What is a Woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the Foundations of the Sexual Difference

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The aim of this paper is to show that Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex has been mistakenly interpreted as a theory of gender, because interpreters have failed adequately to understand Beauvoir's aims. Beauvoir is not trying to explain facts, events, or states of affairs, but to reveal, unveil, or uncover (découvrir) meanings. She explicates the meanings of woman, female, and feminine. Instead of a theory, Beauvoir's book presents a phenomenological description of the sexual difference.

THE SO-CALLED VOLUNTARIST THEORY OF GENDER

I will proceed backwards, from present to past, from critiques and interpretations to Beauvoir's own writing. My starting point is the recent criticism presented by Judith Butler in her Gender Trouble (1990a). In this work, Butler contrasts her own "performative theory of gender" to Beauvoir's "dualist" view. I will argue, that although Butler develops an important alternative to the received Anglo-American understanding of The Second Sex, she still shares the problematic starting point of her predecessors: the assumption that Beauvoir's work is a thesis about the sex/gender relationship.

Before I can go into the problems of Butler's suggestion, I need to examine the context in which she presents her reading. So I will start with an excursion to Butler's own project. It is perhaps an understatement to say that Butler's Gender Trouble rocked the foundations of feminist theory. Butler began her book with a series of provocative statements; she referred to Julia Kristeva, who writes that "strictly speaking 'women' cannot be said to exist," to Luce Irigaray according to whom "woman does not have a sex," and to Michel Foucault who states that "the deployment of sexuality establishes the notion of sex" (Butler 1990a, 1). By discussing the ideas of these scholars, Butler questioned the basic
concepts of feminist thinking: woman, femaleness, femininity, sex, and gender. She set about to develop a new anti-essentialist, "performative theory" of sex and sexuality.

Four years after Gender Trouble was published, a new study called Bodies that Matter (1993) came out. In this work Butler not only gave a more thorough explication of her ideas and arguments, but also redressed the oversimplified interpretations given to her earlier text. Among such misinterpretations was the notion that Butler presented a voluntarist theory of gender. Several scholars claimed she had suggested that a person ultimately chooses her gender (see, e.g., Kaplan 1992, 845; Weston 1993, 5, 11-14). Moreover, such a choice was thought to include not only the mental and behavioral aspects of the sexuality, but also bodily features: all were viewed as voluntary properties, readily selected, somewhat like clothes and hair styles (cf. Butler 1993, x).

Voluntarist understandings of the sexual difference can be—and have been—defended by pointing to the different techniques of shaping the body: body building, diets, lightening of the skin, plastic surgery, and sex-change operations. Such arguments echo the Cartesian idea that free will controls all mental and bodily processes. Descartes argued that the human being can, through will, reject not only the evidence of the senses, but also the truths of reason, for example mathematical truths. A human being is capable of resisting logical necessities as well as physical and social ones (Descartes [1641] 1990, art.58, 40; cf. Baier 1981; Alanen 1989; Baier 1990; Rorty 1992).

When applied to the phenomenon of sexual difference, Cartesian voluntarism offers the claim that a person can reject her sexual characteristics, both mental and physical ones. For example, a woman does not have to accept "feminine" behavioral patterns as her own any more than she has to contend with the shape of her body: breasts can be removed or artificially created.

Butler's Gender Trouble uses concepts such as play, performance, and parody that taken from their context, may form a picture of the human being as an unlimited will playing freely with various characteristics. However, the whole of Butler's work makes it clear that her concepts are motivated by and built on Michel Foucault's critique of the Cartesian subject. A closer examination shows that Butler does not approve of voluntarist conceptions of sexual difference, but on the contrary, argues against them (1990a, 35-36, 111-12; see also Butler 1990b, 143; Butler 1993, 93-95, 223-41; cf. Pulkkinen 1996). The argument against voluntarism coalesces in the criticism of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Butler sees Beauvoir as a Sartrean voluntarist, and states that her own Foucaultian view about sex and sexuality questions Beauvoir's basic concepts, above all the ideas of free will and detached consciousness without body or sex.¹

Butler's presentation of Beauvoir's The Second Sex, however, is incorrect: the work is not voluntarist in the Cartesian or Sartrean sense. Beauvoir's notion of the subject should not be identified with Descartes' Cogito or with Sartre's
being-for-itself. Rather, it is closer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body-subject intertwined with the world. The "decisions" made by such a subject should not be conceived as acts of free will; rather, they are bodily postures or attitudes taken in specific situations.

