

and Cantarella might think it out of our jurisdiction as feminists to concern ourselves with female slaves: if the sex of female slaves doesn't matter—for the purposes, anyway, of someone with a lot of power and authority to determine where slaves "belong"—how can a theory premised on the argument that sex does matter find room for them?

The assumption that gender is isolatable from "race" will blind us to some very important elements of Aristotle's views about gender: though no one can have a gender identity without having a sexual identity, having a particular "racial" identity is a necessary condition of having any gender identity at all. We can't understand Aristotle's views about gender without looking at those males and females he took to be neither "men" nor "women."

*The critics often repeat in new contexts versions of the old assumptions they set out to contest.*

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## *Simone de Beauvoir and Women: Just Who Does She Think We Is?*

We have seen the variety of ways in which Plato and Aristotle reveal their reluctance to welcome women into the community of fully formed human beings. Sometimes their point seems to be that women are just incapable of leading the kind of lives philosopher-rulers or citizens of the polis must live. Other times their concern is expressed more strongly: women constitute a threat to well-ordered lives and to harmonious communities, insofar as they give in to the demands of their bodies or the irrational element of their souls. At the same time, however, women's work is taken to constitute in part the conditions under which citizens of the polis can exercise exemplary human capacities. Women thus simultaneously make possible and undermine worthy forms of human living. In both Plato and Aristotle, women are characterized as being ruled by their bodies and easily overwhelmed by passion and desire. Without such traits humans would not be human; but in the struggle against or proper control over the body, the emotions, only the best kind of humans can succeed.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explores the many ways in which men have depicted women as ruled by forces in human nature that men can neither fully accept nor fully deny.<sup>1</sup> Although she does not examine in any detail the works of Plato and Aristotle, de Beauvoir is a crucial figure in any discussion about the response of feminists to the legacy of Plato and Aristotle preserved in attitudes toward women in the Western world. *The Second Sex* is a landmark work in contemporary

feminist thought (even though for many years de Beauvoir apparently resisted being identified as a feminist).<sup>2</sup> She attempted to give an account of the situation of women in general and to include proposals for the conditions that would have to change if women were to become free. Although not all feminists subsequent to de Beauvoir referred to her work, or even necessarily knew about it, there is hardly any issue that feminists have come to deal with that she did not address. Indeed, she touched on issues such as attitudes toward lesbianism that some later feminists didn't dare to think about.<sup>3</sup>

De Beauvoir explicitly recognized that we live in a world in which there are a number of forms of oppression, and she tried to locate sexism in that context. I have suggested that a troubling characteristic of much contemporary feminist theory is its failure to take seriously the intertwining of sexism with other forms of oppression; and I have tried to indicate the ways in which the attempt to treat gender in isolation from factors such as race and class has both reflected and perpetuated a choice to focus on the lives of some women rather than others. I think that in de Beauvoir's work, we have all the essential ingredients of a feminist account of "women's lives" that would not conflate "woman" with a small group of women—namely, white middle-class heterosexual Christian women in Western countries. Yet de Beauvoir ends up producing an account which does just that. In this chapter, I shall explore how both de Beauvoir's theoretical perspective and her empirical observations lend themselves to a far richer account of "women's nature" than she herself ends up giving. (I am not going to argue about the strengths or weaknesses of her theory or the accuracy of her observations, but rather raise some questions about why she took them to lead in one direction rather than another.) Then I want to suggest reasons for the serious discrepancy between the potential broad scope of her views and the actual narrow focus of her position. De Beauvoir is a thinker of great perspicacity, so to explain the discrepancy simply in terms of a kind of race and class privilege that makes it easy for her to think of her own experience as representative of the experience of others is not enough. We need to ask what it might be in the language or methodology or theory employed by de Beauvoir that enables her to disguise from herself the assertion of privilege she so keenly saw in women of her own position.

## I

Human beings aren't satisfied merely to live, de Beauvoir insists: we aspire to a meaningful existence.<sup>4</sup> But much about our constitution con-

spires against the possibility of such an existence: our being creatures of the flesh entails the ever-present possibility that our grand projects will be mocked. It is not only the facts of our birth and death that give the lie to our being pure, unembodied, immortal spirit. Our bodies need tending to each day, and there is nothing meaningful in the many activities involved in this tending. The feeding and cleaning of bodies, the maintenance of shelter against the powerful vagaries of the natural world, are necessary if we are to live. But if that is all we did, or all we thought we could do, we wouldn't find anything valuable about human life. As de Beauvoir says, unless we can engage in activities that "transcend [our] animal nature," we might as well be brute animals:

On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of life while transcending life through Existence; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. (58, 59)

"Existing," as opposed to merely "living," is best expressed in those aspects of life that are the function of "the loftiest human attitudes: heroism, revolt, disinterestedness, imagination, creation" (588). Only "existing" gives any reason for life; mere living "does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life itself" (59).<sup>5</sup> To exist is to be a creative subject, not a passive object of the forces of nature; it is to be molding a new future through the power of one's intelligence, rather than being at the play of the repetitive rhythms of one's animal nature. Existing is as different from living as consciousness is from matter, will from passivity, transcendence from immanence, spirit from flesh (134).

