BIOLOGISM AND SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL RE-READING
OF “THE GIVENS OF BIOLOGY”

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Philosophy
In the Department of Philosophy
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

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Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, Biology, Phenomenology, Feminism

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Primarily, I thank my supervisor Professor Leslie Howe, whose brilliant reading paved the way for radical revisions. Professor Howe patiently bridled my bubbling enthusiasm for de Beauvoir studies into a coherent research paper, no small task indeed. I acknowledge the guidance offered by my committee members, Professors Philip Dwyer and Diana Relke. I also thank my external, Professor Helena da Silva. I thank Sarah Hoffman, and Karl Pfeiffer for their role in the department graduate committee. Professors Emer O’Hagan and Eric Dayton, who, while not directly involved with my thesis, provided a profound sense of welcome in the philosophy department. My fellow student and friend Rachel Lowen Walker provided invaluable formatting and technical support. I also acknowledge the administrative savvy of Della Nykyforak, for always being willing to find a fledgling graduate student the necessary paperwork. Finally, I acknowledge support from the Department of Philosophy, the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies (may its critical light always shine on the College of Arts and Science), the College of Arts and Science, and the College of Graduate Studies and Research.
DEDICATION

Foremost, I dedicate this work to anyone who has ever lived through, or is currently living with, an eating disorder. Also, I dedicate this to both the team members and participants at Bridgepoint Center for Eating Disorders for providing a safe container in which I could find my voice. If not for Bridgepoint, this work would have never found its completion.

I also dedicate this work to my parents, both for first joining the gametes, and all of their patience with what ensued. I am deeply indebted to my best friend of thirteen years, Erica Kokoski. Our friendship is my most treasured accomplishment: You opened the door to my heart and made it safe for others to enter. Also, I can’t imagine the last two years without my mentor and friend Sarah Hoffman, who, with her astute observations, humility, and humour keeps my feet on the earth when I disappear into writing for weeks. Last but not least, I give much love and respect to the Barrington Balcony Committee for being the first-response team.

This work is also keenly dedicated to all the writers who have deemed it appropriate to term Simone de Beauvoir “Castor”, “Sartre’s student”, or “La Grande Sartreuse” for keeping me motivated and believing in the importance of this project.

I also dedicate this work to the city of Saskatoon for sustaining and nurturing me for twenty-seven years: your riverbanks’ ability to resolve an emotional cadence always amazes me. Any home I make away from here shall only ever be in black and white in comparison to your technicolour.
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CHAPTER 1
DE BEAUVOR: FACTS AND MYTHS

Leading de Beauvoir scholar Margaret A. Simons laments that the oft heard response from philosophers when *The Second Sex* is mentioned is: “‘Why should we read *The Second Sex*? It’s out-of-date, male-identified and just Sartrean anyway!’”¹ Although tersely put, these three criticisms represent some of the most serious problems that de Beauvoir scholars have recently begun to address. Described as one of the most important texts of feminist philosophy in the twentieth century, it is still one of the least understood. Clear and judicious commentary on *The Second Sex* is emerging; however, there is still much contention regarding its intended meaning. What works against the movement of contemporary scholarship, is the still prevalent under-appreciation of the complexity of de Beauvoir’s place in the continental tradition. In brief, *The Second Sex* bears a striking similarity to the Bible: “[it is] much worshipped, often quoted and little read”.² One of the most poisonous misreadings of de Beauvoir alleges that chapter one of *The Second Sex*; “The Givens of Biology”³ constitutes an argument for biological essentialism. This misreading is due to three major problems: the poor English translation, the assumption that de Beauvoir’s thought was derivative from Sartre’s, and most importantly, the failure to understand the philosophical richness in the chapter itself. This study provides an interpretation

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³ Indeed the chapter “Les Données de la biologie,” which is incorrectly translated as “The Data of Biology” is actually a reference to the notion of the “given” in Bergson. Simons argues that the chapter ought to have been translated as “The Givens of Biology” [Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (New York, NY: Roman & Littlefield, 1999) 194.] Bergsen treats the facts of science as both given and not given: given because they can be analysed and are referred to in descriptions of experience, and not given because they are coalesced and melted into one another. This picture of the “givens” of biology gives us an initial clue into why de Beauvoir would permit a discussion of the “facts” of biology in her work.
of “The Givens of Biology” in light of de Beauvoir’s own early works, and locates the chapter within the continental tradition. I argue that “The Givens of Biology,” while strange and obscure at times does not make the mistakes with which many critics have charged it.

Section One: The Search for de Beauvoir

Since de Beauvoir’s death in 1986, the release of her 1927 diary,⁴ and the recognition of the importance of her early philosophical writings, new perspectives on her contributions to feminism, existentialism, and phenomenology have been multiplying. Although these new perspectives are not monolithic, two focal points find increasing support within scholarship. First, it is widely accepted that there are serious translation problems and unacknowledged deletions in the H.M. Parshley English translation of The Second Sex (1952).⁵ Parshley was a zoologist and had little sensitivity to the specific philosophical terminologies intended in the text. Any translation will change a text; however, as Luise Von Flotow argues, “no change is innocent, but is part of a (sometimes deliberate) ideological or cultural agenda on the part of the translation/translator.”⁶ Because of Parshley’s background in biological studies, he has an added investment in the biology chapter which is most apparent to the mindful reader.⁷ The more

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⁵ This translation is still the only one in print and was used to formulate further translations and the errors have multiplied as a result.


⁷ In fact, there are three footnotes in “The Givens of Biology” where Parshley actively contests the biological information that de Beauvoir relays. He argues against her claim that sexual reproduction is no more evolutionarily privileged than any other form [Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1989) 5]. He contests her use of “isogamy” (De Beauvoir, SS, 10). He also cites information that contests her claim of the prevalence of hermaphroditism (De Beauvoir, SS, 25). The reader cannot help but be confused, because he does not contest her in all of his footnotes: in one he adds particular numerical information to de Beauvoir’s use of “vast majority” in reference to the number of eggs expelled by a woman (De Beauvoir, SS, 16). In no other chapter is there such a prevalence of superfluously added footnotes from Parshley.
radical feminist theses in *The Second Sex* likely were not shared by Parshley, and this has affected the translation.

One example of a translation error is the translation of the title of Volume II of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. It was originally entitled “*L’expérience vécue*”, which translates as the contextually Husserlian phrase “lived experience,” or “Erlebnis.” If the translation were correct, the reader would be made aware that de Beauvoir makes reference to Husserlian lived experience, which is “distinct from a field of strictly objective things, [and] consists of a network of interrelated phenomena, whose appearance and significance depends on the intentional mode of our involvements with them.” Thus, rather than delineating objects in an “objective” way, inquiry takes its shape from the manner in which the world is directly experienced. Parshley’s translation of Volume II was simply “Women’s Life Today,” problematically indicating to the reader that a factual delineation of all women’s experience is to follow. When asked about the translation in 1985, de Beauvoir responded:

> When I put philosophy in my books it’s because that’s a way for me to view the world; and I can’t allow [translators] to eliminate that way of viewing the world, that dimension of my approach to women, as Mr. Parshley has done. I’m altogether against the principle of gaps, omissions, condensations, which have the effect, among other things, of suppressing the whole philosophical aspect of the book… I accepted [the translation]… but when I found out that Mr. Parshley was omitting things, I asked him to indicate the omissions to me, and I wrote to tell him that I was absolutely against them… I asked him to say in a preface that I was against the omissions, the condensation. And I don’t believe that he did that, which I begrudge him a great deal.

The anglo-philosophical reception of *The Second Sex* as primarily a sociological text, rather than a philosophical-phenomenological one, is due in part to the errors and deletions that pervade the English translation. As commentators begin to reconstruct and stabilize the effects of the

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Parshley translation, there still remain many unanswered questions regarding de Beauvoir’s theories.

The second focal point in recent scholarship challenges the assumption that de Beauvoir’s work was inescapably dependent on Sartre’s ontology. Extensive feminist criticism has charged Sartre with false dualisms, misogyny, and pessimism. Assuming that Sartre really does have these problems, the belief that de Beauvoir remains Sartrean throughout The Second Sex adds fuel to feminist criticisms of de Beauvoir. In addition, assumed Sartrean dependence has meant that de Beauvoir’s actual philosophical contributions have been ignored in major anthologies and studies of existentialist philosophy and prose. Many contemporary scholars now agree that her unique version of existentialism was budding in her diaries.¹⁰ My thesis situates the seeds of The Second Sex in the continental tradition broadly, de Beauvoir’s earlier philosophical works and studies, and the work of her contemporaries.

In The Second Sex de Beauvoir asks why woman has been made the Other. To answer this, she combs through biology, psychoanalysis, historical materialism, ancient and modern up until recent scholarship, religious conceptions, portrayals in literature, and also provides a unique understanding of the socialization, situation, and “justifications” of the oppression of women. But, what does this question really ask? What is meant by “necessary Other”? In existential theory, “the other” is any person who makes me an object for their consciousness. De Beauvoir aligns herself with this view in The Second Sex writing that the category of the other is primordial in consciousness: it is a “category of human thought.”¹¹ It seems apparent that this category is both value and gender neutral as de Beauvoir praises Stendhal’s literary writings for his equal treatment of both sexes:

“for this humanist, free beings of both sexes fulfill themselves in their reciprocal relations; and for him it is enough if the Other be simply an other so that life may have what he calls ‘a pungent saltiness’.”\textsuperscript{12}

We can see that this category she develops is open to all genders. I will refer to this intended meaning of the other as “the other.”

In \textit{The Second Sex}, de Beauvoir combats, not “the other,” but the notion that women must be the Absolute Other. One becomes the Other when an Absolute Subject desires to separate the free subject from her possibilities. Moira Gatens argues that for de Beauvoir, Absolute Subjects are those that:

Deprive[e] women of the opportunity to become authentic, ethical subjects. Such deprivation functions through the forcible confinement of woman to the negative pole of man's positive self-conception and by symbolically and actually denying them access to the (supposedly neutral) conception of what it is to be a free human subject.\textsuperscript{13}

No doubt, women \textit{are} the Other in de Beauvoir’s work, but the nature of her inquiry is to ask:

“Must this be so?” Jean Leighton, who reads de Beauvoir as a biological essentialist, argues that “for Simone de Beauvoir woman is always ‘the Other’.”\textsuperscript{14} De Beauvoir holds that women need not be the Other, offering several strategies for women to combat their position as the Other which include: speaking together in a collective “we”; positing new values; and recognizing each other as equals, rather than trying to confine each other.\textsuperscript{15} I shall not evaluate her strategies for liberation in this inquiry, but what I do offer is a defence against the charge that she claims that women cannot refuse to be the Other because of their biology.

\textsuperscript{12} De Beauvoir, SS, 249; LDS I, 391.
\textsuperscript{15} De Beauvoir, SS, xxiv-xxv; LDS I, 32-34.
Section Two: The Received Views

Early receptions of *The Second Sex* carved four deep paths of criticism: 1) that it lacks sufficient strategies for liberation; 2) that it is ethnocentric; 3) that it is androcentric; and 4) that it focuses too heavily on the situation of bourgeois women. 16 These four roads create an intersection of disagreement that centres on the question of whether the development of woman into the Other is necessary or contingent based on biological givens. Along these lines, de Beauvoir is charged with biologism: “Beauvoir argues that ultimately women are oppressed, not by men or society, but by biology: being dominated by the cycles of menstruation, pregnancies, and nursing, the female body severely limits the free choice and self-fulfillment of the woman.” 17 I will explore and reframe this slightly weaker charge that de Beauvoir paints biology as a burden, a tyrant, a limiting force on women’s subjectivity, that leaves woman no ontological way to avoid being the Other. A distinct, but related, criticism is that *The Second Sex* contains negative descriptions of the menstruating, pregnant, and lactating female body, and that these experiences are both negative and essential to women’s situation. I do not intend to defend de Beauvoir against the charge that some of her descriptions are negative, but rather I diffuse some of the linguistic and conceptual sting that her commentators read in her descriptions of biology.

Biologism is the view that human behaviour and social situations can be causally explained by an appeal to the physical mechanisms at play in the organic biological processes of the human body. In feminist theory, biologism is a certain kind of essentialism that locates women’s “nature” in the cycles of menstruation, reproduction, lactation, and other bodily processes.

Another kind of essentialism is psychoanalytic essentialism, which holds that women’s “nature” is the product of certain predetermined psychological drives and motives. I will defend de

Beauvoir in light of criticism that locates her as a biological essentialist through providing a comprehensive analysis of her chapter on biology and relevant historical background information. In spite of de Beauvoir’s rejection of naturalistic explanations, charges of biologism have dominated commentaries for years. It is not enough to say that the existential framework itself precludes the possibility that biology is a woman’s essential nature.\(^\text{18}\) Key passages from *The Second Sex*, such as “the female is the victim *[proie]* of the species. During certain periods in the year, fixed in each species, her whole life is under the regulation of a sexual cycle,”\(^\text{19}\) and further, “the bond that in every individual connects the physiological life and the psychic life…is the deepest enigma implied in the condition of being human, and this enigma is presented in its most disturbing form in woman\(^\text{20}\)” lend force to the biologistic interpretation. Regarding the origins of male supremacy, she writes:

Since he did not accept her, since she seemed in his eyes to have the aspect of the *other*, man could not be otherwise than her oppressor. The male will to power and expansion made woman's incapacity a curse.\(^\text{21}\)

Regarding sexual desire:

Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusk…She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous: thus, at least, she vaguely feels herself to be…[A]fter the first coition a woman is often more than ever in revolt against her sexual destiny.\(^\text{22}\)

And maternity:

She feels it as at once an enrichment and an injury; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it…Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life’s passive instrument.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{18}\) Gatens, "Beauvoir and Biology," 270.
\(^{19}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 20; LDS, 58.
\(^{20}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 257; LDS I, 400.
\(^{21}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 78; LDS I, 133.
\(^{22}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 386; LDS II, 165-6
\(^{23}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 495; LDS II 345-6.
These passages are but a few examples that have led Leighton, among others, to argue that for de Beauvoir:

It does not seem unsporting to talk disparagingly about women’s ‘animality’ while devoting almost an entire volume to the minutiae of woman’s erotic life. It appears that Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist bias makes her regard the natural and the physical as somehow demeaning since they involve ‘immanence.’ …The Second Sex is a long and dolorous lamentation about woman’s woes but also a diatribe against the female sex.  

Similarly, Carol McMillan argues:

The idea of biology as a mighty tyrant against whom woman is continually struggling recurs with persistence through Beauvoir’s book; every physical phenomenon she discusses is seen to vindicate the thesis of her basic schema.

These two criticisms charge de Beauvoir with not only devaluing the biology of women, but also with imbuing biology with a magic force that “ties down” the transcendence of women. What is at issue here is how to read “The Givens of Biology” given that authors have historically viewed the chapter on biology as a “diatribe” against women. This incorrect view is largely due to translation errors which have caused great discrepancies over the philosophical content of “The Givens of Biology,” as well as the fact that de Beauvoir has been improperly read through both a Sartrean and a causalistic lens. As a result, the aim of her inquiry has not been fully understood.

In spite of the biologistic reading of de Beauvoir, a growing trend, spearheaded by Judith Butler, maintains that de Beauvoir’s main thesis that “No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society” entails that gender is a socialized construct that bears an arbitrary relationship to sexual differences. Butler also argues that de Beauvoir’s thesis distinguishes between the “natural” and the “constructed” body, and that the project of The Second Sex is to show that the body is an historical idea. De Beauvoir

24 Jean Leighton, Simone de Beauvoir on Woman (Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1975) 118.
26 De Beauvoir, SS, 267 ; LDS, II 13.
argues, according to Butler, that “for the body to have meaning for us, it must first appear within a field of intelligibility, it must first be signified within an historically specific discourse of meaning.” Meaning constructs even the physical body, which can then take multiple shapes and forms; hence de Beauvoir considers the categories “female” and “male” to be unsuitable descriptions of the body. This interpretation is in direct opposition to a biologistic reading of de Beauvoir.

It has been the custom of many commentators to end a discussion of the problem of de Beauvoir’s theory of the relationship between biology and woman’s status as the Other, by claiming that much of de Beauvoir’s work is just plain contradictory, because if de Beauvoir is an existentialist, and hence against essentialism, why does she include such lengthy discussions of biology in her text? Hekman argues that:

The source of the problem is that there is a contradiction between the first and the second parts of her [de Beauvoir’s] book. In the first part she defines woman the other as primordial and necessary…In the second part of the book, however, she takes an entirely different tack. In her analysis of how woman is made, woman becomes a socially constituted being that can, by implication, be constituted differently if different social practices were instituted.

Further, Heinämaa cautions that “[a]s long as we interpret her claims within the sex/gender framework or within the framework of Sartrean philosophy, the book seems self-refuting.” In reality, there is only a change in focus between volume one and volume two of The Second Sex, but not in the general theory. It is my intention to show that if de Beauvoir can be considered a biological essentialist in the way her critics intend it, it cannot be proven with reference to the chapter on biology in The Second Sex.

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I would like to pause for a moment to gesture toward the location of my project in feminist theory. In an attempt to avoid false generalizations about women’s experiences, feminist theorists have created vast amounts of scholarship to the end of avoiding an “essentialist trap.”\(^{31}\) In this branch of scholarship, essentialist undertones detected in a given theoretical text are thought seriously to undermine the credibility of its argument. Indeed, the charge of ‘biologism,’ with its ill-concealed scepticism of the biosciences, can be a very blunt critical instrument when wielded against a text of such wide-ranging complexity and philosophical subtlety as de Beauvoir’s. In this work I hope to not only defend de Beauvoir against the biologistic charge, but to indict this methodological move in feminist scholarship.

This general methodology in feminist theory is most apparent when looking at theories of the body. In response to the essentialist doctrine, theory turned more toward a discursive and postmodern account of the body, as is demonstrated by Butler and the Butlerian apologists. N. Katherine Hayles argues that this “collaborate[s] in creating the dematerilization of embodiment that is one of the characteristic features of postmodern ideology.”\(^{32}\) Indeed, when the body is dematerialized as discourse and performativity, the resultant theoretical abstraction becomes just as deterministic as a materialist essentialism because essentialism can flourish just as easily in the realm of human invention.\(^{33}\) This problem is a result, Hayles argues, of not keeping clear the distinction between “the body” and “embodiment”:

Embodiment differs from the concept of the body in that the body is always normative relative to some set of criteria…[F]or example, embodiment is converted into a body through imaging technologies that create a normalized construct averaged over many data points to give an idealized version of the object in question…Embodiment never coincides exactly with ‘the body,’ however that normalized concept is understood…Relative to the body, embodiment is

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33 Martin, “Methodological Essentialism,” 634.
other and elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities.³⁴

I submit that de Beauvoir’s work is sensitive to this distinction while her critics are not. The focus of my work will be to explicate how the phenomenological tradition distinguishes between the objective body, as the object of scientific investigation, and the lived body, which phenomenology tries to make explicit through description. Some feminist theorists may indeed be frustrating their own ends by replicating the essentialism/anti-essentialism binary they claim to reproach. By being exclusively fixated on the search for essentialism in de Beauvoir’s writing, they fail to see these deficiencies in their own conceptual backdrop. De Beauvoir’s approach contains many suggestions that may indeed help contemporary scholarship move forward from the essentialist/anti-essentialist binary. Her approach is both unafraid to discuss biological influences, yet also does not construct a biological nature meant to foreclose on what Hayles calls “the noise of difference,”³⁵ nor does it discursively separate the subject from its embodiment.

