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Can Existentialism be a Posthumanism?: Beauvoir as Precursor to Material Feminism

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Abstract:

In this article, I demonstrate that Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy represents a first major step toward a rejection of the humanist subject and therefore was influential for the development of contemporary posthumanist material feminism. Specifically, her unprecedented attention to embodiment and biology, in *The Second Sex* and other works, as well as her notion of ambiguity, serve to challenge the humanist subject. While I am not claiming that Beauvoir was a posthumanist or material feminist thinker *avant la lettre*, I show that she is an important precursor to some of their key ideas. Indeed, her thinking about the body, sex, gender, and the importance of embodiment and situation constitutes a challenge to the subject of humanism, thereby opening up a path for thinkers that follow to push Beauvoir's critique and articulate a posthumanism that does away with the subject of humanism.

Keywords:

Beauvoir – Posthumanism – Material Feminism – Embodiment – Materiality

Can Existentialism be a Posthumanism?: Beauvoir as Precursor to Material Feminism

The impact of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy continues today. In the last few decades, a number of Beauvoir scholars have worked relentlessly and with success to establish her as a philosopher. Having done so, they are now devoting their attention to critically examining her thinking.¹ This entails, among many other things, assessing her existentialist views, how they are developed phenomenologically, and how they are put to work into the articulation of feminism put forward in *The Second Sex* from 1949. Beauvoir's relationship with feminism is intriguing and it took her a while to claim herself as a feminist despite the fact that she produced what has

since been considered by many to be the most important work of feminism in the 20th century with her publication of *The Second Sex*. She even said on the very first page of the book: “I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women.”² As irritating as it may have been, the inquiry she conducted and the publication of *The Second Sex* played a crucial role in reorienting feminist discourse from one that had been focused on rights to one focused on identity, sex/gender, and embodiment as a means to provide a strong foundation for claims to equal rights with men. The phenomenological ontology upon which the work rests allows for this shift to occur and has inspired numerous philosophers to explore and develop the themes launched by Beauvoir. Many feminist thinkers have acknowledged their debt to Beauvoir’s work, whether they embraced all or only some of her views or were critical of them.

In this article, I will demonstrate that Beauvoir’s thinking was influential in shaping posthumanist philosophy. Specifically, her views on the body and materiality are akin to what material feminists have been proposing in recent years. The renewed attention to materiality that they embrace leads them to dismiss the binaries upon which Western humanist thinking is established, such as human/nature, body/mind, human/nonhuman.³ Thinkers like Rosi Braidotti have pointed to Beauvoir’s work as foundational without unpacking what precisely in her philosophy can serve as a ground for posthumanist material feminism. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how parts of Beauvoir’s work can be understood as foundational to posthumanist theory. Importantly, however, I do not wish to claim that Beauvoir was a posthumanist or material feminist thinker *avant la lettre*. That would be an extravagant claim as I will explain below. Rather, I want to show how she is an important precursor to some of their key ideas. Indeed, her thinking about the body, sex, gender (albeit not mentioned as such⁴), and the

importance of embodiment and situation constitutes a challenge to the subject of humanism. It begins to crack it open and dismantle it, opening up this potentiality for thinkers that follow to push this critique and articulate a posthumanist theory.

The “Post” of “Posthumanism”

As proponents of a theoretical discourse that challenges and rejects humanism—quite literally a *post*-humanism—posthumanist thinkers are the heirs of two important philosophical lineages. The one runs through deconstruction, poststructuralism, and Derrida—as exemplified by Cary Wolfe—and the other is informed by the philosophies of life and immanence articulated by Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze and Guattari—as proposed most prominently by Rosi Braidotti who adds a good measure of feminist thinking to this mix. What both lineages emphasize is the necessity to criticize and dismantle the dualisms and binaries at the core of humanism. Strict distinctions posited between mind and body, human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, self and other, are thought to be artificial distinctions that do not reflect how interconnected all life is. In addition to the two lineages identified, feminist and postcolonial discourses have also contributed to the challenge of the humanist subject by explaining how a certain conception of the human—typically as cisgendered, heterosexual, able bodied, white, and male—has served as the anchor point of regimes of oppression.⁵ They call for a reconceptualization of the human to include groups that have been historically othered due to their sex, gender, race, etc. They also challenge the strict distinctions posited between human and nonhuman animals. Often this means pointing to how such categories and distinctions are dubious at best. As much as this critique of the humanist subject prepares the ground for posthumanist theorizations, they need not, and in fact often do not, embrace posthumanist

positions and tend to cling to a revised version of the subject. For some thinkers, the challenge of posthumanism is just too radical.

