

Lucky Burden: Beauvoir and the Ethical Temporality of Birth

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His life had germinated within me, and, whatever might happen, I had to bring this development to term, without being able to hurry things even if it meant my death. Then he was there, born of me; thus he was like a piece of work that I might have done in life ... but after all he was nothing of the kind.

– Colette Audry (cited in Beauvoir 1952, 468)

The birth of a child takes its own time. As Colette Audry notes, the germination of life within the body of a woman does not neatly conform to her own timeline of projects and activities, although it does not necessarily conflict with this timeline. Even where access to contraception, abortion, and other reproductive technologies allow many women to choose when, how, and whether to give birth, there still remains a difference between the time of conscious planning and the time of germinating life. This temporal difference contributes to the ambiguity between production and reproduction which Audry suggests in her comparison of the child to “a piece of work” which is nevertheless “nothing of the kind.” On one hand, the woman makes a cluster of cells into a child; her body has the capacity to generate new life, a new existent with his or her own distinct relation to time. What could be more creative than this labor which makes another potentially creative being? But, on the other hand, the procreative process maintains a stubborn and often disturbing resistance to deliberate choice, such that women may find themselves already involved in this process without wanting to be. If we concede that reproduction is a process in which one might be unintentionally involved, without prior choice and even without an immediate awareness of another existence taking shape in one’s body, then in what sense can birth be understood as a creative activity for which one is ethically responsible? Furthermore, if reproduction “happens” to men and women differently, then does it not condemn women in particular—as the sex who bears the fetus in her body, sometimes at the expense of her own health or comfort—to an existence overtaken by nature, condemned to repeat itself for the sake of the species?

Beauvoir takes up these and other questions in *The Second Sex*, with an ambivalence that has led some of her critics to conclude that Beauvoir herself viewed reproduction as a stumbling block for feminism.¹ In the section titled “The Data of Biology,” Beauvoir describes the female as

"the victim of the species" (Beauvoir 1952, 18). Women's capacity to gestate a fetus seems to condemn her to an existence which is not quite her own: "First violated, the female is then alienated—she becomes, in part, another than herself" (19). This sense of alienation makes woman in particular the instrument of a larger force, to which her individuality is forced to submit: "The species takes residence in the female and absorbs most of her individual life; the male on the contrary integrates the specific vital forces into his individual life" (21). Worst of all, the woman may become an instrument for the social reproduction of values and institutions which contribute to her own maternal servitude; pleased with the attention and respect she gains as a mother, she may support the very practices that confine her value to motherhood.² It would seem, then, that for Beauvoir the only way to women's freedom is the way *beyond* maternity; reproduction is incompatible with the vision of an independent, self-transcending, and free individual.

While there is no shortage of textual support for this reading of maternity in *The Second Sex*, it nevertheless overlooks the wider context in which these remarks arise. Throughout *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasises the contingency of biological "facts" and their dependence upon social sanction for their power and authority:

But in truth a society is not a species ... for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subject rather to that second nature which is custom and in which are reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature. It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfilment (Beauvoir 1952, 33).

In this sense, there can be no purely biological account of the reproductive body; the "victim of the species" is also—if not primarily—subject to the social conventions that construct her as a victim and represent this construction as women's biological destiny. One of Beauvoir's central tasks in *The Second Sex* is to distinguish between woman's biology (especially her reproductive capacity) and her social or psychological identity. While I may be born female, this category does not already define the woman I will become: "No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society" (Beauvoir 1952, 249). However the fact remains that only female bodies (and not all female bodies) can become pregnant. To the extent that my embodied situation shapes my existence in significant ways, the possibility of pregnancy will play a role in the social and personal experience of being a *woman*, and not only in the biological life

of the female. Much depends, then, on the way the "facts" of life are interpreted.³ How do we distinguish between the female who is born and the woman she becomes without neglecting the sense in which women are also female? Furthermore, how do we account for the sexual specificity of pregnancy without implying that women can be known by their reproductive capacity alone?