My claim is that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a phenomenological study—not an ideological definition or a sociological explanation—of the complex, many-sided phenomenon named "the sexual difference." Her work has been misinterpreted by most Anglo-American readers, including Butler. I will show that Butler's misinterpretation is guided by the idea of gender that she applies to Beauvoir's text, following the tradition of Anglo-American feminism. More precisely, Butler ends up identifying Beauvoir's approach with those of Sartre and Descartes because she reads Beauvoir's text through the sex/gender distinction dominant in Anglo-American feminism but foreign to Beauvoir's own work. She takes as her goal the deconstruction of this distinction, but despite her critical attitude she actually reads the distinction into Beauvoir's work.

If we sharpen the focus on Beauvoir's own writing and study her claims without adapting them to the sex/gender distinction, we can see that the questions Beauvoir posed over forty years ago do not, after all, stray from the genealogical questions as Butler's discussion leads us to believe. The aim in both cases is to study sexual differences as mental and bodily—but always as signifying—phenomena.

**ONE IS NOT BORN A WOMAN** . . .

Beauvoir starts the second part of her *The Second Sex* with her well-known claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" ([1949] 1991, 13). The received Anglo-American interpretation presents Beauvoir's idea of becoming a woman as a process of socialization. Beauvoir is claimed to maintain that sexual differentiation is an effect of socio-cultural forces. Female beings are made feminine by society. In other words, American and British feminists have assumed that Beauvoir's attack is directed primarily against biological determinism, i.e., against the view that biological factors—more specifically chromosomes and hormones—bring about sexual differentiation independently of the socio-cultural environment. If this is correct, then Beauvoir would be replacing biological constraints with socio-cultural ones and substituting social determinism for biological determinism.

The received interpretation can be supported by the opening section *Destiny* of the first half of *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir studies in detail the adequacy of bio-determinist explanations, and finds them untenable. She argues that biological facts do not provide a basis for the dichotomy between men and women (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 37-77). Crucially, however, this section is just a minor part of her more far-reaching argument that radically questions our ways of understanding sexual difference. Michèle Le Doeuff
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Judith Butler bases her voluntarist reading on Le Doeuff's work. She argues that Beauvoir substitutes individual choice for social constraints as an explanatory ground: gender is not forced on us but freely chosen (Butler 1990a, 8, 21). In the following pages, I will show that this interpretative step leads astray: Beauvoir does not offer a voluntarist theory of gender but develops a phenomenological description of the meanings of sexual difference.

It is not easy to isolate Beauvoir's own view from the many explanations, arguments, and analyses she presents. For one thing, her argumentation is complicated by the way she expresses her critical points. In discussing biological determinism, her strategy is especially difficult. It is as if she indulged in the bio-determinist discussion and adopted its concepts (Beauvoir [1949] 1991, 43-44). So some critics have accused Beauvoir of being contradictory: on the one hand, she explicitly rejects all bio-determinist explanations, but on the other hand, she develops them in detail. Susan Hekman, for example, claims that Beauvoir explains women's subordinate position by referring to their reproductive functions (1990, 74). Hekman's critical conclusion is that Beauvoir contradicts herself when she claims both that "woman are made in the society," and that they are shaped by their biological functions (1990, 76; cf. Seigfried 1990, 308; Diprose 1994, 61; Chanter 1995, 48).

Le Doeuff ([1979] 1980, [1989] 1991) shows that such readings are based on a misunderstanding: Beauvoir does not defend biology-based explanations, but rather reveals their limits. Le Deouff's analysis is supported by several passages in which Beauvoir voices her ultimate goals, stating very clearly that she adopts and employs the biological and physiological concepts only provisionally, for strategic reasons, in order to study the meaning of the word "female." Furthermore, she concludes the biology-section quite clearly: "Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question that is before us: why is woman the Other" ([1949] 1993, 77). What Beauvoir provides is thus by no means a defense of biological determinism, but rather an internal critique of it. Indeed, Linda Zerilli (1992) goes as far as to claim that the beginning of The Second Sex is actually a form of mimetic writing:

Beauvoir does not uncritically adopt but subversively inhabits the putative impartial male voice that deduces the reproductive function of the woman from that of the female, the passivity of the female from that of the egg. Mimicking the language of reproductive biology, Beauvoir exposes a comic absurdity that signals a lack of scientific certitude. It is in the gaps of this discourse that "the meaning of the word 'female' will stand revealed." (Zerilli 1992, 118; cf. Zerilli 1991)
So the received Anglo-American reading of Beauvoir is right in claiming that she rejects biological determinism. But this is just part of the truth; The Second Sex does not just argue against biology-based explanations, but also rejects explanations based on psychoanalytic theory and historical materialism. According to Beauvoir, the phenomenon labeled "woman" cannot be understood as long as understanding means identifying causes and effects:

In our attempt to discover (découvrir) woman we shall not reject certain contributions of biology, of psychoanalysis, and of historical materialism; but we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence. The value of the muscular strength, of the phallus, of the tool can be defined only in the world of values; it is determined by the basic project in which the existent transcends himself towards being (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 105-106; the emphasis on discover is mine).