One worry is that by radically challenging the humanist subject, one may lose the ethical and political agent to whom we can ascribe responsibility and who can carry an agenda to effect socio-political changes. Beauvoir's existentialist and phenomenological commitments would prevent her from going that far as she remains committed to the notion of embodied consciousness. In a recent book, Sonia Kruks examines the potential connection between Beauvoir and posthumanism and argues that Beauvoir in fact proposes what she calls an "ambiguous humanism." This is a philosophical position that still clings to a notion of the human subject all the while acknowledging the ambiguities that constitute us without attempting to resolve them. Kruks points out that Beauvoir shares important points with poststructuralism in her critique of the sovereign subject of humanist liberal rationalism but argues that she is not to be construed as a poststructuralist. Beauvoir is critical of abstract humanism and its notion of universal human nature but at the same time is not willing to go so far as to dismiss the "human." Kruks explains that Beauvoir "did not embrace the troubling erasures of 'the human' that poststructuralism and posthumanism would often advocate or invite."⁶ Beauvoir is proposing instead an ambiguous humanism which takes seriously the posthumanist challenges to humanism and "[y]et, it should not consent to erase or indefinitely to deconstruct, decenter, or defer 'the human.'"⁷ For Kruks, this would even amount to nihilism. She continues: "To erase 'the human' from consideration is to cut from under our feet the grounds on which we may contest certain practices and situations as oppressive. In spite of the violence that may be—and has been—done in its name, even the most flawed humanism still secretes an opposition to what *dehumanizes*."⁸ I see a few problems with Kruks' claims.

First, I think it is problematic to lump poststructuralism and posthumanism together in the way Kruks does. Admittedly both attack the humanist subject, but both do so for different reasons and using different methods. While poststructuralists tend to emphasize psychoanalysis, language, and discourse in how they shape and construct individuals—no longer conceived as unified subjects—posthumanists achieve this dismantling of the humanist subject by inquiring into immanence, life, and the interconnectivity of beings and materiality. Second, given that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is informed by Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, particularly *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* published in 1949 and which she reviewed enthusiastically, and given that there are a lot of affinities between her views on social construction and its operations and Michel Foucault's, who progressed from an early structuralist to a later poststructuralist stance, I think it could be argued that there are more affinities between Beauvoir's feminist project and poststructuralism than has been recognized.⁹ Without engaging in a full blown demonstration of this—indeed, this is not the goal of this article—I would just mention poststructuralist Judith Butler's own acknowledgement of how close she stands to Beauvoir on a lot of issues.¹⁰ Third, and most importantly, I would contend that Kruks' assertion that both movements erase the 'human' is overstating what the thinkers involved are seeking to achieve: not a complete erasure or dismissal of the 'human' but rather a radical reconceptualization. The subject of posthumanism is post-human in the sense that it is a post-humanist human: still human but not in a humanist sense. To claim that poststructuralists and posthumanists dismiss the human, the subject, is caricaturing what is in fact a much more complex project. Theirs is a sophisticated critique that dismantles the humanist construct and proposes instead a dynamic, fluctuating subject that is perpetually done and undone, but never entirely done away with. The emphasis on becoming rather than being that is shared by both

movements, albeit established through different methodological means and ideological commitments, is key here and lays at the heart of their dealings with the human subject.¹¹

At the outset of the posthumanist critique, there is still a subject, an agent, albeit a minimal one which amounts to traces of the humanist subject. In fact, the concern about the loss of the subject, and associated attempt to establish the minimal locus of agency we need and which a subject position allows for, is shared by many posthumanist thinkers. Rosi Braidotti, for example, says that we need to “devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of *subject formation* to match the profound transformations we are undergoing.”¹² Likewise, Samantha Frost indicates that we need a new theory of the human, one that “does not succumb to the conceits of old [e.g. the human exceptionalism of humanism] but also does not conceptually dissolve humans as identifiable agents and thereby absolve them of the crises that mark the Anthropocene.”¹³ Stacy Alaimo explains that “agency must be rethought in terms of interconnected entanglements rather than as a unilateral ‘authoring’ of actions.”¹⁴ This all amounts to a rejection of the humanist subject who is the sole autonomous agent and posits that the human subject is an entangled being that is subject to other agencies as much as it is the subject as author of its own actions. This is not a rejection of the subject but a radical reconceptualization.