My response to these questions turns on Beauvoir's interpretation of the body as a *situation* with both biological and cultural aspects. The body is not simply a discrete organism moving indifferently through the world, driven by its natural instincts or biological "programming." Whatever else it may be, the body is also the starting point for a world; it forms the material basis for my experience of things and interaction with Others. From this perspective, sexual difference matters not because it determines my natural destiny, but because my embodied, sexed, and gendered perspective on the world informs my understanding: "For, the body being the instrument of our grasp on the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another" (Beauvoir 1952, 29). The body is the starting point for a meaningful world; but the meaning of my own body is not fixed in advance, nor is it completely up to me to decide. For Beauvoir, biology and culture are not opposed but rather interwoven: "in the human species nature and artifice are never wholly separated" (476). From the moment I am born, my body is interpreted by others who draw upon their own experience of the world, which in turn draws upon "that second nature which is custom" (33). In this sense, my starting point is never an absolute beginning; it enters a world which is already underway by the time I arrive. As a situation, the body is always open to interpretation by oneself and others. This is both its danger (since my own preferred interpretation can be contested by others) and its promise (since no interpretation, however bleak, is absolutely incontestable). Where the body is understood as a situation to be interpreted, it remains open to a future of possibility; the task of interpretation is never completed, so "we can never close the books" on the meaning of sexual difference (Beauvoir 1952, 30).

The ambiguity of this embodied situation informs Beauvoir's account of maternity:

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. The bondage of woman to the species is more or less rigorous according to the number of births demanded by society and the degree of hygienic care provided for pregnancy and childbirth. 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 individual 'possibilities' depend upon the economic and social situation (Beauvoir 1952, 31).

On one hand "society alone" decides the value and significance of maternity, but on the other hand "it is true" that the female experiences reproduction differently than the male, and that her individual existence is more threatened by subordination to "the species." To say that the body is always interpreted in light of a particular historical and existential situation is not to imply that the body is interpretation "all the way down." Moira Gatens argues for the importance of the material, factual aspect of bodies in *The Second Sex*: "To maintain, as Beauvoir does, that the capacities of the body—understood in naturalistic or biological terms—always require interpretation, is not equivalent to maintaining that the body is itself an interpretation or pure social construction" (Gatens 2003, 273). Rather, Beauvoir's analysis suggests "an interactive loop between bodies and values" (274), which I now seek to elaborate in the particular context of maternity. Given the intertwining of bodies and values in maternity, how do we account for women's experience of maternity as a biological burden or an ethically significant gift, or both?

In what follows I explore two possible interpretations of the ethical significance of maternity in Beauvoir's work. The first approaches reproduction from the perspective of existential ethics, focussing on the possibility of experiencing birth as a project and a choice. For the most part, in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that this possibility is more open to men than to women, such that maternity appears mainly as a failed project, an unchosen submission of one's individuality. My second interpretation of maternity rereads *The Second Sex* in light of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; it shifts the focus from individual transcendence to the ethical richness of ambiguity between self and other, transcendence and immanence, activity and passivity, in the experience of maternity. In *The Second Sex*, pregnancy often appears to threaten the freedom of the individual by burdening her with an other who interferes with her projects and alienates her from her own body, but a different view of freedom and intersubjectivity emerges in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. As Beauvoir explains, "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to one another" (Beauvoir 1964, 18). Here, the freedom of the self is not opposed to the other, but rather *requires* the freedom of others to whom it is nevertheless ambiguously bound. To put this in Colette Audry's terms, the ambiguity that makes the child both a creative "work" and "nothing of the kind" is not an unfortunate sign of reproduction's failure

to attain the heady creativity of artistic production, but rather a "lucky burden," an ambiguity which saves the child from being merely an effect caused by the other, a blip on the timeline of its mother or father. This fortunate ambiguity suggests different possibilities for thinking about the ethical significance of pregnancy, which I elaborate in the second half of this paper. From either perspective, Beauvoir's text does not claim to tell the meaning of reproduction *as such*, but rather to describe the predominant experience of pregnancy in different situations. As I will argue, the experience of maternity as a failed project or an unchosen submission is not simply a fact of life, but rather a "truth" produced by the particular situation of sexist oppression. The way beyond this oppression involves a reinterpretation—and not a repudiation—of maternity as an ethical situation, along the lines that Beauvoir suggests but does not fully develop.

