

Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, eds., *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, 530 pages, ISBN 9781118795972.

The forty original essays by established and junior Anglo-American and international Beauvoir scholars in this edited collection in the Blackwell Companions to Philosophy Series present a stimulating exchange of ideas and views on Beauvoir's phenomenologically grounded, materialist, feminist, philosophical, and literary texts on sex and gender identity. Divided into four parts, this anthology begins with part I exclusively dedicated to a substantial discussion (fourteen essays) of Beauvoir's magnum opus *The Second Sex*, followed by an expansive treatment of Beauvoir's philosophical connections, adaptations, and improvements of other philosophers including G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Claude Levi-Strauss in part II. Part III likewise elaborates on Beauvoir's philosophical writings outside the canon of *The Second Sex* with refreshing readings of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and Beauvoir's metaphysical novels, writings on old age, and travel. In the postcolonial, post-slavery Anglo-American world, particularly in the United States, Beauvoir's radical anti-essentialist critique of women in society—her discovery indeed of the material “situatedness” of women—has been challenged by scholars working at the convergences of race and gender, where Beauvoir's insights have been found lacking in an awareness of the intersectional forces of this “situatedness” that impact girls and women of color.¹ Further, as an existentialist philosopher, Beauvoir's simultaneous reservations about an essentialist biological definition of womanhood while working within a dialectically bound biological framework to explain women's secondary status has also drawn sharp criticism from contemporary feminists as evidence of an overtly masculine, essentialist, and deterministic model. Part IV of the anthology entitled “Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism” addresses both charges with discerning re-interpretations of Beauvoir's biology for trans and queer identities, as well as for race studies.

While this summary of the four-part structure of the book expresses its major themes, as co-editor Laura Hengehold points out in the introduction,

1 See, for example, Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, & Feminism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001; Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and “The Second Sex”: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 1999; Moira Gatens, “Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003 pp. 266–287; Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Fallaize, New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 29–42.

“chapters in different sections engage in a dialogue with one another and rework earlier themes” (introduction, p. 11). This cross-referential exchange between scholars working on similar texts from different perspectives brings to the text the discursive variety of a colloquium. Thus, the essays in this collection reprise many of Beauvoir’s themes across a gamut of categories, concepts, and concerns. For instance, the centrality of “ambiguity” in Beauvoir’s philosophy of transcendence and freedom is discussed in the context of dependence and autonomy in familial life in Emily Zakin’s “The Drama of Independence: Narcissism, Childhood, and the Family Complexes” (ch. 8); ambiguity is once again discussed in Alison Stone’s “Beauvoir and the Ambiguities of Motherhood” (ch. 10) with motherhood “encapsulating the full ambiguity of human existence” (p. 129); and learning to “dwell in one’s own ambiguity” is defined as Beauvoir’s “ideal of authenticity” (p. 263) in Christine Daigle’s “Unweaving the Threads of Influence: Beauvoir and Sartre” (ch. 21). Such varied recontextualizations of Beauvoir’s proposition that human life is lived in ambiguity with their disparate phenomenological validations and ethical elaborations position Beauvoir as a persistent, consistent, and unique voice in existentialist philosophy.

In the introduction, Hengehold describes *The Second Sex* as the “keystone to our presentation” (p. 2), and indeed the fourteen essays dedicated to Beauvoir’s most famous text all more or less approach the book via what Stella Sandford describes as “philosophical transdisciplinarity,” perhaps the most expressive epithet to signal the original contribution of *The Second Sex* to philosophy. Sandford defines “transdisciplinarity” as different from interdisciplinarity; it is when the multiple disciplines embedded in *The Second Sex*, and which contributed to its making, move toward a new result that “yields a new concept, or redefines an existing concept in a way that was not previously seen in any of the disciplines on which it draws” (p. 23). Sandford’s “Beauvoir’s Transdisciplinarity: From Philosophy to Gender Theory” (ch. 1) lucidly sketches the arc traced by *The Second Sex* from European phenomenology and existentialism to feminist phenomenology and existentialism, and thence to critical theory and gender theory. Sandford’s pithy discussion of Beauvoir’s relationship to philosophy and its history and her essential departures from the practice of philosophy in France at the time of the writing of *The Second Sex*, and Beauvoir’s formal innovations—a new way to write philosophy, as well as the variety and scope of sources for the book: philosophy, history, mythology, biology—leads Sandford to categorically state that “Beauvoir’s legacy is not in her specific answer to the newly minted philosophical problem of ‘woman,’ it is the posing of the questions itself. Beauvoir left us with the problem, and thus inaugurated a new area of philosophy: philosophy of sex and gender” (p. 19).