

## II—KATE KIRKPATRICK

### THE OPIUM OF THE LASSES: BEAUVOIR'S REVALUATION OF LOVE IN *THE SECOND SEX*

This paper argues that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers a genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy in which love plays a central role. In dialogue with Sara Heinämaa's reading of Beauvoir as a projection theorist, I argue that the economic and moral dimensions of Beauvoir's revaluation of love are illuminated by reading her in a particular tradition of 'French Marx'. According to Beauvoir, both religious and secular mystifications of love, like Marx's 'opium of the masses', veil the real relations between human beings. However, rather than merely unmasking individualistic mystifications of love, *The Second Sex* situates what I call 'the opium of the lasses' in an axiological critique of Marx's projection theory of religion and post-Nietzschean discussions of 'love' and its capitalist co-optations. As such, Beauvoir's revaluation of love concerns not only the weight of patriarchal myths of what makes women 'lovable', but an inquiry into the possibility of co-responsible solidarity—of what it means to become love-able, able to love.

## I

*Introduction.* I am currently completing a philosophical commentary on *The Second Sex*, in part because no book of its kind exists in English and in part because I think Beauvoir's work has suffered from American cultural imperialism in both its translation and reception history. After its first publication in France in 1949, in 1953 an ideologically partial English translation of *The Second Sex* was published in the United States in the climate of the Cold War, where it was received first as a work of sexology or according to American feminist taxonomies. Although there were notable exceptions—such as the reading by Lorraine Hansberry, who saw it as an expression of 'the spiritual needs' of the species, committed to the inseparability of material and spiritual concerns (1995, p. 140)—few early commentators received this work as an intervention into

live debates in post-war French philosophy, deeply engaged not only with phenomenology and existentialism but with French Marxisms and Catholicisms.

Many French thinkers in this period claimed to inherit the task of the ‘Masters of Suspicion’, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, to unmask false consciousness to reveal reality (Ricoeur 1970). For Beauvoir, however, myths of ‘Woman’ veiled real relations between human beings even in the works of these unmaskers and their disciples. Rather than follow philosophers that mask ‘the tragic ambiguity of the human condition’ (EA, p. 7),<sup>1</sup> or promise that unmasking alienation would reveal our ‘true relations’ with perfect clarity, Beauvoir claimed that works of genius must remove veils and simultaneously refuse to conceal that ‘truth itself is ambiguity’ (SS, p. 763).

*The Second Sex* offers a genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy as a history that is still being written, with a confusing present and an uncertain future because it depends on so much more than defining the concept ‘woman’. This genealogy is not normatively neutral: Beauvoir believed oppression was ‘evil’ (SS, p. 17), and that the oppressive bourgeois myth of ‘femininity’ deserved not only criticizing but overthrowing (SS, p. 289). In Volume II of *The Second Sex* she offers an analysis of ‘traditional’ women’s alienation over the life cycle from birth to old age, in which myths of love play a central role. Her inquiry concerns not only the domain of truth or falsity, or whether men were justified in believing the contradictory and often dehumanizing things they have about women. Rather, she asks *why* the world has come to appear to so many human beings as though female humans are inferior, passive and submissive, or that women’s value should be calculated relative to men’s interests. Why have more women not contested their widespread devalorization (SS, p. 7)? Her method illustrates what Ricoeur called the ‘double motivation’ of hermeneutics: ‘willingness to suspect, willingness to listen’ (1970, p. 27)—to listen to and suspect both men and women. Central to her analysis of shifting values in the centuries immediately preceding her own are representations of women and ‘love’, since the recent European history of women’s economic, moral and ontological situations, on Beauvoir’s account, is inseparable from the history of this contested value.

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<sup>1</sup> Works by Beauvoir are cited by abbreviated titles and page number. See the References section for key and full publication details.

I have argued elsewhere that Beauvoir initiated ‘the ethical turn’ in French existentialism in her early essay ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, in part in dialogue with French personalism. There she asks the question, ‘What can satisfy the aspirations of human transcendence?’ (PC, p. 104). She answers that it is the intersubjective realization of human freedom, which requires both material and moral conditions that many lack. In developing her answer Beauvoir outlines two common paths of love’s failure, egoism and devotion, and claims that moral intersubjectivity is characterized by relations of generosity (see [Kirkpatrick 2024b](#)). Here, in dialogue with Sara Heinämaa’s reading of Beauvoir as a projection theorist, I argue that Beauvoir’s reevaluation of love in *The Second Sex*—and especially her indebtedness to and criticisms of Karl Marx—is illuminated by reading her with this tradition’s ‘French Marx’: namely, the Marx of the personalist tradition running from Max Scheler to Emmanuel Mounier and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

I make this case in three sections: first, I introduce Beauvoir’s Marx and the ‘French Marx’ under discussion; second, I turn to love and Marx in Beauvoir’s projection theory of religion; and third, to the roles of Scheler and Nietzsche in Beauvoir’s reevaluation of love.