Birth as a Project

Beauvoir announces her perspective of existentialist ethics in the introduction to *The Second Sex*:

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future.... Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects (Beauvoir 1952, xxviii).

While the past confronts me with its burden of given conditions and factual constraint, the future opens up a field of possibilities in relation to which even my relation to the past may be transformed. Through my projects, I transcend the present moment and orient myself towards an open future in which I *am* nothing other than what I *choose to become*. The project of femininity is contradictory because the woman—"a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (Beauvoir 1952, xxviii). As the Other of man, woman's individual existence is defined in advance as the negation or lack of masculinity. Even her potentially transcendent activities are directed towards the goal of passivity and immanence.⁴ The feminine woman is a subject forced to masquerade as an object in order to be valued by men, and even by other women. But while the framework of existentialist ethics allows

Beauvoir to challenge any notion of a fixed feminine essence, it poses problems for a feminist interpretation of birth, for the process of reproduction resists conforming to the structure of a freely chosen project. Beauvoir claims that "in any case giving birth and suckling are not *activities*, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no lofty affirmation of her existence—she submitted passively to her biologic fate" (57). While we may contest Beauvoir's verdict on parturition and breast-feeding—recalling that even Freud sees the latter as an activity of sorts (Freud 1965, 143)—we may still take Beauvoir's point that birth involves an irreducible element of passive non-mastery. In giving birth, my body and even my own future are bound to an other in ways that are not for me alone to decide. Even when I am deliberately trying to become pregnant, I cannot *make* myself so, nor can I choose the child who grows inside me.⁵ Does this resistance to choice cast a shadow over women's reproductive capacity, setting a limit to women's transcendence? Or does it open a different, less heroic, and more thoroughly intersubjective approach to existential ethics?

Beauvoir claims that in most animals the female of the species bears a greater reproductive burden than the male. The pregnant body is like a hostage to the fetus, taken over by someone other than herself whom she did not consciously choose, but with whom she is in the closest proximity. Unlike the male, she is forced—at least in the absence of decent reproductive choices—to nourish this child with her own body before and after birth, sometimes at great expense to her own health. By contrast, the male body seems to transcend itself in coition, losing nothing essential with its ejaculation of sperm. With this momentary contribution of bodily fluids, the male creates something outside of himself, something "other" that will outlive his own mortal body without making an immediate claim on his autonomy. This bodily detachment from the gestating child would seem to make possible a more abstract and "free" relation to parenthood as a project freely undertaken rather than a process undergone in passivity. The child whom the male helps to create—and whom, thanks to the laws and conventions of paternity, he can then call "his own"—does not nest inside his own body. It does not change his shape, disturb his sleep, or kick against his skin. Indeed, the male of the species need not even claim this offspring as his own; he has the freedom to "choose" or deny parenthood, while the biological mother of the child is obvious for all to see.

Beauvoir considers the possibility that differences in male and female sexuality might produce different relationships to the process of reproduction and even different configurations of individuality and community:

Immediate, direct in the female, sexuality is indirect, it is experienced through intermediate circumstances, in the male. There is a distance between desire and satisfaction which he actively surmounts; he pushes, seeks out, touches the female, caresses and quiets her before he penetrates her.... This vital superabundance, the activities directed toward mating, and the dominating affirmation of his power over the female in coitus itself—all this contributes to the assertion of the male individual as such in the moment of living transcendence (Beauvoir 1952, 20).

While this preference for transcendence in the male may be cultural as much as it is natural, nevertheless the implication here is that men have a better chance than women of experiencing reproduction as an active project which enhances their individuality—and moreover that this experience is clearly preferable to the passivity of bearing a fetus in one's body. Reproduction would be a more carnal, and ultimately less reliable, form of transcendence, but only for the man. For the woman, even this carnal transcendence remains difficult; as Beauvoir describes it, birth can leave a woman exhausted, misshapen, malnourished, emotionally unstable, and possibly even dead (Beauvoir 1952, 24). For pregnancy does not always accommodate itself to the women's own projects. It does not admit a bodily distance between self and other, or between the maker and the made, by virtue of which the reproducing woman could rise above the ongoing process of reproduction. It would seem that while production conforms to the will of the producer, reproduction happens in spite of the one whom it nevertheless requires.

