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## **Sartre and Beauvoir on Women's Psychological Oppression**

By Mary Edwards (Cardiff University)

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to show that Sartre's later work represents a valuable resource for feminist scholarship that remains relatively untapped. It analyses Sartre's discussions of women's attitude towards their situation from the 1940's, 60's, and 70's, alongside Beauvoir's account of women's situation in *The Second Sex*, to trace the development of Sartre's thought on the structure of gendered experience. It argues that Sartre transitions from reducing psychological oppression to self-deception in *Being and Nothingness* to construing women as 'survivors' of it in *The Family Idiot*. Then, it underlines the potential for Sartre's mature existentialism to contribute to current debates in feminist philosophy by illuminating the role of the imagination in women's psychological oppression.

**KEY WORDS:** Sartre; Beauvoir (de); psychological oppression; bad faith; situation; imagination.

The central aim of this paper is to show that Jean-Paul Sartre's mature work represents a fecund source for contemporary feminist debate concerning the role of the imagination in women's psychological oppression. Before beginning, though, the question of why we should turn to Sartre at all when thinking about feminism must be addressed. Why should we search *his* philosophy for feminist insights? From the outset, it may seem that there are good reasons not to. After all, Sartre was a self-avowed 'macho'<sup>1</sup> who did not devote any of his works to a sustained analysis of gender. But his lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir, did, and *her* distinct philosophical achievements have historically been ignored or reduced to Sartre's, especially in the English-speaking tradition.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980's, however, a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to redressing her wrongful exclusion from the philosophical canon,<sup>3</sup> and this, in combination with the fact that feminist theory is the field in which Beauvoir

has traditionally been least likely to be read as merely applying Sartre's philosophy,<sup>4</sup> could make the project of illuminating his original contribution to that field seem like an unwelcome, *unprogressive* exercise. To the contrary, though, if advancing feminist scholarship involves overcoming what Sandra Harding calls the 'Monster Problem' - that valuable contributions to liberatory knowledge tend to be lost if the person who generates them has the 'wrong' identity<sup>5</sup> - then recognising Sartre as capable of producing feminist insights, and assessing those insights on their own merit, represents progress in this regard. Also, an appreciation of how Sartre's engagement with Beauvoir's work taught him to think in ways that furnished such insights helps us to deepen our understanding of the mutually beneficial, creative relationship between these two philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Having dismissed the idea that we should not look to Sartre's thought for feminist insights, let us turn to the question of why we should. The first part of the answer to this question involves a rejection of the notion that Beauvoir has already salvaged what could be taken from Sartre's existentialism for feminist philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Although Beauvoir was first to use existentialism as a framework for analysing oppression,<sup>8</sup> she used *her* existentialism to do so. And, although Sartre follows Beauvoir by foregrounding the inequity of freedoms as a problem in his mature work, his existentialism is irreducible to hers and *vice versa*. These two philosophers disagreed on many points<sup>9</sup> and each of their perspectives yields unique insights, which leads to the second part of the answer: Sartre's mature form of existentialism<sup>10</sup> brings the role of the imagination in women's continued oppression to light in a novel way that, to my knowledge, has been overlooked by feminist scholars hitherto.<sup>11</sup>

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section shows that even though Sartre's initial form of existentialism cannot provide a satisfactory account of psychological oppression, his phenomenological ontology does not commit him to denying that freedom can be constrained by social factors, as some commentators allege. The second section explains how Beauvoir's

understanding of the *situation*<sup>12</sup> allows her to provide a compelling account of women's psychological oppression. Then, the third section contends that Sartre's endorsement of a more Beauvoirian notion of the situation from the 1950's onwards allows him to make an original contribution to feminist philosophy in his mature work and underlines the potential of his mature form of existentialism to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms involved in the continued psychological oppression of women.

### 1. Sartre I: Psychological Oppression as Bad Faith

Feminist scholars have questioned the extent to which the masculinist biases evident in *Being and Nothingness* (1943, *BN* hereafter) weaken Sartre's existentialism as a whole. In her celebrated book, *The Man of Reason* (1984), Genevieve Lloyd contends that Sartre's ontological conception of 'transcendence' is a male ideal that 'feeds on the exclusion of the feminine', chiefly because it is defined as the negation of 'immanence' – i.e. passive, contingent, bodily, being-in-itself – which is characterised as feminine.<sup>13</sup> She suggests that this renders Sartre's theoretical framework problematic on the grounds that it identifies the freedom which it posits as the essence of *human* consciousness with an experience that is exclusive to masculine subjects. Sartre's identification of freedom with transcendence is also the target of Michèle Le Doeuff's criticism. In *Hipparchia's Choice* (1989), she contends that, in *BN*, 'Sartre is concerned fundamentally to deny that external factors could be an obstacle, a true constraint, real adversity or a cause of alienation'.<sup>14</sup> Le Doeuff reads Sartre's insistence that we each 'choose the world . . . in its meaning'<sup>15</sup> to imply that he takes individuals to be *absolutely* responsible for the meaning of the world in which they find themselves on the grounds that – regardless of their gender, race, class, age, sexuality, physical ability, etc. – human beings are, most fundamentally, transcendence, which is ontologically distinct from, and necessarily surpasses, the social and material facts of its existence. This leads her to

conclude that Sartre's phenomenological ontology cuts consciousness off from the world in a way that obscures its susceptibility to social influences and its vulnerability to constraint from external factors.

Lloyd's and Le Doeuff's influential critiques target different aspects of Sartre's account of transcendence but arrive at the same conclusion: that Sartre's initial form of existentialism is an inadequate framework for feminist analysis because its fundamental tenet – that consciousness *is* transcendence of its situation – entails a rejection of one of the most important insights of contemporary feminist philosophy – that consciousness is shaped by its situation. Since the 1980's, feminist scholars have continued to subject *BN* to scrutiny<sup>16</sup> and their investigations point to the conclusion that Sartre's initial form of existentialism cannot explain the phenomenon of *psychological oppression*, which, following Sandra Lee Bartky, I take to denote the institutionalised, systematic, and generally covert process through which societies harm members of stigmatised groups psychologically.<sup>17</sup> Psychological oppression harms those who are subjected to it by modulating their consciousness in at least two respects. First, it fragments their concept of 'self' by causing them to continually experience themselves as both objects and subjects. Second, it infuses their consciousness with intimations of inferiority that are highly individualised, so that they *live* their depreciated self as 'destiny, guilt, or neurosis'.<sup>18</sup> The typical overall effect of psychological oppression for the victim of it may therefore be described as an 'inferiority complex', insofar as this term designates a range of attitudes, ideas, and behavioural dispositions that are 'more or less masked expressions or reactions of a feeling of inferiority'.<sup>19</sup>

To see why Sartre's initial form of existentialism cannot account for psychological oppression, it is helpful to look at his early existential-psychoanalytic interpretation of an inferiority complex in *BN*.<sup>20</sup> Although Sartre rejects what he takes to be Freud's notion of the psychological 'complex',<sup>21</sup> he does not object to its use as a purely descriptive term for the

networks of meanings and associations that govern individuals' attitudes; yet, he prefers to refer to such networks as 'original' or 'ultimate' *choices*, so as to emphasise the discovery of a 'choice' as the goal of subjecting them to psychoanalysis.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the affirmation that an intelligible choice is the ultimate explanation for all human behaviour – and the abandonment of the supposition that the environment can act mechanically on the subject – is precisely what Sartre believes distinguishes his existential psychoanalysis from the Freudian paradigm. But how can Sartre explain an inferiority complex in terms of a choice? Why would anyone *choose* inferiority? To answer these questions, let us consider his analysis of the stutterer who stutters as a result of his original choice to appear inferior before others. Positing the stutter as the result of a choice allows Sartre to interpret it as behaviour rather than as a symptom of a somatic condition. If, as often happens, the stutterer seeks to cure his stutter by visiting a psychoanalyst, this would initially appear to undermine Sartre's interpretation of the stutter, as the act of visiting a psychoanalyst unquestionably counts as behaviour and, further, as behaviour that evinces the opposite choice to the one Sartre interprets the stutter to evince – i.e. the choice *not to be* inferior before others. However, Sartre maintains that one of the main advantages of his psychoanalysis over Freud's lies in its recognition that the logical principal of non-contradiction does not apply to human motivation, which means that contrary choices can be regarded as intelligible and irreducible aspects of human becoming. The contrary choices expressed by the stutterer's stutter and his quest to cure it can therefore be comprehended by being traced to an original choice that synthesises them and establishes their harmony at a deeper level. Positing the stutterer's original choice as one of inferiority achieves this end, in Sartre's view, because it allows both behaviours to be understood as part of an *inferiority-project*<sup>23</sup> and this allows us to read the stutterer's attempt to cure his stutter to reaffirm his original choice by confirming the incurability of the stutter and, accordingly, the inevitability of his appearing inferior before others. Sartre thereby demonstrates how existential

psychoanalysis can be deployed to make sense of seemingly irrational behaviours without invoking a theory of the unconscious.