## II

*On Individuals and Collectives: Beauvoir, Marx, and ‘French Marx’.* Recent work on Beauvoir’s philosophy has begun to re-situate many of her works of the 1940s in the domains of metaethics and value theory, and in particular of the reevaluation of values heralded by Nietzsche alongside the ‘death of God’ (see [Kirkpatrick 2024a](#); [Bremner 2022](#)). Although an atheist from early adulthood, throughout her life Beauvoir remained concerned with the question of whether it was possible to ‘say yes to life’, or to love the world.<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir’s axiological ethics emerges in part from her commitment to the view that atheism does not entail nihilism, nor secularism disenchantment. According to her early essays, human experience is saturated with value, whether we are hearing a symphony, seeing a beloved, or recoiling from the sight of cruelty or pain. To say that the world is saturated with value is not to say that it is enchanted in a superstitious or religious sense, but in the sense that each human

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<sup>2</sup> See EA, p. 158 on whether it is possible to refuse to love the world.

consciousness brings values into the world, and can feel the disvalue of suffering and destruction, in ways that place a moral burden on us to value—and work for—the freedoms of others.

In the introduction of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir writes that it is ‘difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature’ (SS, p. 15). In outlining the contents of each volume, she claims the first demonstrates how “‘feminine reality’” has been constituted, why woman has been defined as the Other, and what the consequences have been from men’s point of view’ (SS, p. 17)—concluding with a long part on what she calls a ‘multiplicity of incompatible myths’ (SS, p. 276) about women. The second volume, Beauvoir says, describes ‘the world from the woman’s point of view such as it is offered to her’ (SS, p. 17) in what she calls, in a line deleted from the first English translation, ‘the present state of education and customs’ (SS, p. 289). Its final paragraphs cite Karl Marx, ending with an appeal to her readers ‘to make the reign of freedom triumph’ in the given world, even in what Marx called ‘the most natural relation of human being to human being’, ‘the *relation of man to woman*’ (SS, p. 782, Marx’s italics). This relation, Marx claimed, ‘reveals the extent to which man’s *natural* behaviour has become *human*’ (SS, p. 782, Beauvoir’s italics). Beauvoir shared Marx’s concern with alienation, and with unrealized or frustrated freedom. But where Marx identifies production as the site of this alienation (such that what is alienated is the product of labour), Beauvoir’s conception encompasses the invention and expression of values beyond the domain of ‘labour’, including values of aesthetic and moral creativity—and love.

Beauvoir’s axiology is informed by Marx’s view that values arise from the ensemble of social relations. But she did not accept that economic relations were fully *determining* of an individual’s values or adequate to explain them. Nor did she believe that meeting human beings’ material needs was sufficient to meet ‘the aspirations of human transcendence’ (PC, p. 104). Like the personalist Max Scheler, who drew on Marx to develop a material ethics of values, and his French inheritors Emmanuel Mounier and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who combined aspects of Scheler’s axiology with socialist politics in 1930s France, Beauvoir’s ethics accord the individual ‘an absolute value’ (EA, p. 56) since ‘if the individual is nothing, society

cannot be something' (EA, p. 106). In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she claims that denying the value of *singularity* is a point on which 'fascist ideology and Marxist ideology converge': 'a collectivist conception of man does not concede a valid existence to sentiments such as love, tenderness, and friendship; the abstract identity of individuals merely authorizes a comradeship between them by means of which each one is likened to each of the others' (EA, p. 108).<sup>3</sup>

Given these criticisms, it may seem surprising that Beauvoir claimed that *The Second Sex* 'owed so much to Marxism and gave it such a prominent place' (LFC, p. 265).<sup>4</sup> However, reading Beauvoir as a value theorist committed to the irreducible interplay of the economic, the moral, and the ontological in the constitution of each human being's experience illuminates this place.<sup>5</sup> According to her ethics, which she defined in 'What Is Existentialism?' as uniting the Christian emphasis on individual interiority and a Marxist attention to objective conditions (WIE, p. 325; see also EA, p. 156), each human being has a unique 'natural history' (EA, p. 39). Each is situated in a singular body, a past, and a complex network of economic, legal, and social interdependence—and also by a singular network of values about such bodies, pasts, and forms of dependence. In human societies these values are sometimes made explicit: in the realm of law they are codified propositionally, in the realm of waged labour, they are subject to the norms of markets. In the realm of custom, however, values are transmitted through institutions and groups not only by explicitly endorsed propositions (such as declarations of rights or policy) but implicitly through habits, practices, and imaginative engagement with myths and narratives that represent the world in idealized and equivocal forms.

In its introduction *The Second Sex* famously asks the question 'What is a woman?' And in the first chapter of Volume I, 'Facts and Myths', Beauvoir discusses the inadequacy of single-domain,

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard's thought shaped Beauvoir's criticisms of Hegel, including her rejection of the abstraction of his dialectic of recognition in both PC and EA. See Heinämaa (2003, ch. 1) and Parker (2015), which demonstrates the centrality of 'singularity' to Beauvoir's ethics and its misleadingly inconsistent translation in English.

<sup>4</sup> For discussions of Beauvoir and Marx, see McBride (2012), Kruks (2017), Shepherd (2019), and McNicol (2022).