But life is necessary for existence, and we must preserve life even while we struggle against its demands. Descent into life is possible because of the never fully eradicated allure of dumbness and unfreedom, the ever-present possibility of forgoing (or seeming to forgo) the responsibilities, uncertainties, and risks of intelligence and freedom. Men, de Beauvoir says, make women the repository of the multiform threats to a life of transcendence, agency, freedom, spirit; woman remains "in bondage to life's mysterious processes" (72), "doomed to immanence" (68). Her life "is not directed towards ends: she is absorbed in producing or caring for things that are never more than means, such as food, clothing, and shelter. These things are inessential intermediaries between animal life and free existence" (569). Though woman is no less capable of real "existence" than man, it is in her corporeality rather than his own that man

scs palpable and undeniable reminders of his own animal nature, of his own deeply regrettable and undignified contingency. Desirous of seeing no part of himself in her, he regards her as thoroughly Other, or as thoroughly Other as he can, given that he nevertheless needs her as a companion who is neither merely an animal nor merely a thing: "Man knows that to satisfy his desires, to perpetuate his race, woman is indispensable" (74).

Although women are constitutionally no less desirous or capable than men of "existing" rather than merely "living," historically most women have not resisted men's definition of them as embodying mysterious, dumb forces of nature. They have done little to try to undermine the economic, social, and political institutions that reinforce and are reinforced by such attitudes. In this, de Beauvoir says, women are unlike other oppressed groups—for example, Blacks, Jews, workers.

There are two reasons for this. First, women are spread throughout the population, across racial, class, ethnic, national, and religious lines, and this presents huge obstacles to their working together politically. They don't share the same economic and social position, nor do they have a shared consciousness. Moreover, "the division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history" (xix). In all other cases of oppression, she claims, both the oppressors and the oppressed have taken their relative positions to be the result of historical events or social change and hence in principle capable of alteration: "A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some other time, as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved." Similarly "proletarians have not always existed, whereas there have always been women" (xviii).

De Beauvoir's point here presumably is not that whites never have taken racial differences to be biological; rather she seems to be pointing out that the idea that biological differences entitle whites to dominate Blacks has been undermined in theory (to the extent that differences between Black and white are held to be less significant than their similarities as human beings) and nullified in political struggles (through which Blacks make clear their capacity to regard themselves as "subjects" and whites as "others") (xviii). De Beauvoir seems to be saying here that owing to a deep and apparently unbridgeable biological divide, women constitute for men the Other, whereas Blacks or the proletariat, for example, have not always constituted an Other for those by whom they may be dominated.

At the same time, despite these differences among women and between women and other oppressed groups, women do share something in common—but what they share paradoxically works against any possible soli-

arity. They "identify with each other" (513) but do not communicate, as men do, "through ideas and projects of personal interest," and are only "bound together by a kind of immanent complicity" (511). By this de Beauvoir means that women are aware of inhabiting a special domain separate from men—in which they discuss recipes, frigidity, children, clothing—but nevertheless they regard each other as rivals for the attention of the masculine world. They are capable of ceasing to be Other. Despite what men find it convenient to believe, the difference between men and women is no more a biological given and historical necessity than the difference between bourgeois and proletariat. There is, however, a difference between the biological condition of being female and the social condition of being woman. So despite the differences among women, their different social and political locations, they could join in resisting the domination of men. But they haven't.

And why haven't they? Sometimes de Beauvoir suggests that it is because being a "true woman" is inseparable from being the Other, so that it is logically impossible both to be a real woman and to be a subject, while there is no definitional problem, whatever other problems there are, in being a Black, or a worker, or a Jew, and also a subject. But this does not explain why women don't refuse to be "true women." And indeed sometimes de Beauvoir suggests that women simply choose to take the less arduous path: "No doubt it is more comfortable to submit to a blind enslavement than to work for liberation" (246); to "decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste" (xx).<sup>7</sup>

Hence sometimes when she says that economic independence is the necessary condition of women's liberation, there is the suggestion that only if women are forced by circumstance to provide for themselves will they embrace their transcendence rather than fall into their immanence, see themselves as subjects rather than objects, as Self rather than Other. Women recognize the importance and value of transcendence, but only enough to search for men whose creative and productive flights will rub off on them, metaphysically speaking. Women want what men have, but only in wanting the men who have it. What we need, de Beauvoir is saying, is a world in which if women are to get it at all, they must do it on their own.

In short, de Beauvoir argues that there are at least three things that help to explain the fact of women's domination by men: (1) Men's having the attitudes they do toward women; (2) the existence of economic, social, and political institutions through which such attitudes are expressed, en-

forced, and perpetuated; (3) women's failure to resist such attitudes and institutions.

## II

Our earlier discussions should have made us suspicious of any attempt to give a general account of the treatment and experiences of women. This is not to say that some such account is impossible, only that it surely can't be given if only one group of women is the basis for it. Claims made about "women" may be true about one group of women in one time and place but are very misleading if taken to be about all women in all times and places. There is also much in de Beauvoir's account to warn us against such overgeneralization.

Both her observations of differences among women and her more general theoretical perspective provide de Beauvoir with the ingredients of a very rich account of what it has meant to be "woman" and how women have been treated—in fact, they suggest a much richer account than she actually gives us. In each of the three subsections below, we begin with a description of the riches her account sometimes offers and then go on to look at how the analysis proceeds otherwise to deplete itself. Later we shall examine some possible reasons for her failure to embrace some of the implications of her own views.

### *Differences among Women*

As noted above, de Beauvoir more than once remarks upon class, racial, and national differences among women and how such differences bear on the economic, social, and political positions of women thus variously situated. Her comments on the lack of a sense of shared concerns among women are quite arresting: "If [women] belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women" (xix; cf. 103, 566, 590). The housewife is hostile toward her "servant [and toward] the teachers, governesses, nurses and nursemaids who attend to her children" (513).