This hierarchy between productive transcendence and reproductive immanence is reflected in Beauvoir's account of the temporality of birth. To produce is to make something new, but to reproduce is to make more of the same, binding the future to the present and past. The female reproductive body "assumes transcendence, a stirring toward the future, the while it remains a gross and present reality," in part because its body remains stuck to the fetus growing inside itself (Beauvoir 1952, 467). Beauvoir describes this temporal difference in sexual terms; while the man injects creativity into time with his distanced contribution to reproduction, the woman merely maintains the continuity of time:

To maintain is to deny the scattering of instants, it is to establish continuity in their flow; to create is to strike out from temporal unity in general an irreducible, separate present. And 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 (Beauvoir 1952, 22).

Excluded from warfare and confined to the inglorious task of raising children, women become the instruments of continuity while men grasp hold of the future on the strength of their own actions. Here, the father introduces separation and individuality into an otherwise continuous relation between mother and child. He interrupts the flux of "life" to make novelty and initiative possible.⁶ While this alteration offers freedom and transcendence for the male, it traps the female of the species in immanence, offering her no way out of embodied, factual existence. With each successive pregnancy, the mother is "plunged anew into the mainstream of life, reunited with the wholeness of things, a link in the endless chain of generations, flesh that exists by and for another fleshly being" (Beauvoir 1952, 467). Precisely because the male body is not directly implicated in the process of reproduction—because he exists in and for himself, rather than by and for another—he seems to have a greater chance of viewing birth as a form of creative self-expression. For Beauvoir, the implication of female flesh in the very process of reproduction suggests a lack of autonomy on the part of the pregnant woman. Even if a woman looks forward to childbirth and finds a kind of dignity or power in her capacity to give birth, "this is only an illusion. For she does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her; her flesh engenders flesh only, and she is quite incapable of establishing an existence that will have to establish itself" (468). Where authenticity is tied to an autonomous engagement in projects, it would seem impossible for women to have an authentic experience of giving birth, except perhaps with the help of reproductive technology that lets her achieve a more distanced, disembodied relation to birth. But would the female experience of reproduction become authentic only to the extent that it approximates the male? Here we reach a stumbling block, not with reproduction as such but with the existential interpretation of birth as a project of transcendence.

The interpretation of pregnancy as a failed existential project does not allow the pregnant woman to appear as anything more than the pawn of impersonal, natural forces. By implication, any relation with the mother becomes a non-human, amoral relation with a natural force which is trapped in immanence, but for this very reason also threatens to overwhelm the child's own transcendent individuality. For even the producer of intellectual genius has been re-produced. Even the solitary existentialist has been gestated in the body of a woman. Not only does

maternity itself resist interpretation as a project, but where existence has been defined in terms of active, transcendent projects, then even my relation to the mother would seem to thwart individual transcendence. Proximity to her body reminds me that I am not the origin of myself, that the freedom promised to me by the open possibilities of the future is also threatened by the facticity of the past. In this sense, the gift of birth would be the curse of death; from the moment I am born, I begin dying. The mother comes to symbolize both the source of all goodness and the source of all possible deprivation: "Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from which life wells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends" (Beauvoir 1952, 134). Where the mother is identified with the unending cycle of repetition which human projects seek to master, there remains little hope for an ethical relation between man and woman, or even between mother and child. Beauvoir explains:

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will (Beauvoir 1952, 134).

In the mythic figure of Woman as Mother, birth and death are joined together in an endless circle from which the child must escape if it is to survive.⁷

If the child is understood to begin in this seductive but disabling unity with the mother, then we should not be surprised to hear that the fundamental project of existence is to transcend birth, to *produce* reproduction on my own terms, as if I had created myself from the ground up, as if I had given birth to myself. Only by repeating or reclaiming birth does the subject lay claim to an existence of *his own*, in which he is no longer trapped in the body of the mother. Of the child, Beauvoir writes:

He would like to have sprung into the world, like Athena fully grown, fully armed, invulnerable. To have been conceived and then born an infant is the curse that hangs over his destiny, the impurity that contaminates his being. And, too, it is the announcement of his death.... The Earth Mother engulfs the bones of her children (Beauvoir 1952, 136).