<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir rejected Hegel's view of the source of values, locating it not in 'impersonal universal man ... but the plurality of concrete, singular men' (EA, p. 17, translation modified).

purportedly value-neutral answers to it. She rejects biological, psychoanalytic, and Engels's historical materialist answers because they are abstract and monist, and because they deny the ways that each woman's *individual values* affect the relation she has to her body, her history, and her labour. Like many of her phenomenologist and personalist contemporaries, Beauvoir wanted a 'total humanism' that neglected neither the body nor consciousness. Also like them, she understood human freedom to be 'creative' in a way that meant human beings suffer when they cannot realize their vocations in the world.<sup>6</sup> The regulative ideal of *The Second Sex*, she says explicitly, is a 'socialist ethic', which she defines as one that 'seeks justice without restraining liberty', imposing responsibilities without abolishing individual freedom (SS, p. 68).

While Beauvoir's discussion of 'Biology' has generated extensive debate about whether she offers a complete denaturalization of the categories 'woman' or 'sex', less focus has been given to the relevance of the historical constitution of the category 'woman' in relation to the value-conferring categories 'labour' [*travail*] and 'individual' for her later argument. The concept of the 'individual' is central to her reevaluation of the morality of sexual hierarchy since so many past laws, customs, and mythological representations had denied that women were, in potential or in actuality, individuals. In surveying the 'Destiny' proposed to women in her generation, Beauvoir begins with 'biological givens', tracing the lineage of philosophical accounts which justify sexual hierarchy on the grounds of biological inferiority. She focuses in particular on legacies of the Aristotelian claim that woman was a 'defective male', which played a significant role in some Catholic theology, philosophical defences of the bourgeois institution of the family, and in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts of biology, medicine and psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup>

For centuries, philosophers' claims that women were inferior in *qua female*, *qua worker* or *qua individual*, were invoked to justify the morality of sexual hierarchy, and it is precisely the exclusion from being 'man's helper' in labour which Beauvoir cites as the source of

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mounier (1936); Beauvoir describes her concrete approach as attempting to understand women in view of their 'total situation' (SS, pp. 62, 567).

<sup>7</sup> See Aristotle, *De generatione* II and *Historia Animalium* 1.3, III.1 and 2.2, V–VIII, IX.1. On excluding women from labour and individuality see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Prima Pars Q 92.

her becoming the ‘Other’ (with a capital O) in Part II of Volume I, on History. This, Beauvoir says, is woman’s ‘worst curse’: her historical exclusion by men from the human *Mitsein*, which she attributes to men’s ‘will to domination’ (SS, p. 73/LDS, p. 111). The intellectual history of excluding women’s work from the category ‘labour’ and their persons from the category ‘individual’—significant categories in two millennia of European legal and political history—both play a significant role in Beauvoir’s analysis of why woman appears to be the ‘Other’ in the remainder of Volume I.

### III

*Love in Beauvoir’s Projection Theory.* Summaries of *The Second Sex* often pronounce without caveat that its thesis is that woman is ‘the Other’. However, caveats are needed. In Beauvoir’s discussion of History and Myths she claims that ‘Woman’ is not ‘the only incarnation of the Other’, and the importance of this myth is not static (SS, p. 165).<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir illustrates that myths of woman vary with objective conditions such as regime type, history, and economic structures. Nevertheless, she claims, woman *appears* as ‘the Other’ across centuries of European history because of the creation and perpetuation of myths expressing that woman’s value is relative or instrumental, that woman is *for man*, such as the myth of the first woman, Eve (SS, p. 165).

Any myth, Beauvoir says, ‘implies a subject who projects his hopes and fears towards a transcendent sky’ (SS, p. 166/LDS, p. 254, translation modified). Sara Heinämaa argues convincingly that Beauvoir’s answer to the question ‘Why has woman been constituted as the Other?’ involves introducing ‘a theory of projection’. According to Heinämaa, the core claim of this theory is that men ‘cannot accept the finitude of their own existence and thus project it onto women’ (2003, pp. 127–8). Heinämaa traces this theory to roots in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche,<sup>9</sup> showing that Beauvoir agrees with Kierkegaard that projections onto women often give men ontological alibis, defending the individual from the discomfort of his own

<sup>8</sup> The classification of myths as ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ is drawn from Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* ([1935] 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir cites Kierkegaard’s *In Vino Veritas* and Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Gay Science*.

ambiguity and from the existential difficulty of ‘seeing his task in the given self’, as Kierkegaard puts it in *The Sickness unto Death* (cited in Heinämaa 2003, p. 129). However, Heinämaa’s reading does not draw out the other axiological dimensions of Beauvoir’s projection theory, which are present from the start. For the alibis men seek, Beauvoir claims, are not merely ontological—they are also economic and moral—and men’s projections vary depending not only on their situations in history but also on their individual values.