Freed from the male, [the middle-class woman] would have to work for a living; she felt no solidarity with workingwomen, and she believed that the emancipation of bourgeois women would mean the ruin of her class. (103)

De Beauvoir, then, is saying that the women least prepared to have their status changed have been white middle-class women, who are willing

to keep the sexual status quo in return for the privileges of their class and race.

In all such examples, she cites the unwillingness of women with race or class privileges to give them up as the main obstacle to women's all doing something together to resist the domination of men. That is, what prevents a white middle-class woman from attacking sexism is her awareness that if she undermines sexism she will thereby undermine her race and class privilege. This ties in with de Beauvoir's point about the difference class makes to privilege based on sex. She argues that the less class privilege men and women enjoy, the less sexual privilege men of that class have; the more extreme class oppression is, the less extreme sex oppression is. So according to de Beauvoir sexism and classism are deeply intertwined. An important way in which class distinctions can be made is in terms of male-female relationships: we can't describe the sexism women are subject to without specifying their class; nor can we understand how sexism works without looking at its relation to class privilege.<sup>6</sup> What makes middle-class women dependent on men of their class is the same as what distinguishes them from working-class women.

But de Beauvoir does not heed her own insights here. On the contrary, she almost always describes relations between men and women as if the class or race or ethnic identity of the men and women made no difference to the truth of statements about "men and women." This poses some very serious difficulties for her attempt to give a general account of "woman." On her own terms it ought to be misleading to say, as she does, that we live "in a world that belongs to men" (xx, 512, 563), as if all differences between princes and paupers, masters and slaves, can be canceled out by the fact that they are all male.<sup>7</sup> In describing the psychological development of girls, she remarks upon the ways in which everything in a girl's life "confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority" (38). And yet she later makes clear that a white girl growing up in the United States hardly believes that Black men are superior to her: "During the War of Secession no Southerners were more passionate in upholding slavery than the women" (566). She describes ways in which girls of the upper classes are taught to believe in their superiority to working-class men: "In the upper classes women are eager accomplices of their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits provided. . . . The women of the upper middle classes and the aristocracy have always defended their class interests even more obstinately than have their husbands" (590). Whether or not de Beauvoir is entirely accurate in her descriptions of some women's passionate insistence on preserving privilege—were they really more fierce about it than the men of their race and class?—the point is that these

descriptions undermine her claims elsewhere about the common position of women.

De Beauvoir's perceptiveness about class and race inequality should make us wonder about her account of the "man" as "citizen" and "producer" with "economic independence" and all "the advantages attached to masculinity" in contrast to the "woman," who is "before all, and often exclusively, a wife," "shut up in the home," enjoying "vast leisure," and entertaining at tables "laden with fine food and precious wines" (430, 443, 497, 508, 663).

Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the future: he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is, to immanence. (404)

Here de Beauvoir, despite evidence she provides to the contrary, makes it look as if racism, for example, had never existed and never affected the conditions under which a man can "incarnate transcendence." Here and elsewhere when she points to the role women play in reproducing family and species—"the oppression of woman has its cause in the will to perpetuate the family and to keep the patrimony intact" (82)—she chooses to ignore questions about legitimacy even while alluding to them elsewhere. She quotes Demosthenes: "We have hetairas for the pleasures of the spirit, concubines for sensual pleasure, and wives to give us sons" (81); and her argument implies among other things that human beings typically do not "continue the species" randomly or without regard to what kinds of beings will populate the future. We saw concern in both Plato and Aristotle about joining the right kind of men with the right kind of women to produce philosopher-rulers and citizens of the polis. De Beauvoir surely was aware of the extent to which racial, class, and religious conventions dictate what comprises appropriate sexual behavior and "legitimate" reproduction. Indeed, as we shall see below, she explicitly points out but does not consider the implications of the fact that everything she says about sexual privilege only works when the man and woman belong to the same race and class (605).

De Beauvoir sabotages her insights about the political consequences of the multiple locations of women in another way: she frequently compares women to other groups—in her language, "Jews, the Black, the Yellow, the proletariat, slaves, servants, the common people." For example, she asks us to think about the differences between the situation of women, on the one hand, and, on the other, "the scattering of the Jews, the introduction of slavery into America, the conquests of imperialism" (xviii). She

discusses with considerable appreciation Bebel's comparison of "women and the proletariat" (49). She remarks that some of what Hegel says about "master and slave" better applies to "man and woman" (59). In reflecting on slavery in the United States, she says that there was a "great difference" between the case of American Blacks and that of women: "the Negroes submit with a feeling of revolt, no privileges compensating for their hard lot, whereas woman is offered inducements to complicity" (278). She speaks of the role of religion in offering "women" and "the common people" the hope of moving out of immanence: "When a sex or a class is condemned to immanence, it is necessary to offer it the mirage of some form of transcendence" (585). She compares the talk of women about their husbands to conversations "of domestics talking about their employers critically in the servants' quarters" (579).

I bring up these comparisons not in order to assess their historical accuracy but to note that in making them de Beauvoir obscures the fact that half of the populations to whom she compares women consist of women. This is particularly puzzling in light of her recognition of the ways in which women are distributed across race, class, religious, and ethnic lines. She sometimes contrasts "women" to "slaves," sometimes describes women as "slaves" (e.g., 454, 569), but she never really talks about those women who according to her own categories belonged to slave populations—for example, Black female slaves in the United States. She does say at one point that "there were women among the slaves, to be sure, but there have always been free women" (131); and then she proceeds to make clear that it is free women whom she will examine. She also says that in "classes in which women enjoyed some economic independence and took part in production . . . women workers were enslaved even more than the male workers" (119–20). But in contrasting "women" to a number of other groups, and in choosing not to pay attention to the women in those other groups, she expresses her determination to use "woman" only in reference to those females not subject to racism, anti-Semitism, classism, imperialism.