Beauvoir’s Challenge to Humanism

Beauvoir’s philosophy of ambiguity is a first step toward the dismantling of the humanist subject. Even if I disagree with Kruks’ take on posthumanism, I agree with her that Beauvoir provides valuable resources to avoid the loss of the subject as agent. Kruks says, “The task, I suggest, is to move beyond critiques of humanism and toward its productive reconstruction.”¹⁵ She sees Beauvoir as giving us the tools we need for that with her ambiguous humanism. I think

posthumanism offers the productive reconstruction sought by Kruks and that the ambiguous humanism she identifies in Beauvoir is not an alternative to posthumanism but rather forms a rich ground for posthumanism to emerge. Kruks explains that ambiguous humanism is one that refuses to separate consciousness from the body or its situation and that puts forward, without attempting to resolve them, the many tensions generated by ambiguity. According to her, Beauvoir is offering an ambiguous humanism, one that is critical of itself in the name of humanism.¹⁶ Beauvoir first elaborates the notion of ambiguity in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) where she claims: “As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it.”¹⁷ As beings that experience ourselves in ambiguity, we are both immanent and transcendent, subjects and objects, free and yet in need to make ourselves free, in conflict with the Other and yet in need of the Other for our fulfillment. Her thinking on ambiguity is an ‘and...and...and...’ rather than an ‘either...or...’¹⁸ Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity is grounded in her phenomenological positions and also denies any separation between consciousness and the body, consciousness and the situation, and the self and the other. A subject is always an embodied and situated consciousness that is also always in relation with others, treated at times as an object and at other times as a subject. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944), Beauvoir states “Our freedoms support each other like the stones in an arch...”¹⁹ A life lived by oneself would be literally inconceivable for Beauvoir as we need other humans to enter in relation with. Any attempt to cut ourselves from these relations and to exist as disembodied autonomous consciousnesses, any attempt to deny our ambiguity—the dream of the humanist philosophers she is criticizing—is doomed to fail. Rosi Braidotti’s call for the

enbrainment of the body and the embodiment of the mind²⁰ resonates with Beauvoir's rejection of the mind-body dualism and may be said to champion ambiguity as proposed by Beauvoir.

The notion of ambiguity introduced in Beauvoir's early essays is supplemented by the ambiguities that can be experienced between one's sexed being and one's gendered expression, which she turns to in *The Second Sex*. Since a consciousness is not conceivable separate from its body and since this body has a sex, it experiences the world differently whether it is one body or another. In her chapter on biology in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir investigates the body in its physiological and material constitution. Emily Ann Parker notes Beauvoir's statement at the beginning of this chapter that "we can affirm that any living fact indicates transcendence, and that a project is in the making in every function"²¹ and this leads her to argue that *The Second Sex* attributes transcendence, and thereby agency, to all instances of life. She claims that Beauvoir sees the biological studies of nature as necessary "not as Nature, but... as active, temporal, material variability."²² Specifically, Beauvoir's chapter on biology investigates biological processes of reproduction and how they constitute the sexes and their roles for the species. Interestingly, Beauvoir discusses these processes in different species, not only in the human. The aim is for her to show that there is great variety in the relations between males and females from one species to the next, even to a point where males are rendered useless in some species. However, she points out that females are increasingly subjected to the reproductive service of the species the further they are differentiated from the male, with human females being the most differentiated from the males and thereby subjected to reproductive service the most.²³

By investigating biological processes of reproduction across species and by discussing sexual differentiation as universal, Beauvoir is implicitly holding to the belief that these processes are the same.²⁴ The mechanics may differ, but reproduction and the perpetuation of the

species cuts across all species. While Beauvoir wishes to demonstrate that there are various behaviors attached to sexual organs in different species and therefore no direct connection between human sex organs and gender expression, pointing to biological processes as shared among different species is also an important claim to support posthumanist and material feminist positions about interconnectivity and the non-exceptional nature of the human: we all partake of the same materiality and of the same biological processes. The chapter on biology has been much maligned because of the way in which it can be read as providing an essentialist foundation for gender, connecting it to biology and sexual organs. I argue that, on the contrary, it works to show that there is no essential connection between gender expression and gender expectations based on the sexual organs of a body. It identifies some functions that cannot be done away with for female humans, such as menstruation and pregnancy, but the set of socio-cultural expectations about them are not grounded in biology. Beauvoir concludes:

These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation.