In what follows, I position de Beauvoir within her own philosophical landscape by revealing how her early works constitute a philosophical-phenomenological framework that is sufficient for understanding her philosophical undertaking in “The Givens of Biology”. I locate her within the continental tradition broadly through providing a sketch rather than a detailed account of phenomenology which situates de Beauvoir within the frame of existential phenomenology, with a focus on her existential perspective.³⁶ After explaining de Beauvoir’s concept of the lived body, I will examine in detail the chapter on biology from The Second Sex, reconstructing its

³⁶ This particular structure of approach is indebted to Debra B. Bergoffen The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities (Albany NY: New York UP, 1997); Sara Heinämaa (2003a), Fredrika Scarth (2004), and others.
philosophical and phenomenological arguments, and then I respond to charges that de Beauvoir’s theory is biologicist. This analysis of de Beauvoir will add to our understanding of the developments of the existential-phenomenological movement, and situate itself within the feminist project of problematizing essentialist/anti-essentialist frameworks that only provide superficial readings of the elaborate philosophical tapestry that de Beauvoir wove in *The Second Sex*. 
CHAPTER 2
EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND DE BEAUVOIR’S EARLY WORKS

Recent commentators include introductions to phenomenological concepts in their discussions of *The Second Sex*. I argue that not only phenomenological concepts need to be introduced, but that de Beauvoir’s existential-phenomenological concepts found in her early works must also be understood. These themes include, among others, the phenomenological method itself, intentionality, and a “metaphysical condition”. I also develop the concept of a lived body in de Beauvoir by looking to her own works and her connections with Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. My discussion will contribute to a uniquely de Beauvoirean framework that can relevantly situate “The Givens of Biology” in order to answer charges of biologism. To this end, I will primarily discuss de Beauvoir’s works that predate 1949.

**Section One: The Phenomenological Method**

In this section I situate de Beauvoir in the phenomenological tradition by drawing connections between her and Husserl. I provide a definition and a conceptual backdrop of phenomenology, then I show how the existential phenomenological movement, broadly, veered away from the Husserlian tradition and created its own unique version of phenomenological inquiry. I draw on arguments from Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir to show what modifications are necessary to effect an existential phenomenological turn for understanding “The Givens of Biology.”
In an introduction to de Beauvoir's "Review of The Phenomenology of Perception"

Sara Heinämaa argues that it is essential to read de Beauvoir within the wider phenomenological context because she was apprised of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and many other philosophers years before she engaged with *Being and Nothingness* or *The Phenomenology of Perception*.37 Many other commentators share this sentiment, situating de Beauvoir in a larger phenomenological context.38 De Beauvoir recalls in *The Prime of Life* (1963) that in 1934-5 she had her first encounter with phenomenology. She describes her enthusiasm for phenomenology that began with reading Husserl: 39

Sartre...presented me with the German text of *Leçons sur la conscience interne du temps*, which I stumbled through without too much difficulty. Every time we met we would discuss various passages in it. The novelty and richness of phenomenology filled me with enthusiasm; I felt I had never come so close to the real truth.40

Phenomenology is a way of understanding experience by describing our relationship with the world as embodied subjects. As Heinämaa writes:

The phenomenologist takes a “step back” from the world, he suspends his belief in the presence of the world and the objects that it includes, humans included. The aim, however, is not to examine oneself, but to become aware of one’s *involvement* in the presence of the world and in the constitution of the meaning of “reality.”41

Taking a step back entails that we make a decision about the way we want to understand the world and living bodies. Similarly, Husserl intends phenomenology as a presuppositionless description of the essential features of experience. This descriptive enterprise contrasts with

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39 Simons (2001) argues that de Beauvoir may have misrepresented the exact year in which she first read Husserl. However, Holveck (2002), Heinämaa (2003a, 2003b), Bergoffen (1997), Scarth (2004) all include Husserl as a major influence on de Beauvoir in philosophical approach. Of course, she had many other influences including her teacher Jean Baruzi, Hegel, Bergson, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Kant, Leibniz and the list goes on. I submit that Husserl is an active figure throughout her early works as both an influence and the subject of criticism.


41 Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 13, my emphasis.
viewing bodies from the perspective of natural scientists, which would entail abstracting meaning, value and purpose away from the subject of experience. Phenomenology studies the lived body, or the body as it belongs to a person. Heinämaa elaborates on this, arguing that “[i]n this case, our own activity and interest is not in explaining or predicting the behaviour of others, but in responding to their movements and gestures.” The world is primarily given to us as oriented space that we inhabit. When we approach the body as belonging to a person (the lived body) we study our involvement with the world, we are making explicit our connection with the world through expression, communication and intentionality. This theme of taking a “step back”, not to predict behaviour, but to become aware of our involvement with the world is a recurrent theme throughout de Beauvoir’s works.

De Beauvoir’s approach to philosophical problems in The Second Sex resembles Husserl’s emphasis on using our first-person experience as a critical standard for the kinds of questions that philosophy may pose. To illustrate what is meant by a “critical standard”, I will use Husserl’s work The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness (1905), with which de Beauvoir was familiar. This work is an investigation into the phenomenological experience of comprehending meaning over time. Husserl explains that the philosophical problem of comprehending meaning over time is due to a misunderstanding of what qualifies as a philosophical problem. The problem of meaning comprehension is supposed to refer to how we make sense of the relationship between the first word that we hear through to the last word in a

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42 Ibid., 11.
43 Ibid., 26.
44 In de Beauvoir’s early works, we see that she takes this same approach to ethical works. In “Moral Idealism and Political Realism” she argues against idealism (Kantian rationalism) and realism (Millean consequentialism), by claiming, among other things, that neither of them are true to what moral action is like in the first person. The idealist and realist moral concepts are not true to direct experience. See “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” in Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004 [1945]).
45 Vorlesungen über das innere Zeitbewusstsein aus dem Jahre (1905).
sentence. Where does the meaning “go” when a word leaves our consciousness? Husserl writes that in experience we do not actually have this problem, because the past words are present to consciousness without actually being current. Once again, a philosopher might ask, “but how is that possible?” to which Husserl responds that explanations are not necessary: common sense never questions in this manner. In first person experience, meaning just is comprehended over time. Since we view time only as it is experienced by a person there is no problem of meaning comprehension over time. De Beauvoir endorses this view of first person experience, whereupon direct experience acts as the critical standard which determines the kinds of questions that philosophy may pose. Her discussion of biology carries the theme of viewing biology from the perspective of the experiencing person or organism.

What does it mean to view biology from the perspective of the experiencing person? For an answer to this question, I look to Husserl’s notion of intentionality which was inspired by Brentano. Intentionality is the idea that consciousness is necessarily about something: it has a relational structure that orients it towards something. Intentional connection can be of any object of consciousness, from the Eiffel tower to a unicorn. Sartre echoes this notion claiming, “there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent object.” Husserl argued that the intentional relationship that we bear to the world can only be described, as opposed to deduced from abstract principles, because all judgements, scientific or philosophical, are “traceable back to pre-predicative lived experience.” Intentional, or straightforward consciousness is our

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48 Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience*, 21.
49 This is also called the “natural attitude”, in Husserl. It is termed “consciousness” in Sartre, or “straightforward consciousness” in de Beauvoir, whose terminology I shall adopt.
immediate experience of the world, but according to Husserl it is not itself an accomplished phenomenology.

Husserl argues that we must first perform the epoché, which is similar to Cartesian doubt, but it does not suspend belief in the world, rather it merely shelves our everyday beliefs about the world and is characterized by “abstaining from a stand on validity, value, or existence.”

Husserl writes:

In *transcendental-phenomenological reflection* we deliver ourselves from [straightforward consciousness], by universal epoché with respect to the being or non-being of the world. The experience as thus modified, the *transcendental experience*, consists then, we can say, in our *looking at* and describing the particular transcendentally reduced *cogito*, but without participating, as reflective subjects, in the natural existence-positing that the originally straightforward perception contains or that the Ego, as immersing himself straightforwardly in the world, actually executed….The proper task of reflection, however, is not to repeat the original process, but to consider it and explicate what can be found in it.

Reflection puts us at a distance from straightforward consciousness, and thus, according to Husserl, it allows us to explicate, free from bias, our original intentional relationship with the world. His claim is that there is a transcendental ego that posits essences and is a separate reality from the natural attitude. Not only do we reflect in order to gain understanding, reflection is also a philosophical project that must be performed regarding truths that have formerly been taken for granted, thus leading to Husserl’s recommendation that our attitude toward philosophy be that of a constant beginner.

Husserl takes this particular manner of philosophy to be a journey towards a universal science, a sentiment that Merleau-Ponty echoes. Husserl’s use of “science” is technical in this context; after completing the transcendental reduction, philosophy should:

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52 Ibid., 7.
conform to the simple model of science as a *descriptive enterprise* whose concepts and methods will just ‘spring from’ the intrinsic nature of the objects to be described, and whose goal is the exhaustive characterization of an ontological region that is just *given*, and all of whose properties are determinate and investigation independent.\(^5\)

The notion of philosophy as a descriptive enterprise is essential for understanding a phenomenological project.\(^5^5\) Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty begin to diverge from Husserl at just this location. Although they agree with the spirit of *epoché*—and that pure description is the proper basis for understanding reality\(^5^6\)—they do not consider the transcendentally reduced ego as a real “thing” that elucidates essences. In his critique of Husserl, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937), Sartre argues that not only are there biases in our consciousness of the world, but that we are not able to logically separate ourselves from our connection with the world and complete the reduction to the transcendental ego. He further argues against Husserl’s claim that the ego “stands behind” consciousness and allows us to posit essences, when rather, the ego is given only through reflective consciousness: it is a secondary reality, and by nature, figurative.\(^5^7\) Sartre argues that if it was the case that our ego was a separate reality, then it would be indifferent to the objects in the world, and this cannot be the case because we are never indifferent.\(^5^8\) De Beauvoir carries on this theme in *Pyrrhus and

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\(^5^5\) De Beauvoir’s goal is also description in *The Second Sex*: “It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.” (de Beauvoir, SS, xxxvi; LDS II, 9)

\(^5^6\) De Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that “phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external world, whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however, contest” [de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1976 [1948]) 14.]

\(^5^7\) “Thus the Ego appears to consciousness as a transcendent in-itself, as an existent in the human world, not as of the nature of consciousness” (Sartre, BN, 156).

Cineas (1944) claiming that we are not indifferent egos separate from the living world. Instead, “I am [first a] spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts.”

For de Beauvoir, our intentional connection to the world is never indifferent, as it would have to be for the transcendentally reduced ego. Merleau-Ponty carries this theme in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, claiming that the most important lesson to learn from Husserl’s phenomenological reduction is

[the] impossibility of a complete reduction….If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on which we are trying to seize, there is no thought which embraces all our thought.

Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and de Beauvoir hold that the pre-theoretical and straightforward aspects of consciousness carry the fundamental truths of our connection with the world and that the task of phenomenology is not to put aside straightforward consciousness so as to describe what is really “underneath” our naïve belief in the world, but rather to describe immediate experience. The existential phenomenological movement, if it is a description of straightforward consciousness, motility, and action, is therefore a philosophy that begins with the first-person subjectivity of the individual.

Husserlian phenomenology holds that consciousness is transcendent: its intentionality is of objects. Husserl then promotes a “step back” from straightforward consciousness, by means of

60 She argues against this again in *The Second Sex*: “But it is doubtless impossible to approach any human problem with a mind free from bias. The way in which questions are posed, the point of views assumed, presuppose a relativity of interest” (SS, xxxiv; LDS, I, 33).
61 Merleau-Ponty argues for more of a middle ground on the dispute between Husserl and Sartre. Instead of the epoché delivering us from the natural attitude, he argues that reflection slackens the intentional threads that hold us to the world (Merleau-Ponty, POP, 78).
62 Merleau-Ponty, POP, xv.
63 Again she writes: “[T]here is no project which is purely contemplative since one always projects himself toward something, toward the future; to put oneself ‘outside’ is still a way of living the inescapable fact that one is inside” (de Beauvoir, EA, 76).
the epoché, which aims to put us at a distance from the world, so that we may intuit the essential structures of our experience. Phenomenology has a different aim than other philosophies, where it intends to provide a description of experience, rather than deduction of consequents, explanation of facts, or construction of theories. The existential phenomenological movement modified this turn to description by moving the focus to straightforward consciousness, rather than away from it. Existential phenomenology describes the world as it is experienced by a subject. Our access to the world is always in perspective, and existential phenomenology aims to make explicit the way that we experience the intentional connection that we bear to the world.

Section Two de Beauvoir’s Phenomenology

There have been many volumes published on de Beauvoir’s phenomenology, but they tend to focus on her methods developed in The Second Sex. I submit that she develops many themes that predate The Second Sex which are similar to yet distinct from Sartre’s. De Beauvoir’s expansion of Husserlian phenomenology does not fit the pattern of traditional philosophy, and this has contributed to the overlooking of the philosophical content in de Beauvoir's novels and The Second Sex, not to mention her early philosophical essays. Heinämaa stresses that de Beauvoir's rejection of systematic philosophy is not a rejection of “philosophy for art, but a rejection of philosophical systems that do not pay attention to the plurality of living experience.

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64 My focus is developing philosophical themes in de Beauvoir’s works in relation to Sartre’s where necessary, while remaining mindful of the differences. I do not highlight the differences specifically, for a discussion of the differences themselves see: Kristana Arp, The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir’s Existentialist Ethics (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing, 2001); Mahon (1997); Heinämaa (2003b); Simons, (1999, 2000, 2001); and Ursula Tidd, Simone de Beauvoir (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

65 This is also a contributing factor to her refusal to be labelled as a philosopher: “I had no philosophical ambition” (de Beauvoir, Force of Circumstance (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1965 [1963]) 12. Here, she is not rejecting philosophy, rather, she is rejecting philosophy that builds abstract systems that report to be absolute.
Indeed, phenomenology is a different kind of philosophy and the aim of phenomenological inquiry must always be kept in mind when reading de Beauvoir.

I have recounted the development of intentionality in Husserl and its development into a turn to first-person subjectivity, as found in Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir. In this section I explore de Beauvoir’s concept of intentionality that is, I submit, distinct from that of Sartre and others, and will aid in understanding “The Givens of Biology.” I will also show that de Beauvoir’s account cannot easily be charged with negativity by giving a detailed discussion of the charge of negativity in Chapter Three. For now, it shall suffice to continue to build the phenomenological and ontological landscape in which de Beauvoir writes. I then explain her account of the “disclosure of being,” her focus on literature as a phenomenological tool, her notion of a “project,” her preliminary philosophy, and her early rejection of evolutionary psychology.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir argues that a human is “a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being.” Kristana Arp argues that this is Husserlian intentionality couched in Sartrean language. Indeed, this is a description of one’s experience of intentionality: as human beings we are at a distance from ourselves in order to be conscious of the world. According to Bergoffen, de Beauvoir describes intentional experience in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as comprising two moments: “a moment that discloses being, and a moment that identifies the disclosing I with the being it discloses.” This echoes Sartre as he writes that “every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional

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66 Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 17.
69 Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 76.
consciousness of itself.” Thus, intentionality, or consciousness of objects is also implicitly a reflexive self-consciousness. Bergoffen argues that de Beauvoir’s new insight is that this double structure of human consciousness, which she labels the ambiguity of consciousness, is enveloped in a mood, which The Ethics of Ambiguity tries to make explicit. In the work, de Beauvoir upsets the equilibrium between consciousness and implicit self-consciousness by privileging the initial moment of the disclosure of being and by locating the joy of existence in the appropriating and revealing of being. Disclosure is an embodied expression of existence that is a function of our physiological possibilities, and the disclosure of being is a joyous enterprise where one casts oneself into the world. As a result, the first move of consciousness is joyous and the second is an assertion of self, which includes the desire for being.

De Beauvoir is responding here to Sartre’s extensive account of human failure. A person can be said to be in bad faith when they desire not to be free, and consequently “deceive” themselves that they are not. For Sartre, and de Beauvoir, bad faith is inevitable; however, Bergoffen argues that Sartre “establishes an essential relationship between the experience of freedom and the experience of anxiety.” The experience of anxiety, de Beauvoir argues, is only one half of the second move of intentionality. We can return to the first upsurge of intentionality and desire the joyous disclosure of being where disclosure is our primary attachment to being: “There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship ‘wanting to be’, but rather

70 Sartre, BN, 13.
71 Bergoffen, The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir.
72 Implicit self-conscious is well explained by Sartre: “[F]or if my consciousness were not consciousness of being conscious of the table, it would then be consciousness of that table, without consciousness of being so. In other words, it would be a consciousness ignorant of itself, an unconscious – which is absurd” (Sartre, BN, 11).
73 Bergoffen, The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, 76.
74 “[Endowing the world with human signification] manifest[s] existence as a happiness and the world as a source of joy” (de Beauvoir, EA, 41).
75 Bergoffen, The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, 81, my emphasis.
‘wanting to disclose being.’ Now, here there is not failure, but rather success.”76 De Beauvoir’s phenomenology is one that tries to make explicit the ebb and flow between the two types of intentionality, where her ethics act as a guidebook on how to return to the original moment of disclosure. The account of intentionality that I build here, with help from Bergoffen is important, not only for ontologically situating de Beauvoir, but also to highlight her concentration on the instances of joy at the disclosure of being. If our fundamental relationship with the world is joyous, then it can hardly be said that de Beauvoir is negative about the effect that biology has on women’s prospects for free expression.77

I will deal with whether or not de Beauvoir is negative in her treatment of embodiment in chapter three, but for now it is important to pause for a moment and wonder what is meant by this question of negativity? Is it the use of words with negative connotations? If it is, then it can hardly be said that the meanings of certain words have a fixed negative meaning, in fact, we can never know if she would have considered her own writings to be in a negative register. I submit that this charge of negativity holds that de Beauvoir paints female embodiment as “lower” and more mired in immanence, or the tyranny of biological processes, than a man’s and hence, they have a lessened chance of denying to be the Other. This is a more specific arena of the more general charge against existentialism, which is notorious for being received as a pessimistic world view. I pause because this criticism would be far less forceful had it not taken until 2004 for an English publication of What is Existentialism? (1945) to be released. In the work, de Beauvoir argues directly against the charge that existentialism is a pessimistic philosophy. And to be sure, the existentialism she defends is not from behind the shadow of Sartre, although she

76 De Beauvoir, EA, 12.
77 She has a particular focus on this joyous relation to the world in Pyrrhus and Cineas. She gives extensive space in the work to an analysis of generosity, joy, and devotion. Generosity is an ethical attitude that Pyrrhus and Cineas tries to make explicit.
declares her debt to him at many turns. In the work de Beauvoir accuses “popular wisdom” of being the truly pessimistic. By “popular wisdom” she means Kantianism, the ethics of self-interest, Christianity, Marxism and others. Existentialism, therefore, is the only optimistic philosophy: “To define man as freedom has always appeared as the distinctive feature of optimistic philosophers. And so it is false to consider existentialism as a doctrine of despair – far from it.” We can infer from this that de Beauvoir does not consider existentialism, as a whole, to be negative or pessimistic.