Perhaps she is aware at some level that this is the price she must pay for consistency: for where she does describe briefly the situation of females who belong to the groups she contrasts to "women," what she says does not follow from her account of "women." For example, she claims that in the Middle Ages peasant men and women lived on a "footing of equality" (94), and that "in the working classes economic oppression nullified the inequality of the sexes" (96). If she believes this, then of course she has to restrict her use of the word "woman" to those females not subject to the other forms of oppression she refers to; otherwise her large claims about the subordination of women to men would be undermined by her own

account. And yet at the same time, she subjects them to question, which we see as we turn to a third way in which de Beauvoir fails to pay attention to her own significant insights.

As noted earlier, toward the end of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir acknowledges that the differences in privilege and power between men and women she has been referring to are “in play” only when men and women are of the same class and race (605). This is a logical conclusion for someone who holds, as we’ve seen she does, that the wives of white slaveowners in the United States fought even harder than their husbands to preserve the privileges of race; since she thought of “slaves” as male, she could hardly maintain that men who were slaves dominated women who were not. But there is a problem even in the way she signals here that claims about privilege based on sex apply only within the same class or race. For that suggests that sexism within one class or race is just like that within any other class or race. If so, her claims do have a kind of generality after all—for example, while what characterizes relations between white men and white women does not characterize those between white men and Black women, or between Black men and white women, it does nevertheless characterize those between Black men and Black women. But we’ve seen that de Beauvoir also holds that sexual oppression is essentially nullified when men and women are subject to other forms of oppression. In that case, her claim is not really that the sexism she describes operates only when class and race are constant, but rather that she is talking about the sexism in effect only when the men and women involved are not subject to class or racial oppression. She herself leads us to the conclusion that the sexism she is concerned with in *The Second Sex* is that experienced by white middle-class women in Western countries.

### *The Creation of Women*

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (249). This opening sentence from book 2 of *The Second Sex* has come to be the most often cited and perhaps most powerful of de Beauvoir’s insights. Among other things it offers a starting point for the distinction between sex and gender. It is one thing to be biologically female, quite another to be shaped by one’s culture into a “woman”—a female with feminine qualities, someone who does the kinds of things “women,” not “men,” do, someone who has the kind of thoughts and feelings that make doing these things seem an easy expression of one’s feminine nature.

If being a woman is something one can become, then it also is something one can fail to become. De Beauvoir insists that while being or not

being female is a biological matter, becoming or not becoming a woman is not. “Civilization as a whole” produces women (249). In the absence of other humans, no female would become a woman; particular human “intervention in her destiny is fundamental” to who and what she becomes:

Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself. (682)

In particular,

in men’s eyes—and for the legion of women who see through men’s eyes—it is not enough to have a woman’s body nor to assume the female function as mistress or mother in order to be “true woman.” (245)

What she has to do to become a “true woman” is to be seen and to see herself as Other in contrast to the Self of the male, as inessential in contrast to the essential, as object in contrast to the subject. Females of the species don’t come created in this way; they are made this way by the concerted efforts of men and women.

Moreover, de Beauvoir insists that humans create whatever significance is attached to having a body and more particularly to having a male or female body. She directs us to thinking about “the body as lived in by the subject” as opposed to the body as described by the biologist (33). The consciousness one has of one’s body in this way is acquired “under circumstances dependent upon the society of which [one] is a member” or indeed even upon the class one belongs to (44). De Beauvoir suggests, for example, that the physical event of having an abortion is experienced differently by conventional middle-class women and by those “schooled by poverty and misery to disdain bourgeois morality” (461). Along similar lines, she claims that the biological changes that take place during menopause are experienced differently by those “true women” who have “staked everything on their femininity” and by “the peasant woman, the work man’s wife,” who, “constantly under the threat of new pregnancies, are happy when, at long last, they no longer run this risk” (542).

Biology is not destiny in at least two senses, according to de Beauvoir. First, being female is not the same thing as being a “woman”; nor does it determine whether and how one will become a “woman.” Second, different women experience biological events associated with being female differently, depending on how their bodies are otherwise employed and their beliefs about what are the proper things to do with or to their bodies. But de Beauvoir doesn’t take this insight as far as she might in the directions to which her own comments lead. She seems to be saying that there is no particular significance that must be given to biological facts about our

bodies, that whether or how a female becomes a "woman" depends upon human consciousness and human action. But she is well aware of the fact that in many ways human consciousness and human action take quite different forms in different societies. We get a hint of this in her comment quoted above about how a woman's consciousness of femininity is dependent upon the society in which she lives, as well as in her reminder that the intervention of others is so crucial a factor in the creation of a "woman" out of a female that "if this action took a different direction, it would produce a quite different result" (682).

This surely points to the variability in the creation of "women" across and within cultures. Here is where de Beauvoir's lack of attention to females belonging to the populations she contrasts to "women" is particularly disappointing. She doesn't reflect on what her own theoretical perspective strongly suggests and what her own language mirrors: namely, that different females are constructed into different kinds of "women"; that under some conditions certain females count as "women," others don't. This is where her inattention to certain historical facts—for example, that Plato allowed only a very small group of females among the philosopher-rulers—takes its toll.

Whether or not she was a close reader of the philosophers, de Beauvoir's own descriptions of differences among women point to precisely the kind of variability in the construction of "women" that one would expect if, as she claims, women are not born but made and if at the same time differences of class, race, and ethnicity are in force. Indeed, her off-hand reminder that claims about sexual privilege apply only when race and class are kept constant underscores the point: If all males were constructed into "men" in the same way, and all females made into "women" in the same way, one wouldn't have to be cautious about making generalizations about men and women across class and race lines. For example, whatever characterized relations between white men and white women would also characterize relations between white men and Black women.