These claims are clearer when understood in the light of earlier projection theorists to whom Kierkegaard was likely indebted, most obviously Ludwig Feuerbach, whose immanent criticism of Hegel and religion inspired both admiration and disagreement from Marx. In his *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach claimed that the subject of the Christian religion was not God, but the human—our *species being*. For Feuerbach, what his contemporaries called consciousness of God was ‘nothing other than the consciousness of the species’; he thought that ‘there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the *absolute*, than the essence of human nature itself’ (Feuerbach [1841] 1989, p. 270).<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that all human beings experience their species as lovable or worthy of adoration: his projection theory involves a two-step movement, in which individuals first project their own limits onto the species, and then project the lack of these limits onto God. For example, the human experience of ignorance or powerlessness might lead to the positive projections that God is omniscient or omnipotent. The experience of struggling to love oneself or another might lead to the negative projection ‘human beings struggle to love and be loved’, and to the positive consolation that ‘God is perfect love’ or ‘we are loved by God’.

Aspects of Feuerbach’s critique of religion were taken up with critical enthusiasm by Marx, whose *Theses on Feuerbach* articulate several claims that illuminate Beauvoir’s critique of myths of ‘Woman’ and the alienation of women in everyday life. Most pertinent for our purposes are the first and sixth theses, both of which articulate objections to Feuerbach’s abstraction. In Marx’s first thesis, he famously declares that ‘the chief defect’ of all previous materialisms, including Feuerbach’s, is that they take for granted that the theoretical attitude is the only genuinely human attitude:

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<sup>10</sup> On Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, see Malesic (2007).

[T]hings, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, it happened that the *active* side, in contradistinction to materialism, was set forth by idealism—but only abstractly, since of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. (Marx 1976, p. 6)

In his sixth and seventh theses Marx objects that Feuerbach is mistaken to move from the religious essence to the human essence, since the human essence ‘is no abstraction inherent in each single individual’ but rather consists in ‘the ensemble of social relations’. In failing to attend to the ‘ensemble of social relations’, Marx claims, Feuerbach abstracts ‘from the historical process’ and presupposes ‘an abstract—isolated—human individual’. But the ‘religious sentiment’ itself is a social product, on Marx’s view, and therefore so is ‘the individual’ analysed by Feuerbach—in this case, a product of nineteenth-century German Protestantism. This ‘individual’ must therefore be understood in historical, material, context (Marx 1976, p. 8).

Adopting aspects of both critiques of religion, Beauvoir points out not only that women have been excluded from many iterations of the category ‘individual’ but that contemporary theorists of myth have failed to consider the ensemble of social relations from women’s points of view. They too fall foul of her general objection that ‘The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with absolute truth’ (SS, p. 166). Although she does not name Feuerbach’s claim that all theology is anthropology, and the result of splitting and projection, she adapts it, claiming that the heaviest weight of patriarchal projection falls on the so-called ‘weaker’ sex, woman.

In Beauvoir’s critique of the immanent critique of religion, she argues that the way past men assumed their ambivalence towards the limits of the given and the possibilities of freedom was such that, with the arrival of patriarchy, nature and life took on a ‘dual aspect’, characterized by these polarities:

Consciousness	Matter
Will	Passivity
Transcendence	Immanence
Spirit [ <i>esprit</i> ]	Flesh

After identifying patriarchy as the source of this dual aspect, and denial of human ontological ambiguity, she traces the projection of the devalORIZED pole of the duality onto women (SS, p. 167).

In the early parts of Volume II, Beauvoir offers a phenomenology of women's everyday 'sensuous activity', to substantiate her claim that it is bad faith to consider woman merely as a worker, or that alienation merely concerns the domain of labour.<sup>11</sup> In omitting women's experiences of domestic, sexual, and reproductive labour (and the bodily alienation of it when it is not chosen [*asservi*]), Marx's talk of species being omits a vast continent of human experience: frustrated female freedom. And any philosophy that claims to concern restoring humanity to fully *human* relations must not neglect this continent.

Before turning to women's concrete experiences, their 'sensuous life', however, Beauvoir surveys the 'multiplicity of incompatible myths' (SS, p. 276). She does so to demonstrate, first, that woman has not been considered positively, 'as she is for herself', but her value has been defined 'negatively, such as she appears to man'.<sup>12</sup> And second, that as man has defined her, 'woman embodies no set concept'. Nietzsche was right, Beauvoir claims, that men invented Woman. But their inventions are never merely metaphysical—where 'mere' metaphysics is the normatively neutral enterprise of identifying the concepts that best carve nature at its joints. 'In defining woman, each writer defines his general ethic' (SS, p. 273). Men's ethics do not agree with each other, and women suffer both from men's disagreement and from their duplicity (SS, p. 282). Concretely, since each individual woman exists for herself 'without [men's] invention', however she assumes 'the task of her given self', she will be both the incarnation and failure of men's dreams (SS, p. 209). Subjectively, under these mythologized conditions it is impossible to live without split subjectivity, feeling torn between realizing equivocal ideals and valuing her own vocation, the call of her own freedom (SS, p. 209). And objectively, in France in 1949, failing to incarnate 'Woman' had far-reaching economic and social consequences.