To be born to an Other is, at least in this context, to be doomed to passivity, contingency and death.⁸

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre takes this notion to its limit, arguing that even my own birth is a kind of retrospective choice, in the sense that I alone decide the significance that birth will hold for me:

Someone will say, 'I did not ask to be born.' This is a naive way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity. I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being.... Yet I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable, for this fact of my birth never appears as a brute fact but always across a projective reconstruction of my for-itself. I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* being born (Sartre 1956, 556).

While Sartre acknowledges that "I am not the foundation of my being," he argues that this very fact compels me to *assume* my own foundation, as if I had chosen it for myself. The opacity of my birth calls not for a recognition of its strangeness but for a "projective reconstruction" in which I decide the meaning that this undecidable, potentially meaningless fact will have for me. For Sartre, birth is tantamount to abandonment: "I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant" (Sartre 1956, 556). This responsibility is inescapable, since whether I find my existence joyful or hateful, my subjective response remains the final arbiter of its meaning. Sartre explains: "We are taking the word 'responsibility' in its ordinary sense as 'consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or object'" (530). Precisely because I am author of my own existence, "everything that happens to me is mine" (530). I make the facts of life my own by "making myself," by "stamping" any given situation "with my seal" (531). Responsibility for my existence derives precisely from this *ownness*, from this act of self-production. I made myself by choosing my relation to birth, and *therefore* I am responsible for my own existence.

But precisely here, in this proud assertion of self-authorship, the significance of my birth to a mother is reduced to the status of raw material waiting to bear my stamp. If my birth is a project undertaken in retrospect, then reproduction in the body of a woman is at best a condition for my own self-production, and at worst a factual hindrance to my own existential freedom. From this perspective, an ethical relation to maternity as such would seem impossible. Either the child authors its

own existence, in which case the mother hardly matters as an other who *gives* birth, or else the mother authors the child, in which case (presuming she is able to achieve the transcendence necessary for such a project) the child could not be any more responsible or free than a product or a work of art. But is there not something important to be learned from the sense in which birth is *not* chosen, but rather given by an Other? This gift need not appear to the child as a humiliating insult to its freedom, a passivity to be overcome, nor must it appear to the mother as a failed project, tainted by biological processes that alter her body and resist conforming to her will. As Beauvoir herself writes, "The close bond between mother and child will be for her a source of dignity or indignity according to the value placed upon the child" (Beauvoir 1952, 33). The same could be said for the value placed on the mother, and for the interpretation of birth itself. In the next section, I will take a different approach to the relation between mother and child, reinterpreting the value of embodied ambiguity not as a threat to freedom and responsibility, but as their very condition.

Birth as an Ambiguous Situation

While the existentialist perspective is by no means absent from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is significantly modified by an insistence on the intersubjectivity of freedom.⁹ For Beauvoir, "it is other men [and women] who open the future to me," sketching out possibilities that I alone could not have imagined for myself (Beauvoir 1964, 82). Freedom requires a sense of the future as open and indeterminate, a time whose significance is decided neither by facticity nor by my own subjective projects and choices. Rather, freedom requires a plurality of others in relation to whom the future becomes meaningful as a horizon of incalculable possibilities. Precisely because I am not the only one in the world, I do not know what the future will bring. Others may respond to my projects in unforeseen ways, or their own projects may implicate me in dramas I could have never anticipated. In this sense the solitary, isolated individual of existentialist literature may be unrestricted by others, but he is not for this reason free: "No man can save himself alone" (62). Freedom becomes significant only in a social and ethical situation which sustains ambiguity rather than resolving it through a final arbiter or author of meaning. This ambiguity of intersubjective life suggests a horizon beyond my own narrowly subjective view. It keeps the temporality of my existence open beyond the future sketched out by my own projects. Beauvoir argues that because my freedom arises through a collaboration with others I cannot be truly free if there are others who remain oppressed: "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (73). This is not to say

that my freedom is therefore guaranteed by the existence of others, nor even by my desire for the other's freedom. For this desire remains exposed to the possibility that others will deny my freedom, reducing my singular existence to a static function of my race, my class, my sex. The ambiguity of existence is also a risk; it suggests that the meaning of one's life "is never fixed, that it must be constantly won" (129). The other is indispensable for my freedom, but precisely for this reason the other can also become my oppressor.