Le Doeuff concludes that Beauvoir's work ends up "with the image of an oppression without fundamental cause" ([1979] 1980, 286). Further, she claims that

Lacking any basis on the side of the involuntary (nature, economy, the unconscious), the phallic order must secure itself against every circumstance with the forest of props—from the upbringing of little girls to the repressive legislation of "birth control," and from codes of dress to exclusion from politics. (Le Doeuff [1979] 1980, 286)

Le Doeuff's analysis suggest that Beauvoir's solution is voluntarist: if Beauvoir argues that the state of affairs is without an involuntary cause, then "her solution" must refer to our voluntary actions. I think, however, that we should not draw hasty conclusions here. In the introduction, Beauvoir says repeatedly that her aim is not to explain facts, events, or states of affairs but to study the constitution of meanings (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 18-19, 30-32). This phenomenological idea is repeated in other sections of the book. It crystallizes at the end of the section entitled Destiny. Here Beauvoir writes that biological, psychological, and social facts and events cannot resolve the problem, because what we ultimately are faced with is a question of values and meanings ([1949] 1993, 106).

Beauvoir argues that causal explanations must give way to a phenomenological study of meanings and their constitution in actions and practices if we want to understand the sexual difference. In arguing for this new approach, Beauvoir refers repeatedly to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body ([1949] 1993, 39-40, 67, 73, 79, 89). Despite these sections, Beauvoir's work
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has not been studied in relation to the phenomenological questions and themes initiated by Husserl and reformulated by Merleau-Ponty. Even interpreters who have noted the allusions have not taken into consideration the difference between a phenomenological description and an empirical theory (Butler 1989; Kruks 1990; Butler 1990b; Moi 1994). Hence, in order to evaluate Beauvoir's work, it is crucial to return to Merleau-Ponty's writings and study his ways of presenting the question about embodiment.

**STYLES OF BEING**

Phenomenology is a study of experience and its meanings. It requires a special attitude towards the world, a special methodological step. The phenomenologist suspends his judgements and prejudices about existence and non-existence in order to be able to describe the world as it appears to the subject. His attitude can also be characterized by saying that he "puts into parentheses" his existential beliefs and knowledge (Husserl [1913] 1950, 64-66; cf. Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, i-ix; Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 29-30). Especially, all scientific knowledge is put aside. This applies to both natural and human sciences, to biology, psychology, and sociology. The phenomenologist aims at understanding how meanings are constituted in experience, so he cannot base his studies on the realities that are claimed, supposed, or known to be behind experience.

Husserl thought that the phenomenological "suspension" leads to the study of the essential structures of experience and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty argued that essences cannot be the end point of phenomenological questioning. The phenomenologist has to turn back to particular and specific experiences in order to unveil the origins of essences and norms (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, ix-x).

For Merleau-Ponty, the subject of experience is not a consciousness detached from the world, but a living body that dwells in the world with other bodies (e.g. [1945] 1993, viii). Thus, movements, feelings, and perceptions are primarily bodily modes, but so are acts of speech and thought: statement, beliefs, cognitions, and volitions. We can say that, like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty brings the phenomenological subject back to the world. However, one of his principal aims is to avoid lapsing back into Sartre's dualistic ontology (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 401-402, 496-520). What we have then is the materialization of both phenomenology and existentialism which leads to fundamental changes in the concepts of action and choice.

So one should not let oneself be misguided here by individual words or concepts, but should pay attention to how they are used and connected. Although Merleau-Ponty's body-subject is the source of meanings, it is also a sedimentation of them (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 151). It is a chiasma of earlier intentional acts: movements, postures, gestures, and expressions. The
cultural and individual histories form together the background for new original acts of meaning. Hence, the subject does not create meanings independently of others, but rather takes them up and elaborates them like old rhythms or melodies (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 97-99).

