 37)

However, Butler does not consider Beauvoir as a Sartrean voluntarist. She does not consider Sartrean voluntarism as adopting a Cartesian notion of free will, either. Butler uses Sartre's notions of 'prereflective choice' and 'quasi-knowledge'; the knowledge refers to the tacit choices we make partially consciously to explain the sense in which Beauvoir considers gender as a choice. Taking on a gender is a project that is rarely open to reflective consciousness. Becoming a gender is a tacit project which is both "impulsive and mindful" [24] (p. 509). We do interpret the social and the cultural world around us and position ourselves as belonging to a certain gender through a variety of acts. Some of them seem to be important, such as choosing a same or different sex partner, and others seem small and insignificant, such as sitting with legs closed or open wide on a bus.

Butler herself does not criticize Beauvoir for using an existential notion of free will, or a voluntaristic framework as Heinamaa argues. On the contrary, she finds the existential framework Beauvoir endorses in *The Second Sex* to be empowering. She mentions Michele Le Doeuff and other feminists who accuse of Beauvoir for resurrecting "a classical form of voluntarism which insidiously blames the victims of oppression for 'choosing' their situation" and argues that theirs is a misusage of the existential doctrine of choice [14] (p. 40). The empowering character of the existentialist doctrine of choice stems from space opened up for personal agency in situations of oppression. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, for example, shows us that oppression is not a necessary but a contingent condition. Both the oppressor and the oppressed contribute to the perpetuation of it. Beauvoir's historical, anthropological, and economic analysis of patriarchy shows the complexities of the origin of gender oppression. Victims of gender oppression are in no way blamed for 'choosing' their situation in the sense that they create it. However, as Butler appreciates, Beauvoir undertakes the task of showing how patriarchal culture and norms are maintained or sometimes rejected by daily actions of individuals. Beauvoir's discussion of the women who resist living by the norms imposed on them by the patriarchal society throughout *The Second Sex* show us the variety of ways the subject can take up a gender role without being reduced to total determinism or voluntarism as both Butler and Beauvoir's accounts of the subject contend.

It is important to note the influence of Hegelian dialectic on the work of both Beauvoir and Butler. The impact of Hegel's analysis of the development of humanity from the consciousness of the slave in the Master-Slave dialectic is very prominent in Beauvoir's account of the situation of women in *The Second Sex*. While Beauvoir first encounters Hegel through the lectures of Alexandre Kojève (1933–1939), an immigrant to France from Russia, she starts reading *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1940 [25] (p. 60). Beauvoir's fascination with Hegel's work and her enthusiasm to recount Hegelian philosophy to Sartre through her letters also attest to that influence [25] (pp. 60–61).

Acknowledging the Hegelian influence in Beauvoir's work is significant in demonstrating the intertextual character of Beauvoir's original philosophical thinking, a feature she shares with Butler[3]. It also counters the argument that Beauvoir's work was mainly influenced by Sartre and her work is a mere reiteration of his work. As feminist scholars have documented, Beauvoir's work was in conversation with many philosophers—one of whom was Sartre—and social scientists as we can see in *The Second Sex* [25–27]. To name a few, the writings of Hegel, Marx, Levi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Colette, Woolf, and Wollstonecraft had profound influence on *The Second Sex*.

Butler agrees with Beauvoir that gender oppression does not cause the female subject to be a woman in a certain definite way, although it does influence the way the female subject constructs her identity. The female subject enters a dialectical relationship with patriarchal culture, norms, and behaviors and performs her gender in a way that is shaped by her choices. Through this interaction the subject interprets her gender. As Butler puts it "The anguish and terror of leaving a prescribed gender or of trespassing upon another gender territory testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation as well as to the necessity that there be an interpretation, i.e., to the essential freedom at the origin of gender" [14] (p. 42) Motherhood is another good example, which shows the role of personal agency in gender performance. Beauvoir refuses the idea of motherhood as a natural instinct and argues that it is a cultural construct. Some women do not take up the role of motherhood; in other words they do not 'choose' to be mothers. If we take gender as directly imposed upon the subject by culture and society, we cannot give an account of those examples.