Combining aspects of Kierkegaard's critique of speculative thought, Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, and Bergson's theory of myth, Beauvoir takes from Marx attention to the role of economic conditions and technological revolutions in alienating social relations. As women

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<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir levies this 'bad faith' claim against Engels in Volume I: SS, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> This claim is also made by Kierkegaard (1988, p. 48).

gained greater access to education and employment after industrialization, she claims, bourgeois capitalist mystifications of feminine love were developed in order to perpetuate divisions of labour that were both economic and moral. In the nineteenth century, bourgeois conceptions of love shifted in tandem with increasing individualism, giving rise to Romanticism (SS, pp. 465–6). Under what she calls ‘the present state of education and customs’ in 1949 (SS, p. 289), bourgeois myths of femininity shaped many men’s and women’s expectations that the sole domain in which women could hope to be valued in their singularity was in the family (or its illicit corollaries), where a woman’s destiny was ‘self-forgetting and love’ (SS, p. 273). The bourgeois institutions of marriage and ‘the family’, she argued, were not the only moral destiny of woman, but rather mystifications that thwarted the vocation of real reciprocity between human beings.<sup>13</sup>

In Volume II she explicitly invokes Marx’s critique of religion, writing that ‘There must be religion for women as for the people, for exactly the same reasons: when a sex or a class is condemned to immanence, the mirage of transcendence must be offered to it’ (SS, p. 674).<sup>14</sup> For Beauvoir, however, the mirage of transcendence does not always take the form of God or an afterlife. The ‘deep myth’ of absolute alterity, whether theological or secular, constituted many women to desire to resign themselves to the alienation of their freedom in the name of ‘love’.

As I read it, the tone of this claim is not accusatory. Rather, it is an invitation to engage in a collective reevaluation of values, and of the myths that perpetuate widespread human despair (SS, p. 283). In Beauvoir’s genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy, it is too hasty to dismiss myths of love as ideology. Myths have their roots in experience, and myths of love and alterity are rooted in the truth that each human being is an ‘other’ to all others, and one of the ways we experience human alterity is in feeling love (SS, p. 275). Well before 1949, many wondered whether there was a way out of ‘the everlasting disappointment’ (SS, p. 220) that arises from conceiving of relations between men and women as a ‘battle of the

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<sup>13</sup> Hegel, for example, claimed that for women the only ethical life could be lived in the family. See Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, §166: ‘Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family, and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind’ (Hegel [1821] 2015).

<sup>14</sup> On the ‘opium of the masses’, see Marx 1975: 175. On the function of the dominant ideology, see Marx and Engels 1976: 64.

sexes’, from what Henri Bergson called ‘modern illusions’ of what we can expect of love.<sup>15</sup> There is a way out, Beauvoir claims—in an ethics of co-responsible solidarity.

#### IV

*Personalism and the Revaluation of Love.* In 1940, the year Beauvoir read Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, she also read Max Scheler’s *Ressentiment* (WD, p. 321). A critical response to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*, it was one of several of Scheler’s works that played a significant role in inter- and post-war French phenomenology and value theory. Emmanuel Mounier credited Scheler with inspiring French personalism, and when *Ressentiment* was published in France in 1935 Beauvoir’s then close friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty reviewed it in forceful agreement.<sup>16</sup> Scheler’s work on values and emotion feature in all of the ‘great’ texts of phenomenology typically taken to inform *The Second Sex*—Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, and Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, little attention has been given to Beauvoir’s use of Schelerian value theory in her account of women’s alienation—from their own values and the values of solidarity and love. For Scheler, values arise from ‘the heart’.<sup>17</sup> And for the Beauvoir of *The Second Sex*, what characterizes ‘authenticity’ is the knowledge that ‘the source of real values [*des vrais valeurs*] is not in exterior things, but in hearts [*les coeurs*]’ (SS p. 264/ LDS 1, p. 380, translation modified). One way Beauvoir articulates the oppressiveness of the bourgeois myth of femininity is to say that it imposes on each woman a set of ready-made values, a *devoir-être* or duty-to-be, such that she ‘barely has the means to sound out her own heart’ (SS, p. 280).

In *Ressentiment*, Scheler acknowledges the powerful insight of Nietzsche’s characterization of *ressentiment*—that widely recognizable phenomenon by which we try to ‘overcome any strong tension

<sup>15</sup> See Bergson ([1935] 1963, p. 42); and see also Guterman and Lefebvre ([1936] 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty ([1935] 2000) defended Scheler’s redefinition of *ressentiment* and agreed that Nietzsche’s ‘history’ of values mischaracterized the relation between vital and spiritual values and the value of Christian love.

<sup>17</sup> Here Scheler places himself in the tradition of Pascal. Beauvoir’s engagement with Pascal is understudied, but important (see Garcia forthcoming): she uses the literary device of *inclusio* to frame *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with allusions to Pascal’s ‘thinking reed’ (EA, pp. 7, 159) and acknowledges him as a thinker of ambiguity (WIE, p. 325).

between desire and impotence by depreciating or denying the positive value of the desired object' (Scheler 1998, p. 53). Scheler agrees with Nietzsche that *ressentiment* has played a creative role in the history of values, since when human beings cannot 'justify' or 'say yes!' to their own existence in terms of values such as power, health, beauty, freedom and independence, many feel that 'all is vain', or that salvation is to be found in the absence of these values, through negation (Scheler 1998, p. 56).