But this still leaves the question of why someone would choose inferiority in the first place unanswered. Sartre's answer in *BN* appears to be bad faith, as he states that the very will of the person with the inferiority-project is 'in *bad faith*'.<sup>24</sup> For Sartre, bad faith is an attitude of excuse that allows one to go on being *as if* one had a '*nature*' that 'produces' one's acts.<sup>25</sup> Although Sartre uses this term in different ways,<sup>26</sup> we can say that the ultimate goal of an overall project of bad faith is 'metaphysical comfort',<sup>27</sup> since its chief function is to allow the subject to escape from the anguish that comes with recognising the extent of her freedom. Given this understanding of bad faith, the claim that the will of the person with the inferiority-project 'is in *bad faith*' seems to imply that the project is not only pursued in bad faith – i.e. by the subject hiding his original choice of inferiority from himself – but also that it is rooted in an overall project of bad faith, meaning that an inferiority-project is one shape that an overall project of bad faith may take, since it makes it possible for the subject to experience his behaviour as flowing from his (inferior) nature.

While an overall project of bad faith may be a plausible explanation for some inferiority complexes, it cannot explain those that are symptomatic of oppression. But because Sartre initially holds subjects responsible for the meaning of their situation, bad faith is the only concept he can deploy to explain the kinds of negative self-evaluations that scholars today recognise as effects of psychological oppression.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, explaining all inferiority complexes in terms of bad faith – however sophisticated the explanation may be – obscures the features of the shared social world that predispose persons from stigmatised groups to develop them. The remainder of this section attempts to demonstrate, however, that the failure of Sartre's initial form of existentialism to grasp the mechanisms involved in psychological oppression is a consequence of its ontological focus, not its ontology.

As its subtitle *An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* suggests, the overarching aim of *BN* is to sketch an alternative ontology,<sup>29</sup> grounded in a phenomenological investigation. And, according to Sartre, phenomenological investigations require the investigator to analyse the phenomenal character of pre-reflective experience in order to yield ‘absolutely certain data’.<sup>30</sup> In *BN*, then, Sartre strives to communicate his direct apprehension of the world, without allowing ‘impure reflections’ – i.e. thoughts that extend psychological states beyond their immediate presence – to distort the picture he produces. Although Sartre’s relation to his body and his group identities is complex,<sup>31</sup> the time of writing *BN*, Sartre was a young, white, relatively able-bodied,<sup>32</sup> socially privileged male. As such, his apprehension of the world was not universally generalisable. Further, his membership in several oppressor groups puts him at an epistemic disadvantage with regard to the psychological effects of oppression.

This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than it is in Sartre’s example of a woman on a first date, which numerous scholars have taken issue with on feminist grounds.<sup>33</sup> This example features in the second chapter of the first part of *BN*, titled ‘Bad Faith’, in which Sartre aims to show that human behaviour is more satisfactorily explained in terms of *conscious* bad faith than it is by unconscious drives, through illustrating ‘exemplary’ conducts of bad faith. That of a woman on a first date is the first of these. Sartre describes this woman as being on a date with a man who is physically attracted to her. She is also aware of his attraction to her but contrives not to notice it *ex post facto* because the thought of being the object of sexual desire embarrasses her. When he takes her hand in his, though, she is faced with a dilemma: this gesture calls for an immediate, physical response which makes it difficult for her not to acknowledge the physical dimension of their relationship. Two possibilities for action are available to her but Sartre explains that:



to leave her hand there is to consent, herself, to the flirtation; it commits her. To withdraw it is to disrupt the vague and unstable harmony that gave the moment its charm. The moment of decision needs to be deferred as long as possible. We know what happens now: the young woman leaves her hand where it is but she *does not notice* she has left it there. She does not notice because it turns out by chance that she is, at that moment, all spirit . . . the divorce of body from soul is accomplished; her hand rests there, inert between the hot hands of her companion, neither consenting nor resisting – a thing.<sup>34</sup>

This woman wants to both enjoy the affectionate gesture that confirms her as the object of her companion's desire *and* deny that she is enjoying it. Sartre claims that she can only pursue both ends by separating her idea of her 'self' from her body,<sup>35</sup> which her companion's gesture appeals to, in bad faith. This bad faith provides her with an excuse for her inaction; as she is not her body, she is incapable of responding to appeals that are made to it.

Although Sartre recognises that this woman is caught in a double bind of sorts, he fails to recognise how it exemplifies precisely the kind of double bind that characterises the mundane experience of oppressed persons in a way that makes it a poor choice of example for bad faith. Anyone with an awareness of the sanctions, customs, and contradictions associated with feminine sexuality can see that *any* response to the advances of her companion could expose this woman to moral approbation or harm. If she is seen to welcome physical contact (on a first date!), she may be taken for a woman of 'loose' morals; if she removes her hand, she may be considered cold-hearted (as this could wound *his* pride!). A woman in this situation will probably feel as though her 'hand is forced', and her choice not to respond is more likely to be motivated by a concern for her social survival than a desire for metaphysical comfort. So, she need not deceive herself about her motives for her inaction, as inaction may simply present

itself to her as the safest course of action - the only one that is unlikely to sully her reputation or provoke his indignation. (Although Sartre's analysis reminds us that even this 'safe' option makes her vulnerable to being scorned as a 'tease'.)

Sartre's choice to hold up this woman's behaviour as a paradigmatic conduct of bad faith undoubtedly betrays his insensitivity, at this stage of his career at least, to the ways that women often experience themselves as being constrained by a patriarchal social order that imposes strict sanctions on their sexuality. Although his choice to preface his description of it with the remark: 'We know what happens now' signals his recognition that this behaviour is typical, his use of 'we' encourages us to assess the woman's behaviour from a male perspective, which views its existential significance to lie in its effect of limiting her male companion's possibilities rather than in its exposure of the limits of hers.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the purpose of this example is not to show that bad faith is the *only* or even the *most plausible* explanation for this woman's behaviour. It is to illuminate it as a *possible* explanation for it and, importantly, one that does not presuppose a theory of the unconscious. As Sartre strives to underline bad faith as a mode of consciousness that had until then been overlooked in the philosophical and psychological literature, his main objective in the chapter on 'Bad Faith' is to formulate a response to the question: 'What must man be, in his being, if he must be capable of bad faith?'<sup>37</sup>

It is vital not to lose sight of this question when evaluating Sartre's examples of bad faith in this chapter, since it points to an important distinction between them and the discussions of social emotions such as shame<sup>38</sup> and desire<sup>39</sup> that feature in later sections of the book, which is that while the latter aim to illuminate the psychological mechanisms involved in already established modes of consciousness, the former are geared towards establishing bad faith as a mode of consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Sartre's example of the woman on the first date should therefore be treated as a thought experiment, which means that the strangeness of the scenario we are invited to imagine should not prevent us from entertaining the implications of its being true. It may

well be that the total number of women who have been motivated purely by bad faith into inaction in the kind of circumstance Sartre describes are as few as the number of cats who have been in a steel box containing a radioactive source, a fragile flask containing poison, and a monitor that will shatter the flask if it detects radioactivity. Even so, Sartre's example of the woman on the first date illustrates bad faith as a flight from freedom just as Schrödinger's cat illustrates the counterintuitive nature of quantum superposition. For the purposes of Sartre's ontological inquiry, it matters not if bad faith is an implausible explanation for this woman's behaviour; the example only fails if it is an impossible one, which, to my mind, is not the case. Although this example deserves to be criticised for restating a degrading patriarchal fiction that defines women by their (hetero)sexuality, to dismiss it entirely on this basis is to overlook its role as a thought experiment in the formulation of Sartre's phenomenological ontology.