Moreover, de Beauvoir's analysis of racial oppression, cursory as it is, tells us that she believes people have attached different significance to racial differences at different times. She counts as successful social change those economic and political reversals in which a people once regarded as Other no longer are regarded as such by those who formerly dominated them. When she comments, early in the book, on the change of status of Blacks in Haiti after the revolution (xviii—xix), and much later on how Black suffrage helped to lead to the perception of Blacks as worthy of having the vote (686), she is alluding to changes in the significance attached by whites to what they take to be biological differences between

whites and Blacks. If we follow up her insistence that we pay attention to "the body as lived in by the subject" (33), we might begin to ask not only about living in a male or female body in the context of sexism but also about living in a black or white or brown or yellow or red body in the context of racism. Though de Beauvoir refers to the variability in ideals of feminine beauty (146) and, as we've seen, is certainly aware of racial oppression, she does not speak at length about women subject to racism and so does not talk about the ways in which notions of beauty are racially coded. While she certainly is aware of the significance attached to skin color, she does not join that to her point about the distinction between other physical differences among human bodies (i.e., sexual differences) and what humans make of those differences.

### *The Real and the Ideal Woman*

A third promising ingredient of de Beauvoir's analysis is her attack on the discrepancy between the reality of actual women and a static ideal of "woman." The latter is not an empirical generalization based on observations of specific women but a male myth about the nature of femininity:

As against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong; we are told not that femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine. (237)

De Beauvoir believes that this mythical ideal reaches deep into the idea of woman as Other, and as we've seen, she sometimes speaks as if men's treatment of women as Other is inevitable. But on the other hand, it is clear that she thinks that if political and economic conditions change in the right direction, women will be seen in their historical specificity—that is, women might come to be truly known by men rather than being the occasion for men's projection of a mythical ideal of femininity.

It is noteworthy that the feminine comrade, colleague, and associate are without mystery (being "mysterious" is one version of the mythic ideal); on the other hand, if the vassal is male, if, in the eyes of a man or a woman who is older, or richer, a young fellow, for example, plays the role of the inessential object, then he too becomes shrouded in mystery. And this uncovers for us a substructure under the feminine mystery which is economic in nature. (241—42)

The more relationships are concretely lived, the less they are idealized. The fellah of ancient Egypt, the Bedouin peasant, the artisan of the Middle Ages, the worker of today has in the requirements of work and poverty relations with his particular woman companion which are too definite for her to be embellished with an aura either auspicious or inauspicious. (244)

De Beauvoir seems to be making a brief here for establishing a set of conditions under which people can see each other as they actually are. The liberation of women depends upon establishing economic and political conditions under which men won't simply project their notion of "woman" onto women but will look at who women in fact are, observing "the behavior of flesh-and-blood women." De Beauvoir has high regard for what she refers to as "knowledge," "empirical law" (237), "laws of nature," "scientific explanation" (580). Though she does not explain exactly what she means by these terms, it is clear that she accuses men of not being very scientific in their claims about women.<sup>12</sup> Men are right to look for universally true statements about women, but they don't realize that the only solid grounds for such claims are empirical observations. Clear thinking about women would lead to universally true statements about them.

De Beauvoir has not of course laid out a full-blown epistemology here, but the hints of one point to the potential richness of her account of women. As we have noted on several occasions, de Beauvoir at one level is quite aware of the diverse historical, economic, and political situations of women, of the differences class and race make to women's relationships with men and to their relationships with other women. She likens the notion of the "Eternal Feminine" to a Platonic "Idea, timeless, unchangeable" (237). As an existentialist, she has no truck with the idea of an "essence" of anything—of humanity, of man, of woman. We are not who or what we are by virtue of being particular instances of some transcendental entity; rather, "an existent is nothing other than what he does . . . he is to be measured by his acts" (241).

De Beauvoir suggests that a search for some essence of "woman" is deeply misplaced: we would look in vain for some metaphysical nugget of pure womanhood that defines all women as women. We have to look at what women do to find out who they are. This means that we cannot decide prior to actual investigation of women's lives what they do or do not have in common; and this means that we cannot assume that what we find to be true about the lives of women of one class or race or nationality or historical period will be true about the lives of other women.<sup>13</sup> De Beauvoir warns us against any inclination to assume that the lives of women of one race or class are representative of the lives of all other

women. Both existentialism and "scientific thinking" tell us we have to look and see what women are really like.

But at the same time, de Beauvoir also warns, neither existentialism nor "scientific reasoning" will lead us to the viewpoint of "woman," who "lacks the sense of the universal" and takes the world to be "a confused conglomeration of special cases" (580). So while we can't assume, ahead of time, that any particular universal truth about "humanity" or "men" or "women" will be true, we can assume that investigation of women's lives will lead to such a truth or truths about women. Women's isolation from one another—the very isolation that de Beauvoir cites as one reason for their not constituting a likely political class—accounts in large part for their lacking "the sense of the universal": "She feels she is a special case because she is isolated in her home and hence does not come into active contact with other women" (580). If she had the opportunity to know about other women's lives, she might come to see the grounds for universal truths in the similarities in cases she earlier had taken to be special, unique, *sui generis*.

De Beauvoir has a lively concern that views about women be based neither on the assumption that women necessarily share some metaphysical essence nor on the assumption that women share nothing at all. Yet the universal truths she claims to be noting about "women" do not follow from the observations she makes about differences among women.