Throughout our further discussion we shall always bear them in mind. For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world[,] the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever.²⁵

Importantly for her, and leading up to her argument that it is the socio-cultural oppressive apparatus of patriarchy that has given meaning to the sexed bodies and built hierarchies on the

basis of sex, Beauvoir claims, “Certainly these facts cannot be denied—but in themselves they have no significance.”²⁶ They only gain meaning once they are experienced in ways that are shaped by socio-cultural constructs. She also says, at the beginning of the chapter ‘The Psychoanalytical Point of View,’ “it is not the body-object described by scientists that exists concretely but the body lived by the subject.”²⁷ And again, in the introduction to the chapter on ‘The Point of View of Historical Materialism,’ her critique of the limitations of Marxist materialism with regards to women, she says, “We have seen that two essential traits characterize woman biologically: her grasp on the world is narrower than man’s; and she is more closely subjugated to the species. But these facts have a totally different value depending on the economic and social context.”²⁸ The distinction she is introducing is that between the biological body and the social body or, one could say, between being and becoming in which becoming is not entirely determined by being. Furthermore, it is only in the latter that sexual difference matters due to how patriarchal discourse structures the social. Making these points, dissociating one’s becoming from one’s being, and insisting on the role played by social construction and the interiorization of patriarchal discourses and myths by women, allows her to call for different, and better, constructs. It also provides her with the ground for the claim that opens volume two of *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”²⁹ One is born a sexed being. Being born female may lead one to become woman if one’s becoming is shaped by the patriarchal regime. This, however, is not a necessary outcome if other modes of thinking are embraced. This constitutes a charge against the humanist subject, which is a patriarchal subject.

The importance of this achievement in *The Second Sex* should not be downplayed. It has opened the door to both poststructuralist and posthumanist inquiries. Rosi Braidotti acknowledges explicitly the indebtedness of feminist posthumanism to Beauvoir and points to

The Second Sex as the triggering factor. In her 2009 book *La Philosophie... là où on ne l'attend pas*, she explains that feminism is a rejection of dualisms and dichotomic structures of thought for which Beauvoir offers a foundational contribution. Beauvoir's contribution is indeed foundational but remains rooted in a humanist approach that privileges the human and reinforces human exceptionalism.³⁰ However, not everything about a humanist feminism is bad from a posthumanist point of view. Braidotti says further that "Humanist feminism introduced a new brand of materialism, of the embodied and embedded kind. [...] The theoretical premise of humanist feminism is a materialist notion of embodiment that spells the premises of new and more accurate analyses of power."³¹ This is what Beauvoir's philosophy groundbreakingly offered with *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* (1949), and in particular with the "Biological Data" chapter. What I am offering in this article is a demonstration to support this explicit claim of Braidotti's.

Beyond embodiment, the body, and its situation, what about *matter* and how does Beauvoir deal with it? Her considerations on the biological are not the only instances where Beauvoir dwells on materiality and how it is constitutive of consciousness but she does not discuss materiality in itself. There are only very few passages where she comes close to that by pointing to the life of objects. In her diaries and memoirs, for example, she recounts experiences of encountering objects and relating to them as if they were alien and had a life of their own. Chapter 1 of "Two Unpublished Chapters of *She Came to Stay*," opens with an account that brings us back to one such childhood episode experienced by Beauvoir. The character of Françoise finds herself alone inside her grandmother's house. An old jacket is hanging on a chair. Beauvoir writes: "She opened her eyes; she could see the jacket; it did exist but it was not aware of it: this was both irritating and slightly frightening. What is the use of existing if it

doesn't know it? [...] the jacket was lying there, indifferent, completely foreign, while she was still Françoise."³² This passage acknowledges the life of objects. The jacket is not inert; it exists but lacks self-consciousness: it is not aware of itself as existing. It is "completely foreign," namely by lacking self-awareness, it is not the same kind of being as Françoise and therefore she cannot communicate with it, enter in an intersubjective relation with it. And yet, the jacket's existence, as alien as it is, is part of Françoise's becoming at the time of its encounter. This childhood memory is recounted in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) in the following manner: "I have related elsewhere how, at Meyrignac, I stupidly gazed at an old jacket thrown over the back of a chair. I tried to put myself as it were inside the jacket, and say: 'I am a tired old jacket.' It was quite impossible, and I was stricken with panic. In the darkness of the past, in the stillness of inanimate beings I had dire forebodings of my own extinction."³³ Right before this story about the jacket, Beauvoir explains that, as a child, she enjoyed tales of objects having thoughts that were properly their own, such as needles being given "ideas proper to needles" or sideboards being provided with thoughts relevant to a wooden sideboard. She says: "but they were, after all, just stories; objects had black, impenetrable hearts, and reposed upon the earth without being remotely aware that they were doing so, and without being able to murmur reassuringly: 'Here I am.'"³⁴ If an object was able to utter this reassuring self-reflective statement, it could enter into an intersubjective relation with Beauvoir. It would be 'reassuring' for the human encountering the object and not for the object itself. Objects, however, are closed to her, 'impenetrable,' and supposedly inanimate. As a phenomenologist, Beauvoir posits their importance as being part of a situation in which a consciousness may find itself. But materiality and objects are radical others to consciousness that serve to constitute a world that human consciousness renders meaningful. *She Came to Stay* opens up with similar considerations but