While this first Sartrean treatment of a gendered situation betrays an ignorance of the vicissitudes of women's lives, it does not purport to be an accurate description of feminine experience. Of course, excusing Sartre from the task of grappling with the social, economic, and cultural structures of domination that modulate feminine experience will not convince scholars who interrogate these structures that Sartre's existentialism has something to offer them. But it does show that it is not built upon a fundamental misunderstanding of these structures. What is more, once we recognise that Sartre was not hostile to revising his existentialism in response to socio-psychological insights, we can begin to see how it can accommodate these structures. Indeed, it seems that Sartre had already commenced this process of revision within *BN*, even if his ontological focus drives him to employ what Matthew C. Eshleman calls a 'methodological solipsism' in the first two parts, so as to establish what consciousness *is* in isolation from social reality before reinserting it into the shared, social world in the third part.<sup>41</sup> Sartre himself acknowledges this in his remark that freedom appears to be the only thing capable of limiting itself when freedom is examined 'within the category

of existence-for-itself' but, as soon as the other is brought into consideration, 'the existence of the Other's freedom' must also be acknowledged as a limit to freedom,<sup>42</sup> which shows that his initial form of existentialism can account for social limitations to freedom.

We have now seen that a consequence of Sartre's early ontological focus is that he does not undertake an examination of the structures that maintain oppressive social orders in the formulation of his initial form of existentialism. *BN* examines the ways that others can limit freedom within the context of interpersonal relations, but neglects the question of how the social, economic, and political aspects of the situation can also constrain freedom. While Sartre insists that consciousness is necessarily *situated* and describes its situation to include all the particulars of its spatio-temporal, bodily<sup>43</sup> location in the social world – such as gender, ability, race, social class, material assets, family, culture, etc. – his account of the situation in *BN* is underdeveloped because, here, it is presented as consciousness's past, i.e. that which is to-be-transcended in the present.<sup>44</sup> Understanding the situation as *past* leads Sartre to construe the *present* as synonymous with consciousness insofar as it is constituted *only through* consciousness's comprehension of its situation in terms of its projects, which motivates his denial that any 'objective description' of a subject's environment could be of use in explaining her behaviour.<sup>45</sup> Although Sartre's identification of the situation with the past brings individual responsibility into high relief, it leaves him without a satisfactory means of explaining why certain kinds of behaviour are 'typical' of persons belonging to specific social groups or why inferiority complexes are 'symptomatic' of marginalisation, because it presents individuals' *individual* projects as the ultimate explanation for why they respond to their situation the way they do. Hence, Sartre's initial interpretation of the situation precludes him from supplying a satisfactory account of psychological oppression.

## **2. Beauvoir: Psychological Oppression as Metaphysical Mutilation**

Beauvoir's original interpretation of the situation arguably represents the most major difference between her existentialism and Sartre's during the 1940's. As existentialism takes the essence of human being to be *becoming*<sup>46</sup> – i.e. becoming itself, through its continual transcendence of its situation – Beauvoir's observation that many, if not all, women fail to become themselves by *being women* poses a serious challenge for existentialism. How can the existentialist criterion for human being be justified if half of humankind do not appear to satisfy it? Beauvoir, like Sartre, is committed to the view that it is by virtue of being situated that human beings have something to transcend, but she questions the supposition that the specifics of the situation are irrelevant to phenomenological inquiries into the structure of consciousness and its possibilities for transcendence.

Beauvoir argues that the definitive characteristic of women's situation is that it disposes them to assume the role of 'the Other'<sup>47</sup> rather than become themselves, and the question of why they consent to this role is what drives her analysis in *The Second Sex* (SS hereafter). The term 'Other', with a capital O, has a special significance in Beauvoir's conceptual schema; it does not simply denote another conscious subject, who may be perceived either as a subject or objectified. Beauvoir pluralises the monolith 'Other' by using it to refer to both the phenomenal character, and the metaphysical implications, of belonging to an oppressed group. Interestingly, she explains women's status as the Other by showing it to be *inexplicable* in terms of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic, which both she and Sartre – following Alexandre Kojève – interpret as a metaphor for human relations roughly as follows.<sup>48</sup> It is assumed that all *men*<sup>49</sup> have a primal, nonbiological desire to be recognised as the 'sovereign' subject. It is also assumed that when one man encounters another, each will risk his life in a fight to achieve this end. Providing both combatants survive, the victor asserts his status as sovereign subject by enslaving the other. The dialectic ends when the immorality of slavery is recognised and the men's mutual recognition of each other as fellow conscious subjects dissolves the opposition

between master and slave. Now, Beauvoir denies that any phase of this dialectic captures the relation that obtains between the sexes because women seem to have submitted to men without ever engaging them in a fight and continue to grant them recognition without receiving it. Beauvoir sees women as frozen in a subordinate position in relation to the sovereign male subject, a position that may even be more oppressive than that of Hegel's slave.<sup>50</sup> Her short answer to the question of why women have never challenged male sovereignty has three parts: because they lack 'definite resources', because they feel a 'necessary bond' that ties them to men 'regardless of reciprocity', and because they are often 'very well pleased' with their role as men's Other.<sup>51</sup> She therefore presents the material and sexual aspects of women's situation as well as the attitude women take toward that situation as the key reasons for their continued status as the Other. The first two reasons are clearly rooted in women's situation, but the third does not appear to be at first glance. To those acquainted with the notion of bad faith, the most obvious answer to the question of why women might be 'very well pleased' with a situation that freezes them in the role of the Other is that they prioritise metaphysical comfort over freedom. And some feminists have read Beauvoir's claim that women receive metaphysical compensation for assuming traditional feminine roles<sup>52</sup> to imply that she accuses them of bad faith. Le Doeuff, for example, notes that:

Every time Beauvoir mentions a woman who had some means to assert, create or emancipate herself and did not exploit that chance to the full, moral reproof is not long in coming. Themes such as complacency, self-satisfaction, narcissism and above all the solution of taking the easy way out appear. The analogy between oppression and moral fault finally proves to be a boomerang.<sup>53</sup>

Le Doeuff attributes this ‘boomerang’ effect – whereby the blame for women’s oppression eventually falls back upon the shoulders of women – to a focus on the relations between individuals that overlooks the role of institutions in the constitution of subjects, which she takes to be a characteristic shortcoming of existentialism. While it is true that Beauvoir’s existentialist framework leads her to take two consciousnesses that look at each other as the primary form of human sociality,<sup>54</sup> it is a mistake to conclude from this that she ignores the role of institutions in structuring human social relations. To do so is to overlook her crucial point that individuals are always *already* categorised prior to being looked at.

Men’s privileged position within the patriarchy gives them a tremendous advantage in Beauvoir’s account of the gendered politics of looking. In *SS*, men are shown to enjoy undisputed subject-status in their relations with women, which means that their way of looking at the world determines its meaning for women, who must learn to assume a masculine perspective in order to comprehend the world and their place in it. Hence, Beauvoir sees the patriarchy to succeed where the Sartrean sadist fails; by making women perceive their value as lying in their instrumental value for men, the patriarchy constructs the feminine consciousness as one that is *fascinated* by the prospect of being able to realise its being without transcending its situation.<sup>55</sup> Women are lured into attempting to realise this prospect, which leads them to commit ‘treason’ against themselves in Beauvoir’s view,<sup>56</sup> since by consenting to *be* objects for men, they stifle their *becoming*, upon which their very existence as human beings depends. While accusing women of treason against themselves may seem tantamount to accusing them of bad faith, it is important to note that Beauvoir holds the patriarchy responsible for the fascination that drives them to it, as well as the mystification of it as a form of treason in their experience. Beauvoir does not therefore accuse women of forsaking transcendence for the metaphysically easier option of being the Other; rather, she affirms that their situation *mutilates* them in their capacity for transcendence.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, she couches women’s situation within

a spectrum of victimisation. At one end of the spectrum are women whose subjugation is so extreme – those trapped in harems, for example – that their situation is their destiny.<sup>58</sup> At the other, are those for whom transcendence is a legitimate option but who nevertheless assume the role of the Other solely for the metaphysical comforts it affords. Such women, if they exist,<sup>59</sup> have – somehow – escaped from the social, material, and psychological pressures that the rest of their kind face, and so they are guilty purely of bad faith. In reality, though, most women fall somewhere in between these two extremes; they are *part* victim, *part* accomplice, but their complicity is predetermined by their situation because it burdens them with a ‘feminine inferiority complex’,<sup>60</sup> which Beauvoir theorises as a metaphysical handicap that impairs women in their ability to transcend their situation. This view that the patriarchy mutilates women metaphysically lies at the heart of her existentialist account of women’s psychological oppression.<sup>61</sup>