Further, the body should not be understood as the organism described in biosciences. The existential presuppositions and results of anatomy, physiology, and ethology must be suspended with those of human and social sciences. Our bodies do not present themselves to us primarily as objects of study but as starting points for our actions and practices—including scientific activities. Based on this idea of the lived body (Leib) first voiced by Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues that the concepts of cause, effect, and function are inadequate for describing the variation—the openness—of the human body, its activities, and experiences (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 87). The relations between the body and its environment are not external, causal relations but internal relations of expression. This means that the body is actually intertwined with what it encounters, i.e., things and other subjects (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 90).

From the embodiment of the subject and its intertwining with the world, it follows that the subject is not transparent to itself, but forever ambiguous ([1945] 1993, 231). The body-subject does not coincide with itself, it does not belong completely to the world nor is it entirely outside the world. Or, in Merleau-Ponty's own words, "the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 467).

This understanding of the human body is taken up by Simone de Beauvoir as the basis for feminist questioning:

in the perspective I am adopting—that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty—if the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp upon the world and the outline of our projects. ([1949] 1993, 73, cf. 39-40, 67, 79, 89)

it is not the body-object described by the biologists that actually exists, but the lived body of the subject. ([1949] 1993, 78)

When the human body is conceived as a subject of actions, sexuality cannot be understood simply as an attribute of an organism or a subsystem of a biomechanism. Instead, feminine and masculine sexualities are understood as modes, or styles, of being. They characterize the whole of being:

The existent is a sexuate body; sexuality is always involved in his relations with other existents who are also sexuate bodies. But if body and sexuality are concrete expressions of existence, it is with reference to this that their significance can be discovered... (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 87; emphasis mine)
This alternative conceptualization has two interesting consequences for the notion of sexual identity. Note first that the unity of style is not to be found beneath or behind the concrete actions that are conceived as its manifestations (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 368-69). For example, the expressions of a personal style—the posture, the smile, the hair cut, and the clothes—are not held together by any common cause, physical or mental. Neither do they materialize a common form. Instead, their unity is like a weft (trame) or a fabric (tissu) of partial and varied connections (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 185). Likewise femininity or womanhood, when conceived as a style of being, can not be pinned down by a common source or form; it can only be conceived by studying its concrete manifestations and the various relations between them.

Note also that the concept of style is dynamic. A style is not a constellation of fixed qualities or actions but an open, uncompleted structure. A personal style, for example, is not a collection of actions but a way of acting: thinking, writing, dancing, throwing, breathing, reasoning, arguing. It runs through one's whole life like a melody: there is no core, no common quality or number of them present (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1986, 154). In Martin C. Dillon's words, the unity of style is "an adverbial unity" (1988, 79).

Thus, if sexuality has the open structure of a style—as Merleau-Ponty's notion of body-subject suggests—then we cannot understand womanhood by focusing on specific actions, for example childbirth. On the level of lived experience (Erlebnis), we cannot separate the mental from the physical, the natural from the cultural. We have to study the whole of action and try to find its tones and melodies (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 378).

Such a study is exactly what Beauvoir sets up to do in her The Second Sex, not to explain women's lives by femaleness or femininity, but to describe the plurality of actions and practices that constitute the meanings of "woman," "female," and "feminine" ([1949] 1993, 30). So Beauvoir is not trying to find the cause for mental or physical differences between women and men. Nor is she interested in isolating the natural from the cultural. Her aim is to study the meanings involved in sexuality in all its complexity. When this phenomenological strain of Beauvoir's thinking is discovered and understood, many seeming contradictions disappear.

For one thing, the sections concerning biology and otherness, which have been interpreted as Beauvoir's definition for womanhood, show up in a new light. Beauvoir introduces them as aspects of the phenomenon of sexual difference, not as its core or foundation. She writes that woman "is the Other," but adds in a footnote that this definition is given from "a man's point of view" and is biased in disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. So she does not begin her work by defining women but by studying how definitions are constructed: "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him"
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(Butoir [1949] 1993, 15; emphasis mine). Later she suggests that “in her core, she is even for herself quite undefinable: a sphinx” ([1949] 1993, 400).

Also, it becomes understandable why Beauvoir—after studying these definitions (100 pages)—feels the need to widen the view and provides detailed descriptions (1000 pages) of the meanings given to the sexual difference in historical narratives, myths, literature, psychology, sociology, and everyday practices. Her work is not an incoherent collection of ideological definitions and empirical facts but a phenomenological description of a certain style of being. The book is rich, but not closed or completed, because the style described is not a fixed quality but an open structure.

