

Making Our Freedom

Feminism and ethics from Beauvoir to Foucault

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Except where otherwise acknowledged, this thesis describes my own research and analysis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the possibilities for feminism that arise from the work of Michel Foucault, which I explicate by comparison it with humanist existentialism. I begin with *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir's application of existentialism to women. I expose the problems that arise in Beauvoir's project. Woman's body is an obstacle to her transcendence, and further, she must abandon her feminine desires and values, and accommodate herself to masculine patterns if she is to overcome her immanence and subordination. To understand why such problems recur in *The Second Sex*, I turn to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. After examining the conceptions underlying his thought, I conclude that his philosophy is unable to encompass difference, and is therefore antithetical to the feminist project.

Foucault's philosophy offers solutions to these problems by eliminating consciousness as universal subject of action, and by making subjectivity a product of time, through showing how subjects are formed through the changing effects of power upon bodies. His thought encompasses difference at a fundamental level, through understanding human beings as particular 'events' in time. I argue that Foucault's philosophy does not depend fundamentally, as does Sartre's, upon woman as Other.

Foucault shows how our particular historical form of rationality, created within power relations, sets limits on what we can think, be and do. He shows how thought can overcome some of these limits, allowing us to become authors of our own actions. Misunderstandings are common, particularly of his conception of power and its relation to subjectivity. Many commentators demand changes that reinstate the concepts he fundamentally rejects. Others do not see the unity of his philosophy. I show its importance to women's emancipation and to a feminist ethics.

Finally, I compare Foucault's thought with feminism of difference. With the help of Heidegger, I argue that Foucault offers a superior but complementary way to know who we are, through understanding the history of our making. I show how the masculine and the feminine can be reconciled through a reconceptualisation of the relation of sex to time. All told, Foucault is a philosopher of freedom and for him the practice of freedom is an ethics.

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I was introduced to Foucault and to the exploration of the question of the other in my honours year in Adelaide by Michael Dutton. His enthusiasm for this kind of inquiry showed me that here indeed was something to be teased out, and his tentative approach was invaluable in teaching me that knowledge cannot be taken for granted. I thank him, too, for his encouragement and his confidence in my abilities. I also thank Chris Falzon for generously sharing his knowledge of Foucault in many animated conversations. Beverley Shallcross, the Departmental Administrator at ANU, deserves special thanks and acknowledgement for her unflagging helpfulness and respect for the other.

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Introduction

*For man has closed himself up, til he sees all things through
narrow chinks of his cavern.*

William Blake,
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,
'A Memorable Fancy'

Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault might seem a rather odd couple, and in many respects this is indeed so. It is unlikely that Foucault ever read *The Second Sex*. If he had, perhaps he would have been amused to see that Sartre's existentialism, which he opposed, could not be successfully applied to one half of humanity, despite Beauvoir's most strenuous efforts. I say it is unlikely because Foucault was not one to touch upon feminist issues, except rarely - and then often ineptly. Still, Beauvoir and Foucault had in common a very strong and central concern for human freedom as an ethical endeavour. Both believed that freedom and ethics were intimately linked, and that the achievement of an ethical existence required active effort rather than passive acceptance. But even in these similarities they had essential differences, and it is the significance of these differences for women's freedom that I want to show here.

This thesis is intended to serve two purposes. On the one hand, it is concerned with the possibilities for feminism that arise from the work of Michel Foucault. This is presented as a critique of and an alternative to humanism, and, in particular, to the existentialist argument of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. I argue that Foucault's theory offers solutions, not only to the problems of *The Second Sex*, but to some longstanding problems in feminist theory and practice.

On the other hand, it is intended to serve a somewhat similar purpose to the personal notebooks of ancient Greece, the *hypomnemata*, which, according to Foucault, were collections of writings to be used for the project of making oneself differently. Quite unlike the modern use of writing with the object of discovering who one really is, this knowledge was accumulated towards achieving certain ideals. The aim was to become a person who, rather than being governed by exterior forces or the power of others, was self-governed. Of course this thesis is not personal in the same way as the *hypomnemata* but, somewhat in the same spirit, it is an argument meant to facilitate change - towards women (and men) making themselves differently, and becoming self-constituting and self-governing - and towards change in feminist directions and practices.