this time the emphasis is on Françoise's consciousness and its relation to objects as she goes around the dark theater at night: "When she was not there, the smell of dust, the half-light, and their forlorn solitude did not exist for anyone; they did not exist at all. [...] She exercised that power [elle avait ce pouvoir]: her presence snatched things from their unconsciousness; she gave them their colour, their smell. [...] She alone evoked the significance [le sens = meaning] of these abandoned places, of these slumbering things. She was there and they belonged to her. The world belonged to her."³⁵ This is a literary rendition of her phenomenological commitments about intentional consciousness, one that focuses on consciousness but still speaks, albeit indirectly, of the agency of objects in the process of intentional constitution: objects in the situation allow for the consciousness and its world- and meaning-making to unfold.

For the phenomenologist, human consciousness is what renders objects and materiality meaningful; constitutes it in a world that, in its turn, constitutes consciousness. Phenomenological intentionality speaks to the importance of materiality in self-constitution but it fails to realize our material entanglement as conscious beings. In Beauvoir's picture, there is no real material entanglement, only an encounter between consciousness and objects; a reflective consciousness that makes sense of objects, that makes objects out of matter. We have at work the self-constitution and world-constitution of an intentional consciousness. In passages such as the ones I quoted in *She Came to Stay* and parts of her memoirs where she recounts such encounters with materiality, she shows a sensibility to the questions tackled by material feminists and posthumanist thinkers even if she does not engage in the same type of questioning. She remains in the realm of existential phenomenology and her feminism is, after all, a humanist one, perhaps even an ambiguous one as per Kruks. With that said, the work she accomplished in emphasizing ambiguity along with the situatedness and embodiedness of consciousness has inspired more

contemporary thinkers and certainly opened the way to their reflections on materiality. Developments on feminist phenomenology such as those of Elizabeth Grosz, for example, are key in establishing the lineage from Beauvoir to posthumanist feminists. In her early work *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Grosz expands on the notion of embodiment proposed by Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty to further discuss sexual difference by focusing on porosity and liquidity to do away with dualistic boundaries between bodies. She speaks of bodies as leaky and of bodily encounters with exchange of fluids. For her, the body is “a most peculiar ‘thing,’ for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing: nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing. Thus it is both a thing and a nonthing.”³⁶ Using the Möbius strip as an explanatory concept for the body, she indicates that there is no sharp distinction between mind and body. Grosz’s body as Möbius strip is the embodiment of Braidotti’s enbrainment of the body and embodiment of the mind referred to above. This body is volatile because it is always being made by its various encounters with other bodies through its porous and leaky membranes. Grosz thereby takes a step further in thinking embodiment in material ways not captured by Beauvoir. It could be argued, however, that even Grosz remains stuck eventually in a humanist feminism since her discussion of porosity and volatile bodies is still in the service of understanding the constitution of human consciousness. As a phenomenologist and along with Beauvoir, she continues to emphasize intersubjectivity and immanence although she has paid more and more attention to materiality itself in her more recent work.³⁷

The Posthumanist Material Feminist Legacy

As I mentioned earlier, it is the material feminism and posthumanism emerging from the Spinoza—Nietzsche—Deleuze lineage that is successful in reconsidering and reconceptualizing subjectivity in the way we need while still being rooted to a degree in Beauvoir’s notion of

ambiguity. By turning its attention to materiality and interconnectivity, posthumanist feminism seeks to undermine the dichotomous relation between subject and object, human and nonhuman, by demonstrating that all beings partake in the radical entanglement of matter. Redefining subjectivity while emphasizing materiality entails positing a subject that is fluid and hybrid and thereby challenges the traditional view of the subject as a self-contained unity, as is Rosi Braidotti's and many others' project.³⁸ For Braidotti, and taking from Deleuze and Guattari, selves are in the process of shaping themselves and being shaped by their manifold interactions and entanglements and may be understood as fields of tensions. She says: "The body refers to a layer of corporeal materiality, a substratum of living matter endowed with memory. Following Deleuze, I understand this as pure flows of energy, capable of multiple variations. The 'self,' meaning an entity endowed with identity, is anchored in this living matter, whose materiality is coded and rendered in language."³⁹ More recently in *The Posthuman* (2013), and putting emphasis on *zoe*—that is life in its rawest expression and material vibrancy—she defines the human as a "zoe-driven subject [which] is marked by the interdependence with its environment through a structure of mutual flows and data transfer that is best configured as complex and intensive inter-connectedness."⁴⁰ The notion of material vibrancy advanced here recalls Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter, a position grounded in the vitalism that stems from Spinoza's philosophy. Bennett explains that "The vital materialist affirms a figure of matter as an active principle, and a universe of this lively materiality that is always in various states of congealment and diffusion, materialities that are active and creative without needing to be experienced or conceived as partaking in divinity or purposiveness."⁴¹ She picks up the ethical thread of the reconceptualization of the human being as a radically entangled being, embedded and interconnected materially. Even if, or perhaps precisely because, this renders us