Beauvoir uses the term ‘feminine inferiority complex’ to refer to the cumulative effect of women’s internalisation of patriarchal meanings on their psychology. Unlike Sartre, she views a complex as something one *suffers from*<sup>62</sup> rather than chooses. She also distinguishes her use of the term complex from the standard Freudian-psychoanalytic use of it, which she reads to imply that ‘the drama of the individual unfolds “within” him’.<sup>63</sup> She denies that a complex is the result of either a choice or of the operation of forces internal to the subject. Instead, she maintains that it is a typical response to certain situations, a claim which she grounds in her radically social account of self-formation.<sup>64</sup> A significant proportion of *SS* is devoted to revealing how our human desire for recognition drives us to internalise the values others reward us for displaying – especially during childhood when we do not yet have the cognitive resources required for critical reflection – and how these values influence the choices we make and the selves we become. Her analyses of ‘Childhood’, ‘The Girl’, and ‘Women’s Situation and Character’ serve as the basis for her claim that the patriarchy mutilates women



during their transition from girl to woman by encouraging them to display ‘feminine’ traits even as it disparages and ridicules those traits as human flaws.<sup>65</sup> A key message of these chapters is that anyone who self-identifies as a woman will have internalised intimations of her own inferiority because she lives in a patriarchy and the patriarchy ‘decrees that woman is inferior’.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, anyone who understands themselves as inferior is unlikely to see possibilities for transcendence as available *for them* and, even if they do, they will lack the self-esteem required to take the risks associated with transcendence, in Beauvoir’s estimation.

This radically social understanding of self-formation leads Beauvoir to understand transcendence as an intersubjective enterprise and to affirm that our capacity to achieve it depends in no small part upon our social standing and the nature of our concrete relations with others. This explains why she argues that even women who achieve financial independence may still lack the means to become themselves. Though financially independent women may escape from the parasitic, monotonous existence and the thankless duties that limit the housewife to experiencing only the ‘negative aspect’ of transcendence,<sup>67</sup> their transcendence will still be frustrated if ‘neither society nor their husbands give them the help they need to become, in concrete terms, the equals of men’.<sup>68</sup> The strenuous demands society places upon women *qua women* – to perform a disproportionate amount of domestic labour, to provide a wide range of care services, to maintain a ‘feminine’ appearance, etc. – prevents them from throwing themselves into their projects and their work with the same generosity as men, with the effect that they are frequently outperformed by men. Even the independent woman cannot free herself from her inferiority complex through work, then, because her socially mediated perception of herself as a woman-failure and a sub-par worker will only exacerbate it;<sup>69</sup> her situation within the patriarchy still prevents her from realising her full, human potential.

Beauvoir’s original, existentialist account of women’s situation therefore attributes feminine complicity neither to bad faith nor to unconscious forces but to women’s

psychological oppression. One aspect of Beauvoir's portrayal of women's psychological oppression is problematic, though, and a consideration of Marilyn Nissim-Sabat's taxonomy of ideologically constituted victims helps bring this to light. In her essay, 'What is a Victim?', Nissim-Sabat contends that there are three dominant categories of victim in late capitalist societies. The first is *V-1*, which refers to victims whose suffering is caused by 'Acts of God' – i.e. 'natural'<sup>70</sup> catastrophes such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes – and not any fault of their own. The second, *V-2*, refers to victims whose suffering is deemed to be ultimately self-imposed; paradigmatic *V-2*s include female victims of domestic abuse and people living in poverty. Finally, *V-3* is the alternative to *V-2* since it interprets victims of the same humanly made states of affairs as being caused by others; i.e. those who victimise them. Though these different categories of victim are associated with different worldviews – namely, monotheistic religion, the political right, and the political left – all of them construe victims as essentially passive and thereby dehumanise them. This is even the case with *V-2*, which, while seeming to recognise the agency of victims in blaming them for their suffering, blames them for *inaction*; for *succumbing* to and becoming *dependent* upon drugs, abusive partners, etc., and for failing to exercise human agency through taking the steps necessary to escape their victimhood.

Nissim-Sabat argues that the reason why our dominant conceptions of 'victim' are dehumanising is that they are intelligible only within a capitalist ideology that occludes awareness of human freedom by presenting it as incompatible with vulnerability before, or dependence upon, others. In order to recognise victims as persons in need of our care and support without dehumanising them, she affirms that we need a concept of 'victim' that is 'beyond ideology'. She indicates how such a concept, *V-4*, would differ from *V-1* – *V-3* by discussing the example of the female victim of domestic abuse. Interpreting this woman as a *V-4* involves recognising that she *could* have detected the signs that her romantic relationship

was becoming unhealthy at an early stage and so *could* have escaped from the abuse she suffers at the hands of her partner. But it also involves attributing her failure to do so to a ‘developmental arrest’ caused by numerous ‘psychosocial factors’, such as the social conditioning of girls, which ‘generates feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, depression, and so forth’.<sup>71</sup> Nissim-Sabat stresses that V-4 departs from the victim-blaming stance of V-2 in its acknowledgement that the psychological state of the majority – if not all – persons in a capitalist society is characterised by some degree of developmental arrest, as the ‘anti-human’ norms of individualism and self-sufficiency push all those who fail to achieve them into crippling self-blame or the victimisation of others (in order to bypass self-blame).<sup>72</sup>

Now, although Nissim-Sabat’s taxonomy forms part of her critical analysis of the treatment of victims in contemporary American public life, it is generalisable to all late capitalist societies, including Beauvoir’s, insofar as the ideals of independence and self-sufficiency prevail in them and shape our understanding of what a victim is. Thus, if Nissim-Sabat’s claim that a non-dehumanising construal of victimisation must go beyond the capitalist ideals taken for granted in Western societies is correct, Beauvoir’s account of women’s victimisation through psychological oppression falls short of achieving this goal, despite her use of Marxist methods and her aim to demystify it. Of course, Beauvoir does not suggest that psychological oppression makes women pure ‘victims,’<sup>73</sup> and her sensitivity to how the scope of women’s possible responses to their oppression varies as a consequence of differences between their situations certainly takes her analysis beyond the reductive, dehumanising tendencies of V-1 – V-3. Nonetheless, Beauvoir still presents independence and self-sufficiency – albeit in the context of a radically different society<sup>74</sup> – as what ultimately liberates women, even though she notes that financial independence is not enough to free them of the feminine inferiority complex, which suggests it is the common fate of women in a patriarchy. Aside from the hint that a socialist revolution will save women from this fate, no solution to

the feminine inferiority complex is forthcoming in *SS*. I submit that this is because the ideological framework that presents independence and self-sufficiency as the norm is not explicitly criticised in ways that would highlight connections between women's psychological oppression and other forms of social and material injustice.<sup>75</sup> At the level of ideology, Beauvoir's analysis of women's situation is depoliticising because, while it uncovers the processes that cast women as vulnerable and dependent, it does not challenge the ideology that construes independence and self-sufficiency as 'normal' human qualities - and thereby casts all but the social elite as inferior - in a way that would furnish a sense of solidarity between women and other disadvantaged groups, and motivate the socialist revolution she calls for.

In summary, this section has shown that Beauvoir uncovers the potential of the situation to structure consciousness in a novel way in *SS*. Although she takes the situation to refer to the same broad range of facts as Sartre – i.e. an individual's family, culture, social class, gender, access to material resources, etc. – she argues that the situation is not only the basis for transcendence but also 'our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects'<sup>76</sup> by showing that it does not only constitute consciousness's 'past' but that it is also partly constitutive of its present. Moreover, her recognition that situations can 'recur', and that different people can find themselves in situations that are 'the same'<sup>77</sup> in ways that count with regard to character formation allows her to provide a compelling explanation for why people belonging to the same social groups manifest similar attitudes and patterns of behaviour, which in §2 we saw that Sartre's initial version of existentialism could not explain. However, a shortcoming of her exposition of women's psychological oppression is that it does not treat the ideology endemic to late capitalist societies as a factor in the mystification of the feminine consciousness (and other oppressed consciousnesses).