Likewise, for Butler "construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency" [15] (p. 201). The external forces that contribute to our construction are both external and internal to us. In other words, they form the foundation of who we are, while at the same time they condition our behavior. Our possibilities emerge from the workings of these forces which at the same time subject us to themselves. For Butler

agency is "implicated in subordination" [28] (p. 17). She argues that the subject exceeds these external forces; yet this does not mean that the subject escapes them. Thus, the relationship of the subject to these forces is "painful, dynamic and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come is a crossroads that rejoins every step by which it is traversed, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency" [28] (p. 18). Here, Butler implicitly operates within the framework of existentialist notion of freedom. The subject is never a self-identical phenomenon. It always exists in the directional mode of intentionality. The subject is always in the process of surpassing itself as it thrusts itself toward new projects. The subject is always between already realized projects and projects yet to be realized.

Despite Beauvoir and Butler's focus on the gender problem, their main concern ultimately is the human and the question of the ethical and political conditions in which a human can flourish. Nevertheless, their account of gender is informed by their answers to those questions. In that respect, I argue that Beauvoir and Butler's philosophical stance share more commonalities than even Butler herself acknowledges. The fact that Butler has turned in a strongly ethical direction in recent years also strengthens this argument. Butler argues that "What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the "human" and the "livable"" [15] (p. xxiii). In a similar fashion, in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir shows the limitations normative gender structure has on both the male and the female subject. In strictly defining the roles of men and women, patriarchal structure drastically narrows down their options, and hence limits their freedom. Some lives become immediately not "livable" for them because of their gender. In an interview Butler states that "human being is always about becoming. [. . .] This is not just a question of a private struggle with the self, but of the social terms by which identities are supported and articulated" [29] (p. 116). Therefore, both Butler and Beauvoir are mainly concerned about the becoming of the subject within social, political, cultural and historical conditions.

Butler states that she is committed to "a problematizing suspension of the ontological" [30] (pp. 105–106). She is interested in questioning the construction and circulation of ontological claims. She refuses any type of essentialist notions concerning human nature and conceives of the subject as a potentiality. She also recognizes Beauvoir as committed to the same task. She claims that for Beauvoir "any effort to ascertain the 'natural' body before its entrance into culture is definitionally impossible, not only because the observer who seeks this phenomenon is him/herself entrenched in a specific cultural language, but because the body is as well. The body is, in effect, never a natural phenomenon" [14] (p. 46). She states that "Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects, and, hence for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject" [15] (p. 16).

2. Existentialist Dimensions of Butler's Ethics

In this section, I show Beauvoir's continuing relevance by presenting a detailed study of Butler's late writings and discussing the ways she takes on some basic ethical questions concerning vulnerability, violence, and ambiguity that Beauvoir already has accentuated in her writings. Existentialist elements in Butler's early writings have already been discussed in feminist and philosophical literature. However, the influence of Beauvoir's existentialism on Butler's late work has been almost entirely neglected in contemporary debates. In pursuing the existentialist dimension of Butler's late work, I show both the congruence between Beauvoir and Butler's ethics and the fruitful resources existentialism offers for solving questions of ethics in current continental feminist scholarship. In this section, I show three intersection points between Butler and Beauvoir's ethics; their accounts of: (i) vulnerability and interconnectedness, (ii) violence and inevitable ethical failure, and (iii) situated ethics which bring about opaqueness and ambiguity. In the first part, I

explain how in the work of both Butler and Beauvoir the inevitable interconnectedness of human beings situates us as vulnerable beings in the world. In the second part, I explain how for Butler and Beauvoir violence emerges as an ever present potentiality in human interactions because of vulnerability and interconnectedness. I also discuss the inevitability of ethical failure in human actions. In the last part, I argue that Butler follows and furthers Beauvoir's efforts to establish an ethics based on generosity which comes with mindfulness of our ambiguity and opacity. In doing so, I also show that Butler's postmodern feminist approach is predicated on similar ethical concerns with Beauvoir's existentialist and phenomenological feminist approach.