fundamentally vulnerable—as entangled beings that are permeated by the beings we are in relation with—she thinks that we stand to benefit from foregrounding materiality and our own entanglement in it.⁴² I agree with Bennett that being attentive to matter and understanding ourselves as, first and foremost, material beings, will allow us to be more ethical. Our “encounters with lively matter can chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.”⁴³ This can certainly serve the feminist agenda which seeks to dismantle structures of oppression embedded in the humanist patriarchal system.

As an “always-productive becoming” mind and matter are inseparable and deeply interconnected. Entangled in this field of tensions and forces, in our manifold material relations, we and the beings we are entangled with exist in the mode of becoming, a dynamic unfolding process of relations. Claire Colebrook points out that “Recognition of matter’s own dynamism—its role in the trajectory of human history—will allow us to harness matter’s potentiality such that human life can live in accord with its own material nature.”⁴⁴ This is the foundation for the accountable *post*-humanist subject we seek, namely a “critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings.”⁴⁵ The accountability of such a subject is necessarily “based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building.”⁴⁶ This relates to the notion of agentic capacity further developed by thinkers such as Stacy Alaimo, Diana Coole,⁴⁷ and Samantha Frost. According to them, although there is variation in the actual capacity of agents, agency is distributed across all material beings. It constitutes a challenge to our anthropocentric understanding of agency. Indeed, to say that bacteria has agentic capacity or even a rock or a forest fire, is moving us away from any willful, intentional course of action which a rational agent might undertake following a process of practical deliberation. By pointing

to relationality as constitutive of posthuman subjectivity, as posthumanist material feminists do, one uncovers a web of interrelated agencies, intentional and non-intentional, that lead to a course of action. I may decide to eat a tempeh burger for dinner but the agent making this decision is a multiple agent inhabited, permeated, and located in a multitude of agentic capacities that shape its own agency in making that decision. Samantha Frost speaks of “intentless direction” when referring to the agentic capacity of non-intentional beings.⁴⁸ She explains that this capacity is most often intentless and follows the mechanics of atomic energy relations and biochemical processes. For Frost, the human’s willful agency rests on and is modulated by the numerous intentless directions at work in its body: it is the expression of these directions. Exploring the biochemical processes that regulate all bodies, human and nonhuman, she shows that organisms are permeated by their habitat and rely on the traffic of atoms and cells through their numerous permeable membranes for their persistence, for life to unfold, but each organism also “composes and recomposes itself continuously in response to and through engagement with its habitat.”⁴⁹ No traffic through membranes, no life. No intermingling with one’s habitat, no life. Entanglement is fundamental to life processes. In this context, to speak of an inside and an outside is completely meaningless. There is no such distinction.

The posthumanist material feminist views I have delineated reject human exceptionalism in that they posit that the human being is on the same ontological plane as any other being and shares in the same materiality. This is not something that Beauvoir would have put forward. However, her unprecedented attentiveness to embodiment did open the pathway for those who followed her to make those claims. Understanding our being as both rooted in materiality and in discourse, be it personal or social, is key to reconceiving ourselves, which is the call put forth by

posthumanist material feminists. Beauvoir did groundbreaking work in identifying the way in which patriarchal discourse was shaping human beings. Her attention to the body and biology is also unprecedented at the time of the publication of *The Second Sex*. Posthumanist material feminists walking in the path she opened are providing the reconceptualization called for and put us in a position to offer better ethical proposals since those will rest on a sounder understanding of who and what we are as materially entangled beings. After all, Beauvoir was critical of traditional ethics because it rested upon a misunderstanding of the human and a rejection of its ambiguous nature. If it is indeed the case that we are as described by posthumanists, then any ethics that disregards our 'nature' is bound to fail. We need to undertake the task of conceiving of ourselves as radically entangled in materiality and, from there, work out an ethics that will provide for our fundamental vulnerability and allow us to exist to the fullest of our generative potential.