### **3. Sartre II: Psychological Oppression and Survival**

Although Sartre preserves his notion of bad faith into his mature work,<sup>78</sup> he radically revises his understanding of the situation in the years between the publication of *BN* (1943) and his second major philosophical treatise, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960, *CDR* hereafter), in which he concedes that consciousness is thrown into a situation that is *already* partially constituted by specific material, economic, and social structures.<sup>79</sup> This development is reflected in the new terminology Sartre adopts in *CDR*, where ‘praxis’ replaces ‘being-for-itself’ and ‘practico-inert’ captures what he previously referred to as ‘being-in-itself’, as well as the whole of the social world, including language, and the meanings that are imbued in objects. Although it is a mistake to read *BN* to present conscious being-for-itself as ‘pure’ transcendence because it emphasises that consciousness is necessarily *embodied* and *situated*, consciousness’s situation is nevertheless characterised by a pure inertia in that work, as a nexus of contingent facts that only consciousness can make meaningful. In *CDR*, however, the situation is construed as an ‘agential-inertia’ that acts upon, and is acted upon by, consciousness. The dualism of ‘praxis’ and ‘practico-inert’ blurs the distinction between subject and object through its attribution of an agential force to objects, institutions, ideologies, and social norms, as well as to individuals.<sup>80</sup>

Sartre’s mature conception of agency as distributed between consciousness and the situation has important implications for his understanding of transcendence. *Praxis*, he states ‘remains transcendence of material being towards a future reorganisation of the field’ but it also displays a ‘new characteristic’: ‘the *inertia of praxis*’ or its ‘petrified framework of exigency’,<sup>81</sup> which denotes the way that inertia infuses praxis or, more simply put, the ways that the material dimension<sup>82</sup> of human reality means that agents are always also objects. Accordingly, in the context of Sartre’s mature form of existentialism, the situation may be likened to a plastic mould for freedom, whose level of plasticity is positively correlated to the

subject's level of privilege. This point is perhaps best illustrated by Sartre's sensitive analysis of how a pregnant factory worker's situation influences her decision to have an abortion:

[W]hen the woman in the Dop shampoo factory has an abortion in order to avoid having a child she would be unable to feed, she makes a free decision in order to escape a destiny that is made for her; but this decision is itself completely manipulated by the objective situation: she *realises* through herself what she *is already*; she carries out the sentence, which has already been passed on to her, which deprives her of free motherhood.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Sartre describes this woman as having a 'destiny' that her society, in collusion with her biology, has made for her. Her choice to terminate her pregnancy is free even though she has to make *this choice* to ensure her economic survival. Her recognition that free motherhood is not a possibility for her is not bad faith, but neither is her decision fated; while she cannot choose free motherhood, she can choose to escape from the only future she can imagine awaits her and her child if she were to have it: wretched poverty.

This second Sartrean analysis of a gendered situation demonstrates a sensitivity to gender-specific constraints on freedom that was absent from his analysis of the behaviour of the woman on the first date in *BN*. Although the trajectory of Sartre's intellectual development between *BN* and *CDR* is complex, it is known that Sartre began to reconsider his initial existentialist stance in the wake of the Second World War<sup>84</sup> and, especially, after his 'conversion' to Marxism during the 1950's.<sup>85</sup> What is only beginning to be brought to light, though, is the extent to which Beauvoir's existentialism influenced the revisions he made to his existentialism during this period.<sup>86</sup> His biography of the writer Jean Genet, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (1952), marks a pivotal turning-point in his thought because it portrays the

course of Genet's life and, therefore, his *becoming*, as being partly determined by his situation.<sup>87</sup> Sartre cites Beauvoir three times in this work.<sup>88</sup> The first of these citations is particularly telling because it indicates how his engagement with her account of the situation may have allowed him to see how gender can structure consciousness. 'Simone de Beauvoir', he writes, 'has pointed out that feminine sexuality derives its chief characteristics from the fact that woman is an object to the other and to herself before being a subject',<sup>89</sup> and this insight is key to his exposition of the capacity of the situation to constrain a feminine subject's thought in *CDR*.

Before his discussion of the pregnant factory worker, Sartre considers the situation of low-paid women factory workers in some depth. After citing reports that specialised women workers frequently engaged in sexual fantasies as they worked, he strives to demonstrate that these erotic thoughts are predetermined by a situation that is peculiar to the workers who have them. He points out that the kind of repetitive tasks specialised workers perform allow for 'neither distraction (thinking of something else) nor total mental application (thinking would slow down their movements)',<sup>90</sup> although they do allow for *feminine* sexual fantasy, in Sartre's view, because this involves apprehending oneself as an object, which he deems to be less cognitively demanding than thinking as a subject. He asserts that heterosexual fantasy is unlikely to function in the same way for men in equally specialised roles, though, because men are conditioned to regard themselves as active subjects in heterosexual relations; they are the ones who are supposed to 'take' women, for instance. Hence, it is precisely because feminine sexuality is constructed as passive that erotic thoughts assist women workers with the performance of repetitive physical actions in Sartre's view. However:

The truth is that when the woman worker thinks she is *escaping* from herself, she is really finding an indirect way of making herself what she is . . . Is she conscious

of this? Yes and no: no doubt she tries to people the desert of boredom produced by the specialized machine. But *at the same time*, she tries to fix her mind within the limits allowed by the operation, by the objective task: she is the unwilling accomplice of employers who have determined norms and minimum output in advance.<sup>91</sup>

The specialised woman factory worker's situation is thus presented as a mould as inflexible as steel: the rhythms of the machine constrict the range of her motions and her thoughts; she only has enough leisure to recover so that she may repeat the motions of the day before; she only has enough money to sustain her life; and her consciousness is so mystified that she believes she 'escapes' her situation through fantasies that facilitate her complicity.

Sartre's analysis of how the situation of specialised women workers modulates their consciousness is Beauvoirian in that it describes their consciousness as mystified. But what, in my view, takes it beyond the Beauvoirian prototype is its insistence that the specialised female factory worker is an *unwilling accomplice* of the system that exploits her, and that she is thoroughly duped into believing that an entirely imaginary 'escape' from her situation counts as an exercise of her freedom - a small act of rebellion, even. Indulging in 'inappropriate' thoughts in the workplace is likely to be experienced by the woman worker as an act of invisible, individual resistance but, rather than having no real consequences, Sartre strenuously emphasises the point that her private thoughts actually serve the interest of capital by increasing her productivity. He thereby provides an astute illustration of a definitive feature of late capitalist ideology: 'overvaluing belief – in the sense of inner subjective attitude – at the expense of beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behaviour'.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, his insistence that it is 'the machine' in these women workers that dreams of being 'taken', demonstrates how



women's gender conditioning in combination with their internalisation of capitalist ideology renders them especially 'docile bodies'.<sup>93</sup>

Let us now turn to consider one final Sartrean analysis of a gendered situation, which comes from a rather surprising place: his multi-volume biographical study of the nineteenth-century, male author, Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot* (1971-2). In this work, Sartre insists that Flaubert 'is a woman' in the sense that his situation within the Flaubert family oppresses him psychologically in much the same way as women's situation oppresses them.<sup>94</sup> This idea has been criticised,<sup>95</sup> but I will not belabour the point here since insofar as this investigation is concerned, it matters not whether Sartre is correct to consider Flaubert a woman, only that he does. Now, after examining a letter that the fifteen-year-old Flaubert wrote to a friend relaying the story of his school proctor being caught in a brothel, he concludes that Flaubert took great pleasure in reimagining this scenario and that what 'particularly delighted him in the proctor's misadventure was the unhappy man's suffering', which evinces his 'passive malice'.<sup>96</sup> *Passive malice*, according to Sartre, is typical in women who, like Flaubert, live in connivance with their oppressors and share their interests in such a way that makes revolt impossible for them. Sartre's discussion of Flaubert's passive malice therefore allows him to further develop his ideas about the role of the imagination in women's psychological oppression. He does so through his suggestion that the resentment women accrue by enduring their oppressive situation, in concert with the cultural taboos against female anger they have internalised, prompt them to *make believe* that the world yields natural sanctions to men's vices, and this is what makes them especially shrewd observers of men. The passive malice that Sartre associates with 'feminine' observation has a cathartic function:

[O]bserving in a salon that polite assiduous husband whose wife knows his low tricks, observing the way he flirts discreetly thinking she doesn't see, hearing him

repeat for the hundredth time the phrases he thinks he is inventing for the occasion, listening when his superiors approach him, and rejoicing in his slightly servile manner or his awkwardness; to others he may be reserved, but she is delighted that to her he is as naked as a worm. This knowledge is based on detail: from his attitude, his clothing, every perceptible particular she expects the objective exposure of her oppressors, who are condemned in her eyes as ridiculous<sup>97</sup>

Of course, this imaginary condemnation goes unnoticed by others and, crucially, the perpetrator will be oblivious to his punishment. Be that as it may, this form of imagining still satiates women's desire to express the anger they feel as a consequence of their situation, without actually expressing that anger or doing anything to alter the situation that incites it. Passive malice emerges as a coping mechanism; an *aggressive defence*<sup>98</sup> of the human being in an oppressive situation. But, as is the case for the specialised woman worker, the imaginary revolt of the feminine observer is really no revolt at all, despite the satisfaction it may provide her with. Women who indulge in passive malice are thus also shown to be unwilling accomplices in their own oppression.