Amongst de Beauvoir’s early works, phenomenological themes are nowhere more apparent than in Literature and Metaphysics (1946). In Holveck’s book Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics (2002), she explains de Beauvoir’s philosophy of lived experience in contrast with systematic or abstract philosophy. According to de Beauvoir, abstract philosophy makes the mistake of asserting only itself as real, and through “[positing] the subjectivity and historicity of experience as negligible, it obviously excludes any other manifestation of the truth.” She argues against “false naturalistic objectivity” by stressing that a philosophy of lived experience makes embodied experience of the world primary over second-order expressions in abstractions, or even thought itself. Here, De Beauvoir, like Husserl, is treating direct experience as a critical standard for what qualifies as a philosophical problem.

78 This particular characterization of influence is indebted to Debra B. Bergoffen. In her work The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, she is cautious, yet realistic at every turn in discussing the philosophical relationship of influence between de Beauvoir and Sartre. Indeed, this is no small task: a more unique philosophical and life partnership has never been seen.


80 Ibid., 273-274.

81 Ibid., 275.
In her discussions of literature, de Beauvoir focuses on direct experience and phenomenological descriptions of all aspects of experience. She writes:

For the writer, [literature] is not a matter of exploiting on a literary plane truths established beforehand on the philosophical plane, but, rather, of manifesting an aspect of metaphysical experience that cannot otherwise be manifested: its subjective, singular, and dramatic character, as well as its ambiguity. Since reality is not defined as graspable by the intelligence alone, no intellectual description could give an adequate expression of it. One must attempt to present it in its integrity, as it is disclosed in the living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought.82

Husserl also emphasised the superiority of fiction for aiding in our understanding of experience because in imagination we can test the limits of concepts by imagining experience differently in a process that he termed the “free variation of essences in imagination.”83 Fiction propels us back to the moment when objects are disclosed: our original relation with the world.84 The understanding that we can have of our embodiment and the world is interrelated and the description that we come up with must be compatible with direct experience. The meaning of these experiences is not graspable in a purely thought-based theory, because it is disclosed to us “in the overall relation we sustain with [the world] which is action, emotion, and feeling.”85 Thus, like Husserl, our involvement with the world is the focus of her inquiry, and this includes the relation that we have with other people and with biological givens. De Beauvoir writes that “empiricism is false because science begins only when the individual fact is surpassed toward a general theory.”86 It is this “surpassing toward a general theory” that creates distance between the actual concrete lived experience and generalizations that hope to encapsulate it.

In Pyrrhus and Cineas de Beauvoir demonstrates the Existential basis of her phenomenology. The Existential tradition holds that because there is no pre-ordained destiny for

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82 Ibid., 274-5.
83 Holveck, Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience, 24.
84 Ibid., 17.
humans, they must then create themselves through projects and engagements with the world and others. De Beauvoir writes: “[Man] is constitutively oriented toward something other than himself.”\(^87\) What we are oriented towards is up to us:

A project is exactly what it decides to be. It has the meaning that it gives itself. One cannot define it from the outside. It is [never] contradictory; it is possible and coherent as soon as it exists, and it exists as soon as a man makes it exist.\(^88\)

This gives us context to understand de Beauvoir’s account of how our existence finds its meaning. When we engage in a project we imbue our engagement with meaning. This also gives us a clue to her account of time, because the transcendence of our being is revealed to us through time. If we were just body, then there would be true “rest” or respite, but because we are oriented toward the future\(^89\) we do not exist statically, we are always actively involved in the constitution of our surroundings.

At the very beginning of her philosophical training, de Beauvoir wrote *Analysis of Claude Bernard’s Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* in 1924. She was sixteen years old and a student in a senior-level philosophy class at the Institut Adeline-Désir.\(^90\) Bernard’s work focuses on taking no biases or background assumptions for granted when performing scientific observation. He argues for a theoretical difference between observation and experiment, whereupon the first is the means by which we have contact with existing phenomena, and the second is the means by which we gain understanding of meaning. The two

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\(^87\) De Beauvoir, PC, 97.
\(^88\) Ibid., 100.
\(^89\) Ibid., 95.
cannot be separated, they only “serve as starting point and conclusion for experimental
reasoning, outside of which there are only concrete facts.”\(^9\) De Beauvoir writes:

But one must notice that the experimental method is concerned only with objective truths. The
truth appears to us only as relative since we do not know the primary causes and the essence of
things...[I]n the objective sciences, the principle of things is unknown to us, and even if we want
to determine it subjectively, we must rely on an experimental and relative criterion, instead of a
criterion that is interior and absolute.\(^9\)

Margaret Simons argues that this shows:

Her [de Beauvoir’s] rejection of philosophical absolutes and turn to the ‘disclosure’ of concrete
reality, traditionally assumed to reflect the influence of Bergson’s philosophy and Husserlian
phenomenology, are already suggested in her 1924 student essay on the philosopher of science
Claude Bernard. Scientific discoveries, according to Bernard, require the rejection of
philosophical absolutes and the assumption of one’s freedom. Beauvoir’s later concept of
philosophy as a way of life, with its call to reject the quest for being, embrace the exhilarating if
uncomfortable reality of one’s freedom, and pursue the disclosure of being, seems to reflect
Bernard’s philosophy.\(^7\)

Although Analysis is a short student essay, it demonstrates that de Beauvoir was attuned to the
subjective aspects involved in scientific claims, which aim at an objective and absolute truth.
She praises “fertile” doubt, and agrees with Bernard that “the greatest error of the experimenter
would be to take truths that are merely relative as absolutes.”\(^4\) If I am right that de Beauvoir is
not using biological facts in The Second Sex as absolutes, but rather as information for
understanding our involvement with the world, then she would be following her own advice
from the Analysis.

In Pyrrhus and Cineas we see an outstanding example of the treatment of an abstract scientific
type being held to the critical standard of lived experience. De Beauvoir discusses

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\(^7\) Ibid., 25-26.

\(^7\) Margaret A. Simons. Introduction to Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004 [1924]) 7.

individual concerned as a person with purpose, meaning, and value. She writes that as a theory of human behaviour, evolution puts forward motives, drives, and success relevant to our actions that are never given in direct experience. A theory of behaviour would assume a certain continuity that would hold together the different members of the species, but when we consult our direct experience, we see that we do not initially experience the world the same as everyone else, but rather, we experience ourselves as foreign, different than others, and at times, opposed to them: “The myth of evolution assumes a human continuity.”

This continuity is never given in experience, rather:

Undoubtedly it is always possible to use a collective noun for the ensemble of men, but this would be to consider them from the outside, as objects unified by the space that they take up. This collectivity would be only a herd of intelligent animals. We have nothing to do with this given, fixed in the plentitude of its being.

Thus, evolution is not a description of experience from the perspective of an embodied subject.

Sartre explains this succinctly, stating that “[the] study of exteriority, […] is anatomy. The synthetic reconstitution of the living person from the standpoint of a corpse is physiology.” By extension, the “study” of our intentional connection with the world is phenomenology, which is not a proper study, but rather it consists in understanding the commonalities in multiple descriptions of embodied experience: a synthetic anthropology. To view humans synthetically is to understand that they share a common metaphysical condition rather than a nature. For example, common to a metaphysical condition is the necessity of being born, dying, finitude, other consciousnesses, and most importantly the task of having to create ourselves: freedom. It is the explication of this metaphysical condition that is the task of The Second Sex. I submit that

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95 De Beauvoir, PC, 109.
96 Ibid., 106, my emphasis.
97 Sartre, BN, 457.
99 Ibid.
most previous commentators have not understood the concept of a synthetic anthropology and that this has mislead commentators to think of a metaphysical condition as the same thing as a destiny, or an essential nature.\textsuperscript{100}

De Beauvoir’s situatedness in phenomenology is revealed by her focus on describing the intentional connection that we bear with the world. This is the initial moment of consciousness, the disclosure of being. She describes humans in terms of their freedom because according to existential phenomenology, we are what we make ourselves through our projects. De Beauvoir focuses on literature’s ability to reveal the singular and subjective character of an individual’s metaphysical condition, ultimately rejecting philosophical and scientific absolutes that aim at explaining and predicting behaviour. These explanations are never given in concrete experience, which is the critical standard for her phenomenology. Concrete experience is elucidated through understanding the subject in terms of action, emotion, and motility. I now turn to the description of the lived body.

**Section Three: The Immediate Structures of the Lived Body**

De Beauvoir’s most prominent development of a conception of embodiment is found in *The Second Sex*. For philosophical background, it serves to take a look at the concept of the lived body in Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, because as de Beauvoir states early in *The Second Sex*:

[T]he body is not a *thing*, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty…Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the

\textsuperscript{100} This difference between an essential nature and a metaphysical condition is a fine line to walk and must be understood contextually in each passage in *The Second Sex*. She writes that biology and sexuality are one aspect of information that is added to help understand the human situation, or metaphysical condition: they are not exhaustive in defining human existence they add to the “totality of a situation that they only help[…]to define.” (de Beauvoir, SS, 717; LDS II 634).
body on a basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science; whenever the physiological fact takes on meaning, this meaning is at once seen as dependent on a whole context.\textsuperscript{101}

But what does it really mean to interpret the body as the basis of existence? As we learned from Sartre, because reality is presented to us in \textit{perspective}, description makes explicit our involvement in the constitution of the world. Description of our intentional connection with the world is primary because there is no more basic reality than the lived body. The phenomenological description of embodiment is already in the most basic terms possible: it is ground-level in ontology, rather than the “real” story of the body being an explanation offered by the biological sciences. Notice again how this turns upside-down the tendency in philosophy to privilege scientific knowledge claims as unquestionable truths, but in this case de Beauvoir is using the term “fact” in many ways. First, she uses it to refer to the fact of our \textit{existence}, which is the lived body. So, \textit{that} our body is primarily lived, is a fact of our \textit{existence}, it is an essential feature of our metaphysical condition, and the second step of phenomenology is to gain understanding of the lived body through description. Because we find that some experiences are opaque, or \textit{ambiguous} we do not gain “knowledge” or “facts” about the lived body, we gain understanding of particular embodiments. Another way of using the term “fact” is in the sense that a biologist might. This will serve us as a useful distinction: a fact of our metaphysical condition or \textit{existence}\textsuperscript{102} is revealed by phenomenology, while an exterior reality is a fact of science. These facts are about different \textit{kinds} of relationships. Sartre explains that the relationship between a non-lived body and the world is an \textit{objective} relationship (fact of science), whereas the relationship between the lived body and the world is \textit{existential} (a fact of our metaphysical condition).\textsuperscript{103}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{101} SS, 34; LDS I, 75-76.
\textsuperscript{102} I shall be using “existence” and “metaphysical condition” interchangeably.
\textsuperscript{103} Sartre, BN, 434.
\end{footnotesize}
The body is the perspective that our existence takes on the world. The lived body is what
projects us intentionally into the world. It is the site of our transcendence. I remind the reader
that de Beauvoir claims to be adopting the positions of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. In
many ways their theories are not consistent with one another, so in my exposition I have focused
on what I believe to be either concepts that are relatively consistent among all three, or concepts
that de Beauvoir herself stresses. I will paint a fuller picture of what her concept of the lived
body was going into the writing of The Second Sex so that my exposition remains faithful to the
many nuances intended in the text. To this end, I will briefly sketch a theory of the lived body in
Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, with a brief refresher on Husserl’s discussion
of the body.

The existentialists—Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir—turn to the
first-person experience of embodiment which flows out from the phenomenology of Husserl.
Heinämaa argues that not only are the existentialists mutually-influential on each other, but that
Husserl is still a background figure that shapes subsequent works, especially de Beauvoir’s,
notion of the lived body. In The Ethics of Ambiguity, and throughout The Second Sex, de
Beauvoir makes repeated reference to becoming made aware of our involvement with the world
and others, and also of the lived body, both of which are reoccurring themes in Husserl’s work.
Husserl’s notion of the lived body is that it differs essentially from material objects, as Heinämaa
clarifies:

Husserl [points] out that the body presents itself to us in two different ways: as the
starting point of all our activities (Leib), and as a passive resistant object (Körper). He then
argues that the living body is primary and that it appears essentially as the expression and
instrument of the spirit. It is not a separate reality, but it is the horizon of all our activities, both
eyeryday dealings and scientific idealizations.105

104 Heinämaa, Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference, 11-13.
The lived body is a primary reality that appears to us, at times, as a passive resistant object. It is both our expression in the world, and a part of the material world. This duality is one of the many phenomena of lived experience that de Beauvoir terms “ambiguity.”

The phenomenology of Heidegger also flows from the Husserlian tradition where the primary self-world connection is intentional. Heidegger, however, argues that the connection is primarily one of care, and this forms a Mitsein, or being-with: “human beings are primordially bonded together in some salutatory way…socially, psychologically, [and] biologically.”106 That is to say, an accurate account of experience must include reference to another being for whom the description must matter. De Beauvoir discusses this in Pyrrhus and Cineas:

There exists no privileged spot in the world about which [man] can safely say, ‘This is me.’ He is constitutively oriented toward something other than himself. He is himself only through relationships with something other than himself. ‘Man is always infinitely more than he would be if he were reduced to what he is in the instant,’ says Heidegger.”107

De Beauvoir modifies this slightly, and creates distance between her view and Heidegger’s. She maintains that we are, to some extent, isolated in our subjectivity, and that, instead of being inextricably linked to us, others provide us with a foundation from which to assert our projects.

In The Ethics of Ambiguity de Beauvoir argues that the individual is dependent on human connection, not only in the social sense of development and nurturing, but also in the ontological sense. There is an “original helplessness from which man surges up.”108 Our status is ambiguous because at the same time, we are both individuals, and members of a collectivity.

Bauer shows that for de Beauvoir, the recognition of others, and the fact that we share a meaningful human world together, “leaves open the possibility that I may invite them to judge me freely, not as I wish to be reified, but as they genuinely – in their own assumed freedom – are

106 Nancy Bauer, Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism (New York: Columbia UP, 2001) 86.
107 De Beauvoir, PC, 97-8, my emphasis.
108 De Beauvoir, EA, 12.
inclined to experience me.”\textsuperscript{109} We find our being through projects in relation with others, as de Beauvoir writes “[my] essential need is therefore to be faced with free men. My project loses all meaning, not if my death is announced, but if the end of the world is announced to me. The time of scorn is also that of despair.”\textsuperscript{110} This modification of the Heideggerian view provides insight into de Beauvoir’s notion of the lived body: it is lived in situation first, which includes a human world of meaning and significance, but we are also isolated enough in our subjectivity that we can strive for recognition and the free relations with others.

Another shared theme between Heidegger and de Beauvoir is an anti-reductionism about the lived body. Bauer argues that because the individual must be understood in her entire situation, philosophical inquiry must not reduce contextual human experience to scientific explanations. In a wide reading of the term “reductionism” every phenomenon can be reduced to its microphysical particles, thereby annihilating the subjective observer. “Anti-reductionism” is the idea that lived experience contains meaning that is not captured in a third-personalized explanation of the body. Bauer writes:

Now, Heidegger would not want to deny that people’s bodies are made up of particles or even that one day we might be able to provide an exhaustive causal explanation at the level of microphysics for why composite objects, even people, behave as they do. What he would want to deny is that philosophy makes any serious progress by approaching the question of existence in the way that [a reductionist] approaches it…Heideggerian ontological investigation forbids the wrenching of the object of study from its context, or contexts, of human meaning.\textsuperscript{111}

In \textit{Literature and Metaphysics} de Beauvoir repudiates the reductionist view: “today we are no longer dupes of a false naturalistic objectivity.”\textsuperscript{112} The anti-reductionism of de Beauvoir asks us to remain conscious of a description of experience as it is \textit{lived}, rather than as it is explained by science. This creed applies most aptly to the lived body, which is the focus of this inquiry. At a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{109} Bauer, 87.
\textsuperscript{110} De Beauvoir, PC, 129.
\textsuperscript{111} Bauer, \textit{Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism}, 71-2.
\textsuperscript{112} De Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 275.
\end{flushleft}
minimum, de Beauvoir and Heidegger share a focus of inquiry, arguing that we must investigate
the world with regard to our connection to it and that the body as it is lived can only be
described. That is to say, there is no further underlying reality as with an empiricist view which
refers to an underlying micro-account. Of course, there are many descriptions that can be made
of a non-lived body, think of DNA or evolutionary psychology, but what they are describing is
the non-lived body. The lived body is a basic metaphysical reality that can be described
accurately only from the first-person perspective of the one who lives it. De Beauvoir also
claims that there is a connection with the lived body in Sartre’s work, and it is to this that I now
turn.

One of the reasons that commentators have either criticized de Beauvoir, or tried to distance her
view from Sartre’s, is that they see problems with his dualistic ontology of pour-soi and en-soi.
The received view is that he replicates Cartesian dualism, where the pour-soi is active
consciousness and en-soi is inert body:

Sartre’s account tends to view the body as a passive instrument subject to the mind’s wilful
control. This neglects some of the sophisticated ways in which we can experience our bodies,
psychologically and physiologically, and the relation of these experiences to socio-political
bodily interdictions.113

I do not deny that Sartre’s account of embodiment leaves us wondering about the body subject to
social taboos, but I submit that his account is not one in which the “mind” controls the “body.”
For Sartre, the body is always the lived body: his account is dualistic, but not Cartesian. In fact,
he argues against Cartesian dualism:

If I apprehend my body as an instrument […] it demands an instrument to manage it; and if we
refuse to conceive of this appeal to infinity, then we must of necessity admit that paradox of a
physical instrument handled by a soul, which, as we know, causes us to fall into inextricable
aporias.114

113 Tidd, Simone de Beauvoir. 58.
114 Sartre, BN, 423.
Instead, he argues that the connection between consciousness and body is one that is different in kind from any other. Sartre writes: “It would be best to say, using ‘exist’ as a transitive verb – that consciousness exists its body.” In experience, consciousness and body are contemporaneous: they both physically exist and we can know the lived body only from the perspective of subjectivity. But, if the pour-soi is a physical thing, then why must only a first-person description of the body suffice? Would not a third-person description offered by science be adequate?