SEX AND GENDER

In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler states that Beauvoir’s concept of the subject is an elaboration of the theories of Descartes and Sartre (Butler 1990a, 9-12, 129, 153 n.21; cf. Chanter 1995, 47-51). She writes, for example, that Beauvoir conceptualizes the body as a “mute facticity, anticipating some meaning that can be attributed only by a transcendent consciousness, understood in Cartesian terms as radically immaterial” (1990a, 129). Here Beauvoir’s idea of becoming a woman is distorted into an act of the Cogito or the being-for-itself: the immaterial consciousness freely adopts features that it is not bound to, either causally or expressively (Butler 1990a, 112).

In light of the many sections where Beauvoir explicitly describes the subject as bodily, and the body as historical, Butler’s claims are untenable (cf. Le Doeuff [1989] 1991, 99; La Caze 1994). Moreover, Gender Trouble contradicts not only Beauvoir’s writing, but also Butler’s own previous texts. In her article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex,” Butler suggests that, in describing a woman’s situation, Beauvoir rejects Descartes’ dualistic conception of a human being (1986, 37-40, 44). She claims further that Beauvoir’s elaboration of Sartre’s concepts radicalizes his ideas (1986, 38). In Gender Trouble, Butler states that she has abandoned her previous interpretation of Beauvoir and claims that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism typical of Cartesian thinking (1990a, 12). She does not come forward with an argument to support her new interpretation, but merely declares her change of opinion. We can, however, track down the reason for Butler’s critique by studying the differences and similarities between her divergent views.

In an early study “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description” (1989), Butler called attention to Beauvoir’s allusions and references to Merleau-Ponty. However, she did not elaborate on the connection between their conceptions of the body. Instead, the argument was that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception is dominated by the assumption of the primacy of vision and that this leads to a misogynistic and heterosexist conception of sexuality.
Butler’s criticism does not provide a close study of Merleau-Ponty’s works. It finds its basis only in those sections of *The Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty discusses the ideas of early Gestalt theorists who used vision as their primary example of the Gestalt phenomenon in perception. Butler ignores other passages where Merleau-Ponty uses touch and feeling to elaborate his own ideas and she does not discuss his criticism of the Gestaltists. She is thus forced to conclude that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project changed radically (1989, 99-100), since his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, is largely based on the model of touch—for instance lips touching (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1986, 179). Martin C. Dillon (1983) has presented strong arguments against interpretations that present Merleau-Ponty’s work as disconnected. Also, Samuel B. Mallin (1979) has argued that there was no substantive change in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Butler does not, however, take such alternative readings into account; she ends up rejecting Merleau-Ponty’s notion of sexuality as hetero/sexist.

In the article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1990b), published right after *Gender Trouble*, Butler returns to her positive reading of Beauvoir. She sets Beauvoir’s work into a phenomenological tradition and compares her notions to those of Merleau-Ponty. The basic presumption, however, is the same as in her critical reading: Butler assumes that Beauvoir’s aim is to present an explanation for gender differences. She fails to see the specific character of the phenomenological questioning and of Beauvoir’s interests in the meanings of sexual experiences instead of their mechanisms and means of production. As a result, Beauvoir’s work still presents itself as a theory about the socio-cultural production of gender (feminine, woman), presupposing a factual basis in nature and outside all signification (female).

When Beauvoir claims that “woman” is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have to become woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman.” (Butler 1990b, 273)

This latest contribution makes it clear that Butler’s reading—both in its positive and its negative modes—is guided by a conceptual distinction that does not do justice to Beauvoir’s work. As stated earlier, Butler is misled by the sex/gender thinking that is self-evident in Anglo-American feminism but incompatible with Beauvoir’s phenomenological argument. In order to see just how crucial this conceptual starting point is to Butler’s interpretation, it is necessary to examine the “logic” of the sex/gender distinction. The concepts
have been used in two different ways; I shall distinguish between the substantive and the formal use.

Originally the sex/gender distinction was made substantively, by listing the features that were included in the category of sex, on the one hand, and in the category of gender, on the other. The American and British feminists of the 1960s and 1970s defined "gender" by referring to mental and behavioral features, and "sex" by referring to biological features—genetic, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics (Heinämäa 1996b).¹⁴

Later this substantive definition waned and gave way to a formal understanding that did not list features, but merely stated a criterion for belonging to a category. "Gender" came to mean any sexual feature—be it mental, behavioral, or anatomical—that was socially or culturally determined. "Sex" was defined as consisting of those sexual features that are determined by the biological structure of the organism.¹⁵ Thus "sex" came to mean those possible components of sexual difference that are independent of cultural and social practices (Heinämäa 1996b).