We are now in a position to see how Sartre's later analyses of gendered situations interpret women as *surviving* their oppressive situations through some kind of imaginary act. Women's attempts to escape from or improve their situations in the imaginary are presented as attempts to preserve their humanity in situations that deny it. However, as Beauvoir points out, 'living is only not dying',<sup>99</sup> and so we may be sceptical about whether Sartre's portrayal of woman as 'survivors' of psychological oppression succeeds in going beyond ideology. After all, feminist scholarship suggests that just as our dominant conceptions of 'victim' tend to presuppose capitalist-neoliberal ideals, so do our dominant conceptions of 'survivor'. First, the term 'survivor' can emphasise individual strength in a way that obscures the fact that *survivors*

*are also victims*; that they are, by definition, victims who did not die as a consequence of the harm they have been subjected to. Although survivors are persons who are often in need of help and support, interpreting them as survivors can misleadingly construe them as victors in relation to their victimisers due to the mere fact of their survival, even though those who victimised them may be in far better situations than they are. Emphasising survivors' survival can thus prevent us from fully acknowledging the extent of their suffering as well as the likelihood that they are *still* suffering. When the term 'survivor' places too much stress upon celebrating individual survivor-victims' resilience, it has the effect of normalising victimisation and distracting us from inquiring into the practises, procedures, and persons that engendered it. Second, the assertion of survival can also perpetuate survivor-victims' victimisation by limiting their possibilities in the wake of a harmful event. In the context of sexual violence, for instance, Dianna Taylor observes that even though 'survivor identity may function as a first step' that releases victims from an 'externally generated, static self-relation of dehumanisation', 'abjection', and 'humiliation', valorising the *overcoming* of harm also encourages victims to relate to themselves 'precisely in terms of what it is they are ostensibly resiliently overcoming', which can stunt the development of the 'critical and creative capacities that facilitate not "overcoming" but actually *becoming* otherwise.'<sup>100</sup>

Sartre's account of how women endure oppressive, dehumanising situations does not, however, attempt to put a positive, 'neoliberal' spin on survival. It shows that certain kinds of imagining allow women to experience something close to *becoming*, through engaging in a thought process similar to that which precedes action – namely, imagining possibilities – even if they do not realise any of the possibilities they imagine. As such, it develops a theme from his early work, *The Imaginary* (1940), which theorises the imagination as the condition for human becoming: the recognition of dangerous potential of the imagination to alienate the freedom it makes possible by enabling subjects to experience satisfaction through the mere

contemplation of possibilities. He illustrates this point with the example of the ‘morbid dreamer’ whose choice of an imaginary life over a real one leads her to inhabit a ‘poor and meticulous world’ that cuts her off from the joy and the pain of real experience and relationships.<sup>101</sup> It is by virtue of its in-depth exploration of the implications of the choice of an imaginary life that *The Family Idiot* represents the sequel to *The Imaginary*, and its central message is that one cannot *become* oneself through imagining alone. Flaubert’s retreat into the imagination is presented as a kind of death, in the sense that it led him to relinquish what control he had over who he became and, at the very end of his life, Sartre’s Flaubert has the terrible realisation that, in spite of his grandiose ideas about himself, he still is – and never stopped being – ‘the family idiot’.<sup>102</sup>

The ‘survival’ of the human being in the imagination of the objectified, exploited, mystified subject is therefore only an imaginary survival, on Sartre’s account, because human being involves being the agent of one’s life. Moreover, Sartre’s development of Beauvoir’s account of women’s situation through his exposition of the role of the imagination in it arguably presents women’s psychological oppression as even more insidious, since it suggests that the illusion that the full dignity of human being can be preserved in situations that are dehumanising is a condition for women’s ongoing exploitation under capitalist patriarchy. By indicating how certain modes of imagining make women unwilling accomplices in their own oppression by making them believe they are escaping their situation, when in fact they are facilitating its perpetuation, or by allowing them to interpret their situation as other than what it is, Sartre argues that fantasies of escape and passive malice represent desperate ‘choices’ for those who find themselves trapped in oppressive situations, although their only effect is to make the trap tolerable.<sup>103</sup> This allows him to underline the capitalist ideals of individualism and self-sufficiency as a factor in the mystification of the feminine consciousness on the

grounds that they structure experience in ways that emphasise individual over collective experience and discourage subjects from looking to others for help in enduring their situation.

Thus, Sartre makes a novel contribution to feminist philosophy by developing Beauvoir's insights on how women's situation structures their consciousness in the context of his mature, materialist existentialism, which places the recognition of human interdependence and vulnerability at its centre. While Sartre's position of privilege may put him at an epistemic disadvantage with regard to women's psychological oppression, he has Beauvoir's account of women's situation in *SS*, a more sophisticated understanding of his own gender conditioning,<sup>104</sup> as well as many years of Marxist scholarship to draw upon in his mature analyses of gendered situations. This, in conjunction with his years of phenomenological research into the imagination, allows him to uncover the potential for women to *make believe* that their submission is a form of resistance. His theorisation of the function of the imagination in the psychological oppression of women provides feminist scholars with a new, powerful tool for understanding the capacity of the modern patriarchy to co-opt and 'hijack' women's agency<sup>105</sup> and make them imagine that normative standards which degrade them *as humans* serve as the basis for their 'empowerment' *as women*.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a late interview, Sartre admits that he 'must have been a macho' because he was 'brought up in a family of machos', see Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 298.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret A. Simons documents the systematic and contemptuous dismissal of Beauvoir's philosophical contributions in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition in the Introduction to her edited volume, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> The publication of Margaret A. Simons's article, 'Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship', *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986): 165-79, was pivotal in shifting the critical opinion away from the idea that Beauvoir simply 'used', or even 'stole', Sartre's philosophy to inform her own work to the idea that Beauvoir developed her own existentialist philosophy. Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook's controversial biography, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The*

*Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), then sought to reverse the initial position on the Sartre-Beauvoir relationship by contending that it was Sartre who 'stole' Beauvoir's philosophical ideas. Kate Kirkpatrick's recent biography of Beauvoir, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), can therefore be read to redress this imbalance by advocating that the line of philosophical influence ran both ways and that Sartre and Beauvoir helped each other to forge two distinct brands of existentialism, both of which stem from a common genealogy in the existential thought of Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and the philosophies of Hegel, Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret A. Simons notes the tendency of *The Second Sex* to be interpreted in some feminist circles as 'male-identified' and 'Sartrean', see 'Beauvoir and Sartre', 167.

<sup>5</sup> Harding argues that, from the perspective of marginalised identities, certain identities - i.e. male feminists, heterosexuals against heterosexism, and whites against racism - can appear 'monstrous' and untrustworthy, which has led the views of persons with such identities being unduly dismissed in the context of liberatory movements. This has then prevented liberatory knowledge from becoming 'strongly objective', in her view, because strongly objective knowledge is knowledge that results from taking the most possible perspectives into account. See, Sandra G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 273-84.

<sup>6</sup> Although the sexism Beauvoir was subjected to may have ultimately led her insist that she was not a philosopher (see Simons, 'Beauvoir and Sartre', 168-9), it is worth noting that Beauvoir was adamant throughout her life that she never was oppressed by Sartre and even describes her relationship with him as the 'one undoubted success' of her life in the Epilogue to *The Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 659. Further, Kirkpatrick presents Sartre's chief role in Beauvoir's life was that of an 'incomparable' friend to her thought and uncovers evidence that he regarded her as his philosophical equal, see *Becoming Beauvoir*, 103, also: 117-18, 190-8, 280-1, and 370. Deepening our understanding of this intellectual friendship therefore involves bringing the extent of Beauvoir's influence on Sartre's philosophical thought to light. In agreement with Margaret A. Simons, I believe that the work Sartre produced from 1950's onward evinces 'the richest interaction' between the pair's philosophical ideas, although *pace* Simons I deny that it lacks 'Beauvoir's feminist understanding', see 'Beauvoir and Sartre', 177-8.

<sup>7</sup> It has been contended that Beauvoir preserves the gender-neutral aspects of Sartrean existentialism and abandons the gender-specific - and sexist - aspects. See, for example, Dorothy Kaufmann McCall, 'Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, and Jean-Paul Sartre', *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 2 (1979): 209-23, and Michèle Le Doeuff, 'Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism', *Ideology and Consciousness* 6 (1979): 47-57.