### III

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir gives us directions for thinking about women that she refuses to follow—or more accurately, that she only sometimes follows. Moreover, when she does come down the paths she has pointed to, she misdescribes what is found there. As we have seen, on the one hand she refers to what she herself takes to be significant differences among women; but on the other, she dismisses those differences as irrelevant to understanding the condition of "woman," insofar as she takes the story of "woman" to be that provided by examination of the lives of women not subject to racism, classism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and so forth. According to her, the situation of "woman" must be contrasted to that of Blacks, Jews, the working class.

De Beauvoir notes how important it is to remember that claims about the difference between men's and women's social and economic position can only hold when we keep race and class constant; yet she also typically speaks of "men" and "women" as if their class and race identity didn't matter.

She points to the ways in which biological females are made into "women" through the concerted efforts of the societies into which they are born; still she forgets about the fact that by her own reckoning different females are made into "women" in so many different ways that they see themselves as particular kinds of women and may have a deep investment in not becoming any other kind of women. This happens whenever white women have wished to preserve the privileges based on their being white women rather than Black women; whenever rich women have wished to preserve the privileges based on their being wealthy women rather than poor women; and, she might have added, whenever heterosexual women have wished to preserve the privileges based on their not being lesbians.

She insists on the importance of recognizing the role of social institutions in shaping what it means to us to live in our bodies; yet she ignores the effect of the history of racism in constructing what it means to have white or black or brown or yellow or red skin.

She insists on the importance of attention to the actual facts of women's lives as opposed to relying on what she describes as male fantasy and female gossip; but at the same time she presents as conclusions from a study of "woman" what even on her own reckoning has to be seen as a study of a particular and not necessarily representative group of women. She chastises women who have clung to the privileges of race and class even though her appropriation of "woman" to describe the situation of women of her own race and class expresses just such privilege.

Does de Beauvoir simply not notice the directions in which her work points? Is she simply not aware that on the basis of evidence she herself presents, she has misrepresented the situation of one group of women as the situation of "woman," of women in general? Or is there some reason she may think it both possible and important to lay out general truths about "woman"—about how "woman" has been perceived by "man," about the ways in which the condition of "woman" is and is not like the condition of Blacks, Jews, the poor—despite the variety of social, economic, and political circumstances of different groups of women?

Let us look at two possible explanations of these contradictory strands in de Beauvoir's thought. The first comes from Judith Okely.<sup>14</sup> She suggests that one important reason de Beauvoir doesn't talk much about the effects of race and class oppression on women is that as an existentialist she takes individual will to be a much more significant determinant of one's position in life than factors such as race and class. But this won't work: on those grounds, de Beauvoir would also have to discount sex or gender as a significant, even if not wholly sufficient, determinant; and

moreover, Okely's comment ignores the considerable amount of material in de Beauvoir on the effects of race and class oppression.

A second promising explanation links de Beauvoir's ultimate silence about race and class to white middle-class privilege in the following way: there is something in de Beauvoir's work that suggests that the viewpoint such privilege expresses is ineradicable; that de Beauvoir is bound to take the case of women like herself to be the case of "women," and that it is inevitable that she would take women different from herself to be Other. This explanation is less easily dismissed than Okely's, but it too proves finally unconvincing, as we shall see.

Let us recall briefly what de Beauvoir described as the attitudes men have taken toward women: while thinking of themselves as destined for activities of transcendent spirit, men think of women as doomed to leading lives of fleshly immanence; men take themselves to be active. Self, women to be passive Other. But it is not clear what role de Beauvoir takes these attitudes to play in men's domination of women. First of all, she doesn't really discuss in detail the relation between such attitudes and the economic, social, and political institutions that underwrite male domination. There is the suggestion that the attitudes she describes complement the institutions and that they will no longer be sustained in the absence of such institutions—that where there is not economic and political inequality between men and women of a certain class, the men of that class don't regard the women as Other.

But on the other hand, she suggests that the desire for transcendence is part of the constitution of human beings, that it is a transhistorical and transcultural characteristic of humans and hence will exist no matter what the political and economic institutions of a society. Indeed, while the liberation of women will be marked by their no longer being seen by men (or by themselves) as creatures of immanence, it will also inaugurate the moment at which women think of themselves as "transcendent." So it is not as if de Beauvoir thinks the dichotomous attitudes she describes will or should disappear (even if she implicitly suggests a redescription of them). The question is whether she thinks anyone aspiring to a "meaningful existence" will inevitably believe there to be constant threats to such an existence located either in people or in things that will as a consequence be treated as Other. De Beauvoir certainly leans toward an affirmative answer to this: "At the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the Other arises" (73), and "Man never thinks of himself without thinking of the Other; he views the world under the sign of duality" (63).

Hence we must ask whether the liberation of women would mark the

moment at which humans no longer think in terms of some people as transcendent, spirit, subject, Self, and others as immanent, flesh, object, Other; or whether it simply would mark the moment at which men and women stop thinking of men as transcendent and women as immanent, start thinking of both men and women as transcendent, and continue to think of someone (who else is left?) or something else as immanent. Indeed, in the introduction to *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir insists: "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. . . . No group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (xvii). A bit later she refers to "the imperialism of the human consciousness, seeking always to exercise its sovereignty." It includes "the original category of the Other and an original aspiration to dominate the Other" (52). She has already told us that even when regarded as Other by men, women with race and class privilege will insist in turn on seeing members of the races and classes they dominate as Other. Their ceasing to be regarded by men as Other won't necessarily mean that these women will cease regarding other men and women as Other. The very attitude they must take up about themselves (the one that men have had about themselves) inevitably involves taking up quite a different attitude about some Others.