Sartre argues that there is no objective third-personalization of subjectivity that can be offered because all objects are fundamentally revealed to us in perspective. A third-personalization of the body answers a different question than a phenomenological description does. We can only answer the question of the metaphysical conditions of the pour-soi by describing our engagement in the world because the pour-soi is the transcendental condition that makes the world exist for me. He writes:

Thus it is the upsurge of the for-itself in the world which by the same stroke causes the world to exist as the totality of things and causes senses to exist as the objective mode in which the qualities of things are presented. What is fundamental is my relation to the senses according to the point of view which is adopted. Blindness, Daltonism, myopia originally represent the way in which there is a world for me; that is, they define my visual sense in so far as this is the facticity of my upsurge.

115 Ibid., 434.
116 Ibid., 427.
117 For example, the description of hunger from the perspective of a pour-soi would be: a desire for food, a nauseous feeling, stomach pain, lightheadedness, irritability etc. The description of hunger, not as it is lived, but as it is understood from the third-person would be a causal-story about, say, neurobiological processes, blood glucose levels and muscle contractions in the stomach.
118 For example, a third-personalization of the body answers the question: “How is the non-lived body constituted or explained?”
119 What is also meant by this is the essential features of the pour-soi, the what-it-is-likeness of consciousness, or the subjective feel of embodiment.
120 Pour-soi.
121 Red-green colorblindness.
122 Here “facticity of my upsurge” also refers to what I mean by “metaphysical condition” (Sartre, BN, 421).
So, if I have myopia, the myopia is the way in which I have visual capacities. Our lived body, according to Sartre, is our manner of being in the world.\textsuperscript{123} The relationship between a lived body and the world is existential,\textsuperscript{124} and therefore different in kind than the relationship between the non-lived body and the world, which is objective. We can describe non-lived myopia, which would be informative for understanding what causes myopia, but that description would not serve a phenomenological project that holds the lived body as a primary and irreducible reality. For Sartre, as it is for de Beauvoir, the lived body is an existential entity that is fundamentally different than other objects in the world.

The lived body in Merleau-Ponty’s writing is very influential for de Beauvoir and in her “A Review of The Phenomenology of Perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty” (1945) she explains his phenomenological method and succinctly describes the main themes of Merleau-Ponty’s work. Normally, it may not be very rigorous to consider a review of a work as an endorsement of it, but in A Review, de Beauvoir clearly praises not only the work, but also its conclusions. She says concisely “one of the main merits of this book is that it’s convincing.”\textsuperscript{125} De Beauvoir further praises Merleau-Ponty:

One of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of the subject and the object. It is impossible to define an object in cutting it off from the subject through which and for which it is an object; and the subject reveals itself only through the objects in which it is engaged.\textsuperscript{126}

Again the inextricable link of the subject with the world is evoked in order to undermine theory which treats purely objective descriptions as primary. The relationships of subject to object and

\textsuperscript{123} I submit that this is also the sense in which de Beauvoir means the body as the basis of existence (SS, 34; LDS I, 75-76).
\textsuperscript{124} Sartre, BN, 434.
\textsuperscript{125} De Beauvoir, PC, 164.
object to subject, are inextricable in lived experience. This notion can be further understood through an investigation into Gestalt psychology, an area of study that had great influence on Merleau-Ponty.

The German word “Gestalt” has two meanings, it can mean form or shape, but it also refers to the total meaning of a concrete entity, which may have shape as one of its characteristics. A more technical definition of Gestalt is an organized whole whose parts “belong together, as opposed to being simply juxtaposed or randomly distributed.” Often a melody is used as a typical example of a Gestalt where a certain arrangement of individual notes becomes recognizable as a melody. However, when a melody is transposed, the melody is still recognizable—it has unity—so a melody cannot simply be reduced to its individual parts if it survives a complete change of components. This occurs because it is not just the individual notes that matter, but the relationship between them. Wertheimer explains that:

[t]he fundamental ‘formula’ of Gestalt theory might be expressed in this way. There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the aim of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes.

Merleau-Ponty translates this into a transcendental argument, such that the fact that we perceive organized wholes is a minimal pre-condition for us to perceive. In other words, perception is not immediately dependent only on sense organs: “the smallest sensory datum is never presented in

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127 In Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, he argues that our subjectivity can extend into the total sketch of our being and incorporate material objects. For example, a blind person who uses a cane senses the world in the cane. The blind person does not apprehend movement in the hand and then “judge” a spatial relation to an object. The object is there to his consciousness as it would be with sight. “The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight” (Merleau-Ponty, POP, 165).


any other way than integrated into a configuration and already ‘patterned’.” Merleau-Ponty contrasts this notion with what he terms a “mosaic psychology” where each bit of “sense data” is an isolated datum of experience. Rather, he argues that perception is dependent on Gestals, and in order for perception to be “patterned” in this way, it must involve a subjectivity that constitutes a reality by living it. De Beauvoir explicitly rejects the mosaic theory in *The Second Sex*:

But the concept of a simple association of elements is unacceptable, for the psychic life is not a mosaic, it is a single whole in every one of its aspects and we must respect that unity. This is possible only by our recovering through the disparate facts the original purposiveness of existence. If we do not go back to this source, man appears to be the battleground of compulsions and prohibitions that alike are devoid of meaning and incidental.

Our primary relationship with the world is perception by way of Gestals. De Beauvoir praises Merleau-Ponty for calling attention to a distinction that originated in Gestalt psychology. In her review she argues that the distinction between the “abstract” and “concrete” attitude is, “the most definitive of the book.” Merleau-Ponty cites Gestalt researchers who investigate cases of brain injuries and found evidence for what they termed “the abstract attitude.” To avoid confusion, the use of “attitude” is technical: defined as “a capacity level of the total personality in a specific plane of activity. Each one furnishes the basis for all performances pertaining to a specific plane of activity.” For example, a sexual attitude would furnish a ground level of sexual meaning that would present possible actions and movements to our consciousness. The discovery of an “abstract attitude” led Gestalt researchers to be hesitant that science, as traditionally conceived, could accurately describe the behavioural deficiencies in

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131 Merleau-Ponty, POP, 184.
132 Think of Berkeley’s idea theory of perception, Hume’s impressions, or Descartes’ sensory perceptions.
133 SS, 44-45; LDS I, 87, my emphasis.
a growing number of patients with brain injuries. Their claim is that the “normal” person is capable of assuming at least two different attitudes toward the same thing. First, the abstract attitude envisions possible movements such as pointing or dancing. The abstract attitude is the means by which we are aware of *more* than what is immediately given. As far as capabilities are concerned, if we are capable of assuming an abstract attitude towards something, our bodies are “intact as a vehicle of [our] being.” Second, the concrete attitude presents possible movements that appear as habitual, such as grasping, or scratching your nose. The concrete attitude is realistic: it does not require that one knows what one is doing. The person is “surrendered to experiences of an unreflective character.” With concrete movement:

The patient is conscious of his bodily space as the matrix of his habitual action, but not as an objective setting; his body is at his disposal as a means of ingress into a familiar surrounding, but not as the means of expression of a gratuitous and free spatial thought.

The abstract attitude is what allows human beings to accomplish phenomenological descriptions by making explicit our unreflective experiences. Merleau-Ponty argues this point by invoking numerous psychological studies where patients have had damage to their brains in the occipital region. For example, one patient has lost the capacity for assuming an abstract attitude, while retaining the ability for the concrete:

[The patient’s] trouble affects motility and thought as well as perception… [W]hat it damages, particularly in the domain of thought, is his power of apprehending simultaneous wholes [Gestalts], and in the matter of motility, that, so to speak, of taking a bird’s-eye view of movement and projecting it outside himself.

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140 Ibid., 146.
The patient’s deficiency is explainable with reference to changes in his biological or objective body, but also with reference to a perceptual deficit that affects his lived body. His intentional connection with the world has changed: he no longer “has” a wide range of perceptual meaning that is available in the normal case. The point of this distinction is to argue that in the non-brain injured case, if we start from the experience of our bodies, the represented body (abstract attitude) and the lived body (concrete attitude) are two different things, even for us. This distinction will serve de Beauvoir in her discussion of biology, not in abnormal cases, but in the case of different lived bodies. The objective or represented body of a woman and her lived body are two different things; the lived body is what presents to us a world of possible perceptual discriminations that is described for the purposes of understanding how it is lived by a person, and the objective body is an abstraction created by scientific explanations for purposes of predicting and explaining behaviour.

For Merleau-Ponty, we not only perceive based on Gestalts, but the lived body functions on a Gestalt structure of figure/background. A figure/background structure is one in which the organized whole that is a dialectical movement between what we immediately perceive (figure) and the elimination of other information (background). Imagine looking at the Eifel tower: in looking at the tower, the tower becomes foreground, while the background melts away. But draw your attention to only the front right leg of the tower, and the top of the tower along with the landscape has become background. Merleau-Ponty argues that our being-in-the-world functions on a figure/background structure, and further that when we start with experience, there is no mind/body problem. Our body is an anonymous background on which certain areas are presented as foreground for consciousness, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a region of our body “sheds

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its anonymity” when it announces itself to consciousness.\textsuperscript{142} This is the flow of perceptual discrimination between figure and background, both for the lived body and objects in the world. He states that:

One’s own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space.\textsuperscript{143}

Another type of figure/background that we experience is movement. Each act of motility has a background and a foreground: it is unified in a particular Gestalt. Merleau-Ponty writes:

If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands…the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet...[I]f my body can be a ‘form’ and if there can be, in front of it, important figures against indifferent backgrounds, this occurs in virtue of its being polarized by its tasks, of its \textit{existence towards} them.\textsuperscript{144}

This figure/background structure can also occur with objects that we incorporate in the total sketch of our being. We can extend the figure of our consciousness into a larger background:

A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is...The example of instrumentalists shows even better how habit has its abode neither in thought not in the objective body, but in the body as mediator of a world.\textsuperscript{145}

De Beauvoir writes something very similar in \textit{Pyrrhus and Cineas}: “[Enjoyment is when] I leave myself and engage my being in the world through the object that I am enjoying.”\textsuperscript{146} Merleau-Ponty understands not only the lived body in terms of a figure/background structure, but also a person and her world functions on a figure/background structure; they are internally related. This is why he argues that we must understand humans and animals always also in terms of their

\textsuperscript{142} Merleau-Ponty, POP, 125.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 165-7.
\textsuperscript{146} De Beauvoir, PC, 96.
milieu. The reason that we need an understanding of the Gestalt character of the lived body is that a gestalt is fundamentally irreducible, it is part of our metaphysical condition.

The lived body in Merleau-Ponty has a special feature that shall become crucial in reading the biology chapter in The Second Sex. The special feature of the body is what Merleau-Ponty terms the “dual existential action” of the body: it structures our consciousness of reality, and it is receptive to consciousness. The body has two simultaneous roles: “The body can symbolize existence because it realizes it and it is its actuality. It sustains its dual existential action of systole and diastole.” Merleau-Ponty means this quite literally, whereupon the body can transform itself based on a conscious act, for example the mimicry of sleep into real sleep, the refusal of coexistence into a loss of voice, or the refusal of life into anorexia. The body does not just express “the modalities of existence in the way that stripes indicate rank, or a house-number a house: the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it; it is, in a way, what it signifies.” Merleau-Ponty gives the example of a young woman who has been forbidden from seeing the young man she is in love with and as a result she cannot sleep, loses her appetite, and finally loses her capacity for speech. The young woman loses her voice as one would lose a memory. It is not lost accidentally, it is “lost rather in so far as it belongs to an area of my life which I reject, in so far as it has a certain significance.” His argument is that the body has dual action because it is both in the world, and our means of communicating with it.

147 Merleau-Ponty, POP, 104-106.
148 De Beauvoir writes something very similar in the chapter on psychoanalysis: “Symbolism did not come down from heaven nor rise up from subterranean depths – it has been elaborated, like language, by that human reality which is at once Mitsein and separation; and this explains why individual invention also has its place” (de Beauvoir, SS, 47; LDS I, 91).
149 Merleau-Ponty, POP, 190. Systole and diastole are the rhythmic contracting and relaxing of the heart muscle and ventricles. Merleau-Ponty illustrates with this metaphor to highlight the reciprocal relationship of consciousness and body that is our existence.
150 Merleau-Ponty, POP, 190.
151 Ibid., 186.
152 Ibid., 185.
153 Ibid., 187.
I submit that this notion is present in de Beauvoir’s early work, Moral Idealism and Political Realism, where she writes that “gaining an awareness is never a purely contemplative process; it is engagement, support or recognition.” The body symbolizes the world as it is engaged with it.

Suzanne Lava Cataldi argues convincingly that the account of the loss and recovery of voice in Merleau-Ponty extends into de Beauvoir’s account of embodiment in The Second Sex. De Beauvoir’s concept of the lived body unfolds the body as expression, not in pathological cases, as in Merleau-Ponty, but the lived female-body in the context of male power. Not only can our body “represent” our expression toward the world, but also the ideas and expectations of others can be represented “in” us. For example, de Beauvoir describes young women’s first menses in great detail, and gives many different ways that it could be experienced. It can be experienced as good or bad based on what it signifies. She writes: “[I]t is because femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame.” De Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the body can represent our attitude toward the world and the attitudes of others.

De Beauvoir claims to be adopting the conception of the lived body shared, in general, by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Heidegger. These three philosophers’ theories are not consistent with one another; indeed, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre were, at times, each other’s foremost critics. I shall understand de Beauvoir’s claim to be general. In general, there is consistency between all four views about the lived body. I have explained the modifications that de Beauvoir makes throughout her early works when doing so is necessary for understanding the background to the

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155 Lava Cataldi, “The Body as a Basis for Being.”, 88.
156 De Beauvoir, SS, 315; LDS II, 73. She continues: “In a sexually egalitarian society, woman would regard menstruation simply as her special way of reaching adult life; the human body in both men and women has other and more disagreeable needs to be taken care of, but they are easily adjusted to because, being common to all, they do not represent a blemish for anyone; the menses inspire horror in the adolescent girl because they throw her into an inferior and defective category” (SS, 315-6).
The most explicit development of de Beauvoir’s lived body is in the *The Second Sex*, with a fundamental beginning point in the biology chapter. For this reason, I save my development of de Beauvoir’s lived body for the next chapter. It suffices for now to have argued that in de Beauvoir’s early works, we find that lived experience is lived toward something other than ourselves. The connection between us and the world can only be brought into understanding through description. The lived body is primordial to the non-lived body that is represented in language or thought. That our non-lived body is the basis of our existence, shapes the core of meaning that situates our bodies in the world. Once the body is lived, it is a basic reality that is irreducible to third-personalized explanations. Existential-phenomenological inquiry hopes to make the structures of the lived body explicit by way of turning to direct experience. It is in straightforward consciousness, motility and embodiment, that we can understand our involvement with and participation in the world. The significance that the world takes on is due both to our non-lived bodies and to our involvement with the world; it is not imposed on a consciousness by the world, but rather it “surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project.” Ultimately, there is an ontological difference between the lived body and the non-lived body: “the body is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world. \[I\]t determines no behavior.”

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157 De Beauvoir, PC, 97; “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” 188.
159 De Beauvoir, “A Review of The Phenomenology of Perception.”
161 De Beauvoir, EA, 41.
“The Givens of Biology,” while brief, sketches a wide variety of reproductive processes and behaviour in animals. De Beauvoir discusses the smallest insects through to fishes, birds, mammals and ultimately human beings. The chapter is fundamental in two ways: first, the biological body acts as the “basis” of the expression of our being, and second, biology heavily underscores her feminist project. She argues that we must begin at biology because biological “facts” have been used to “justify” the oppression of women. Specifically, she argues against encapsulating woman as the necessary Other by emphasizing women’s “animality” with an appeal to “facts” of biology. At first glance, we may think that the chapter on biology’s project is to rule out a justification of the alignment of biologically determined embodiment more strongly with women than men. We might then think that what suffices as an argument against this portrayal of women would be other facts of biology that align either women more with transcendence, or men more with animality. The kind of facts sought for that project may indeed do that work, but this kind of strategy does not apply to de Beauvoir’s project in this chapter, nor would an argument of the aforementioned kind be germane to her inquiry. The project here is not to draw conclusions from which sex is more determined by biological processes, but rather, since de Beauvoir has advanced a theory of the body as the basis of our existence, an inclusion of the facts of biology is to the end of better understanding our presence to the world, or so I shall

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162 This is not to exclude the idea that they are currently being used in this way.
163 De Beauvoir, SS, 3; LDS, 37.
argue. To the end of my overall project, I will show that de Beauvoir’s treatment of biological facts in the chapter does not entail biologism. I explore the nuances of the weaker claims that de Beauvoir paints biology as especially limiting for a woman’s subjectivity while with the same stroke I argue that she does not align women with passivity and men with activity. In so doing, I defend de Beauvoir, as well as I can, against the charge that her description of female embodiment is negative. My exposition of the philosophical-phenomenological concepts in “The Givens of Biology” will be argumentative and I will draw interpretive connections with the previous chapter throughout.