Certain situations, Scheler claims, are especially charged with this temptation—for example, the situation of women.<sup>18</sup> However, Nietzsche's story of *ressentiment* is untrue to history and conceptually confused about love. The 'weakness' Nietzsche objected to in 'love' deserved his criticism; but it was not Christian, it was bourgeois. Since the thirteenth century, Scheler claims, bourgeois values came to be more dominant than Christian values, such that the radical love of early Christian communism was replaced by the modern ideas of the 'universal love of man' or 'love toward every member of the human race' (Scheler 1998, p. 91).

Scheler's point is not merely the one made famous by Dostoevsky—that it is easier to love mankind in general than human beings in particular. In addition to conflating the bourgeois imperative to love 'all men' with the Christian command to love persons in their singularity (Scheler 1998, p. 50), Scheler, influenced by Marx, claims that a true history of love would need to attend to revolutions in material and ideological conditions in ways that Nietzsche's does not. In particular, it would have to contend with two reductionist ideological revolutions in capitalist modernity, evolution and utilitarianism, which made love's value instrumental to its role in the perpetuation of the species and the maximization of welfare (Scheler 1998, p. 52). This history, Scheler argues, is part of a long rise to dominance of bourgeois capitalist values:

As the merchants and representatives of industry came to dominate, especially in the Western countries, their judgments, tastes, and inclinations became the selective determinants of cultural production even in its intellectual and spiritual aspects. ... [E]verywhere their type of valuation became the criterion of 'morality' as such. (Scheler 1998, p. 77)

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<sup>18</sup> Scheler does not claim that all women are susceptible to 'feminine resentment', but that women's situation carries a greater danger of it since both 'nature and custom' impose on them 'a reactive and passive role in love' (1998, p. 15).

In Scheler's axiological ethics the value of love is not instrumental—it is 'the value of love itself as love' that matters (1998, p. 66). With the rise of 'utility' over what Scheler calls 'the values of life', however, came three changes: (1) increasing individualism, (2) the subjectivation of values, and (3) a reconceptualization of the relation of the individual to the community. This individualism has its source, Scheler claims, in *ressentiment* which wants to deny that it is possible to fail in one's evaluations and to live one's life well—and that this failure has implications not only for ourselves but for others (Scheler 1998, pp. 117–18). Instead of conceiving of the relation of the individual to the collective as one of solidarity—such that each person's 'values are part of the values which permeate the community'—utilitarian frameworks conceived of human collectives summatively, and 'societal morality' conceived each man's responsibility and guilt as limited to himself, an isolable unit who could not be considered 'co-responsible' (Scheler 1998, pp. 136–7).

Merleau-Ponty's review of Scheler's *Ressentiment* (1935) agreed that, properly understood, Christianity entailed socialism; it was not Christianity that fell foul of Nietzsche's criticisms but bourgeois distortions of it. The following year, Norbert Guterman and Henri Lefebvre published *La conscience mystifiée*, which aimed to provide a 'science of ideology' and outlined a method of cultural revolution that included 'the surpassing of bourgeois culture and the creation of a more vast culture' (Guterman and Lefebvre [1936] 1999, p. 37). This was necessary because the cultural values and ideological creations of the capitalist world are *ambivalent*. They were contradictory, and living under them led to feeling depersonalized and divided. Capitalist values had to reflect bourgeois civilization, bourgeois interests and ideals. But they must also perpetuate the bourgeois belief that they act for the good of society ([1936] 1999, p. 38). In the mid-1950s Beauvoir articulates a similar conception of bourgeois culture: its task is 'to invent a superior justice in whose name injustice will find itself justified' (RWTT, p. 120).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's ethics—which persistently affirm that intersubjective love is a movement of moral freedom she calls 'generosity' (PC, pp. 121 ff.; EPW, p. 206; SS, p. 163)—enabled her to undertake a groundbreaking articulation of women's alienation in her culture in which mystified conceptions of 'love' justified injustice. In its introduction, Beauvoir reiterates that each human being feels pressure to 'justify their existence'—to become *someone* who

matters, not merely in virtue of being a 'self' or 'subject', but as a singular embodied presence to the world. Concretely, she says, each subject 'posits itself as a transcendence' through projects, accomplishing its freedom 'only by perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms' (SS, p. 17). But in mid-twentieth-century France, Beauvoir claims, something happened to many girls under the constitution of bourgeois 'femininity'. Instead of remaining 'the radiation of a subjectivity' (SS, p. 293) as they experienced themselves in early childhood, many girls' experience of 'sexual hierarchy' (SS, pp. 44–5, 313) constituted them, affectively and cognitively, to see themselves as inferior and passive, and their bodies as objects of men's pleasure, instead of expressions of their subjectivity or sites of the joy of existence. Their futures, instead of being open and co-responsible, became closed and communicationless; some accepted depersonalized alienation as their destiny. In the book's conclusion, Beauvoir claims that women must work for their liberation, which can only be accomplished collectively (SS, p. 680). Under the objective conditions and dominant values of her time, however, the existential pressure of women's desire for justification led many to seek 'individual salvation' through the 'supreme vocation' that men proposed to them: 'love' (SS, pp. 680, 726).