So the substantive understanding of the sex/gender distinction is based on the mind/body dichotomy, whereas the formal understanding is founded on the dichotomy between culture and nature. The latter implies the idea that sexual difference has a core in nature and leads to two well-known positions: the constructionist view according to which gender differences are results of social compulsions, and the voluntarist assertion that they originate from choices and decisions made by individuals.¹⁶ In Butler's view, Beauvoir takes the stand of voluntarism. This is a mistake, because Beauvoir's phenomenological aim is not to explain gender differences, but to reveal, clarify, and understand the meanings of woman/man, female/male, feminine/masculine. All these dichotomies are under scrutiny in Beauvoir's work:

> If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through "the eternal feminine," and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman? (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 13; italics mine)

Thus, admitting no a priori doctrine, no dubious theory, we are confronted by a fact [sexual reproduction] for which we can offer no ontological basis nor any empirical justification, and which we cannot comprehend a priori. We can hope to grasp the significance of sexuality only by studying it in its concrete manifestations: and then perhaps the meaning of the word "female" will stand revealed. (Beauvoir [1949] 1993 43; italics mine)

Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately
than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 29-30; italics mine)

Hence, Butler introduces foreign ideas into Beauvoir's text when she states that Beauvoir's notion of becoming underscores the sex/gender distinction. The formal concept of gender presupposes the idea of sex given by nature. While in her own project Butler strives to undo this idea she claims to find it in Beauvoir's text. Her aim is to do away with the distinction between the natural foundation and the cultural surface. Nevertheless, this distinction creeps into her discussion under the name of the opponent. She claims that

Beauvoir was willing to affirm that one is born with a sex, as a sex, sexed, and that being sexed and being human are coextensive and simultaneous; sex is an analytic attribute of the human; there is no human who is not sexed; sex qualifies the human as a necessary attribute. But sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex; indeed for Beauvoir, sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed—or so she thought—gender is the variable cultural construction of sex. (Butler 1990a, 111)

Butler's statements entirely ignore the passages where Beauvoir takes an explicit stand on the question of the necessity of sexual difference. Immediately after the section about biological explanations, Beauvoir stresses that heterosexual activity "is not necessarily implied in the nature of human being" ([1949] 1993, 39). Beauvoir not only denies the necessity of differentiation in the productive life, but also in reproduction:

The perpetuation of the species does not necessitate sexual differentiation. True enough, this differentiation is characteristic of existents to such an extent that it belongs to any concrete definition of existence. But it nevertheless remains true that both a mind without a body and an immortal man are strictly inconceivable, whereas we can imagine a parthenogenetic or hermaphroditic society. (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 40)

Here Beauvoir refers once again to Merleau-Ponty, who argues in his The Phenomenology of Perception that human existence forces us "to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency" (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 199). The idea is that the human way of being transforms contingency into necessity by repeating and carrying forward.
I have argued, that in the light of the references Beauvoir makes to Merleau-Ponty's work, it is highly questionable to read her text on "becoming a woman" as a theory of gender-acquisition. Instead, what Beauvoir wrote, and what we are faced with, is a radical problematization of woman's being in general. When we study Beauvoir's work as a whole, we can see that her aim is to call into question the basic concepts of woman, femininity, and femaleness. Hence, her analysis is not as far from the genealogical project as Butler claims.

Beauvoir does not presuppose that human beings fall, by virtue of nature, into two complementary or opposing groups (sex) that, either by social constrains or by individual choices, become further separated (gender). Neither constructionism nor voluntarism supplies us with adequate understanding of sexual difference. Beauvoir does not presuppose that there are women, but on the contrary asks, "Are there women, really?," and what she wants to study is the meaning of this being.

In Beauvoir's phenomenological perspective, "sex" (female/male) cannot be conceived as a natural basis for "gender" construction, and "gender" should not be viewed as the cultural interpretation of a pregiven "sex." Both sex and gender must be seen as theoretical abstractions or idealizations, developed in specific practices of explaining and predicting human behavior and based on the feminine and masculine styles of lived experience.