Earlier we saw de Beauvoir arguing that the fear of losing race and class privilege has been strong enough in some women to prevent them from resisting sexism; now it looks as if she is also implying that those who end up resisting sexism will do so in a way that is geared toward not losing race and class privilege. Perhaps she believes that if this group of women engage in battles to end their own subordination, they will ipso facto be undermining the conditions of their own race and class privilege and that any economic and political gains they make for themselves will also accrue to all other women. But we must have doubts about where she stands here, especially given her silence about the possible connections between being a transcendent Self and being a sexist or racist or imperialist. There is nothing in her account that tells us that real "transcendence" is incompatible with taking it to be one's right, or even one's obligation, to subordinate others' wills, resources, and lives to one's own. At the same time, there is much in de Beauvoir to suggest that despite her early references to the "imperialism of the human consciousness," she is not about to treat her own or any one else's decisions or behavior as the inexorable working out of the need for human transcendence. Indeed, for her to do so would be at odds with her own emphasis on the responsibility of any woman at any time for her own position. First of all, as an existentialist, de Beauvoir is not in the business of trying to show how a

particular behavior is the inevitable outcome of a given human propensity or need. Moreover, as we have seen, she thinks women share the responsibility for being treated as Other, insofar as she takes them to be in many ways complicit in their domination by men. Finally, we have also seen that she implicitly has criticized women who have refused to give up their race or class privilege. We thus have no good reason to think de Beauvoir would regard the race and class privilege expressed in her focus on women of her own kind as the inevitable price of thinking about her own liberation.<sup>15</sup>

## IV

But what then will explain the contradictory pulls in de Beauvoir's account of women? The point of asking this is not to exonerate her from the charge of inconsistency or of misrepresenting the situation of white middle-class women as that of "women in general." The point, rather, is to see where white middle-class privilege has to lodge in order to make itself resistant to observations and theoretical perspectives that tell against it.

Certain strands of de Beauvoir's thought lead inexorably in the direction of a central focus on white middle-class women to illuminate the condition of "woman." As we've seen, at least some of the time she holds the following conditions to be true:

1. If one is not a "man," one is either a woman or a Black, a woman or Jewish, a woman or a poor person, etc.
2. Sexism is different from racism and other forms of oppression: sexism is the oppression women suffer as women, racism the oppression Blacks, for example, suffer as Blacks.
3. Sexism is most obvious in the case of women not otherwise subject to oppression (i.e., not subject to racism, classism, anti-Semitism, etc.).

Now insofar as de Beauvoir takes these conditions to be true, it is quite logical for her to take the examination of white middle-class women to be the examination of all women. Indeed, anyone who assumes the truth of these three conditions will take it to be the most logical thing in the world for feminists to focus on white middle-class women. De Beauvoir certainly is not alone on this position.<sup>16</sup> To the degree that conditions 1, 2, and 3 seem logical, we ought to think of the white middle-class privilege her work expresses, not as a personal quirk in de Beauvoir, but as part of the intellectual and political air she and many of us breathe.

There are two important features of what we might call the 1-2-3 punch. First, it has the status of near truism: Points 1 and 2 may appear

to be true by definition (de Beauvoir, as we saw, at times took them utterly for granted), and 3 may seem just to be a matter of common sense, something not even needing the confirmation of historical inquiry (aren't the effects of sexism on women more distinct and hence easier to investigate when other forms of oppression don't affect the women in question?). Second, it leads to the focus on white middle-class women *without mentioning white middle-class women*.

These two features are crucial to the way in which white middle-class privilege works in feminist theory and hence crucial to understanding why we would miss a golden opportunity if we simply dismissed de Beauvoir's focus as an individual expression of her privilege and leave it at that. (Indeed, it would also be an expression of that privilege to mention its presence but not bother to explore and expose its depth and pervasiveness.) Privilege cannot work if it has to be noted and argued for. For someone to have privilege is precisely *not* to have to beg for attention to one's case. For feminist theory to express white middle-class privilege is for it to ensure that white middle-class women will automatically receive attention. How can it ensure this without making explicit what it is doing? Conditions 1–3 do the trick, by making the default position of feminist inquiry an examination of white middle-class women: unless otherwise noted, that's who we are going to be talking about.

De Beauvoir was very attuned to the expression of privilege in women's behavior: as we saw, she took note of the desire of white slaveowners' wives to preserve the racial status quo; she talked about the hostile treatment of female domestic workers by their middle- and upper-class female employers. But privilege, we well know, can lodge almost anywhere, and since it works best when it is least obvious, it is not surprising that we should find it reflected in what appear to be axioms of her inquiry into the condition of "women."

Insofar as any of us agree to points 1–3 (and the agreement is likely to be implicit, not explicit), we are not likely to give much weight to those strands in de Beauvoir's thought that might give us reason to question their status. For example, we aren't likely to be struck by the fact that if, as de Beauvoir claims, one of the reasons women don't seem to form a natural political class is that we are found in every population, then, contra 1, it is very odd to contrast women with Blacks, Jews, the poor. Nor are we likely to notice the force of de Beauvoir's saying that we ought always to ask about the race and class of any men and women we are talking about, since claims about sexual hierarchy hold only when race and class are kept constant: if this is so, the sexism women are subject to will vary in accordance with their race and class privilege. But in that

case, contra 2, there is no simple form of sexism the same for all women as women. Thus even if, as condition 3 claims, sexism is easier to track in the case of women not otherwise subject to oppression, it doesn't mean the sexism one finds is just like the sexism one would find in the case of women who are subject to other forms of oppression. We have to be very careful: the oppression white middle-class women are subject to is not the oppression women face "as women" but the oppression white middle-class women face. Their race and class are not irrelevant to the oppression they face even though they are not oppressed on account of their race and class.