On this reading of Beauvoir, transcendence is not clearly preferable to immanence. The ambiguity of existence consists in "both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself" (Beauvoir 1964, 82). My freedom is grounded in facticity, and transcendence always refers to the immanence of a situation that can be transformed but never completely overcome. Oppression attempts to deny this ambiguity, splitting transcendence from its conditions and reserving the privilege of freedom for a select few. "Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures" (83). This temporality of oppression vividly recalls Beauvoir's account of reproduction, in which the world is divided into two sexes: the men who transcend and the women who are doomed to immanence, defined in advance by their natural capacity to reproduce the species and maintain its continuity. It also recalls her description of women's work in the home as a series of endless tasks whose effect is simply "marking time: [the housewife] makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present" (Beauvoir 1952, 425). The analysis of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* allows us to read these descriptions of women's reproductive labor in a different light. Rather than illuminating a natural or ontological fact about women, they point to a particular situation of sexist oppression in which the ambiguity of women's existence is denied and even posited as the cause of their "natural" subordination to men. Of course, "one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature" (Beauvoir 1964, 83). Women's enslavement to the species, then, could be an effect of social and political oppression rather than one of its root causes. Where the future of women *as women* is blocked in this way, it would be no surprise if their most sexually specific experiences appeared as an endless repetition of the same. The point is not only that women's bodies appear immanent, repetitive, and unfree under patriarchy, but that they appear inevitably and *unambiguously* so, with no possibility of a different or unexpected future. Given Beauvoir's analysis of oppression, the most compelling path of resistance would not be to claim transcendence for oneself, thus

gaining access to the realm of those who "enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself," but rather to enhance and empower the sense of ambiguity between transcendence and immanence, freedom and facticity, surpassing and perpetuating.

This empowerment implies a temporal and ethical existence whose significance remains open and indefinite, whose meaning "must be constantly won." For Beauvoir, the oppressor

... defends a past which has assumed the icy dignity of being against an uncertain future whose values have not yet been won; this is what is well expressed by the label 'conservative.' As some people are curators of a museum or a collection of medals, others make themselves the curators of the given world; stressing the sacrifices that are necessarily involved in all change, they side with what has been over against what has not yet been (Beauvoir 1964, 91).

A woman who is reduced to her reproductive capacity is oppressed in this sense: not because reproduction itself makes her unfree but because the meaning of her life has been defined in advance by one of its many aspects. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes: "Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming.... What gives rise to much of the debate is the tendency to *reduce her to what she has been, to what she is today*, in raising the question of her capabilities" (Beauvoir 1952, 30; my emphasis). In reducing the becoming of woman to a static form of being, sexist oppression denies woman the possibility and the risk of an open-ended future. It restricts her existence to the "reality" of past and present, in relation to which birth may appear as a failed project of transcendence. Ironically, the very ambiguity of pregnant embodiment which posed problems for its interpretation as an existential project also suggests a possibility for *resisting* oppression and holding open a future of becoming for women, whether or not they decide to reproduce. In what follows, I explore the potential of understanding pregnancy as "the strange ambiguity of existence made body" (Beauvoir 1952, 685) in order to shed a different light on the ethical significance of birth.

In *The Second Sex*, the pregnant woman feels "the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence" (Beauvoir 1952, 467).¹⁰ It is difficult to say where the pregnant woman ends and the gestating child begins, and yet the very possibility of alienation in pregnancy suggests that there is always already a difference between mother and child even in the midst of ambiguity. Beauvoir writes:

Tenanted by another, who battens upon her substance throughout the period of pregnancy, the female is at once herself and other than herself; and after the birth she feeds the newborn upon the milk of her breasts. Thus it is not too clear when the new individual is to be regarded as autonomous: at the moment of fertilization, of birth, or of weaning? (Beauvoir 1952, 19).