<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir was the first to subject 'the Problem of the Other' to existential analysis, see Simons, 'Beauvoir and Sartre', 169.

<sup>9</sup> See, Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 115-120, for a discussion of Sartre and Beauvoir disagreements about the ontology of literature and the role of the emotions, and Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (London: Penguin Books, 1959), 344, for evidence of their early disagreement on ethics.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this paper, I follow Jonathan Webber in distinguishing between Sartre's 'initial' and 'mature' forms of existentialism. See, Jonathan Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113-130, for his discussion of the difference between the two. I take the former to find its fullest articulation in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and the latter, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).

<sup>11</sup> Although Sonia Kruks's, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom', in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 79-96, here, 92-5 and Angela Shepherd's, 'De Beauvoir, Existentialism and Marx: A Dialectic on Freedom' *Sartre Studies International* 24, no. 1 (2018): 70-90, here, 89n., acknowledge that Sartre's mature existentialism allows him to account for oppressive situations, Sartre's mature ideas about the function of the imagination in women's oppression have yet to be fully explored by scholars.

<sup>12</sup> Throughout this essay, the term 'situation' will be used in the technical sense that is common to both Sartre's and Beauvoir's uses of it; namely, to designate the totality of consciousness's environment.

<sup>13</sup> Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984), 99-101.

<sup>14</sup> Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.*, trans. Trista Selous (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 98.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond (New York and London: Routledge, 2018) (cited as *BN* hereafter), 606.

<sup>16</sup> In particular, *BN* has been criticised for presenting a consciousness-body relation that is peculiar to the experience of a young, able-bodied, white, cis-gendered male as the 'norm', when it is alien to the experience of marginalised persons who experience their bodies as perpetually present. See, for instance, AUTHOR (2018); Sandra Lee Bartky *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 83-98; Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 358-370; Christina Howells, *Mortal Subjects* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 24-45; and Gail Weiss, 'The Shame of Shamelessness', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2018): 537-552.

<sup>17</sup> Although psychological harm is the direct result of psychological oppression, this also tends to increase its victims' vulnerability to other physiological and material harms. For example, it is widely recognised that psychological oppression disposes its victims to a wide range of self-sabotaging, 'risk' behaviours, see Luna Dolezal and Barry Lyons, 'Health-Related Shame: An Affective Determinant of Health?', *Medical Humanities* 43 (2017): 257-263.

<sup>18</sup> Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1973), 213.

<sup>20</sup> *BN* 616-19

<sup>21</sup> The psychoanalytical concept 'complex' may be defined as: 'Organised group of ideas and memories of great affective force which are either partly or totally unconscious', which are 'constituted on the basis of the interpersonal relationships of childhood history' and 'may serve to structure all levels of the psyche: emotions, attitudes, adapted behaviour', see Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 72. However, Laplanche and Pontalis also note that Freud himself had reservations about this concept, as he was averse to the practice of 'psychological typing' that terms such as 'failure complex' encourage, since risks both obscuring the 'specificity individual cases' and 'passing of the statement of the problem as an explanation of it', *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> *BN* 739-42

<sup>23</sup> Sartre uses the terms 'original choice' and 'ultimate choice' interchangeably with 'fundamental project' to refer to a subject's choice of her *self*, *BN* 740.

<sup>24</sup> *BN* 618

<sup>25</sup> *BN* 80

<sup>26</sup> Sartre defines bad faith in relation to anguish – i.e. 'consciousness of freedom', *BN* 72 – as being simultaneously anguish and the flight from it; 'anguish-in-order-to-flee-it', *BN* 86. He uses the term 'bad faith' to refer to many different ways that people hide the truth of their freedom from themselves. It can refer to an overall project, the denial of actual character traits, as well as the acceptance of unpersuasive evidence in favour of what wants to believe. For a detailed analysis of the various senses of the term in *BN*, see Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 88-103.

<sup>27</sup> There is an existentialist precedence for this use of 'metaphysical'; Beauvoir, for instance, states that children are often 'metaphysically privileged' because they are shielded from experience anguish, see, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), 36.

<sup>28</sup> Negative self-evaluations consistent with psychological oppression manifest themselves through displays of low self-esteem and a lack of self-trust, see Anna Bortolan 'Self-Esteem and Ethics: A Phenomenological View', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2018): 56-72, as well as through behaviours that anticipate shame, see Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 83-98.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre's notion of 'ontology' is somewhat idiosyncratic since, rather using this term interchangeably with 'metaphysics', he distinguishes it from the latter by holding it to be concerned with providing an

accurate account of what there is, rather than with questions about why there is anything rather than nothing, *BN* 801-2.

<sup>30</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

<sup>31</sup> In particular, Sartre's poor eyesight and eventual blindness, as well as his short stature and ugliness, were significant factors in structuring his experience. For a detailed discussion of this, see Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Sartre, Self-Formation and Masculinities* (New York and Oxford: Berhahn Books, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> In *BN*, Sartre seems to play down the effect of his disability on his experience by discussing it as something chooses to 'constitute', *BN* 439-40.

<sup>33</sup> See, Shepherd, 'De Beauvoir, Existentialism and Marx', 78-9; Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, 72-3; and Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994), 127-33.

<sup>34</sup> *BN* 98

<sup>35</sup> According to Sartre, one cannot in good faith deny that one is one's body, even though one is irreducible to one's body, see *BN* 434-40.

<sup>36</sup> Sartre's analysis presents this woman's conduct of bad faith as being especially deplorable by virtue of disarming 'her partner's actions', *BN* 98.

<sup>37</sup> *BN* 97

<sup>38</sup> *BN* 347-408

<sup>39</sup> *BN* 501-526

<sup>40</sup> There is some disagreement among Sartre scholars about the optimum order in which to read Sartre's examples in *Being and Nothingness*. Eshleman, for instance, argues that Sartre's examples of bad faith would be better placed at the end of the book so that they could be read in light of his discussion of shame in Part III, see Matthew C. Eshleman, 'The Misplaced Chapter on Bad Faith, or Reading *Being and Nothingness* in Reverse', *Sartre Studies International* 14, no. 2 (2008): 1-22. Webber, however, affirms that Sartre's discussion of shame relies partly upon his exposition of bad faith in Part I, see Jonathan Webber, 'Bad Faith and the Other', in *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Jonathan Webber (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 180-194. An advantage of reading the chapter on 'Bad Faith' as having a primarily ontological focus is that it allows us to preserve both Eshleman's insight that reading Sartre's examples of bad faith in light of his discussion of shame allows us to understand the structure of consciousness in bad faith and Webber's insight that these examples supply the ontological groundwork for Sartre's investigation into our concrete relations with others.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew C. Eshleman, 'Beauvoir and Sartre on Freedom, Intersubjectivity, and Normative Justification', in *Beauvoir & Sartre: The Riddles of Influence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 65-89, here, 68.

<sup>42</sup> *BN* 682

<sup>43</sup> The body cannot be distinguished from the situation in Sartre's view; 'to exist and to be situated are one and the same', *BN* 417.

<sup>44</sup> See, *BN* 711-15.

<sup>45</sup> *BN* 743

<sup>46</sup> Beauvoir, for instance, states that 'there can be a having-to-be only for the being who, according to the existentialist definition, questions himself in his being, a being who is at a distance from himself and who has to be his being', *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 11, and Sartre holds that 'for human-reality, to be is to choose itself', *BN* 579. Kirkpatrick also uses the term 'becoming' to refer to the existentialist notion that being a self is a continual process of becoming who one is through action in the world, see *Becoming Beauvoir*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chavallier (London: Vintage Books, 2011) (cited as *SS* hereafter), 17.

<sup>48</sup> Hegel uses the Master-Slave dialectic as an allegory for the development of human consciousness, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-19. For Kojève's interpretation of the Master-Slave dialectic, see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 39-39. For an informative overview of Beauvoir's and Sartre's uses of it, see Debbie Evans, 'Sartre and Beauvoir on Hegel's Master-Slave



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Dialectic and on the Question of the “Look”, in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 90-115.

<sup>49</sup> I use male pronouns to underline the exclusion of women’s experience from the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic.

<sup>50</sup> Although Beauvoir does not make this claim explicitly, she underlines that women’s dependence ‘is not a consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not *happen*’, which means that the tie that binds women to their oppressors is ‘unlike any other’ SS, 8-9. This suggests that women may be at a greater disadvantage in relation to men than the Slave in relation to his Master, since they have never entered the struggle for recognition, see Evans, ‘Sartre and Beauvoir’, 107.