## V

We have been trying to see what might explain the discrepancy between the implicit complexity of de Beauvoir's assessment of the lives of women and the oversimplification in her explicit rendering of "woman's situation" and of gender relations. We've suggested that while it is true that such oversimplification expresses the privileged tunnel vision of someone of de Beauvoir's own race and class, we must also take the task of unmasking privilege seriously by trying to locate the places it finds a home, rather than simply noting that it must be at work. Since de Beauvoir herself was highly attuned to and bothered by the presence of such privilege, we honor her work by asking how such privilege functions in her own thinking.

What we've begun to see is that taking the lives of white middle-class women to be paradigmatic for the situation of "woman" is a logical conclusion from several apparently straightforward facts that de Beauvoir seems to accept about how to investigate gender and how to examine sexism. Because they have the status of truisms, they are unlikely to be shaken by other parts of her account, parts that might lead to doubts about the soundness of these truisms but themselves without axiomatic strength. In short, de Beauvoir ends up giving more weight to those parts of her account that draw attention to the condition of "women in general" than to those that allude to differences among women. As we've seen, she attaches great importance to being able to give an account of the condition of "women in general" and so perhaps regards attention to differences among women to be an unnecessary distraction. Her analysis itself reminds us that what she calls the condition of "women in general" isn't that at all, but it is worth looking again briefly at why she was so eager to provide a general account.

There's no doubt that the case de Beauvoir makes about "woman"

would be less compelling, at least to many of her readers, if she were to wonder aloud whether there is any difficulty posed for her account by the fact that there are women among the populations she contrasts to "woman"; if she were to say, "Notice, by the way, that the account I give of relations between middle-class men and women is not the same one I give of relations between working-class men and women"; if she did not hide away on page 605 of a 689-page book the reminder that any time we speak of male-female relations we must make sure that the men and women are of the same race and class.<sup>17</sup>

Such explicit musings would produce a less forceful argument for anyone who thinks that if we cannot talk about "woman" or about "women in general," then no case can be made about the injustice done to women, no strategy devised for the liberation of women. According to this line of thinking, a coherent feminist political analysis and agenda requires that we be able to talk about the history of the treatment of all women, as women. In order to be taken seriously, feminists have to make a case that they are speaking about more than a small group of people and that those referred to have been mistreated. So, for example, a group of white middle-class women would not claim that harm has come to them for being white or middle-class, but for being women. And they might well believe that not only would it be irrelevant to refer to being white and middle-class, but it would suggest that the group is not as representative as it otherwise would appear. So were de Beauvoir to make more explicit than she does who "woman" refers to in her analysis, she would defuse its potential impact: the case would not be that of "woman" but of particular women.

Furthermore, as we've seen, de Beauvoir thinks women lack a "sense of the universal" (580). This has been a crucial part of their failure to resist the domination of men: not caring to notice the similarities in their experiences, each one given to "overestim[ing] the value of her smile" because "no one has told her that all women smile." They fail to "sum . . . up in a valid conclusion" the many instances that ground claims about the conditions of "woman's" existence. Until women see beyond their own individual cases, they will not "succeed in building up a solid counter-universe whence they can challenge the males" (581). De Beauvoir may well regard it as a kind of weakness on her part were she to resist generalizing from the case of a woman like herself.

But it is one thing to urge women to look beyond their own cases; it is quite another to assume that if one does one will find a common condition or a common hope shared by all women. Perhaps there is a common condition or hope,<sup>18</sup> but de Beauvoir's own work speaks against it. Given

her insistence on the different social and economic positions occupied by women, she suggests, not that similarities among women's various conditions are there to be found, but rather that they need to be created. Indeed de Beauvoir implies, as we've seen, that class and race privileges are perceived by some women to be so important that they will be extremely reluctant to work for economic and political changes that would dissolve the difference between the conditions of their own lives and the conditions of the lives of those women without such privileges. Since de Beauvoir cites the diversity of women across race and class lines as a large part of the reason for their not having a shared consciousness or joint political projects, she could not assume that what women would find if they looked at each other would be something that was true about all of them.

Examining the tensions in de Beauvoir's work ought to make us wonder whether the same tensions aren't going to be present in any version of feminism: Is there any way of taking differences among women seriously without at the same time undermining the kind of case about women as women that feminism seems to require? Is there any way to make a case about "women in general" that doesn't in fact represent the situation of one group of women only?

These aren't new kinds of questions for feminism. We've asked ones similar to them again and again about theories of "human nature": Can we take seriously differences among men and women and still come up with a tidy theory about humans "as humans"? Is there any account of "human nature" that, in the guise of a universal account, doesn't end up conflating the situation of one group of humans with the situation of all?

In chapter 7 we will consider the implications of the existence of differences among women for the idea that we can talk about "women in general." For the moment we might note that "the 1-2-3 punch" represents a version of the idea that we can, indeed that feminism must, talk about gender in isolation from race and class. Certainly on the face of it, it seems impossible to make any case about the significance of gender for women unless we can talk about gender in isolation from race and class, that is, unless we can talk about the effect of gender on a woman, not the effect of some other fact about her. Is it possible to do that? We now turn to a prominent example from the feminist literature that promises both to focus on gender and gender relations in isolation from other aspects of identity and other forms of oppression and to suggest the ways in which sexism and those other forms of oppression are connected.