The *hypomnemata* did include knowledge of the self, not for modern therapeutic purposes but as a necessary basis for making oneself differently. A large part of the thesis is devoted to understanding and criticising some of the ideas from which feminism has been constructed. This need to know what we are in order to become something else is why I begin this 'archaeology' with an investigation of *The Second Sex*. This, of course, is only one source of present-day feminism, but Simone de Beauvoir is known as 'the mother of us all' for good reason. Many beliefs similar to hers continue to be incorporated in important and influential sections of feminist thought and practice today. Her work also participates in a particular philosophical movement, humanist existentialism, which was strongly repudiated by a later generation which included Foucault, whose work I investigate in the third and fourth chapters of my '*hypomnemata*'.

For a reader unfamiliar with existentialist thought, *The Second Sex* is a puzzling book, and it is Beauvoir's ambivalences and contradictions that I bring to light in chapter one. Perhaps the most significant example of this for feminism is her ambivalence towards the female body. For example, she doubts that pregnancy can ever be more than a second-rate activity, but also insists that the facts of the body have no significance until they are given meaning. There are other puzzles as well. Although few feminists would deny that serving others and economic dependency *has* allowed men to oppress women, it is not clear why Beauvoir links this so sweepingly to the notion of transcendence over the given, why she despises women's traditional work in the home, why women are blamed for their oppressed state, or why they must be 'assimilated', to become like men.

The key to such puzzles lies in the philosophical basis of Beauvoir's work, but, since she herself does not explain this in any detail, it is necessary to turn to the work where it is spelled out - Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In chapter two, then, I investigate the obstacles to finding a means of emancipating woman through a humanist philosophy, despite the fact that this is a philosophy preoccupied with freedom. I conclude that these problems are very serious - that in fact Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* cannot embrace women's emancipation, and that a very different philosophical outlook is needed if this is to be achieved.

In restricting my study of Beauvoir and Sartre almost entirely to *The Second Sex* and *Being and Nothingness*, my aim is to separate out the core aspects of these works that are antithetical to women's emancipation and to an ethical feminism. My object has been to present a type of thought, rather than to present a general overview of the work of these two philosophers.¹ As will become clear, my own theoretical inclination is anti-humanist, but I do not deny that their work

1. There is a very large literature giving broad overviews of Sartre. Dominick LaCapra (1987) gives a fair and penetrating assessment.

was an advance towards understanding human being as constituted in the world, and that in the cause of liberation it has been inspiring to many.

In my view it is unfortunate that Beauvoir finally gave too little weight to her view that humans are not natural beings and are not isolated individuals, but make their choices, act and so construct their identities within the general social framework (EA:71). This is particularly so considering that she herself shows in *The Second Sex* how influential and complex are the social forces within which woman constructs herself² On the question of respect for an 'older sister', I cannot do better than quote Irigaray:

To respect Simone de Beauvoir is to follow the theoretical and practical work for social justice that she carried out in her own way; it is to maintain the liberating horizons which she opened up for many women, and men She certainly found part of her inspiration for these during her long and often solitary walks in the countryside, in nature. It seems to me that her concern for and writings on this subject are a message not to be forgotten (1993:13-14).³

Foucault was a member of a generation of philosophers who constructed their thought in direct response to the humanist existentialism of which Jean-Paul Sartre was probably the leading French exponent, and so the link between Beauvoir and Foucault is Sartre. It is not surprising, then, that the same problems that I find in *The Second Sex* and in *Being and Nothingness* are addressed by Foucault. I explain his approach and how he solves these problems in chapters three and four. It is in this part of the thesis that the more constructive aspect of my '*hypomnemata*' begins to be revealed, through Foucault's suggestions for how we might conceive of ourselves and the world differently.

For clarity, I divide my writing on Foucault into two parts, although these are in fact interdependent. In general, chapter three deals with the relations between self and exterior world, at the same time defining what that self is. For Foucault, the human subject is made within culturally specific forms of knowledge and practice, themselves forged through the operation of power relations. Although there is now considerable familiarity with this aspect of his work,

2. Feminists have hotly disputed at great length over *The Second Sex*. Toril Moi (1994) strives to defend Beauvoir against her critics, whom she feels have been 'far more hostile than might reasonably be expected' and have allowed their 'preconceptions or prejudices to shape their perceptions' (1994:77). I disagree if, as sometimes is the case, Moi considers a different philosophical stance to be 'prejudice'. See, for example, Moi's caricature of Irigaray's position on Beauvoir (Moi 1994:183; Irigaray 1993:10-14). It is not, as Moi believes, that Beauvoir's critics generally misrecognise her project and judge her by an 'alien standard'; rather the project *is* recognised and found wanting as a means of liberation (Moi 1994:184).