In some ways, the ethical problem that emerges for posthumanist material feminists can be considered to be an exacerbation of the one faced by Beauvoir and her rejection of the absolute subject in favour of immanence and ambiguity. Indeed, a philosophy such as theirs that conceptualizes the subject as in a dynamic process of becoming, as emerging from a swarming field of tensions, seems an even more tenuous ethical agent than the ambiguous embodied and situated agent proposed by Beauvoir and one that also is more vulnerable than ever. However, I would argue that this vulnerability was always present, that we were always the materially entangled beings discussed by posthumanist material feminists. Centuries of humanist thinking had obscured this fact and hidden it behind a cloak of humanist disembodied, rational, and autonomous subjectivity. Refocusing on materiality allows us to better understand ourselves and consequently to better exist along with the other beings we are entangled with.

¹ Debra Bergoffen welcomes this shift in Beauvoir scholarship in her “Review of Penelope Deutscher’s *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance*,” *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 1, no. 2 (2008): 251-256. She applauds Deutscher’s critical inquiry into Beauvoir’s philosophy which leaves behind the issues of justification—Beauvoir is indeed a philosopher—as well as issues of influence—who influenced whom between Beauvoir and Sartre—issues she sees as having dominated Beauvoir scholarship until very recently.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 1949), 3.

³ For a clarification on this approach, see Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 17. As they point out, there is an important distinction between material feminism and feminist materialism. While the latter emerges from Marxist feminism and focuses on class and labor, the material feminism Alaimo and Hekman embrace and which I will examine in light of Beauvoir’s thinking is more interested in “the materiality of the human body and the natural world” (1). Interestingly, Beauvoir may be said to engage in both. It has been shown by Sonia Kruks and others (see for example Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir: Engaging Discrepant Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 258-280) that Beauvoir’s socio-political positions were inspired by her appropriation of Marxist thinking. Like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, she was deeply interested in Marxism and what she, and others, thought was a concrete application of it in the Eastern block and Cuba. My article does not dwell on her feminist materialism, which grounds her critique of historical materialism in *The Second Sex* (she claims that historical materialism fails to capture the peculiar reality and experience of women, a feminist twist to the materialism of Marxism) and also her various claims about the importance of economic independence and meaningful labor for women throughout the book. Instead, I propose to demonstrate how she offers insights that anticipate material feminism.

⁴ Even though it may be said that *The Second Sex* is all about the sex/gender distinction—the chapter on biology is the foundation for this as well as her famous claim that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”—she does not use the term.

⁵ Rosi Braidotti discusses how the rise of the studies—gender, postcolonial, media—have contributed to destabilize disciplinary discourses thanks to their “radical epistemologies that have exposed the persistence of the fatal flaw at the core of the humanities, namely their inbuilt Eurocentrism that unfolds into methodological nationalism” (“The Contested Posthumanities,” in *Conflicting Humanities*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 16). This Eurocentrism also entails embracing a humanistic universalism which comes to be contested by the studies and the posthumanities they pave the way for.

⁶ Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 26.

⁷ Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 32

⁸ Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 32.

⁹ In another essay, I have discussed these affinities between Beauvoir and Foucault. See Christine Daigle, “Authenticity and Distantiation from Oneself: An Ethico-political

Problem,” *SubStance* Issue 142 46, No. 1, (2017): 55-68. For Beauvoir’s relation to Lévi-Strauss, see Shannon M. Mussett’s introduction to “A Review of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by Claude Lévi-Strauss” and the review itself in *Simone de Beauvoir: Feminist Writings*, eds. Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmermann, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 51-57 and 58-66.

¹⁰ See for example her essay “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” *Yale French Studies* 72, ‘Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century,’ (1986): 35-49.

¹¹ It can be said that the phrase “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient” (“One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman”) encapsulates the whole project of *The Second Sex* which is to show that female humans are made into women through a complicated mix of social construction and the interiorization of the patriarchal discourse that makes them into objects. How one relates to the pressures of the socio-cultural and linguistic shaping of oneself becomes key, just as it is in Foucault’s and Butler’s views. However, more work needs to be done on these connections to show that Beauvoir, in embracing Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist views, may also have been a precursor of poststructuralism and may have propounded positions that could align with it.

¹² Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 12. My emphasis.

¹³ Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 156.

¹⁵ Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 31.

¹⁶ Kruks argues that Beauvoir thereby responds to “Said’s call for a humanism ‘critical of humanism in the name of humanism’” (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 55).

¹⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Kensington Publishing, 1948), 7.