<sup>51</sup> SS 20

<sup>52</sup> Beauvoir stresses that that assuming the role of the Other allows women to avoid the ‘*metaphysical risk*’ of a freedom that must invent its own goals without help’, SS 10, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> SS 73

<sup>55</sup> Feminine complicity, for Beauvoir, entails that women find it quite natural ‘count on the protection, love, help, and guidance of others’ and they let themselves ‘be fascinated’ by the illusion that one can be fully human by being instrument-objects for other humans, rather than pursuing one’s own projects, SS 774. Compare this with Sartre’s description of the sadist as someone who wants the other to be ‘*fascinated* by the facticity of unreflected consciousness’, so that she forgets her power to return his look, BN 527, emphasis added.

<sup>56</sup> SS 669

<sup>57</sup> SS 385

<sup>58</sup> In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir exempts ‘those who are denied all instruments of escape, those who are enslaved or who are mystified’ of bad faith, 48, but appears to suggest that educated, ‘western women’ *could* attempt liberate themselves with the ‘instruments’ in their possession but do not and so they are guilty of bad faith, 38. However, she seems to change her view about this, as she recognises that the feminine consciousness as a ‘mystified’ consciousness in SS 772.

<sup>59</sup> Beauvoir’s analysis suggests that women at this end of the spectrum of feminine complicity – pure accomplices – may not exist in reality, since even those women who are most actively complicit in women’s oppression are mystified consciousnesses and, as such, partly victims of psychological oppression, SS 763.

<sup>60</sup> SS 627

<sup>61</sup> Beauvoir describes women as ‘heavily handicapped’, SS 9, and alludes to the mutilation of women’s consciousness at numerous points in SS, e.g., 319, 385, 433.

<sup>62</sup> SS 14, 272, 581, 740.

<sup>63</sup> SS 59

<sup>64</sup> Beauvoir affirms that our self-image, our affective relation to our bodies, and even our character is, in part, a reflection of our social situation, SS 677.

<sup>65</sup> SS 669

<sup>66</sup> SS 770

<sup>67</sup> SS 448

<sup>68</sup> SS 738

<sup>69</sup> ‘Inasmuch as the woman wants to be a woman, her independent status produces an inferiority complex; inversely, her femininity leads her to doubt her professional opportunities’, SS 754.

<sup>70</sup> Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, ‘What Is a Victim?’, in *Neither Victim Nor Survivor: Thinking Toward a New Humanity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 1-20, here, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Nissim-Sabat, ‘What Is a Victim?’, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Nissim-Sabat, ‘What Is a Victim?’, 13.

<sup>73</sup> The term ‘victim’ is placed in ‘scare quotes’ here since Beauvoir’s existential ethics is opposed to the notion of a ‘pure’ victim, as it emphasizes the freedom of all human subjects in all situations in ways that mean that situations of oppression are irreducible to a binary relation between ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’, see *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 23, and Christine Daigle’s chapter on ‘The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir’ in her edited volume, *Existential Thinkers and Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 120-41.

<sup>74</sup> Although Beauvoir holds that the society which would allow women (and men) to fully ‘become human’ is a socialist one, her emphasis is on relieving women of the ‘burden’ of being a ‘parasite’ through securing their independence, *SS* 782, 776.

<sup>75</sup> Beauvoir certainly recognises that ‘human interdependence . . . explains why oppression is possible’, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 82, and her conception of transcendence as an intersubjective enterprise in *SS* could be read as a critique individualism, which – if further developed – has the potential to take her analysis of women’s victimisation ‘beyond ideology’. Also, in the third volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir remarks that her discussion of gender relations in terms of a metaphysical struggle between consciousnesses is too idealistic and states that, in hindsight, she should have framed her analysis of women’s situation in more materialist terms. See *Force of Circumstance*, 202.

<sup>76</sup> *SS* 44

<sup>77</sup> *SS* 57

<sup>78</sup> Sartre continues to interpret human behaviour in terms of bad faith right into his final major work. See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 5, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago press, 1993), 160.

<sup>79</sup> Sartre’s later acceptance of structure as a source of meaning in the world does not entail the dissolution of the subject; ‘the future’, he insists, ‘comes into material circumstances through men’, Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976) (cited as *CDR* hereafter), 235-6.

<sup>80</sup> In *CDR*, matter is construed as having ontological priority over consciousness, as consciousness mediates the relation of matter to itself; ‘man is a material being set in a material world; he wants to change the world which crushes him, that is, to act on the world of materiality through the mediation of matter and hence to change himself’, *CDR* 112.

<sup>81</sup> *CDR* 235

<sup>82</sup> In *CDR*, Sartre describes a broad range of phenomena – i.e. social meanings, prohibitions, and even spoken words – in material terms. For example, he includes language in the practico-inert, as it mediates the relation of matter to itself by virtue of its implications for praxis; ‘words circulate from mouth to mouth . . . like a coin from hand to hand’ and it is in this sense that discourse is a ‘sound-object, a materiality’, *CDR* 380.

<sup>83</sup> *CDR* 235

<sup>84</sup> In 1975, Sartre responds to questions about the changes in his philosophical outlook by stating: ‘There is an evolution, but I don’t think there is a break. The great change in my thinking was the war’, Jean Paul Sartre, ‘An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre’, in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (Illinois: Open Court, 1981), 5-51, here, 12.

<sup>85</sup> See, Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 94-115, for a discussion of how Sartre reconciles his existentialism with Marxism.

<sup>86</sup> See, Michael Kail, ‘Beauvoir, Sartre, and the Problem of Alterity’, trans. Kevin W. Gray, in Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (eds.), *Beauvoir & Sartre: The Riddle of Influence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 143-59; Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 187-202; Kruks, ‘Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom’; and Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 113-30.

<sup>87</sup> Sartre argues that Genet’s situation ‘condemned’ him to theft, for example, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 58, and for a discussion of how the process of writing *Saint Genet* allowed Sartre to rethink his existentialism, see Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 125-30.

<sup>88</sup> Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 37, 57, 291.

<sup>89</sup> Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> *CDR* 233

<sup>91</sup> *CDR* 234

<sup>92</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 13.

<sup>93</sup> See Bartky’s influential essay, ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power’, for her argument that criticises Michel Foucault’s original analysis of the ‘docile bodies’ of modernity

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failed to examine ‘those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine’, *Femininity and Domination*, 65.

<sup>94</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 1, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago press, 1981), 432

<sup>95</sup> Hazel E. Barnes, *Sartre and Flaubert* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 364-9.

<sup>96</sup> Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 1, 431.

<sup>97</sup> Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 1, 432.

<sup>98</sup> In his later applications of his existential psychoanalysis, Sartre uses the term ‘aggressive defence’ to refer to a specific form of ego-defence whereby the subject accepts what she has been made to be by reframing her situation in such a way that makes it bearable, see, for example *Saint Genet*, 58-72, and Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 3, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago press, 1989), 96-108.

<sup>99</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 83.

<sup>100</sup> Dianna Taylor, ‘Humiliation as a Harm of Sexual Violence: Feminist versus Neoliberal Perspectives’, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 33, no. 3(2018), 434-50, here, 445-6, emphasis added.

<sup>101</sup> Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 146-8

<sup>102</sup> Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. 5, 556.

<sup>103</sup> It is important not to understate Beauvoir’s influence here, however, since she suggests that the imagination has an important role to play in feminine complicity at numerous points in *SS*, 672, 674, 751.

<sup>104</sup> In the early 1960’s, Sartre applied his existential psychoanalysis to himself in order to write his autobiography, in which he sensitively describes scenes from his childhood that influenced embodiment of his gender and his disability. See, especially, his description of others’ reaction to his long hair being cut off when he was seven-years old, *Words*, 65-67.

<sup>105</sup> For an astute examination of how women’s agency is ‘hijacked’ in the realm of heterosexual relations, see Ann J. Cahill, ‘Unjust Sex Vs. Rape’, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 31, no. 4 (2016), 746-61.

<sup>106</sup> For a classic feminist discussion of how women are tricked into believing that maintaining a feminine appearance will empower them when, in fact, it offers them very little by way of social power, see Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 63-82, and for a feminist critique of the kind of empowerment women in late capitalist societies are encouraged to strive for – namely, sexual empowerment – see, Nicola Gavey, ‘Beyond “Empowerment”? Sexuality in a Sexist World’, *Sex Roles Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 718–24.