De Beauvoir cautions that one should not disregard the facts of biology because we fear the political consequences: instead, we must examine the facts in close detail to aid our understanding of their meaning. As she says, the facts are the facts, they need not have the consequences or significance in society that they currently do. But, what does it mean to treat the facts apart from their social consequences? To gain understanding, de Beauvoir suggests that we take a “step back” and “disregard notions of superior/inferior, equal/unequal, and more or less important to the species, or happy or not happy (as, say, a housewife) and start afresh.” Her goal is to not conform to existing ways of framing the discussion. Yet, in the chapter she acknowledges that most biologists use either mechanistic or teleological language, and that, at times, she will adopt their language. She specifically mentions that this is not an endorsement of the biologists’ conceptual landscape. I shall be mindful throughout my exposition as to what kind of language she employs. Also, because the language is both technical and philosophical I will, at every turn be cautious of Parshley’s translation. To begin her descriptive

164 Ibid., SS, xxxiv; LDS I, 32.
165 Ibid., SS, xxxiii; LDS I, 31.
166 “It is to be noted, however, that all physiologists and biologists use more or less finalistic (teleological) language. […] I shall adopt their terminology” (De Beauvoir, SS, 10; LDS I, 45).
phenomenological project, she begins with an indictment of the concept “female.” She asks: is the body as represented by the biological sciences enough to define woman?\textsuperscript{167} Do biological differences in each sex found a reason for a difference in individual chances for success?\textsuperscript{168} Can anything interesting be inferred from the roles that the sperm and egg play in reproduction?\textsuperscript{169} I have already argued that de Beauvoir’s approach to the body is as the body that belongs to a \textit{person}, or the lived body. She intends to describe our involvement in the constitution of meaning, both by us and by the non-lived body as the basis of our existence. My exposition of the themes developed in “The Givens of Biology” will take seriously de Beauvoir’s arguments in relation to her overall project in \textit{The Second Sex}. In brief, she asks: “Why has woman been made the Other?” and the biology chapter specifically asks: “Has woman been made the Other because of biology?” She concludes “The Givens of Biology” by stating that biology is not the reason that woman has been made the Other, but that it constitutes the basis of her situation (as it constitutes the basis of the situation of all animals). I examine what de Beauvoir means by biology constituting a situation. My exposition of her theory will be argumentative to the point of dissuading the reader from understanding the chapter as making the three errors that the received view attributes to it: aligning men with transcendence and women with immanence, devaluing women’s embodiment, and also, explaining the development of woman as the Other with an appeal to biology (biological essentialism). My final chapter will situate my reading of “The Givens of Biology” in relation to both the traditional reception of de Beauvoir, and also the continually expanding contemporary scholarship.

\textsuperscript{167} De Beauvoir, SS, 37; LDS I, 79.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., SS, 33; LDS I, 73.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., SS, 13; LDS I, 49.
Section One: Sexual Differentiation

De Beauvoir begins “The Givens of Biology” with an exposition of sexual differentiation. In a Merleau-Pontian vein, she discusses sexual differentiation as a kind of sexual significance taken on through the act of sexually engaging with the world. Then she goes on to argue that not only are the forms “male” and “female” not necessarily conceptually distinct, but we should be wary of attributing necessity to any form of sexuality. In true phenomenological colours, this section begins with a query; she asks: “What does the female denote in the animal kingdom? And what particular kind of female is manifest in woman?”170 In this section, I undercut the conceptual linking of females with passivity and males with activity by arguing that de Beauvoir calls into question the notion that there is a rigid distinction between male and female. Her theory entails that the lived body acts as a locus of meaning that is multiple across humanity, each ambiguously imbued with activity and passivity.

When de Beauvoir does draw a distinction between males and females it is concentrated on function: there are two kinds of individuals in a species that are differentiated for the purposes of reproduction.171 She tries to put in the most basic terms what “male” and “female” mean in the animal kingdom. In humans, there are two gametes, and reproduction is sexual reproduction, but she argues against the assumption that the existence of two gametes implies that there must be a male and female in a species. Hermaphroditism and parthenogenesis have two gametes, yet there is often not a male/female structure. She appears to be arguing against a particular evolutionary conception of sexual reproduction, which holds that the division of a species into male and female is superior for survival over hermaphroditism or parthenogenesis. She argues that if biologists begin to reason with only data concerning the structure of the gametes’ cells, they

170 Ibid., SS, 4; LDS I, 38.
171 Ibid., SS, 4; LDS I, 38.
would infer neither that sexual differentiation is superior to other forms, nor that there necessarily be sexual differentiation in a species. All that we can say about whether certain forms of reproduction are privileged is that:

[All forms] coexist in nature, [...] they both succeed in accomplishing the survival of the species concerned, and that the differentiation of the gametes, like that of the organisms producing them, appears to be accidental. ¹⁷²

In other words, measuring success in terms of survival is value neutral. If we view sexual differentiation from a functional point of view, and treat bare reproduction as the standard for success, then no form of reproduction is privileged, or “better” than any other.¹⁷³ She then asks, since no form of reproduction is privileged, are any necessary?

Many philosophers have claimed that reproduction, and in some cases, the world, can always be viewed through a binarism of male and female, and that there are essentially active and passive attributes that map onto each category. De Beauvoir claims that what Aristotle and others did not understand about sexual difference is that their alignment of male and female with active and passive respectively is an attempt to put an observable contingency into necessary categories. If in some cases a female is observed as passive and the male as active, this does not justify the necessary alignment of the attributes. De Beauvoir explains that would be faulty because, the specific passivity of, in this case the egg-gamete, if it is indeed passive, does not justify a general alignment of females with passivity. She cautions, reflecting Bernard, that “there is no warrant for so bold an expectation, for nothing warrants us in universalizing specific life processes.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Ibid., SS, 5-6; LDS I, 40.
¹⁷³ In the work, “finaliste” has been translated as “finalistic”, when in fact; it could have been more adequately translated as “teleological.” It is not immediately apparent that the reader would know that “finalistic” is meant to refer to Aristotle’s notion of a final cause.
¹⁷⁴ De Beauvoir, SS, 9; LDS I, 44-5.
She explains that some observables, like the “division of a species into two sexes is not always clear-cut.”\textsuperscript{175} She writes:

Many cases of intersexuality are known in both animals and man; and among insects and crustaceans one occasionally finds examples of gynandromorphism, in which male and female areas of the body are mingled in a kind of mosaic.\textsuperscript{176}

Not only does de Beauvoir disagree with categorizing observable sexual differences in necessary categories, but she also questions that what is observable is clearly defined.

De Beauvoir goes on to speculate why philosophers like Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Hegel have tried to come up with a rigidly categorized account of sexual difference. The mistake that de Beauvoir charges these philosophers with is begging the question: they have assumed what they are trying to prove. Of Hegel, she writes: “[He] would have been untrue to his passion for rationalism had he failed to attempt a logical explanation [of sexual difference].”\textsuperscript{177} Most philosophers, de Beauvoir argues, take the significance incarnated in sexual difference and make it into a necessity, they fail to see that sexual significance is not in the nature of our being: it is merely one particular manifestation of the phenomenon of reproduction.\textsuperscript{178}

In her section on sexual difference, de Beauvoir paraphrases a pivotal passage\textsuperscript{179} from Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, which I quote in full:

Man is a historical idea and not a natural species. In other words, there is in human existence no unconditioned possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute. Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand.\textsuperscript{180}

According to Merleau-Ponty, the contingent act of taking something in hand gives it a “necessary” significance. Also, the structure of our bodies creates a locus of “necessary”

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., SS, 4; LDS I, 38.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., SS, 15; LDS I, 51.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., SS, 6; LDS I, 41.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., SS, 7; LDS I, 42.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., SS, 7; LDS I, 41-2.
\textsuperscript{180} Merleau-Ponty, POP, 198.
meaning. Thus, objects get their meaning from how we engage with them, yet the meaning they have is not wholly arbitrary.\textsuperscript{181} When we participate in society’s customs, language and traditions we are engaging our lived body in a context of meaning. It is contingent that some society’s conceptual groupings about sexual difference allow for only two types of sexual embodiment: this is the new notion of “contingency” that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir advocate. However, it is not the only way that our bodies have meaning: our lived body also has a meaningful core that has some unchangeable meaning structures, like the bare structure of embodiment, which I submit is reflective of Husserl’s notion of the body appearing to us as a passive resistant object.\textsuperscript{182} De Beauvoir agrees with this view, but only to the point that the sexual structure of individual humans is not considered to have a given meaningful core: sexual embodiment is varied, not just for females, but for all humanity.\textsuperscript{183}

De Beauvoir turns to an ontological claim about our metaphysical condition based on the ambiguous evidence of sexual differentiation and its consequences for sexual behaviour. Sexual activity itself is not necessarily implied in the structure of a human being, because we could have developed a different method of reproduction other than sexual reproduction. The only phenomenon that is in the nature of our being is reproduction, or what de Beauvoir terms “the perpetuation of the species,”\textsuperscript{184} free of a rigidly pre-determined form. Thus, she concludes, there is no \textit{a priori} doctrine that will give us a theory of sexual difference. We can only study reproduction, and sexual difference in their concrete forms.\textsuperscript{185} According to Heinämaa:

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., POP, 169.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., POP, 170.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{183} De Beauvoir, SS, 7; LDS I, 41-2.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., SS, 7; LDS I, 42.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., SS, 9; LDS I, 45.}
\end{footnotes}
For Beauvoir, feminine bodies and masculine bodies are not two kinds of entities but different variations of human embodiment. They both realize and recreate ‘in their different ways’ the human condition, which is characterized by fundamental ambiguity.\textsuperscript{186}

Our ambiguity marks us as both immanence and transcendence: both intentionally connected to the world and free. The metaphysical condition of our existence is reproduction, yet no specific form of sexual difference is implied: all bodies, and those that are clearly male and female contain passivity. In relation to her account of sexual difference, de Beauvoir does not align any one form of lived body more with passivity or activity.

The sexual structure of embodiment has no necessary structure across individuals, though each individual does have their own necessary core of meaning that is the bare structure of their embodiment. Each embodiment is imbued with both activity and passivity, and value is placed on this feature of embodiment based on how we engage with the world, how we act. De Beauvoir does not endorse universalizing sexual embodiment, and thus attributes no necessarily active or passive attributes to one sex. The lived body on this view is a dialectic between the two revised notions of “necessity” and “contingency.” Our bodies contain loci of necessary meaning, but they are also given meaning.

\textbf{Section Two: The Being of The Gametes}

You know the story: Girl-gamete meets guy-gamete, they fall in gamete-love and have a gamete-child. Sounds like a wonderful love story, or does it? De Beauvoir’s section on the gametes is, I submit, meant to combat this treatment of the gametes as microcosms for the respective person from whence they came. Indeed, if a story like this were possible, biological essentialism would flourish. The section on the gametes starts at the very foundation of biological reproduction to dispute biological essentialism before it gets off the ground. The section on the gametes is meant

\textsuperscript{186} Heinäämaa, “Beauvoir’s Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” 31.
to disprove the idea that the biological roles of the egg and the sperm have any consequences relevant to why woman has been made the Other. I submit that for de Beauvoir the function of the gametes can tell us nothing about why woman has been made the Other.

In this section I recreate de Beauvoir’s section on the gametes in order to show that not only does she not align the egg with passivity, but also that the structure of the gametes tells us nothing about whether female embodiment constitutes a decline in subjectivity. Not only does she argue against ancient conceptions of reproduction that align the egg with passivity and the sperm with activity, she argues against a reaction to this that tries to align the egg more with activity. She argues against the inference that since the egg contains the means to sustain life, women must be more “fundamental” to reproduction. She argues against a romantic conception of the gametes, and in the end infers that the gametes contain symmetrical, or equal “vitality.”

Aristotle believed that a male’s role in reproduction was to plant a seed that is a replica of himself to be nurtured by the female. He contributes the form, whereas the woman contributes the matter, or at least, that is all she should do:

For just as the offspring of deformed animals are sometimes deformed and sometimes not, so that of a female is sometimes not – but male. For the female is as it were a male deformed, and the menses are seed but not pure seed; for it lacks one thing only, the source of the soul.187

This view in biological explanations pictures reproduction as the relationship between an active sperm and a passive egg. Combine this theory with the unfortunate historical coupling of value with activity and not passivity and we have a recipe for the devaluing what was made of the role of the female in reproduction. Some feminists, however, have responded by arguing that the egg itself is actually privileged and active. This is where de Beauvoir begins a more traditional style of philosophical argument: she cautions against this kind of transvaluation. She argues that “it is

false to say that the egg greedily swallows the sperm, and equally so to say that the sperm
victoriously commandeers the female cell’s reserves.”\textsuperscript{188} The reason that she gives for these
pronouncements is a shift in focus rather than an empirical argument that “proves” where the
activity is most apparent. She strikes at the heart of the dispute by asking why it matters which
gamete is more active? Our focus should be on not conceptually connecting gender roles with
the relation of the gametes.\textsuperscript{189} Analogizing adult females or males to their respective gametes is
faulty. It was the Ancients who falsely began treating women as though the egg was a
microcosm that represents what ought to be the adult female’s role.

Another common theory of the gametes is that the passive, receptive egg is more “fundamental”
in guaranteeing the permanence of the species than the active transient sperm. This conception
of the gametes she argues against is all too familiar:

Motionless, the egg waits; in contrast to the sperm – free, slender agile – typifies the impatience
and the restlessness of existence. […] The ovule has sometimes been likened to immanence, the
sperm to transcendence, and it has been said that the sperm penetrates the female element only in
losing its transcendence, its motility; it is seized and castrated by the inert mass that engulfs it
after depriving it of its tail.\textsuperscript{190}

She has a few interrelated responses to this type of analogy. She argues that even if there was a
clear difference between the activity and passivity of the egg and sperm, it is of no real
consequence for human behaviour, contra the essentialist’s claim. And with regard to which
gamete is more “fundamental” she responds that no gamete’s chromosomes are actually
privileged in their “competition” with each other, because genes are passed down 50/50. She
writes:

\textsuperscript{188} De Beauvoir, SS, 13; LDS I, 48.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., SS, 14; LDS I, 50.
\textsuperscript{190} Indeed, this view has been attributed to many biological essentialists. She continues: “This is magical action –
disquieting, as is all passive action – whereas the activity of the male gamete is rational; it is movement measurable
in terms of time and space. The truth is that these notions are hardly more than vagaries of the mind” De Beauvoir,
SS, 12-13; LDS I, 48.
The embryo carries on the germ plasm of the father as well as that of the mother and transmits them […] It is, so to speak, an androgynous germ plasm, which outlives the male and female individuals that are its incarnations.¹⁹¹

Not only are the genes equal, but the life incarnated¹⁹² in the gametes also is: the “nucleus of the egg is a center of vital activity exactly symmetrical with the nucleus of the sperm.”¹⁹³ Once again, we must remember that because of her earlier argument against Aristotle, where she breaks the analogy from egg to woman and sperm to man, even if the relation of the gametes were active and passive respectively, it would have no bearing on the valuation of an individual male or female existence.

One may grant that the egg and sperm are symmetrical and equal in function and vitality, but then still insist that the sperm is more active, while the egg only passively sustains the means for nourishing an embryo. This might lead us to believe that the egg has a more “fundamental” role in reproduction, and that the sperm has a more transitory nature. De Beauvoir anticipates that her critics would persist in this light, so she draws a distinction between the first and second order differences between the gametes. The first order differences are those that I have already discussed that amount to chromosomal equality and equal vital activity. But, the second order differences are ontological in nature: they treat the egg and sperm as individuals with their own life force. These differences, she argues, have played the biggest role in the conclusion that a woman’s place is in the home.¹⁹⁴ Treated this way, in terms of their individuality, the sperm and egg form a dialectic. In providing an environment for the fertilized egg to prosper, the egg “readies” itself for fertilization, and in providing the stimuli needed for new life, the sperm provides for fertilisation. After they join, the two have “lost their individuality in the fertilized

¹⁹¹ De Beauvoir, SS, 11; LDS I, 47.
¹⁹² I explore her concept of “life incarnated” in the next section.
¹⁹³ De Beauvoir, SS, 11; LDS I, 47.
¹⁹⁴ “It would be foolhardy indeed to deduce from such evidence [of the relation of the gametes] that woman’s place is in the home – but there are foolhardy men” (De Beauvoir, SS, 13; LDS I, 49).
Viewed in terms of their vital force, the two gametes play an identical role. In a last attempt to convince the reader, she argues: “[I]n any case it is a long way from the egg to the woman.” Just because the egg is enclosed in an environment that can sustain the fertilised egg, does not mean that the egg, itself, is more fundamental to reproduction.

Another ancient conception of reproduction is the idea that nature necessarily divides organisms into a female/male structure. On this view, nature provides necessarily male and female essences, and in arguing against this notion, de Beauvoir is strengthening her case against biological essentialism. Her specific target is the notion that males and females are a “cosmic whole” that have been split in two, only to rediscover one another. She cites this as from Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas and others. She shows that the explanation offered by Plato and others is meant to explain love and not reproduction. Indeed, so is my story of gamete-love. She argues directly against any romantic conception of the gametes, and all of the imagery that entails.

It is worth noting that de Beauvoir also argues that the presence of two gametes does not guarantee that there will be two types of individuals in a species. In some species an individual can produce both eggs and sperm. Even if there are separate sexes that each produce eggs and sperm: “Males and females appear rather to be variations on a common groundwork, much as the two gametes are differentiated from similar tissue.” The common groundwork is the necessity of perpetuating the species.

De Beauvoir writes that we can infer only one valid suggestion from the discussion of the gametes, which I submit, is ontological in nature:

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195 De Beauvoir, SS, 11; LDS I, 46.
196 Ibid., SS, 14; LDS I, 50
197 Ibid., SS, 6; LDS I, 40.
198 Ibid., SS, 14; LDS I, 50.
There are two interrelated dynamic aspects of life: it can be maintained only through transcending itself, and it can transcend itself only on condition that it is maintained...[T]ogether [the gametes] create a living being in which both of them are at once lost and transcended. 199

This conclusion treats the gametes as a primary reality, like the lived body. This ontological suggestion mirrors my conclusion from the previous section that the perpetuation of the species is ontologically founded, but also that there is no necessary form of reproduction. Here, ontologically, the gametes are treated as two individuals that contain life that transcends them toward new life: perpetuation of the species. If her description treated the gametes as reducible to a more primary reality, then the story that explains them would be a reductive scientific third-personalization concerning DNA and physical, biological forces. This, however, is not the case because even the gametes are provided a phenomenological description: their being is made explicit.

In this section I have argued that de Beauvoir breaks down analogies from the egg-gamete to the adult woman, and further, annexes any lingering consequences from Ancient conceptions of reproduction. An extension of this is that even if the egg was essentially passive, it would tell us nothing about a female’s role in reproduction, or the gender role of a woman. She argues against the notion that the egg (and, hence, the woman) is more fundamental to reproduction than the sperm because in conception they are both lost in the creation of new individuals. Also, one cannot deduce the existence of two sexes from the presence of two gametes. In sum, the particular kind of biological essentialism that treats the behaviour of the egg and sperm as indicative of a certain “nature” for men and women is not held by de Beauvoir, rather, she argues against it in many different forms. Thus, we must never draw conclusions from the structure of the gametes to the reproductive or gender role of their respective adults.