2.1. Vulnerability and Interconnectedness

Vulnerability is one of main themes discussed in depth in a variety of Butler's publications. *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Precarious Life* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), *Frames of War* (2009), *Parting Ways* (2012), and *The Force of Nonviolence* (2021) all deal with the theme of vulnerability to different degrees. This is significant because vulnerability is used by feminist philosophies and specifically feminist ethics as the main defining characteristic of being a human through which the ethical urge is felt. Feminist ethics of care, for example, is based on the definition of human being always already vulnerable. Although how much and how long we need care is contingent upon many factors, every human being is dependent on the care of others, sometimes completely and sometimes partially. As embodied beings in the world, we are aware of our need for other human beings and this awareness shapes our relations with others in many respects, mainly ethical. We feel an ethical urge to respond once we receive the call of the other for care. This call sometimes comes from people we know, who are around us and sometimes from people on the other side of the world, people that we do not know at all. In both cases, we are ethically challenged and drawn into questioning ourselves to see what we can do for the other. Sometimes those demands can be conflicting. We may find ourselves in the middle of too many demands for attention and care. Given the limited resources, time and energy we have, we have to assess the urgency and severity of the demands we receive. These conditions constitute the ambiguous character of ethical and political choice in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Vulnerability, for Butler, is a primary human condition that cannot be avoided in any condition; it precedes the formation of the self. Vulnerability to others may create space for very different responses and experiences ranging from care and compassion to violence and abuse. Butler argues that "It would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how humans suffer from oppression without seeing how this primary condition [vulnerability] is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied" [16] (p. 31). In their most recent work, *The Force of Nonviolence*, Butler revisits the concept of vulnerability and emphasizes the concept of vulnerability as an outcome of human interdependence and interconnectedness. She writes "To be dependent implies vulnerability: one is vulnerable to the social structure upon which one depends, so if the structure fails one is exposed to a precarious condition." [31] (p. 46). Butler's acknowledgment of the potential for violence in human relations—a potential which is inevitable due to the interconnectedness of human beings echoes Beauvoir's analysis of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Beauvoir states the need for others as follows: "we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" [32] (p. 67). There is the need for the others on the one hand, and there is the "separation and multiplicity of existents" which raises serious problems, the most malicious of which is oppression [32] (p. 67). Interconnectedness of our freedoms combined with the material and bodily limitations of our existence may produce moments of conflict even when one uses others as means to the fulfillment of their projects. Vulnerability that comes with our interconnectedness may lend itself to possible situations of violence. Hence, violence and oppression are potential conditions in human relations. Beauvoir maintains that "it is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful" [32] (p. 82).

Butler also explains violence and oppression in the same vein. She writes that: [. . .] we are vulnerable to those we are too young to know and to judge, and hence, vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives at the other [33] (p. 31).

This inevitable interdependency among human beings has been articulated fully in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and 'Pyrrhus and Cineas.' In 'Pyrrhus and Cineas' she states that violence is neither necessarily an evil, nor can it be eliminated completely; "we are condemned to failure because we are condemned to violence" [34] (p.138). We can never escape being subjected to some type of violence or being treated as an object although we experience ourselves as subjects as well. Relationships with others always carry the possibility of opposition and violence. In that sense evil is an irrevocable part of human existence. As Beauvoir puts it, "If division and violence define war, the world has always been at war and always will be; if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely: there will never be any other future" [32] (p. 119). One way of dealing with this reality is to deny it and another way of dealing with it is to accept this tragic condition of being a human; it is our inevitable ambiguity. Existentialist ethics gives "a real role to evil" and goes with the second way [32] (p. 34).

In *Precarious Life*, Butler considers the interdependency endorsed by Beauvoir in a global context, among communities and nations. She analyzes the new global form of political violence which presented new forms of economic and social exploitation that abuse interdependency of the global communities. The social context that emerged from the neoliberal global capitalism radically transformed the social, political, and cultural experience of distant communities across the globe by diminishing their sense of local security. The intensity of global trade and interaction is almost erasing self-sufficient local economies and creating a much more interdependent economic structure. This whole structure is centered on domination of global capital and renders many communities on the globe potentially vulnerable. Butler states that: "Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war" [33] (p. 29). Butler's work talks about ethics and politics together and does not consider them as separate domains. Although Beauvoir mostly focuses on ethics in her work, the reader can easily detect her political agenda between the lines.

2.2. Violence and the Inevitable Ethical Failure

Contemporary debates on political violence in feminism ignore the rich resources Beauvoir's work offers on the topic. Kimberly Hutchings rightly observes that one reason for Beauvoir's dismissal in those discussions is the wide reception of her work as existentialist rather than feminist [35]. Beauvoir is certainly an existentialist philosopher, but she is also a feminist philosopher. In addition, Beauvoir's work can help build important partnerships between existentialist ethics and feminist ethics.