3. Sartre later tried to recognize the influence upon the individual of the social world, and of language, more fully. This change in his thought became obvious after Beauvoir's publication of *The Second Sex* (see, for example, Silverman, 1980), and was possibly influenced by her difficulties in applying it to women.

misunderstanding is not uncommon, particularly of his particular conception of power and its relation to subjectivity. Many commentators praise aspects of his work yet demand improvements or additions that reinstate the very concepts that he fundamentally rejects. Perhaps the best example of this is his rejection of the transparent, self-reflexive, constituting subject, a loss bewailed by critics, in their concern for agency. For them, it is an either/or question: either humans constitute themselves and the world or they are constituted by it. As they see it, this constituting subject is the source of independent thought and action and its loss means that human beings have lost all freedom to act independently, a serious problem for social theorists concerned with freedom. Another example is a demand for the normative guidance which Foucault so studiously avoids providing. Since I insist that Foucault's work should not be seen as divided between the 'useful' earlier genealogical material on discipline and bio-power, and the later material on the aesthetics of the self that can blithely be rejected, I aim to show how the two parts are connected, and the importance of both to women's emancipation and to ethics. At the conclusion of this chapter, I argue that from Foucault's understanding that there is no ultimate truth of human being it follows logically that an ethical relation to the other must be concerned with difference.

Chapter four deals with the second of the two sets of relationships involved in the question of women's freedom, the internal relation of power between self and self, the way that we act upon our own actions. Foucault agrees with Beauvoir and Sartre that we cannot be free if we are at the mercy of the beliefs, emotions and desires which have been created in us without our knowledge or consent. For him, the tyrant and the slave are both not free and not ethical subjects (1988:8). However, unlike Beauvoir and Sartre, Foucault avoids making individuals culpable for their own plight or for the state of the world. Avoiding moral persuasion, he moves beyond the concept of good and evil, considering instead what is good for us and what is bad. He suggests that we seek freedom through actively taking part in the making of ourselves, that we intentionally construct ourselves as 'works of art'. I argue, against critics who take this to be a move towards egotistical and frivolous self-indulgence, that this constitutes an ethical relation to self which is the ground of possibility of an ethical relation to others. Foucault is a philosopher of freedom and for him the practice of freedom is an ethics.

In my concluding chapter, I discuss what my understanding of Foucault means for feminist theory and practice today. I look critically at the feminist pursuit of identity for women in terms of an essential difference. I conclude that feminism of difference uses concepts of identity and representation that come uncomfortably and unnecessarily close to the humanist oppositional thought that has subordinated us in the modern era. I argue that this is not a good strategy. There are other ways of knowing who we are, and Foucault offers a better alternative. It is better for women to understand themselves as particular beings in time - as creatures of history. This, I argue, not only frees women of the

oppositional form of representation in which we are caught, but also frees us to become authors of ourselves.

Finally, to throw some positive light upon how we might make our freedom, I turn first to Heidegger, one of Foucault's acknowledged mentors, to heighten and sharpen our understanding of Foucault's thought. Heidegger offers a depth of understanding of man's relation to time which Foucault has taken up, but which is difficult of access without reference to Heidegger. Through Heidegger's conceptions of dwelling and Being, I reinforce the importance of Foucault's emphasis upon the practise of genealogy - of knowing who we are through knowing how we have been made in time. I also consider what it is that women might seek in making themselves differently. Then, through a reflection upon the relation of the masculine and the feminine to time, I draw out the essential part played by the concept of time in Foucault's thought. Through this, I summarise what Foucault can tell us about the problem of the relation between the sexes in Western thought and culture today.

New stuff:

The problem of freedom versus cultural determinism that has been grappled with by feminist thinkers from Beauvoir to the present day. 'Why *is* woman so submissive?' was Beauvoir's testy question. As Judith Butler puts this, 'how are we to understand the constitutive and compelling status of gender norms without falling into the trap of cultural determinism?' (*Bodies that Matter*, p. x). Foucault suggests that when we are faced with an impossible question such as this we should sidestep it. The cultural is a product of time. It is through considering the relation of gender to time that the impasse of determinism can be forestalled.

Situating human being in time has great ethical effects: no longer can we appeal to the higher authority of God, precedent, or Man for direction. Many find this is a disturbing prospect, but I will show that it is, rather, a great opportunity for freedom and for choosing ethical practices that apply effectively to the particular dilemmas of our present time.