199 Ibid., SS, 13; LDS I, 49.
Section Three: Enslavement by the Species

De Beauvoir’s phrase “enslavement by the species”\(^{200}\) has a clichéd ring in de Beauvoir studies. The language of enslavement is often a site of criticism even though the concept rarely receives an in-depth explanation in relation to her overall analysis of reproductive behaviour and biological processes. Thus far I have not encountered an interpretation of this concept as a phenomenological concept. I treat “enslavement” as a type of experience of the lived body in which reproductive bodily processes come to the foreground of embodied consciousness. In this section, I recreate de Beauvoir’s analysis of the phenomenon of reproduction. I have argued that de Beauvoir’s feminist project is to undercut possible justifications of woman as the necessary Other by searching for “necessity” in reproduction. Reproduction is part of our metaphysical condition: we reach beyond ourselves to create new individuals. In this section, I relieve some of the conceptual sting that may lead the reader to believe that she treats this as negative and especially limiting for women’s subjectivity. I will argue that “enslavement to the species” is not a causalistic characterization of reproduction for human beings, but rather, a description of reproduction for all animals, including the human species. My argument will focus on an overlooked distinction that de Beauvoir draws between human beings and the human species.

In de Beauvoir’s discussion of the urge for reproduction in animal behaviour, what she terms “the rutting urge,” she gives distinct descriptions of experience for different species. Although she writes at length about crustaceans, insects, and fishes, the animal groupings that I focus on are mammals, the human species, and human beings. De Beauvoir

\(^{200}\) De Beauvoir uses both “la tyrannie de l’espèce” and “l’emprise de l’espèce”, which could easily have been translated differently than “enslaved to the species,” or “in the iron grip of the species.” For example, it would also be correct to say “the control of the species” or in the second case “encased or restricted by the species.” As the alternatives that I offer may still not please the critics of this language, I will have to do other work to have those worries appeased. However, I do hope to dissipate some of the language of “enslavement” from the text.
uses “female” often to mean the female of any species. Her use of “mammals” can be ambiguous because at times she means all mammals and at other times she sets apart the human species from mammals because of the high rate of their “individuality.” She writes that “In the mammals, life assumes the most complex forms, and most concretely individuates itself.”\textsuperscript{201} I explore further her notion of “individuality” in Section Four. For now, it suffices to understand that her argument relies heavily on the distinction between mammals and all other animals, and between the human \textit{species} and human \textit{beings}. Because her discussion of biology propels toward a better understanding of human experience, and because humans are mammals, I understand this as a narrowing of her focus, rather than a privileging of mammals over other species.

Narrowing her focus further, de Beauvoir separates the human \textit{species} (\textit{l’espèce humaine}) from human \textit{beings} (\textit{l’humanité}). Parshley’s translation is inconsistent with regard to these terms, which is unfortunate because de Beauvoir takes each to mean quite different things. In the following passage, she claims both that female embodiment cannot be understood apart from its social meaning, and that we can only understand the experience of males and female humans with reference to their total situation:

As with her grasp on the world, it is again impossible to measure in the abstract the burden imposed on woman by her reproductive function. The bearing of maternity upon the individual life, regulated naturally in animals by the oestrus cycle and the seasons, is not definitely prescribed in woman – society alone is the arbiter…Thus while it is true that in the higher animals the individual existence is asserted more imperiously by the male than by the female, in the human species [\textit{l’ humanité}] individual “possibilities” depend upon the economic and social situation.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{201} De Beauvoir, LDS I, 58, my translation. The original French reads: “C’est chez les mammifères que la vie prend les formes les plus complexes et s’individualise le plus concrètement” (LDS I, 58). Parshley translates this as: “In the mammals life assumes the most complex forms, and individualization is most advanced and specific.”

\textsuperscript{202} De Beauvoir, SS, 35; LDS I, 76.
The end of this passage should read: “For humanity individual ‘possibilities’ depend upon the economic and social situation.”\(^{203}\) Originally, the English reader would believe “human species” and “human beings” to indicate the same thing, when actually de Beauvoir intends them differently.\(^{204}\) When she talks about the human species, she means humans treated from a functional point of view, as with other animals. She is considering them purely from the perspective of the urge to reproduce, without considerations of language, social conditions, or value.

De Beauvoir’s concept of a human being treats them as part of a collectivity; reflecting Heidegger, we are part of a group for whom it matters what meaning we make of the world. To differentiate between human species and human beings, she suggests:

Society is not a species, for it is in a society that the species attains the status of existence – transcending itself toward the world and toward the future. Its ways and customs cannot be deduced from biology, for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature.\(^{205}\)

I read this difference phenomenologically: the essential structures of experience for a member of the human species is different than for a human being. As a member of the human species becomes a member of society, they are raised to the level of an existent, their metaphysical condition is changed. It is at this level that human beings take on projects and posit value and meaning. Part of the metaphysical condition of a human being is that they are free, always in a creative state of becoming. She writes that “humanity is forever in a state of becoming.”\(^{206}\) Thus, according to de Beauvoir, humanity cannot be read as being causally determined by biology.

\(^{203}\) De Beauvoir, LDS I, 76, my translation and emphasis.

\(^{204}\) Again, a key passage is: “[T]he human species [l’humanité] is forever in a state of becoming” (De Beauvoir, SS, 33). On my reading, this should read: “[H]umanity is forever in state of becoming.” In this case, the reader would see more clearly de Beauvoir’s intention to separate the two concepts.

\(^{205}\) De Beauvoir, SS, 36; LDS I, 78, my emphasis.

\(^{206}\) De Beauvoir, LDS I, 73, my translation. Parshley has again translated “l’humanité” as “the human species” (De Beauvoir, SS, 33).
It is useful to read the difference between the human species and human beings as reflecting Merleau-Ponty’s concrete and abstract attitude where we understand a member of the human species as conscious, but not at a “distance” from itself, as is the case with the concrete attitude. A member of the human species is surrendered to experiences that are unreflective and immediate: they are aware of what they are doing, but are not able to project more meaning onto the world than is originally there. Animals, unlike human beings can be defined: “[A]nimal species are fixed and it is possible to define them in static terms.”²⁰⁷ Because human beings are capable of both attitudes, whereas animals and presumably the human species are capable of only the concrete, we can never close the book on human existents: they are forever in a state of becoming. De Beauvoir acknowledges that the human species does not properly exist: it is a mere fiction: “[I]t is not as single individuals that human beings are to be defined in the first place,”²⁰⁸ it is only in the bosom of society where “the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment.”²⁰⁹ To stray from “The Givens of Biology” for just a moment, I want to strengthen my case that the human species is not capable of an accomplished abstract attitude.

In Part II History, de Beauvoir gives what I argue is a phenomenological description of how humanity became explicitly aware of, and consequently posited values for, sexual difference and the facts of reproduction. In other words, in this particular synthetic anthropology, de Beauvoir is speculating about what the commonalities of experience would have been when humans first began to understand their biology and then began to assign roles related to child-rearing and ultimately “gender.” She begins with a description of what primitive humanity would know, followed by what their experience was like:

²⁰⁷ De Beauvoir, SS, 33; LDS I, 73.
²⁰⁸ Ibid., SS, 33; LDS I, 75.
²⁰⁹ De Beauvoir, SS, 36; LDS I, 78.
As there was obviously no birth control, and as nature failed to provide women with sterile periods like other mammalian females, closely spaced maternities must have absorbed most of their strength and their time, so that they were incapable of providing for the children they brought into the world. Here we have a first fact heavily freighted with consequences: the early days of the human species were difficult. […] Necessary as she was for the perpetuation of the species, she perpetuated it too generously.210

The more humanity becomes aware of biological processes, the more they are able to step back from the concrete attitude when performing reproductive acts, and assign meaning to their experiences.

For mammals, I understand “enslavement to the species” in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the Gestalt quality of consciousness. I have explained how for Merleau-Ponty the lived body functions on an internally related figure/background structure. I read mammalian “enslavement to the species” as a process in which the urge for sexual reproduction becomes foreground in animal consciousness. I also read de Beauvoir as claiming that the “higher” we go up on the scale of the species the more able we are to express and understand our experience of the movement of biological processes into the foreground of consciousness. She repeatedly mentions that as we travel up the scale of animal life, individuality is increasingly developed through both heightened awareness and perceptual understanding. Regarding the “low” animals whose existence is especially dedicated to the reproduction of life, she writes: “[H]ere the female is hardly more than an abdomen, and her existence is entirely used up in a monstrous travail of ovulation.”211 A “low” animal does not have the same ability to understand their experience and is consumed only by immediate awareness. We can see here that subjectivity is increased as conscious understanding is increased and there is never mention that the ability to make implicit self consciousness explicit for male or female human beings is disproportionate. If she did claim that somehow female human beings were less aware of their experiences due to biological

210 Ibid., SS, 62; LDS I, 112-3, my emphasis.
211 Ibid., SS, 17; LDS I, 53, my emphasis.
processes, that would support the charge that she regards female embodiment as especially subjectivity limiting.

With respect to human beings, de Beauvoir is not exclusively dependent on the metaphor of enslavement; she also uses the phrase: “The [...] transcendence \([\textit{dépassement}]\) of the individual toward the species.”\(^{212}\) I have described de Beauvoir’s notion of transcendence as the intentional connection that we bear with the world. I have given much space to the notion of intentionality in my historical and interpretive scene-setting for just this reason. Our relation to the species is intentional: it is an object for our consciousness. This is another ambiguous feature of the double structure of consciousness: we both live our bodies, and our lived bodies can be objects for our consciousnesses. In the latter case, our lived bodies appear to us as passive resistant objects, while the former appears as our involvement with the constitution of the world as revealed by phenomenology. When our lived body is described from the perspective of an individual, the experience may well be enslavement, as de Beauvoir argues can be the case with the experience of a woman who is forced into maternity. Our ability to return to joy at the disclosure of being means that “enslavement” can be lived with a joyous attitude. It is not inherently negative: indeed, she says that there need not be any detrimental psychological experiences associated with maternity, while at the same time she acknowledges that gestation and childbirth can be difficult and dangerous.\(^{213}\) With the proper social conditions the task of parenting for an individual woman is not a substantial “limiting factor” on her individual freedom.\(^{214}\) Phenomenologically speaking, the subjectivity incarnated in male and female human beings is equivalent, when females are engaged in reproductive processes more of their consciousness may be occupied by said processes, but this is neither inherently negative nor especially subjectivity limiting.

\(^{212}\) Ibid., SS, 6; LDS I, 41.
\(^{213}\) Ibid., SS, 30; LDS I, 69.
\(^{214}\) Ibid., SS, 35; LDS I, 77.
In this section I have argued that de Beauvoir draws a distinction between human beings and the human species. It is only in a human *Mitsein* that a member of the human species attains the status of an existent: a human being. I take “enslavement by the species” to refer to the movement of implicit bodily processes into the foreground of animal consciousness. According to de Beauvoir, as subjectivity increases the abstract attitude presents itself and the human species is then able to understand and make explicit the appearance of bodily processes into the foreground of their consciousness. For human beings, their relationship to the species is one of transcendence; reproductive processes become an object for our consciousnesses. Human beings experience “enslavement” as transcendence toward the creation of new individuals. This process is not necessarily experienced negatively; in fact, it can be experienced with joy.

**Section Four: “Life”, “Individuality”, and Animal Behaviour**

In the previous sections I argued that in “The Givens of Biology” de Beauvoir does not exclusively associate males with activity and females with passivity, nor does she argue that a female’s nature is describable in terms of her biology or reproductive role. “Enslavement by the species,” if understood phenomenologically, is implied in the structure of human experience and for both male and female human beings, and thus a woman’s biology is not especially limiting on her subjectivity compared to a man’s. In this section I explore the notion of “life” that de Beauvoir develops. If “enslavement” is not especially limiting on a woman’s subjectivity, then what can be made of the claims that de Beauvoir makes about the size of the task of reproduction for women’s lives? She claims that female human beings not only experience the severity and
danger of reproduction more than any other species, but also that compared to male human beings, females are weaker, more emotional, and less robust. She writes:

[W]oman is of all mammalian females at once the one who is most profoundly alienated…[Her crisis of puberty and the menopause, monthly ‘curse,’ long and often difficult pregnancy, painful and sometimes dangerous childbirth, illnesses, unexpected symptoms and complications…are the characteristics of the human female…In comparison with her the male seems infinitely favoured: his sexual life is not in opposition to his existence as a person, and biologically it runs an even course, without mishap.

These “facts,” de Beauvoir claims, have no significance: they do not determine woman’s situation. But if they do not, why include these comparisons, and further, how do we understand them in relation to her overall theory? I believe it is these comparisons that have, in part, led commentators to think she is negative about women’s embodiment - that their embodiment is especially burdensome - and that women are passive with regard to the reproductive processes that unfold within them. In this section I suggest that her concept of “life” incarnated can aid us in understanding not only why the “size” of the reproductive burden a person bears does not limit her subjectivity, but also that it is not essentially a passive or negative undertaking. I also give an exposition of her account of sexual behaviour in animals and argue that it does not extend to members of the human species.

The phenomenological focus of this chapter is: what are the essential structures of experience (metaphysical condition) of a being that must procreate? Further, what does it mean to live a biology that has as one of its necessary ends the creation of new individuals? She claims that part of our experience is that we experience a “life” force. Life is a creative force that assumes a different form in each individual, and at times, it is lived towards only reproductive projects. As a preliminary remark, she offers:

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215 Ibid., SS, 31-33; LDS I, 73-5.
216 Ibid., SS, 32; LDS I, 72.
I do not intend to offer here a philosophy of life; and I do not care to take sides prematurely in the
dispute between the mechanistic and the purposive or teleological philosophies…Without
taking any stand on the relation between life and consciousness, we can assert that every
biological fact \([\text{fait vivant}]\) implies transcendence, that every function involves a project,
something to be done.\(^{217}\)

I believe what she means here is that she will describe from the perspective of an individual
organism the intentional relationship between the lived body and its transcendence toward
procreation. She writes that all life implies a transcendence, a going past what is immediately
given toward a future,\(^{218}\) and I remind the reader that this is part of the metaphysical condition of
all living things: that they reach beyond themselves to create. At the same time as biology is
lived-toward the future in the upsurge of transcendence, it is the basis and parameters of our
projects.

The “life” that she argues is incarnated in the lived body is related to, but not coextensive with,
the \(\text{élan vital}\) found in Bergson, who is influential for de Beauvoir’s overall treatment of
biological concerns. Simons writes that de Beauvoir

argues that a human perspective, and an ontological context, must be brought to the study of
sexual difference, much as Bergson argues in *Creative Evolution* (1911), that we must bring to
the study of evolution, metaphysics, and what our intuition reveals of the creative force of life,
which Bergson calls the “\(\text{élan vital}\)” (another Bergsonian expression found in *The Second
Sex*).\(^{219}\)

What does it mean to bring the creative force of life to the study of sexual difference and
reproduction? It means that we understand each organism in terms of its individual existence
and its experience. Simons finds Bergsonian influence in *The Second Sex* and I do not disagree
that it is present; however in the biology chapter in particular, the term she employs is “life,” not

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\(^{217}\) Ibid., SS, 9-10; LDS I, 45.
\(^{218}\) She has a similar definition to this in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: “[Transcendence is being] carried off toward a new
future” (de Beauvoir, PC, 135).
*élan vital* in particular. Indeed, her idea of life will be crucial for understanding the rest of the chapter.

In “The Givens of Biology” de Beauvoir repeatedly speaks of “life” as having a project that it incarnates in individuals; one manifestation of the project of life is procreation. Life transcends the individual toward many different projects, for which procreation is one.\(^ {220} \) When it is reaching for procreation, de Beauvoir refers to it as the “species.” The rate at which individuals are “enslaved by the species” is the extent to which their life is employed toward reproduction.\(^ {221} \) In terms of my earlier analysis, the higher the rate of enslavement, the more that biological processes are foreground in consciousness. At times, de Beauvoir paints the employment of life towards the species as though it is in opposition to our individual existences. Here, “opposition,” like “enslavement by the species” appears to be negative, but to be sure, this is not a negative *aspect* of lived experience: again, it may be experienced either negatively or positively for a human *being* based on social value, meaning, and context. Procreation and reproduction are aspects of our metaphysical condition, and whether they are experienced positively or negatively is up to us. But, insofar as the species is part of our being, it is not *ontologically* negative: “as [the species] enslaves the individual life, the species simultaneously supports and nourishes it.”\(^ {222} \) She argues that the castrated individual “is impoverished and thrown out of balance; it can expand and flourish only as its genital system expands and

\(^ {220} \) Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this point, stating that “the body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance; this is true of motor habits such as dancing (concrete behaviour)” (POP, 169).

\(^ {221} \) De Beauvoir, SS, 17; LDS I, 53.

\(^ {222} \) Ibid., SS, 27; LDS I, 66.
flourishes.”223 Indeed, we can see from this that reproduction, and the species “within”, is good for our individual existences.

In the case of crustaceans and insects, “life” is primarily employed by the species to transcend the individual member in order to create new individuals. In this case, “life” is concerned only with the survival of the species.224 “Life” can also be employed within other projects. When not exclusively employed toward procreation, life is expressed through feeling, action, motility, and communication. In “higher animals,” the way that life expresses itself is twofold: “life seeks expression through particular individuals, while also accomplishing the survival of the group.”225 Thus, the transcendence present in life seeks an objective form in projects, one of which can be the creation of new individuals. The creation of new individuals is both a component of our metaphysical condition, and an active transcendent project for both male and female human beings.

In the “lower” species a large portion, if not all, of their existence is consumed with maintenance of the species and because of this de Beauvoir argues that the males and females of these species are not properly individuated. We can see from this that another aspect of “individuality” is the ability of an existent to express their life toward creative projects. Even while engaging in reproductive processes, human beings’ individuality is highly developed because they are able to ascribe meaning to their experiences in ways that the “lower” animals are not able. De Beauvoir argues further that if the life of an organism is consumed with reproduction, then they can “hardly be regarded as individuals, for they form a kind of unity made up of inseparable elements.”226 If we read “individuality” as both increased awareness and ability to engage with

223 Ibid., SS, 27; LDS I, 66.
224 Ibid., SS, 16; LDS I, 53.
225 Ibid., SS, 16; LDS I, 53, my emphasis.
226 Ibid., SS, 17; LDS I, 53.
the world freely, then this claim seems reasonable if we think of how a crustacean does not understand itself to be engaged in reproduction: it just is. This argument is important for contrast because the corollary of this argument is that in the higher forms, there is more autonomy and separateness. Male and female mammals, de Beauvoir argues, are more individuated, and because of this, the species has to assert itself more in order to accomplish procreation.\textsuperscript{227} The amount that the species has to “assert” itself is measured in terms of experience: if an animal is able to be aware, and in the case of humans, describe procreation it would be experienced more acutely.