A significant point of intersection between Butler and Beauvoir's accounts of ethics is their understanding of violence as a universal phenomenon, which leads them to form an ethics demanding universal concern for the other. They both argue that we have a responsibility to fight against oppression of others even if we do not know those "others" at all. In her interview with Wenzel, for example, Beauvoir declares female circumcision to be a human rights issue that concerns everyone around the globe. As Margaret Simons states, Beauvoir directed much of her energy toward the issue of violence against women [36] (p. 5). However, her account of violence and oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* shows that she is concerned with all forms of oppression. Similarly, Butler in *Frames of War* maintains that we are dependent on "people we know, barely know, or know not at all. [. . .] These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitutive obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who "we" are" [37] (p. 14).

Violence can emerge in different forms. In Beauvoir's thought we see two different forms of violence; one is violence in the form of oppression and the other is violence in the form of resisting oppression. As Hutchings states, we can talk about two main camps within feminist thought concerning their approaches to violence [35]. Although both camps have serious reservations about the use of political violence, one camp sees a meaningful distinction between oppressive violence and violence that fights oppression. This approach provides a legitimate ground for the use of violence when it is aimed at abolishing some oppressive condition. The second camp does not accept such a distinction and rules out any type of violence as deplorable. They consider violence to be incompatible with feminist ethics. Beauvoir and Butler firmly belong to the first camp. For Butler and Beauvoir, possibility for violence is a constitutive aspect of being a human because of our fundamental vulnerability arising out of interdependency. When exposed to violence, especially systemic forms of violence supported by well-established institutions as in the case of colonial violence in Algeria, the use of counter violence to end violence would be ethically justified for Butler and Beauvoir.

The uncertainty of receiving help and care when needed, the possibility of receiving harm or violence rather than support and unwillingness or inability to provide help and care when we are asked present ethical failure as an ever present condition in our lives both for Butler and Beauvoir. We are often confronted with our limitations. When we adopt a project involving helping an oppressed group, for example, we do not know the results of our project for sure. A project which intends to liberate a certain group may end up aggravating their suffering. Moreover, our project may fail to consider possible negative consequences such as harm caused to other parties while helping a certain group. These possibilities should never be considered as deterrents from action. For Beauvoir, they are unavoidable parts of any ethical action. The responsibility of the ethical individual is to accept and acknowledge this ambiguity because "without failure, no ethics" is possible [32] (p. 10).

Just as Beauvoir's existentialist ethics is based on the inevitability of failure, Butler's account of ethics is also based on the acceptance of failure. Beauvoir's subject who is always already transcending herself through her projects never coincides with herself. Butler also considers the subject as becoming and argues that the expectation of remaining selfsame through time is a very hard norm to satisfy. Butler's subject also faces the dilemma of changing over time while having to present herself as selfsame. When the subject obeys the norm to be selfsame at every instant and struggles to present herself as such, she expects others to do the same as well. Butler considers this norm as incurring ethical violence upon subjects because:

> For subjects who invariably live in a temporal horizon, this is a difficult, if not impossible, norm to satisfy. The capacity of a subject to recognize and become recognized is occasioned by a normative discourse whose temporality is not the same as a first-person perspective. This temporality of discourse disorients one's own. Thus, it follows that one can give and take recognition only on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself, that one undergoes a de-centering and "fails" to achieve self-identity. [38] (pp. 41–42)

Butler proceeds by asking if a new sense of ethics could emerge from that inevitable ethical failure. Her answer is positive. She suggests such an ethics is possible only if we would be willing to acknowledge the limits we face in knowing and presenting ourselves. However, this opacity remains at the heart of this new sense of ethics because "To acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency" [38] (pp. 41–42). The first condition of being an ethical subject for Beauvoir is to accept our inherent ambiguity in every type of relationship we have in the world-relationship with the self, with others or with the world, which comes with our exercise of freedom. For Butler, vulnerability and precariousness are notions that we do not easily recognize and accept. Mostly, we prefer acting as if they do not constitute the basic condition of life. Beauvoir says the same things for the notion of ambiguity. Instead of owning our

ambiguity, we tend to choose to ignore it. It is the ideal of full accountability and lucidity that produces an ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity. For both Butler and Beauvoir, the very first condition of ethics is undoing this ignorance.