The woman who gives birth is both herself and an other, both altered by pregnancy and still maintaining a sense of separation or difference from the fetus. Beauvoir draws attention to the strangeness of this situation, where an other whom I have never met and about whom I know almost nothing is nevertheless formed within my body, in closest proximity to me. While the child is mine to bear and perhaps to raise, s/he still remains unknown to me: "everything he experiences is shut up inside him; he is opaque, impenetrable, apart; [the mother] does not even recognize him because she does not know him. She experiences her pregnancy without him: she has no past in common with this little stranger" (Beauvoir 1952, 478). This strangeness need not signify alienation, for the otherness of the child opens a future that is not my own, and for this very reason makes an ethical response to birth possible.

On my first reading of *The Second Sex*, pregnancy seems to disclose a future in which the pregnant woman herself does not figure, and in which she can only participate by dissolving herself into the "whole," the "species," the swelling rhythm of "life." Beauvoir concludes: "Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself" (Beauvoir 1952, 26). A woman's body may or may not be for her a reliable tool for mastering the world or attaining transcendence. Yet this ambiguity—in which woman *is* her body, but her body is *other* than herself—suggests a more complex sense of the embodied self than one might draw from the subject who uses his body as an instrument. Perhaps Beauvoir's sense of a woman being, but not possessing or controlling, her body, and her sense of pregnancy opening up a future that is not quite her own, can be understood not merely as a sign of alienation or absorption into the species but rather as the possibility of incarnate Being-for-the-Other, of a feminist ethics *in the flesh*. This possibility requires a commitment to the freedom of Others, where freedom is understood not as the right to choose one's own birth but rather as the openness of an indeterminate, ambiguous, and intersubjective future.

At first glance it seems that Beauvoir finds little, if any, promise in becoming "flesh that exists by and for another fleshly being" (Beauvoir 1952, 467). But could we not reconsider the significance of this flesh, and even the significance of prepositions such as "by" and "for"? Rather

than understanding the maternal body as "plunged into the mainstream of life" (467), immersed in the continuity of the species, could we not find in this body that exists by and for another body the figure of a self who is born and gives birth, a body whose flesh signifies not the continuity of the species but rather the abrupt discontinuity of responsibility for an Other?¹¹ It is not clear that autonomy and projection are the best categories for feminist change, nor for understanding what it means to give birth to an Other. The ambiguity of the pregnant body need not force the alienation of the self. It may suggest a different sort of transcendence, not *of* the self but *towards* the Other. It is not necessarily a bad thing to "deny the proud singularity of the subject" (151), and such a denial need not amount to merely an assertion of our enslavement to the species.

It is certainly possible to interpret *The Second Sex* as a lament for the failed project of reproduction. But this interpretation would underestimate the ethical significance of ambiguity in Beauvoir's work, and even in her account of maternity. I have argued that reproduction is not best understood as a mode of production or (self-) authorship. Rather, to give birth is to bring an other into the world, a distinct self with her own future, her own embodied existence, and her own capacity to reproduce. In this sense birth introduces something, or someone, utterly and un-repeatably new into the realm of the familiar. The daughter has her mother's eyes, her father's smile, yet she is more than the sum of her parents and different from anything they might have made for themselves. Reproduction takes place in this ambiguous nexus between present and future, nature and culture, passive reception and active engagement. The child is not a brainchild; except in fantasy and mythology there is no sudden moment of inspiration in which the child springs fully-formed from the head of its creator. But this duration of time, this slow germination, also takes on a life of its own, an otherness of which I am the facilitator but not the cause. As Colette Audry notes, there is nothing of which this new child is "the kind," and yet he or she nevertheless comes from me, emerging in time from my own body. The surprise of birth, this upsurge of the strange in the midst of the familiar, marks an ontological but more importantly an *ethical* ambiguity which Beauvoir sometimes acknowledges and sometimes overlooks. While the ambiguity of reproduction raises complicated issues in which women's bodies can and often have been exploited for their capacity to generate new life, I suggest that the problem lies less in this ambiguity *per se* than in the desire to make reproduction conform to a neater, cleaner model of production.