The question of individuality is phenomenological; it is about whether the animal experiences itself as individuated, autonomous, and aware. De Beauvoir suggests that menstruation, pregnancy, lactation and other reproductive processes are, at least, experienced more consciously for the human female compared to other species. Indeed, she draws numerous contrasts: human females experience the “rut” once a month, where other females have seasonal rutting urges, labour, and delivery are especially perilous for woman, and so on.\textsuperscript{228} These claims seem reasonable enough. To relate this notion to enslavement, one could argue that the more perceptually sophisticated an animal is, the more they can self-consciously experience reproduction as foreground in the figure/background structure. She argues that it is because the human female is a highly singularized individual that the species will be experienced as most difficult for her (compared not to the male, but to females of other species). At first, this seems to be an odd claim. It appears to be good to be singularized and aware of experiences, yet it is because of this that the species is experienced so dramatically for women. I see no entailment

\textsuperscript{227} “It is noteworthy that the more clearly the female appears as a separate individual, the more imperiously the continuity of life asserts itself against her separateness” (de Beauvoir, SS, 22; LDS I, 60).
\textsuperscript{228} De Beauvoir, SS, 27, 32; LDS I, 66, 71-2.
here that because female embodiment is difficult it must be negative, passive, or especially subjectivity limiting.

In her discussion of the human lived experience of reproduction, de Beauvoir introduces a new conceptual distinction that has also loomed over *The Second Sex* as is the case with “enslavement to the species.” De Beauvoir draws a phenomenological distinction between “maintenance” and “creation.” The more that the singularity of the individual becomes pronounced in a species, the more that the two aspects of reproduction—perpetuation (maintenance of the species) and creation (creation of new individuals)—are separately apportioned to the two sexes.229

Maintenance is attributed to the member of the species that rears the young, and creation to the sex that is least involved in rearing. This distinction is not always divided along male/female lines.

To understand this claim it will serve us to look more closely at what is meant by “maintenance” and “creation.” The difference between the two, to be sure, is not a difference between activity and passivity for she claims that both are active,230 but rather:

To *maintain* is to deny the scattering of instant, it is to establish continuity in their flow; to *create* is to strike out from the temporal unity in general an irreducible, separate present.231

We can see here that de Beauvoir is describing phenomenologically the movement of life through time. The experience of maintaining is of holding an individual constant through time as in the rearing of young. Creation is experienced briefly and is not a consuming task for, what is usually the male.232 This process for the male is couched in heavy phenomenological language: “the male recovers his individuality intact at the moment when he transcends it.”233

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229 Ibid., SS, 19; LDS I, 56.
230 Ibid., SS, 25; LDS I, 63.
231 Ibid., SS, 25; LDS I, 63.
232 Ibid., SS, 22; LDS I, 60.
233 Ibid., SS, 22; LDS I, 60.
that de Beauvoir here is referring to mammals and the human species. To her, these descriptions are value neutral for the human species that lives them. By extension, these facts have no significance that would entail superiority of one sex over the other; these are just descriptions of the essential features of the experience of mammals and the human species. This distinction has been a locus of feminist criticism because it has been interpreted to mean that creation is essentially male and active, and that maintenance is essentially female and passive. Instead, I read maintenance and creation as a phenomenological description of the experience of sexual reproduction and the rearing of young. The sexual and parental behaviour of mammals is what is being described from the animal’s first person point of view. This claim is speculative at best; however, it does not have biologistic consequences for women.

Commentators may persist that on the whole, de Beauvoir does align female reproductive processes with passivity because maintenance does not create projects to the extent that creation does. The following passage could be seen as aiding this case:

[It is true that in the female it is the continuity of life that seeks accomplishment in spite of separation; while separation into new and individualized forces is incited by male initiative. The male is thus permitted to express himself freely; the energy of the species is well integrated into his own living activity. On the contrary, the individuality of the female is opposed by the interest of the species; it is as if she were possessed by foreign forces – alienated.]^{234}

The claim that the males are freer, and women less free based on their respective biologies is a quick target for criticism, and indeed it needs contextualizing to be understood in a judicious manner. We must first remember that de Beauvoir takes herself to be speaking of all mammals in general, and the human species. In this passage, she is not referring to human beings in the bosom of society. Again, the metaphysical condition of a human being is different than a member of the human species: there is no guarantee that a woman will experience the species as opposed to her individuality. The more “individuated” that the female is, the more keenly she

^{234} Ibid., SS, 25; LDS I, 63-4.
experiences the species, but whether she experiences it as positive or negative is up to her. To provide a contrast, she writes of animals: “Paturition in cows and mares is much more painful and dangerous than it is in mice and rabbits.” The contrast between cows and mice is then extended to the experience of the adult woman, such that it is more painful and dangerous for her. De Beauvoir describes woman as the most individuated of females, and consequently the most aware of the assertion of the species. Being aware does not equal being determined. If there are times when a male experiences the assertion of the species less, then that is only a particular time and a particular experience. Maintenance and creation, while perhaps clunky and unnecessary for her overall theory, do not entail female passivity or subordination.

Does my analysis really satisfy the critical reader of de Beauvoir on this point? In her descriptions of reproductive behaviour in animals, de Beauvoir makes many claims that have led commentators to believe that her account holds the female as essentially passive and determined by biological forces. Hekman writes: “Woman’s incapacity to act and her inherent passivity are rooted in what de Beauvoir sees to be the fundamental difference between men and women: men are capable of transcendence while women are mired in immanence.”

This reading of de Beauvoir is pervasive and I submit that it relies on the notion of reproduction as oppositional to individuality. But, surely reproduction is not opposed to our existences if it is part of our metaphysical condition. What de Beauvoir means is that human beings can experience it as oppositional, especially in the case of enforced maternity. The biological facts of reproduction have no fixed significance for an individual human being.

Even if de Beauvoir did claim that female behaviour is determined exclusively by biology, it would not entail any necessary change in the value of an individual man or woman. Value is

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235 Ibid., SS, 25; LDS I, 64.
236 Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge*, 74.
something that is taken on when we ascribe significance to the world and ourselves through action and engagement. The “facts” of biology, differences between the sexes, and the bare structure of our embodiment, she argues, are just facts; they have no given significance.\footnote{De Beauvoir, SS, 34; LDS I, 75.} She writes:

Woman is weaker than man; she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles, can compete with man in hardly any sport; she cannot stand up to him in a fight…Certainly these facts cannot be denied – but themselves they have no significance. Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the body on a basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science whenever the physiological fact (for instance, muscular inferiority) takes on meaning, this meaning is at once seen as dependent on a whole context; the “weakness” is revealed as such only in the light of the ends man proposes.\footnote{Ibid., SS, 34; LDS I, 76.}

Following Merleau-Ponty and others, the facts of existence take on meaning according to how we take them in hand, or in de Beauvoir’s terms: in light of a proposed end.\footnote{It is worth noting here the concept of “end” that de Beauvoir develops in \textit{Pyrrhus and Cineas}. Goals have an internally related dialectic structure. She writes: “A goal is always the meaning and the result of an effort…The notion of end is ambiguous since every end is a point of departure at the same time” \cite{de Beauvoir, PC, 99}.} Weakness is a fact of the objective body, but the lived body takes on meaning based on freely engaging with the world. A certain muscular weakness informs the basis of our existence, but it determines no significance or behaviour. I think de Beauvoir reasonably negotiates a middle ground between some of our actions being biologically based, while others are free.

To take one more run at relieving some of the force of the charge of biologism, I want to be clear that most of the obscure and so-called “offensive” claims about the superiority of males are in regard to the animal kingdom, and not human \textit{beings}. In “The Givens of Biology” de Beauvoir makes many claims about the superiority of males in the non-human animal kingdom. She writes that the males of a species find “self-fulfillment in activity,”\footnote{De Beauvoir, SS, 21; LDS I, 59.} and that their “individual existence”\footnote{Ibid., SS, 18; LDS I, 56.} is more manifested because of the structure of their particular role in
reproduction. What does de Beauvoir mean by “self-fulfillment in activity”? She never gives a clear definition of the concept, but there are a few passages that can lead us toward better understanding. Of the male mammal, she writes:

But the fundamental difference between male and female mammals lies in this: the sperm, through which the life of the male is transcended in another, at the same instant becomes a stranger to him and separates from his body; so that the male recovers his individuality intact at the moment when he transcends it. The egg, on the contrary, begins to separate from the female body when, fully matured, it emerges from the follicle and falls into the oviduct…the female is then alienated – she becomes, in part, another than herself.\(^{242}\)

In procreation, the male’s role is complete after he has deposited his sperm, described in terms of the creative force—or “life” incarnated in the individual—he loses very little vitality in the separation of himself from his sperm. In terms of phenomenological description, this amounts to a male mammal’s experience of procreation, or enslavement by the species: he only minimally lives his body as resistant, and consequently he finds more self-fulfillment in activity. But, this can only be understood in terms of that with which Beauvoir contrasts it. She is contrasting only a small amount of bodily resistance for the male, with (mandatory) pregnancy in the female. In these terms it makes sense to conceive of pregnancy as a more daunting task for a female. Mahon writes:“[G]estation, says de Beauvoir, is a fatiguing task of no individual benefit to the woman, but on the contrary, demanding huge sacrifices of her.”\(^{243}\) We must not forget the effort and risk involved in gestation and child birth for fear of the “essentialist trap.” These are real bodily experiences for which a “positive” psychological outlook cannot provide the entire shape of meaning.

What does it mean to have a particular animal’s individual existence more “manifested”? Of mammals she writes:

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\(^{242}\) Ibid., SS, 22; LDS I, 60.

\(^{243}\) Mahon, *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir*, 116
He is in general larger than the female, stronger, swifter, more adventurous; he leads a more independent life, his activities are more spontaneous; he is more masterful, more imperious. In mammalian societies it is always he who commands.244

Does this passage entail that males of the human species are naturally more “active” than their respective females, and if so, what does this say about human beings? To begin, in most of the passages in which de Beauvoir makes these claims she is contrasting the male and female of the species while they are engaged in their respective “rut.”245 The context of these claims is always in relation to both the physical manifestation of reproduction, i.e. the production of sperm and the œstrus cycle, and the animal behaviour that accomplishes reproduction. Self-fulfillment is not closed off to the female, it is just less pronounced in her when she is engaged in gestation, lactation, and childbirth. In human society, if part of our metaphysical condition is that we have the ability to incarnate meaning by the act of taking in hand, then a woman who experiences enforced maternity is less able to assign meaning to the world; she is less *free*. This piece of her theory has created a breeding ground for criticism. To name (mammalian) males in the animal kingdom as freer has led to the notion that de Beauvoir privileges this aspect of “maleness” in human society. But, once again, she makes no generalizations from animal behaviour to human behaviour, not only because her project is not concerned with explaining or predicting behaviour, but because human beings are metaphysically different than animals.

In this section I have argued that “life” can be employed toward two ends; first, toward the species, and, second, toward expression in the world. In “lower” animals, life is mostly employed toward the creation of new individuals, whereas “higher” animals and human beings have an increased ability to express their being in the world and are thus, more individuated.

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244 Ibid., SS, 24; LDS I, 63.
245 “[P]eriodically he feels the rutting urge; but these processes involve the sum total of the organism in much less degree than the œstrus cycle. The production of sperms is not exhausting, nor is the actual production of eggs; it is the development of the fertilized egg inside an adult animal that constitutes for the female an engrossing task” (de Beauvoir, SS, 24; LDS I, 62).
Employment of life towards procreation is not necessarily experienced as negative for human beings because reproduction takes place in the bosom of society where meaning is ascribed by free individuals. I have argued that de Beauvoir’s distinction between “maintenance” and “creation,” although perhaps not especially illuminative does not entail that a woman’s role in reproduction is essentially passive. Also, most, if not all of de Beauvoir’s claims about sexual behaviour in “The Givens of Biology” relate to animals and not human beings, which are not able to be analogized with each other because human beings are ontologically different than animals.

Section Five: Conclusions

In this chapter I have situated “The Givens of Biology” within a philosophical-phenomenological framework. I have provided an exposition of the biology chapter which aims to understand the subtleties and various implied or intended meanings that are contained in its dense and difficult language. De Beauvoir’s discussion of biology is meant to reveal the way in which biology informs our presence to the world. Part of our metaphysical condition is that we have a biological body that acts as the basis of our existence without “determining” it. In regard to sexual differentiation, de Beauvoir’s theory leaves open the possibility for a spectrum of human embodiments that each contain activity and passivity. This account does not specifically align female embodiment with passivity, even if their lived body is, at times, experienced as passive or resistant.

In section two of this chapter, I argued that de Beauvoir cuts the analogical ties between the gametes and their respective adult human beings. The common conception was that the role of the egg and sperm in reproduction acted as a microcosm for the sexual behaviour in which men and women ought to engage. With the same stroke she argues against the conception that
the egg is passive while the sperm is active by treating each gamete as an individual existence. In this sense, the “vitality” contained in each is symmetrical and they are both lost and transcended in the creation of a new individual life. De Beauvoir’s discussion of the gametes is meant to combat an essentialist conception of reproduction that she traces back to the ancients.

In my exposition of “enslavement by the species” I highlight de Beauvoir’s distinction between the human species and human beings. The human species is a theoretical fiction. Members of the human species do not properly exist; they have a different metaphysical condition than human beings. What human beings have, that human species lack, is social embeddedness and the abstract attitude. Human beings exist in a world of social meaning that informs the experience of their lived bodies. The interconnectedness of human freedoms affords space in which humans can posit meaning and value for their lived bodies. The becoming of the human species into human beings parallels the addition of the abstract attitude found in Merleau-Ponty. As humans we are able to be at a distance from ourselves, a process which affords us the ability to posit meaning and value for our situations through action, emotion, and language, and results in changes to our metaphysical condition. Given that this is what our experience is like we can read “enslavement” as the presentation of our bodily processes into the foreground of our consciousness. Bodily processes “stand-out” against what Merleau-Ponty calls the “anonymous background” of our lived body. Read in this way, the experiences we have of our reproductive processes are not inherently negative. For de Beauvoir, “enslavement” is then transformed into a phenomenological category that makes explicit an aspect of our metaphysical condition.

When we view a human being from the phenomenological perspective, we see that they have a life force, or transcendence of the world that orients them toward certain projects. Life can be directed toward creative expression: motility, engagement, and emotion. Life can also be
directed toward reproductive endeavours which have as their end the creation of new individuals. In “lower” animals most of their existence is consumed with the creation of new individuals, and from this de Beauvoir concludes that they are not proper “individuals.” For de Beauvoir, individuality reflects the awareness and separateness of an existent. Compared to females of other species, human females are most individuated and advanced in their awareness and understanding and therefore they experience reproduction as oppositional to their individuality more acutely than any other species. As I have argued, these experiences are not inherently negative, nor do they comprise a biologically constituted “nature” for woman.

My exposition of “The Givens of Biology” is intend to highlight deficiencies in the criticisms that have been levelled at de Beauvoir. Through providing a philosophical-phenomenological framework, from which to draw interpretations, I hope to have demonstrated that there are many subtle complexities in de Beauvoir’s writing that are not always visible at first glance. Indeed, readings of de Beauvoir that most vehemently throw the charge of “essentialism” are those that put the least effort into understanding her existential-phenomenology. It is to the critical reception of *The Second Sex* and “The Givens of Biology” that I now turn.
Interpretations of *The Second Sex* took a sharp turn in 1985 when *Hypatia* (1985) held the Women’s Studies International Forum, a special symposium to mark approximately thirty years since the release of the English translation of *The Second Sex*. Before the symposium, there were a few pivotal works published on de Beauvoir that coloured the landscape of interpretation. These commentators tended to read de Beauvoir as Sartrean, essentialist, and negative. I have argued in the preceding chapters that these errors are due in part to the philosophical insensitivities, inaccuracies and deletions in Parshley’s translation. As these problems came to light, and as commentators came to see the richness of *The Second Sex*, reception and commentary began to shift towards a more charitable and phenomenological reading of the work. In Jo-Ann Pilardi’s essay “The Changing Critical Fortunes of the Second Sex” (1993) she provides a detailed historical situating of the critical reception of *The Second Sex*. In it she remarks that subtler interpretations are increasing, and that it was the early onslaught of criticism that caused de Beauvoir’s ideas to lay dormant for so long. Much progress has been made in de Beauvoir studies, however, many questions still remain unanswered and many ideas are still to be interpreted.

De Beauvoir’s engagement with philosophy leaves open many doors for interpretation because it is not always clear to whom she takes herself to be responding, how closely she holds

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a consistent theory across different periods of her writing, and also, just how much philosophical import can be taken from her novels. I began this inquiry by framing the commentaries as from three voices: those that interpret her as a biological essentialist, those that view her as a constructivist, and those that claim that she is just contradictory. These commentaries also map onto two voices of the historical reception of de Beauvoir’s work, not just in relation to her theory of biology, but in general. Early receptions, which I term “the first voice” of criticism were very critical, barely giving *The Second Sex* a chance to be understood. Little effort was given to understanding the dense and sometimes obscure language that it contained. Some commentators, who could not understand the text after a first glance, deemed it as being accessible and applicable to only bourgeois women.247 Then, as almost an antithesis to the early receptions, new interpretations were extremely charitable to de Beauvoir, while being very critical of Sartre. One commentator went so far as to describe the difference between their two views as “oceanic.”248 Included in this second voice are commentaries that are a synthesis between the too charitable and a new perspective which treats de Beauvoir’s insights as informative for a theory that extends beyond what, I submit, is actually contained in de Beauvoir’s writings. The obvious question is: “Where does the present inquiry fit into this backdrop?” My goal was to not conform to existing modes of inquiry into de Beauvoir’s work and instead I offer a defence against misplaced charges, but do not defend her *in toto*. Where the first voice zealously tears down her theory, the second (at times, wearily) props up, or tries to rebuild the wall from new materials, I hope that my work has shown why at least one brick need not be torn down, although it remains to be seen whether it should be used to build a defensible theory. Indeed, the science that de Beauvoir was working with in the 1940’s was quite

247 Mahon, *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir*, x.
248 Ibid., 88.
biologic and perhaps, with the addition of a more contemporary glace at scientific understanding, with a slight tune-up her theory could yet provide new ways of understanding traditional feminist concepts.

In what follows, I summarize the historical critical reception of de Beauvoir in order to locate my work in the field. My focus will be on the reception of de Beauvoir’s account of the relation of biology and the oppression of women. I begin with what I have termed the first voice; then I proceed to the second, where I situate my inquiry and show how my analysis is unique in the field. The two voices that I identify are not monolithic, indeed, they also do not follow a rigid historical sequence. I use these categories to situate my reading of “The Givens of Biology.”