2.3. Situated Ethics: Opaqueness and Ambiguity

The idea of an art de vivre in Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* expresses an ethics without an appeal to abstract moral rules, an ethics that tries to overcome the ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity [39]. Since the self is always situated in different conditions in the world, which do not admit of straightforward solutions, a universal morality is of no use according to Beauvoir. Hence, the ambiguous character of the human condition must be the source of moral values. Ethics is a way of being in the world. It is composed of the values we assign to the world through our choices that endorse not only our freedom but also others' freedom under ambiguous conditions. Being ethical for Beauvoir does not mean to follow a set of pre-established abstract universal rules. On the contrary, it is to denounce all such rules and to continually create one's own and assume responsibility for the self-created moral codes; because "[. . .] one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all the previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; is the rejection of every principle of authority" [32] (p. 142). The main difficulty involved in such an act of rejection is giving up the comfort and assurance we enjoy through ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity. We strive to feel and present ourselves as complete and coherent to avoid the feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Ethical practice requires a constant questioning of the self, a practice which never allows the subject to feel stable, complete, and coherent. We think that our actions and values should present a coherent picture and we ignore the fact that this picture is never done but is always changing. As Bergoffen puts it "I cannot enclose myself within myself" [26] (p. 48).

Beauvoir presents the notion of ambiguity in a descriptive manner, as an inescapable human condition. Butler's presentation of precariousness shows significant resemblances to Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity. Butler defines precariousness as "an irrefutably generalizable condition"; it is simply what everyone is exposed to by virtue of being human. [37] (p. 22). However, Butler engages in a deep analysis of the unequal distribution of precariousness through the globe and calls for a more equal redistribution of it. She maintains that " . . . there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable"" [33] (p. 32). Our limitations are also present in our projects concerning others. When we adopt a project involving helping an oppressed group, we do not know with certainty the results of our project. A project which intends to liberate a certain group may end up aggravating their suffering. We throw ourselves into such a project based on our ethical values about the subject and the available information at hand. Our project may fail to take into account possible negative consequences such as harm caused to other parties while helping a certain group. These possibilities should never be considered as deterrents from action. For Beauvoir, they are unavoidable parts of any ethical action. The responsibility of the ethical individual is to accept and acknowledge this ambiguity.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler discusses the notion of the "I" as the center of the ethical discourse in Adorno and questions the possibility of the "I" "that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" [38] (p. 7). She then proceeds to provide an account of the "I" within the matrix of social conditions. One of the main claims of *Giving an Account of Oneself* is that it is impossible to give a full account of oneself, because any account of the self would have to be formed within a matrix of social norms, and any account requires recourse to a normative structure as its reference point. Here is how Butler explains the conditions of impossibility of full accountability:

> There is (1) a non-narrativizable exposure that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) primary relations, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent

impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my partial opacity to myself. Lastly there are (4) norms that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. The last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the structure of address in which it takes place. [38] (p. 39)

For Butler, this fact constitutes the core of an ethics, an ethics based on humility and generosity, since acknowledgment of the impossibility of a self that is completely transparent to itself creates a disposition to humility and generosity.

Beauvoir's ethics is also grounded on the notion of generosity. Generosity consists in maintaining the two freedoms simultaneously in the encounter with the other. It implicates recognition of the other despite her/his ambiguity and as similar to myself. The generous person accepts him or herself as both subject and object in his relation to the other and regards and treats the other as such as well. As Beauvoir puts it, "In enlightened, consenting gratitude, one must be capable of maintaining face to face these two freedoms that seem to exclude each other: the other's freedom and mine" [34] (p. 123).

Butler explores the notion of accountability by drawing on Althusser's notion of accountability as interpellation [40] (p. 33). I am expected to provide an account of myself when I am called upon. Given the difficulty of giving a coherent account of the self, I find myself as exposed to a great risk, a risk which incites me to pretend as if I were fully aware of my acts and can provide a rational story of why I acted in a certain way. Further, my account is informed by the assumption of my full knowledge of proper ways of conduct. I am expected to provide a clear, unambiguous, coherent, and reasonable account of myself. Butler claims that this enforcement upon the subject to present herself as if she is transparent is a kind of ethical violence. Providing that sort of an account is certainly easier for those who already conform to the social and cultural norms. Hence, a political system based on that type of accountability privileges those who conform to the norms and puts those who are already marginalized in an underprivileged situation. Butler states that,

> What is striking about such extremes of self-beratement is the grandiose notion of the transparent 'I' that is presupposed as the ethical ideal. This is hardly a belief in which self acceptance (a humility about one's constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition towards the limits of others) might find room to flourish. [38] (p. 80)