Further, Beauvoir's subject should not be confused with Sartre's being-for-itself. Although Beauvoir defended Sartre against Merleau-Ponty's criticism (1955), she did not accept Sartre's conceptual framework as such. Instead she applied Sartre's notions to a whole new set of questions and, consequently, changed both the notions and questions. I have argued, that this revision shows traces of Merleau-Ponty's antidualistic notion of the body. Beauvoir is not developing an empirical theory or arguing for a voluntarist philosophy. She takes a phenomenological attitude towards the body and its sexual differences.

Thus, when Beauvoir asks how does one become a woman, she in fact asks how it is possible that a body, intertwined with the world and other bodies, can both repeat certain postures, gestures, and expressions, and change and modify them. Her answer to this question is perhaps not coherent. However, to criticize the solution, one has to understand the question correctly.

I have argued, contrary to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, that the correct framework for interpreting *The Second Sex* is not to be found in Descartes' or Sartre's philosophy of consciousness nor in the sex/gender distinction of Anglo-American feminism, but in the phenomenological questions first voiced by Edmund Husserl. If I am right, the debates on Beauvoir's work have not been settled. As a matter of fact, we have only just reached the beginning of the book:
For a long time I hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in quarreling over feminism, and for the time being the matter is closed. But still it is talked about, although it seems that the voluminous nonsense uttered during this century has done little to clarify the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? Are there women, really? ([1949] 1993, 11)

NOTES

I am thankful to Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, Martina Reuter, Ilpo Helén, Martin C. Dillon, and Lorraine Code for enlightening discussions on Merleau-Ponty.

1. A more recent criticism along Butler's lines can be found in Tina Chanter Ethics of Eros (1995).


3. Butler takes as her starting point Foucault's claim that sex—as a mental and bodily unity—is an idea formed by the deployment of sexuality (Foucault [1976] 1984, 152; cf. Butler 1990a, 1-6). According to Foucault, this idea has made it possible “to group together—in an artificial unity—anatomical elements, biological functions, conduct, sensations, and pleasures” ([1976] 1984, 154). Moreover, the fictitious unity presents itself as the cause of those conduct and practices that it actually effects (Foucault [1976] 1984, 154-155).

The construction of sex does not only concern our understanding of bodies, but also bodies themselves. Foucault's intention is not to write just about the concept of sex developed in the history of Western thinking but also—and perhaps more importantly—to study the genealogy of sexed bodies ([1976] 1984, 152). Butler follows in Foucault's footsteps to answer the question: In what sense is the category of sex constructed? Her aim is to establish a feminist genealogy of women (Butler 1990a, 5, 147; cf. Butler 1993, 93-94).

In the Foucaultian framework, the construction of sex should not be understood as a process of subjection, where an unlimited drive or an essentially free subject is forced to adapt to forms of behavior or being which are inherently alien to it. Rather, what we have in this case is a process that even produces its own raw material, be it the drive or the subject (Butler 1990a, 1-6, 142-47; Butler 1993, 94-95, 224-30).

4. This not just a problem of Butler's reading. The same assumptions guide, for example, Tina Chanter's interpretation in Ethics in Eros (1995, 47-79; cf. also Dallery 1990). The result is that Beauvoir's work seems to be incompatible with Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference. Chanter ends up claiming that "Beauvoir's final message is that sexual difference should be eradicated and women must become like men" (Chanter 1995, 76).

I would suggest that rather than accepting the idea of a simple opposition between Beauvoir and Irigaray, we should reject the sex/gender distinction and Sartre's existen-
itialism as keys to Beauvoir's texts. I have argued elsewhere that the relation between Irigaray's ethics of difference and Beauvoir's description of the sexual relation is more congenial and also more complicated than Chanter's reading suggests (Heinämaa 1996a, 1996c).

5. Cf. Le Doeuff ([1979] 1980, 285-86). Merleau-Ponty maintains in his The Phenomenology of Perception that the descriptions of historical materialism and psychoanalysis are misleading only if they are taken as causal explanations, and that such causal readings can be replaced by historical ones. The historical versions of materialism and psychoanalysis describe the events as intentional actions and meaningful expressions (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993, 199-202).

6. Beauvoir refers to Merleau-Ponty's early work The Phenomenology of Perception (1945). Already in this study, Merleau-Ponty describes the subject and its relation to the world in a quite different way from that of Descartes and Sartre. He takes his criticism of these thinkers even further in his unfinished work The Visible and the Invisible (1964). This study makes it quite clear that Merleau-Ponty's uncompromising project was to break away from the dualistic thinking that divides "reality" into two separate realms: consciousness and world, subject and object, mind and body, being-for-itself and being-in-itself. . . . ([1964] 1986, 167). Beauvoir expresses a similar kind of antidualist attitude when she states in The Second Sex that "the immanent and the transcendent aspects of living experience" are inseparable ([1949] 1993, 269).