Section One: The First Voice

The voice of the highly critical or dismissive commentator is one which gives a thin reading of *The Second Sex* and de Beauvoir’s other works. In this section I illustrate how the “life and work” study of a figure such as de Beauvoir has provided a backdrop against which de Beauvoir’s theory was silenced. De Beauvoir’s critics rarely understood the conceptual framework in which she was operating. It is not difficult to fail to understand her conceptual framework because as Donald L. Hatcher writes,

> Part of the difficulty [of reading *The Second Sex*] lies in the sheer length of the book, not to mention its complexity. However, part of its difficulty surely lies in de Beauvoir’s own philosophical perspective which she presupposes rather than develops in the work. Unless the reader has some understanding of de Beauvoir’s philosophical framework, is well versed in existentialism and the Sartrean tradition, and is familiar with Marxist and Nietzschean ideas which underlie her analysis, many of her arguments appear as if they were merely her prejudices. Without some understanding it is hard to see why she says what she says.249

I have provided a philosophical perspective which I believe is adequate for understanding “The Givens of Biology,” and since there is no other exposition of the biology chapter in the literature similar to mine, the backdrop that is missing from other commentaries will be slightly different than the one I have provided. In this section I hope to highlight the errors in interpretation that other commentators have made in understanding de Beauvoir’s views on the development of woman into the Other, as well as her views on biology.

To take a small sidetrack into the “life and work” genre of interpretation, and to be sure, there are many books in which the author has mingled analysis of de Beauvoir’s personal life and psychology with her theories, I want to spend a brief moment on the work *Hearts and Minds: The Common Journey of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (1977) by Axel Madsen. This book treats Sartre’s philosophy, politics, and fiction as focal points. When de Beauvoir’s writing is mentioned throughout the work, she is referred to as “Beaver,” which was the nickname assigned to her by Sartre. When Madsen does discuss de Beauvoir’s writings, he does so in the context of Sartre’s motivations for “telling” her to write certain works. Indeed, if this book is the reader’s first encounter with de Beauvoir and Sartre they would be left with the impression that de Beauvoir was merely a scribe for Sartre’s genius. Of the entire 295 pages, mostly dedicated to Sartre, there is one paragraph that explains the theory developed in *The Second Sex*. Madsen writes: “Beauvoir’s most startling affirmation is perhaps her view that woman’s enslavement was a historical necessity, that humankind’s progress was gained against

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woman.\textsuperscript{251} This sentence is meant to summarize all of \textit{Facts and Myths}, the first volume of \textit{The Second Sex}. To provide a contrast, the author spends three pages summarizing three of Camus’ works.\textsuperscript{252}

In \textit{Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin} (1985), Mary Evans’ arguments take many wrong turns in her reading of \textit{The Second Sex}. To begin, she argues that de Beauvoir’s chapter on biology rules out the possibility that women can refuse to be the Other. Evans argues that de Beauvoir offers “little hope for escape” from female passivity.\textsuperscript{253} As I have shown, this cannot be read into “The Givens of Biology.” Evans also provides a flawed analysis of sexual difference. She writes that because de Beauvoir begins with a progression of the animals from “low” to “high” she must then accept a Darwinian theory of reproduction and sexual difference. She also claims that “De Beauvoir, in following Darwinian evolutionary theory, implicitly accepts the concept of general and extensive difference between male and female, man and woman, which now seems at least questionable.”\textsuperscript{254} This interpretation, based on both my reading of de Beauvoir, and the customs of philosophical argument is patently false. Not only does de Beauvoir not accept human continuity, she also rejects evolutionary theory as having any explanatory power for the behaviour of human beings in the social world. Also, my reading of her account of sexual difference shows that she left many doors open for varied and multiple sexual embodiments. Also, one cannot read implicit Darwinianism into de Beauvoir’s theory without an unfair conceptual leap. Further, Evans argues that another problem with de Beauvoir’s discussion of sexual difference is that de Beauvoir makes faulty generalizations from animal behaviour to human behaviour. Evans’ analysis is not unique; indeed, it fits into a larger

\textsuperscript{251} Madsen, \textit{Hearts and Minds}, 162.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 169-71.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 63, my emphasis.
theoretical movement that is antithetical to biologism - a certain “culturalism” about the body – which is equally totalizing. According to Evans, “de Beauvoir’s account of animal life is often interchangeable with her descriptions of human society.”

This assertion is also untenable given my argument that there is a clear distinction between human beings and members of the human species.

In Elizabeth Fallaize’s *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (1988) we see a conceptual introduction to *The Second Sex* that is in line with the charges against which I have defended de Beauvoir.

[In ‘The Givens of Biology’ w]omen’s bodies emerge as problematic, crisis-ridden element of their situation, and an element, moreover, for which Beauvoir seems to have a personal distaste.

Fallaize seems to be referring to descriptions of enslavement by the species and also de Beauvoir’s claims that the species asserts itself more profoundly in women. But, when we read these claims “enslavement” as and not inherently limiting of subjectivity, but rather as a phenomenological category that points to woman’s increased individuality, it is hard to describe de Beauvoir as having a distaste for female embodiment.

In Carol McMillan’s *Women, Reason and Nature* (1982) she argues that de Beauvoir’s account entails that women are oppressed by biology. She writes that Shulamith Firestone is following de Beauvoir when she argues that:

The idea that there can be anything fulfilling in being a mother is a contradiction in terms. To be a mother is ipso facto to be oppressed…[De Beauvoir claims that] woman is subordinate to biology, she construes the peculiar features of the female anatomy in terms of a struggle between biology and woman in which biology is all too often the victor.

I have argued that for de Beauvoir, the facts of biology have no significance until they are embedded in a social context of meaning. Motherhood is not inherently oppressive, indeed it can

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255 Ibid., 63.
be a positive experience for a woman. De Beauvoir does use language that frames the relation of an individual with the species in terms of enslavement or opposition at times, but as I have shown, this is not inherently limiting of subjectivity, and it does not entail a negative psychological experience although processes such as gestation and childbirth may be dangerous to a woman’s individual well being. A woman can experience transcendence toward the species as joyous by returning to the original movement of consciousness: disclosure.

Jean Leighton’s work *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman* (1975), which is an expansion on his dissertation *The Conception of Woman in the Works of Simone de Beauvoir* (1969) is likely the least charitable reading of de Beauvoir available. In his introduction, Leighton sets his task: “[T]o examine Simone de Beauvoir’s novels, *The Second Sex*, and her autobiography in an effort to unravel and explore the ideas and attitudes about woman and her tragic limitations.”257 As an introduction to an interpretive work, this sets a tone of indictment of de Beauvoir, rather than investigation. Again, he takes a combative tone toward the work:

The book is written in several registers at once and is by turns dry and factual, lyrical, satirical, and even clinical and vague, turgid, and exceedingly repetitious. There is also a mixture of almost cynical worldliness and childhood naïveté, which gives it a special flavour…Her extremism is paradoxically both a defect and a positive asset since it occasionally makes the doctrine difficult to accept.258

He proceeds to strengthen his characterization of de Beauvoir by quoting a passage from *Memoirs of A Dutiful Daughter* (1958) in which de Beauvoir describes herself as a young child who, with a “natural impetuous vitality,” was prone to temper tantrums and a certain “tempermental extremism.”259 Not only does this sort of analysis infantilize de Beauvoir and attempt to undercut her theories as merely attributable to her “childish ways,” but it constitutes a personal attack. Leighton persists in giving psychological antecedents for de Beauvoir’s writing.

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257 Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman*, 18, my emphasis.
258 Ibid., 26.
259 As quoted by Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman*, 27.
He blames the length of *The Second Sex* on de Beauvoir’s stubbornness by appealing to her “vague but grandiose plans” as a college student.260

Regarding biology in particular, Leighton writes that de Beauvoir devalues motherhood because she ascribes it no value in itself. De Beauvoir’s woman, according to Leighton, has an intrinsically inferior embodiment and that her role in reproduction merely maintains, while men daringly create values.261 This reading fails in two ways. First, it misses the conceptual framework of existential phenomenology. There is no inferior or superior embodiment because there is no value inherent in anything; value is conferred onto the world through action and engagement, of which men and women are equally capable. And second, this reading presupposes that if something is to have a value worth having it has to be intrinsic. This assumption again would not gel with an existential phenomenological framework. Perhaps Leighton’s framework of assumptions attempts to honour a system of values that ascribes “special” value to motherhood. It is unclear in the text how Leighton would prefer motherhood be valued. It is clear, however, that he prescribes a normative reaction to his reader: “No woman can read sections of this dismal record without vibrating with indignation.”262

The works of Madsen, Evans, McMillan, and Leighton are only a few of the widespread philosophically insensitive readings of de Beauvoir. These readings were among the first in anglo-philosophical circles and their repercussions are still visible in de Beauvoir studies. Again, Hatcher is correct that one must have an adequate understanding of de Beauvoir’s early works and a philosophical background to understand *The Second Sex* or her work appears as prejudicial and obscure. Perhaps it would have been easier on the reader if de Beauvoir had been more clear in her impressive and extensive work, but the text as it stands is all that we have about

260 Ibid., 29.
261 Ibid., 31.
262 Ibid., 30.
which to posit interpretations. The negative tone of this first critical voice led to a strong counter reaction in which commentators did their best to defend de Beauvoir from all charges, and to distance her from Sartre, if not a trifle too zealously.

Section Two: The Second Voice

As I have argued, interpretive errors in anglo-philosophical circles function on a three part axis: failure to understand de Beauvoir’s philosophical background, an assumed Sartrean dependence, and translation problems and insensitivities in the Parshley translation. The second voice of commentators was essential for retrieval of de Beauvoir’s theory. Commentators began to understand the existential-phenomenological framework in which de Beauvoir was operating, they started to read the text in the original French version, and they started to read her in light of influences other than Sartre. This was a vast improvement, although many commentators have been too limited in their choice of philosophical backdrop.

The most pivotal scholar of the second voice is Margaret A. Simons. She has worked collaboratively with de Beauvoir’s adopted daughter Sylvie le bon de Beauvoir to most accurately follow de Beauvoir’s vision. Simons’ work was a critical light that began to shine in 1979. In her interpretations and engagements with de Beauvoir’s work and theories she has constantly questioned the historical reception of de Beauvoir in a way that is not overly critical, yet which is not afraid to point to problems with de Beauvoir’s theory when obscurity and contradictions riddle the works. Simons interviewed de Beauvoir three times between 1979 and 1985, and in the interviews she queried de Beauvoir on her theories. What is especially impressive about Simons’ body of work is that she has never advanced a large work that attempts to give a definitive reading of the whole of The Second Sex. Instead, she writes papers on various issues, always gesturing toward new interpretations. Also, she has put together volumes of
papers and encouraged a wide variety of de Beauvoir scholarship. She is also the editor of the new and pivotal English publication of de Beauvoir’s early works, which is sure to encourage a variety of new works on de Beauvoir that bring scholarship one step closer to accurate interpretations.

Sara Heinämaa has been key in unlocking new interpretations of de Beauvoir’s concept of embodiment. Her work *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (2003) advances a theory that heavily situates de Beauvoir in the phenomenological tradition. As is obvious from the title, this work distances de Beauvoir from Sartre, as do many other authors.²⁶³ In this work, Heinämaa situates de Beauvoir’s account of the body more closely with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Her account shares my conclusions about de Beauvoir’s lived body, yet she does not inquire into “The Givens of Biology” itself. Regarding sexual difference, Heinämaa writes: “In Beauvoir’s interpretation, [women’s bodies and men’s bodies] are the two main variations of human embodiment, and every singular human existent is a variation of one of them or else combines elements of both.”²⁶⁴ This is consistent with my reading where each body has a given locus of meaning, which is varied across humanity, and then based on how we engage in the social world of meaning we give meaning to our lived bodies.

Heinämaa writes in “What is a Woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the Foundations of the Sexual Difference” (1997) that Butler, in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), misattributes the sex/gender distinction to *The Second Sex*. Heinämaa rightly contextualizes de Beauvoir in the phenomenological tradition of description to reveal meaning, rather than to investigate “causes”


and “effects.” Her reading, like mine, places de Beauvoir’s descriptions of biology as to the end of increasing our understanding of embodiment. Heinämaa argues that de Beauvoir discusses the details of biological processes in order to reveal the limits of the present theories. Indeed, de Beauvoir’s conclusions at the end of “The Givens of Biology” are, in effect, a declaration of the inadequacy of the current conceptual landscape, and its methodology. But, discarding the “givens” of biology of her time is not tantamount to rendering biology irrelevant and declaring gender as performative. Butler, Heinämaa argues, actually reads in the very sex/gender distinction to de Beauvoir’s theory that she is trying to dismantle in Gender Trouble (1990). Heinämaa gives a Merleau-Pontian reading of de Beauvoir’s lived body to show that de Beauvoir does not reproduce Cartesian dualisms of mind/body. It is because Butler viewed de Beauvoir through this particular lens that she “found” there to be a sex/gender distinction in The Second Sex. Again, this is another example of de Beauvoir’s critics falling short of understanding the theoretical shortcomings that inform their criticisms. As Heinämaa writes “Butler is misled by the sex/gender thinking that is self-evident in Anglo-American feminism but incompatible with Beauvoir’s phenomenological argument.” Sara Heinämaa’s extensive works on de Beauvoir are subtle and rigorous in their ability to diffuse misplaced criticism. My historical reinterpretation is indebted to her brilliant re-readings.

In Joseph Mahon’s Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir (1997) he offers a detailed exposition of the concepts developed in both de Beauvoir’s philosophical writings and her novels to the end of revealing her conceptual development of existentialism. His work does not make the mistake of psychologizing her theories, nor does it align her too closely with Sartre. In fact,

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266 Ibid., 23.
267 Ibid., 29.
Mahon offers a defence of de Beauvoir against some of her harshest critics. He comes from a breadth of knowledge of existentialism and phenomenology, which allows him to situate de Beauvoir’s works in light of its most likely influences, while at every turn he acknowledges her individuality. He introduces both the historical context and the philosophical concepts at play in *The Second Sex* which allow for an interpretive exposition of her theory:

[T]he philosophy of *The Second Sex* is both her own creation, and rooted in the Western philosophical tradition. This philosophy must be studied to be understood; its insights cannot be made instantly available to the casual reader, no matter how accomplished at his work the translator happens to be.268

Mahon apportions this deficiency to not just Parshley but most of de Beauvoir’s critics. He takes feminist criticism on at full force throughout the work, arguing that feminist readings miss the context and subtleties contained in *The Second Sex*. Perhaps it is Mahon’s outsider perspective on feminist theory that provides him with the ability to come at *The Second Sex* with less conceptual baggage than his counterparts. Mahon gives a short exposition of the biology chapter that, while not inaccurate, does not probe the conceptual depths of the chapter. Instead he focuses on her claim that the facts of biology do not establish a fixed destiny for woman.269

In Fredrika Scarth’s *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (2004) she briefly discusses de Beauvoir’s use of the “tyranny” of biology. She writes that what de Beauvoir means by “tyranny” is that the biological body is limiting what our lived bodies can express.270 This claim is not consistent with my reading of “enslavement,” which I take to be the same phenomenological concept as “tyranny.” First, this reading of “tyranny” is far too broad: our biological bodies are the basis of our being, and as such, structure what our lived bodies can express. What is missing from this reading is an account of what makes tyranny distinct from

268 Mahon, *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir*, 113.
269 Ibid., 117.
270 Scarth, *The Other Within*, 81.
embodiment. On my account I give a reading of this concept as mapping onto the figure/background structure of consciousness: the appearance of our biological processes as becoming foreground for consciousness, which is contrasted with our bodies as in the background of consciousness. Although Scarth’s exposition of the body in de Beauvoir gives a good phenomenological account of how our bodies take on meaning in a social context, it does not go far enough in understanding how “enslavement” is intended as part of our metaphysical condition.

Scarth argues convincingly against the charge that de Beauvoir is negative about maternity. Like many other commentators, she takes an “ethical” approach to maternity, rather than understanding it in terms of the lived body. An ethical approach to maternity is one that asks whether a woman can assume maternity in an authentic way. As Scarth writes:

For Beauvoir free maternity is an engagement, an obligation and a responsibility, and an opening onto the future; a mother must have concrete opportunities to shape the world because she is taking on responsibility for the world her child will enter. In reconceiving maternity in this way, Beauvoir asserts that maternity is not simply an immersion in the cyclical time of the species, but is an essential connection with the future through the other, the child-to-be.271

This reading of maternity is a shift in focus that can act as an extension of my account of the equality of subjectivity in both male and female embodiment. If subjectivity was lessened by maternity in a woman it is hard to imagine that she would be able to freely engage in the world if she is to take responsibility for the world in which the child enters. Here maternity is an active expression of a woman’s being toward new individuals that acknowledges her subjectivity.

Moira Gatens gives an account of de Beauvoir’s theory of biology, but like many other commentators focuses mainly on the chapter on psychoanalysis and historical materialism. In her essay “Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look” (2003) Gatens engages with the original dilemma of de Beauvoir as essentialist, constructivist or contradictory by arguing against the idea

271 Ibid., 138.
that de Beauvoir is a strong constructivist about bodily meaning. Gatens fleshes out the middle
ground that de Beauvoir is arguing for with her discussion of biology:

The idea that the relation between the lived experience of woman and the female body is an
arbitrary one is directly contradicted by Beauvoir. She holds that in spite of cultural or historical
variability in interpretations of sexual difference, a certain relation between the female body and
womanhood will always remain...[And also] the body will bear the consequences of the values
that are bestowed on it, thus forming an interactive loop between bodies and values.272

I would not term the idea of the each body having a fixed core of meaning as there being a
relation between the female body and womanhood, but Gatens’ point is clear: to interpret de
Beauvoir as wholly constructivist or essentialist is to miss the ambiguities in de Beauvoir’s
account.

My reading is unique in its phenomenological treatment of “The Givens of Biology.”
Most other discussions of biology draw from the chapter on psychoanalysis, childhood, and
maternity. These are also fruitful places to understand biology in de Beauvoir’s framework,
however, without a firm grasp of the body as the basis of existence and de Beauvoir’s treatment
of biological facts, any reading of the subsequent chapters will be inadequate. Without these
important re-readings of de Beauvoir, parts of her theory will remain silenced.

Section Three: Towards Liberation

Feminist theory has to take a step forward in the direction of always questioning the theoretical
and methodological shortcomings in their understanding of texts. It is not enough to comb
through great works looking for essentialism, dualism, or misogyny. Texts like The Second Sex
require subtle interpretations that allow for the revelation of embedded meanings. There are
many questions that remain unanswered in relation to The Second Sex and “The Givens of
Biology” that have not been touched on in this essay. For example, it would be fruitful to know

more about how the concept of the lived body that I have developed extends into the chapters on psychoanalysis, historical materialism, and maternity. These other chapters are also on the receiving end of the charge of biological essentialism. Indeed, the work as a whole could use a phenomenological re-reading, which is perhaps a task for another day. For now it shall suffice to have repaired some of the unraveled threads in “The Givens of Biology,” in hope that future weavers like myself will unveil de Beauvoir’s dynamic tapestry.

LIST OF REFERENCES