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Notes

1. For example, see Iris Marion Young's critique in "Throwing Like a Girl": "By largely ignoring the situatedness of the women's actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world, Beauvoir tends to create the impression that it is women's anatomy and physiology as such that at least in part determine her unfree status" (Young 1990b, 143). See also Mary O'Brien's critique in *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981). Compare these critiques, however, with Julie K. Ward's re-evaluation in "Beauvoir's Two Senses of Body" (in Simons 1995).

2. Beauvoir draws attention to what she interprets as the temptation to avoid "the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. When man makes of woman the *Other* he may expect her to manifest deep-seated

tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often well pleased with her role as the *Other*" (Beauvoir 1952, xxi). Of note here is the way that material and psychological aspects of oppression (lacking "definite resources" and feeling "well pleased" with her role) may implicate and reinforce one another.

3. In "The Data of Biology," Beauvoir points to the importance of biological "facts" which are nevertheless not definitive for women's situation: "Thus we must view the facts of biology in the light of an ontological, economic, social, and psychological context. The enslavement of the female to the species and the limitations of her various powers are extremely important facts; the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society" (Beauvoir 1952, 33). Again: "Certainly these facts cannot be denied—but in themselves they have no significance" (31).

4. Iris Marion Young elaborates these contradictions with respect to women's bodily movements in her classic essay, "Throwing Like a Girl" (see Young 1990).

5. Of course, given current developments in reproductive technology, increasingly I *can* make myself pregnant, and I *can* choose the child who grows inside me. At what point does reproduction becomes another form of production, and with what consequence for women's experience of birth? I address this question in Chapter 6 of my forthcoming book, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*.

6. Later, Beauvoir reiterates the distinction between the temporality of feminine and masculine procreativity. She writes: "Man's design is not to repeat himself in time: it is to take control of the instant and mold the future. It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value; this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman" (Beauvoir 1952, 61).

7. As Kristeva puts it in a different context: "For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. *Matricide is our vital necessity*, the sine qua non of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circum-

stances and can be eroticized..." (Kristeva 1989, 27–8, my emphasis). The implication is that either the mother must be symbolically "murdered" or her suffocating power will destroy me.

8. Beauvoir elaborates this point at length. She writes of the male child: "He would be inevitable, like a pure Idea, like the One, the All, the absolute Spirit; and he finds himself shut up in a body of limited powers, in a time and place he never chose, where he was not called for, useless, cumbersome, absurd. The contingency of all flesh is his own to suffer in his abandonment, in his unjustifiable needlessness. She [the mother] also dooms him to death. This quivering jelly which is elaborated in the womb (the womb, secret and sealed like a tomb) evokes too clearly the soft viscosity of carrion for him not to turn shuddering away. Wherever life is in the making—germination, fermentation—it arouses disgust because it is only made in being destroyed; the slimy embryo begins the cycle that is completed in the putrefaction of death. Because he is horrified by needlessness and death, man feels horror at having been engendered; he would fain deny his animal ties; through the fact of his birth murderous Nature has a hold on him" (Beauvoir 1952, 135).

9. For a sense of the more orthodox existential perspective in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, see for example Chapter 1: "Every man is originally free, in the sense that he spontaneously casts himself into the world..." (Beauvoir 1964, 25) and Chapter 2: "Man's unhappiness, says Descartes, is due to his having first been a child..." (35).

10. Iris Marion Young also emphasizes the ambiguity of pregnancy in her essay, "Pregnant Embodiment" (1990): "The pregnant subject ... is de-centered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head.... Pregnant existence entails, finally, a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future" (160). Young argues that pregnancy is not inherently alienating, but can be experienced as such in a patriarchal society like the one Beauvoir describes. The difference between this account and the analysis in "Throwing Like a Girl" mirrors the difference between my first and second readings of Beauvoir.

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