¹⁸ The opening chapter of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* introduces rhizomatic thinking. Their claim is that thinking thus far has been arborescent, that is it has grown in a tree-like fashion. In contrast, they want to introduce a mode of thinking that does not dwell in logical reasoning, strict categories, and dualistic thinking. As they say, rhizomes fight the dualisms of arborescent thinking and “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be.’” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25). Beauvoir’s emphasis on ambiguity, on the necessity to live those ambiguities as such rather than attempt to resolve them, is an expression of this conjunction which also takes the form of an emphasis on existence and becoming in Beauvoir instead of essence and being.

¹⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), 140.

²⁰ See Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Humanities,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Special Issue on “Transversal Posthumanities,” eds. Matthew Fuller and Rosi Braidotti (2018): 1-31.

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 26.

²² Emily Anne Parker, “Becoming Bodies,” in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, eds. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 91. While the focus of her article is to discuss Beauvoir’s treatment of the body and sexual difference and to revisit

Moira Gatens and Judith Butler's readings of *The Second Sex*, Parker makes a few statements indicating that she sees a potential for reading a vibrant materiality as being at work in the philosophy proposed by Beauvoir. She does not develop that argument however.

²³ On this, see, for example, *The Second Sex*, 38.

²⁴ It is, of course, problematic that she only acknowledges in passing the existence of intersexuality (see *The Second Sex*, 30). She is often criticized for not pushing her analysis in this direction. Without wanting to fall into the apology trap, I would counter that the discussion in this chapter, along with some elements of the chapter "The Lesbian" provide tools for followers to investigate intersexuality, queer identities, and trans* issues that she herself may not have been in a position to pursue or even in need to pursue given her specific goals in *The Second Sex*.

²⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 32-33. In agreement with Merleau-Ponty, she suggests that the body is our anchor in the world, our location in the world, where consciousness as a fold can constitute itself by perceiving things, others, and itself. As a fold, consciousness shapes and is being shaped by the world that it enfolds. For her enthusiastic reception of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, see her "A Review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*" (1945), in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 159-164, and Sara Heinämaa's discussion of it in the same volume (153-158).

²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 34.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 49.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 62.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 283 (translation altered). Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have chosen to translate "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" as "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." This is problematic and incorrect. Indeed, their choice of translation which omits the indefinite article "a" misses the point Beauvoir is making with her whole book: it is through a whole process of patriarchal socialization that individual females become women, that is individual instances of the myth of woman she discussed in the chapter ending part 1.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *La Philosophie... là où on ne l'attend pas* (Paris : Larousse, 2009), 50-51.

³¹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 22.

³² Simone de Beauvoir, "Two Unpublished Chapters," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 42.

³³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: Penguin, 1959), 49.

³⁴ Beauvoir, *Memoirs*, 49.

³⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1982), 1-2.

³⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi.

³⁷ See for example essays such as "The Thing" (in Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 167-184) and "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom" (in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 139-157). In her most recent book, she expresses a strong concern with what she refers to as an excess of materiality. She explains that as a result of having been troubled by our lack of attention to the excess of subjectivity, feminists may have given excessive attention to materiality. Proposing to embrace an "extramaterialism,"

her goal is to explore “the incorporeal conditions of corporeality, the excesses beyond and within corporeality that frame, orient, and direct material things and processes, and especially living things and the biological processes they require” (*The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5). To parallel the new materialism, she wants to “call into being a new idealism” (ibid.).

³⁸ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3.

³⁹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 165-166.

⁴⁰ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 139.

⁴¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 93.

⁴² She says: “Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its power will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest *is good for humans.*” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13).

⁴³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

⁴⁴ Claire Colebrook, “On Not Becoming-Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 63-64.

⁴⁵ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

⁴⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

⁴⁷ Alaimo and Coole rely on Karen Barad’s notion of intra-activity to discuss their notion of distributed agency, what they coin “agentic capacity.” This phrase is grounded in Karen Barad’s famous *Meet the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) in which she speaks of the intra-active becoming of matter. To speak of agentic capacity definitely moves us away from a subject-object dichotomy where an identifiable and delimited subject can be identified as an agent. To say that all matter and material beings have agentic capacity allows for capturing the way in which we are done and undone by our material entanglements and serves to further undermine the fantasy of human mastery and exception.

⁴⁸ See Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 28.

⁴⁹ Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 145. Stacy Alaimo’s recent work also explores this line of thinking, from an environmental perspective. Similarly to Frost, she talks of the human as an “exposed subject [which] is always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted for” (*Exposed*, 5). As mentioned earlier, she argues that we must reconceive of agency and intentionality and think of ourselves as radically material.