These individualistic loves are what I call 'the opium of the lasses', and they prompt some of Beauvoir's most withering and compassionate rhetoric, about promising paradise and delivering living hells. But running throughout the work is acknowledgement that mystifications of love are so pervasive and successful in part because, in one sense, love *is* every human being's moral vocation. That there should be human relations of irreplaceable presence to the world and other persons is a call that echoes in many hearts, over many centuries. Beauvoir's rich discussion of authentic and inauthentic human loves, divine love, and idolatry draws on ancient and modern philosophical and religious discussions of desire as the constellating category of selfhood, and of love as the locus of the self's order and disorder. Rejecting the idea that divine love is a sublimation of human love, Beauvoir claims that both are 'a movement towards a transcendent, towards the absolute' (SS, p. 726). The freedom that you realize in becoming who you are, which defines the 'essence' you acquire through existence, is a 'movement': a 'project of self toward the other' (PC, p. 93). But for this freedom to become moral freedom—to be capable of the love and friendship, generosity and

solidarity that merit their names—it must become capable of seeing others not with the abstract recognition of the Hegelian dialectic, but with the gaze of ‘a witness’, who sees your present projects as expressions of your freedom and envisions your future in ways you recognize as your own (PC, p. 133).

As such, Beauvoir’s discussion of the ethics of reciprocal love should not be read according to the dyadic lens of some readings of Hegel’s master–slave dialectic, where the only failures Beauvoir is concerned to correct are ‘men’s’ failure to understand reciprocity and ‘women’s’ failures to posit themselves as subjects. To read her as though all ‘men’ and ‘women’ have the same values or situations is to ignore both her value individualism and her refusal to consider complicity in oppression in abstraction from the economic, social and mythologized conditions in which individuals act (EA, p. 48). Rather, Beauvoir’s intervention concerns a broader reevaluation of what her ‘civilization’ called love, and the true definition of ‘reciprocity’ itself. Read in this light, *The Second Sex’s* reevaluation of love concerns not only the weight of patriarchal myths of what make women ‘lovable’ but an inquiry into the possibility of solidarity—of what it means to become love-able, able to love.

Volume II of *The Second Sex* takes aim at ideological conceptions of ‘feminine’ love that span the lifetime of a ‘traditional’ woman’s biological development and bourgeois roles. Whether in Freudian psychosexual claims about ‘feminine narcissism’ or the bourgeois inventions of ‘conjugal’ and ‘maternal’ love, in each of the mystified conceptions of bourgeois ‘feminine’ love Beauvoir discusses, the *individual values* of a girl or woman play little or no role in the way she is understood to assume the physical and social metamorphoses of her life. Beauvoir’s analysis in this volume demonstrates that individuation, puberty, sexual initiation, lesbianism, marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, menopause and post-menopausal ageing are lived differently depending on the individual values of the person who lives them, and the material, moral and mythological conditions in which they are lived.

This attention to individual values, however, is not a subjectivism or individualism: that I recognize that my values are *mine* does not entail that they are justified, or good, or that their consequences are limited only to me. In cases where girls were encouraged to see their value as comparative and competitive, under the ideology of bourgeois capitalism and its institution, the bourgeois

family, bodies became assets to exploit and peers rivals to outrank. As Emmanuel Mounier described this logic (while criticizing it in the 1936 *Personalist Manifesto*), women were ‘merchandise for the rest or ornament of the warrior. ... An object (as they say so well) of pleasure and exchange’ (Mounier 1936, p. 102, translation mine). The bourgeois family exalted private life, individualism, conformity and possession as a source of pride and a symbol of superiority in a social hierarchy. For their personalist critics, by contrast, the family is a community of love in which each person is called to a unique vocation. Few families manifest this ideal, however, leading Mounier to claim, ‘We must have the courage to say that the family often, and even the best of families, kills as many people spiritually, and perhaps more, by its narrowness, or its greed, or its fears, or its tyrannical automatisms, than the breakdown of the home’ (Mounier 1936, p. 107).

Before Beauvoir, Mounier claimed that their epoch had devalored the problems of private life, and that ‘public opinion’ seemed to pose only men’s problems in men’s words (Mounier 1936, p. 112).<sup>19</sup> Mounier called women’s ‘moral situation’ that of ‘a spiritual proletariat a hundred times as numerous’, describing this situation as ‘the impossibility for the person to be born to her own life’ (1936, pp. 112–13). The spiritual death of ‘traditional’ bourgeois femininity and marriage (SS, p. 289), Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, was still imposed—not freely chosen—in many girls’ lives, so much so that in ‘many social strata she is offered no other perspective’ (SS, p. 455). In discussing it she offers an economically and age-indexed analysis of the ‘advantage held by males’ in a context where women’s professions are ‘so unrewarding and badly paid’, that many women are forced to prefer marriage to her own career and with this preference to accept the widely held view that sex is a service and her body ‘an object to be purchased’, ‘capital she has the right to exploit’ (SS, p. 456).