According to Butler, our self-opacity implicates our capacity for recognition as well. A new ethics emerges from our acknowledgment of our "shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves" [38] (p. 42). When we recognize that we are different from how we present ourselves in a given discourse, in other words when we are humble enough to see our imperfections, we give up on expecting others to do the same and provide a full account of themselves; we attend to others' limitations and understand their imperfections, as well. Butler also seems to suggest that there are two ways of responding to our inherent incoherence and ambiguity; one is to constantly escape from it, and the other is to accept and embrace it—the former way corresponds to being in bad faith and the latter to being authentic in existentialist ethics. Although we tend to do the first rather than the latter, this flight from our incoherence and ambiguity is not possible at all. Moreover, it harms the authenticity of the ethical subject. The subject is only trying to avoid punishment and its injurious effects in her effort to offer a coherent account of herself; the subject's sole concern is to project an acceptable image of herself to invalidate any criticism and blame and evade their consequences [38] (p. 16). Denying one's incoherence and ambiguity is tantamount to denying one's vulnerability. It is to present oneself as an enclosed being that is protected from any harm that may arise out of interpersonal relationships. This is a kind of self-violence according to Butler, because "one is compelled and comported outside oneself" [38] (p. 28).

One intricacy of Butler's account of non-transparent self which Butler herself recognizes, as well lies in the limitations concerning responsibility for one's actions. Her account of the non-transparent self seems to remain short of providing a theoretical basis for responsibility and justification for action. If the self is never fully transparent, does that mean that the self can never be fully responsible for her/his actions? Although Butler does not answer this question directly, her account of the non-transparent self seems to create problems for her ethics. She asks "Haven't we, by insisting on something non-narrativizable, limited the degree to which we might hold ourselves or others accountable for their actions?" [38] (p. 83). Butler generates a theory of accountability out of her notion of the opacity of the self. In *Precarious Life*, Butler revisits the question of responsibility and argues that we do not need a fully fledged account of agency to move us into action. She contends, "If you saw me on such a protest line [asserting and defending the rights of indigenous women to health care, reproductive technology, decent wages, physical protection, cultural rights, freedom of assembly] would you wonder how a postmodernist was able to muster the necessary "agency" to get there today? I doubt it. You would assume that I had walked or taken the subway" [33] (p. 48).

Beauvoir, on the other hand, overcomes this difficulty by her critique of bad faith and the notion of authenticity. By invoking a prediscursive reality for the embodied subject, Beauvoir secures the subject a domain in which she/he can account for herself/himself. Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity in no way diminishes one's responsibility in front of oppression. On the contrary, the person assumes responsibility despite the ambiguities surrounding both herself/himself and the situation to be acted upon. Contrary to Butler's notion of the non-transparent self, Beauvoir's notion of the ambiguous self seems to lend itself more easily to self-analysis and critique. Although the secondary literature in feminism, existentialism and ethics rarely links them, Beauvoir's and Butler's accounts of ethics present salient lines of connection. Both Beauvoir and Butler situate ambiguity and vulnerability as irrevocable conditions of human existence and both emphasize the need for an ethics that acknowledges these conditions rather than one that evades or denies them. Each of them recognizes the potential for violence in human interactions and again instead of denying this potential, they each argue for an ethics that admits it. Existentialist ethics does not hide the failures, violence, and evil that lies at the heart of our existence; on the contrary it highlights them and looks for ways to deal with them. For Beauvoir this is why it is "the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place" [32] (p. 34). This existentialist dimension also is present in Butler's work. Both Butler and Beauvoir's accounts of ethics aim at uncovering our responsibility in a world where it is impossible to eliminate oppression, evil and violence. As my analysis of Butler's work shows, the possibilities of existentialist ethics have not been exhausted yet, and further engagement with it by continental feminists might prove to be very productive.

Notes

1   This can partly be explained by Butler's having read Beauvoir in Parshley's problematic translation which was incomplete, inaccurate, and insensitive Beauvoir's voice. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

2   It is important to note that Olkowski does not claim the Law of Excluded Middle to be gendered masculine. The rule could be used by anyone yet "[. . .] generally in their lives and in their daily tasks, women do not find it useful because it is inadequate to their reality." [20] (p. 225) Moreover, as Olkowski brilliantly articulates, even the responses women receive when they protest or critique the male of use of the binary thinking are heavily dualistic and paradoxically based on binary thinking [20] (p. 226).

3   I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

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