9. Husserl developed the concept of the living body (Leib) in his manuscripts for the "second book" of Ideas (1952) and for The Crisis of European Sciences (1954). In the later work, he also gives a list of phenomenological problems of study and includes among them "the problem of the sexes" (1954, 192). To my knowledge, Elin Svenneby (1995) is the first person to ponder how Husserl's remark is related to recent feminist discussions of knowledge. Svenneby argues that there are interesting connections between phenomenological criticism of science and feminist epistemologies (Keller 1985; Harding 1986; Code 1991; Rose 1994).

Merleau-Ponty's argument against causal and mechanical descriptions of embodiment proceeds from the abnormal to the normal. He studies pathologies of perception and movement, showing that they cannot be understood in causal terms. Here, Merleau-Ponty applies the basic idea of Husserl's eidetic method: variations free the description from the immediate and the presupposed. Cf. e.g. Edie (1987, 60-65); Haaparanta (1994).

External (causal) relations and (internal) intentional relations differ from each other in that externally related things can be identified independently from each other, but intentionally related things cannot. On this difference see, e.g., Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1993, 10, 67, 217); cf. Melden (1961, 43-55); Stoutland (1970); von Wright ([1971] 1993, 83-131).

10. Beauvoir refers to Emmanuel Levinas' Time and the Other (1933) where Levinas argues that "Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning" ([1933] 1994, 81). Beauvoir comments: "I
suppose that Mr. Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is consciousness for herself. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus, this description, which claims to be objective, is in fact an affirmation of masculine privilege.” (Beauvoir [1949] 1993, 16; cf. Levinas [1933] 1994, 78)

11. The term “Cartesianism” is misleading here, because Descartes’ view of the mind-body relation is not unambiguous. In certain contexts he seems to abandon his well-known doctrine of two substances for a monistic description in which body and mind function as two attributes of one substance, the human being. In his The Passions of the Soul, he presents the human subject as corporeal and argues that only a bodily being can achieve scientific knowledge about the material world ([1649] 1990), cf. Alanen (1989) and Rorty (1992).

12. Butler’s essay was published in 1989, but in a footnote she states that originally it was written in 1981.

13. Luce Irigaray argues, in her An Ethics of Sexual Difference, that the problem of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is not so much that it privileges vision but rather that it privileges a certain way—a certain style—of seeing, touching, and listening (1984, 152-53). The privileged attitude is the one that objectifies the other: the woman, the man, and the world. Irigaray’s difficult aim is to discover and describe a radically different kind of attitude—a style of touching and seeing that does not possess the other as an object but lets the other appear in its own right (Irigaray 1984, 20; cf. Heinämaa 1996a, 1996b).

14. The sex/gender distinction first appeared in the beginning of the 1960s in texts written by a group of American psychoanalysts (e.g., Greenson 1964; Stoller 1964). The discussion concerned the formation of gender-identity and its connections to early personal relations. Ritva Ruotsalainen has studied the philosophical and scientific background of this discussion, especially its relation to medical studies on hermaphroditism (Ruotsalainen 1995).

Robert Stoller explicated the distinction in his work Sex and Gender, a psychoanalytic theory on the formation of transsexual gender-identity (1968). In this connection, Stoller referred to Freud’s essay “A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” where Freud distinguishes between three different aspects of (homo)sexuality: the physical, the mental, and the object-choice ([1920] 1990, 389-99). Stoller identifies his concept of gender with the second aspect of Freud’s list, i.e., with mental and behavioral differences.


For a more detailed analysis of the sex/gender distinction see Gatens ([1983] 1991) and Heinämaa (1996b).

15. Note that the formal definition leaves the content of the two classes for empirical sciences to decide. In other words, the definition does not tell us which features are included in the gender-class and which in the sex-class. Hypotheses are numerous—biologists claim that the major part of all differences between women and men are independent of social factors and radical constructivists argue that only features directly connected to reproduction—if any—are biologically determined.

16. When the act of choice is conceived in causal terms, as in the theories of mental causation, voluntarism becomes an equally causalistic theory as constructivism.
17. Isabell Lorey argues that Butler uses the term "sex" in two different meanings: it means both a "situated body" and a "sexually differentiated anatomy" (Lorey 1993, 12).

18. For a more detailed argument see Heinämaa (1996a).

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