In addition to playing a significant role in some forms of sexual objectification, the ‘feeling of depersonalization’ (SS, p. 637) features in Beauvoir’s analysis of the marginalization of women as they age past the years of reproduction, and it is in view of women’s ‘misunderstood personality’ that Beauvoir claims it is rational that so many

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<sup>19</sup> See SS, p. 16: ‘There is no public good other than one which assures the citizens’ private good’.

women turn to religion—since some religion fulfils their axiological needs both to be valorized as persons and to reject any masculine pretence to superiority as ‘arbitrary and unjust’ (SS, pp. 674–5). It is in the context of this discussion that we find her allusion to Marx’s famous ‘opium of the masses’ passage: ‘There must be for religion for women as for the people, for exactly the same reasons: when a sex or a class is condemned to immanence, the mirage of transcendence must be offered to it’ (SS, p. 674).

Beauvoir’s penultimate section of *The Second Sex*—entitled ‘Justifications’—sketches common ‘opiums of the lasses’, figures whose individualist, ersatz loves become ‘religion’ (SS, p. 700): the narcissist, the woman in love, and the mystic (SS, pp. 683–735). What is needed to transform women’s situation, Beauvoir has already claimed in the work, are coalitions and collective liberation (SS, pp. 137, 680). So why does she draw her book to a close with such lengthy examples of (mainly) how not to be?

To answer this question, it is useful to look again to Beauvoir’s ethical non-formalism (see Kirkpatrick 2024a, 2024c). As Sara Heinämaa’s contribution to this symposium shows, Husserl’s ethics stand in this tradition, and were developed in explicit dialogue with the Christian love command: love your neighbour as yourself (Heinämaa 2025). Like many other non-formalists—including Max Scheler, Henri Bergson and Søren Kierkegaard—Beauvoir shared Husserl’s concern with how to form communities of love. In ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, alongside the secular exemplar of Voltaire’s *Candide*, she uses a parable to illustrate her position. When the disciples asked Christ, ‘Who is my neighbour?’, she writes, he did not give them an abstract enumeration of an ethics. He told the story of the Good Samaritan, a man whose action transformed an abandoned stranger into ‘a neighbour’. On Beauvoir’s view, ‘One *is* not the neighbour of anyone. One *makes* the other a neighbour by treating him as a neighbour in action’ (PC, p. 93). *How* to act, to realize love, depends on the singularity of each human being and their situation. The command is universal in that it applies to all, singular in that concrete love has no recipe.

Woven throughout *The Second Sex*’s negative exemplars of individualist love are glimpses of the possibility of authenticity, in which love is neither ‘narcissism’ nor ‘devotion’ but, rather, a free movement ‘founded on the reciprocal recognition of true freedoms’ (SS, p. 723). Its ethics of reciprocity is not one of transaction but of gift (PC,

pp. 118–23). In the practice of this ethics, myths must be taken seriously as survivals of past values that take root in the heart. Understood as such, overthrowing them is not simply a matter of revealing contradictions on paper. Only an intellectualist would assume that the ‘the opium of the masses’ can be detoxed merely by ideological diagnosis. Argument alone rarely sets the imagination alight or gives rise to new values—to do that, you have to open a heart. In 1949, Beauvoir claimed, many men’s and women’s hearts were closed because they continued to derive economic, ontological and moral benefits from the bourgeois myth of ‘Femininity’. And yet women were increasingly conscious of how much it divided and frustrated them, because there is only one way to become yourself—by ‘throwing yourself into the world by loving, by doing’ (PC 130). The open question was: which ‘love’ could they realize in the world? The one that claimed it is a ‘law of nature’ that when a woman loves she must forget her personality (SS, p. 700)? Or that she cannot love or be loved without it?

## V

*Conclusion.* I have argued that *The Second Sex* offers a genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy, central to which is a reevaluation of love. This re-situating of *The Second Sex* in the history of French moral and political philosophy is important for the history of Beauvoir’s reception and for contemporary thinking about feminism, myths and politics. According to this reading, Beauvoir’s central argument in Volume I is not that ‘Woman’ is ‘the Other’ but rather that no definition of the contested concept ‘woman’ is merely metaphysical, neutrally carving nature at its joints. For Beauvoir, in defining woman, each man ‘defines his general ethic’ (SS, p. 273). In Volume II, Beauvoir turns to women’s singular experiences of becoming under the ‘traditional’ *devoir-être* of bourgeois ‘femininity’ (SS, p. 289). Under its mystifications, she claims, childhood is often an apprenticeship to alienation, a ‘mutilating’ process in which girls are expected to accept a sexual hierarchy in which they are considered inferior, deny their individual values, and evaluate their bodies and their lives according to the utility values of some men. And yet, for some, becoming a woman did not mean becoming divided; their childhood loves grew with them in ‘pure authenticity’ (SS, pp. 384–5). On this axiological reading, Beauvoir rejects any definition of woman or ‘general ethic’ that fails to attend to the singularity of each human

freedom (*EA*, p. 108). Read as such, it is a mistake to interpret *The Second Sex* as an exercise in abstract metaphysics or bourgeois universalism. As Emmanuel Mounier himself pointed out in his review of *The Second Sex*, it is not to be confused with a ‘a manual for erotic egotism’ (Mounier 1949). Rather, it is part of a broader philosophical reevaluation of love, and a ‘cultural revolution’ which rejected the intellectualist assumption that individualism could be overcome by ideology critique. It sought, through the aesthetic experience of ambiguous exemplars, to awaken imaginations and open hearts, to make love’s singularity and solidarity live options.

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