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On the Limits of Philosophizing¹

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A central focus of Kathryn Gines's paper is the claim that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* deploys "frameworks of oppression" – that is, a certain way of discussing, in particular, anti-Black racism, antisemitism, colonialism, and class oppression – in two problematic ways (252). On the one hand, Beauvoir sometimes *compares* these forms of oppression with

the oppression of women by emphasizing the similarities among them. These comparisons are based on a central organizing notion in *The Second Sex*, the idea of "the other" (small 'o'); and Beauvoir has a habit, Gines argues, of assimilating all of the forms of oppression she invokes to one another. The cost of this assimilation is an elision of the particular and often complex ways various forms of bigotry create specific kinds of oppressions. Worse, Gines claims, there is often an implication in Beauvoir's comparison of women with Blacks, Jews, proletarians, and other oppressed peoples that "women" are not (also) Black, Jewish, proletarian, etc.; that is, that women are, by definition, white. This means that the experience, even the existence, of non-white women is, ironically, absent from Beauvoir's text.

In addition to worrying about Beauvoir's comparison of frameworks of oppression, Gines also draws our attention to the ways in which she sees Beauvoir putting the frameworks in *competition* with one another in service of arguing that the subordination of women is unique among forms of social oppression. First, women are what Beauvoir calls the "absolute Other" (with a capital O). Unlike Blacks, Jews, and proletarians, women have never revolted *en masse* against their condition. To put the point in the Hegelian terms of which Beauvoir is fond, they have never on a large historical scale demanded recognition from men. Gines reads Beauvoir as suggesting that the static, ahistorical nature of women's oppression not only makes it different from but also worse than the other kinds of oppression she discusses. When you put this claim together with the claim that Beauvoir's "woman" is implicitly a white woman, you get the erasure of non-white women in *The Second Sex*. As Gines puts it, "The subjugation of non-white women is obscured, not only in the form of what Beauvoir calls antifeminism, but also as a salient aspect of anti-Black racism, antisemitism, and/or classism that women within these groups simultaneously experience" (260).

¹ At the kind invitation of Kathryn Gines, I presented an earlier version of this commentary on January 23, 2015, at a Penn State workshop on the paper that is the focus of this Symposium.

A third concern of Gines's is Beauvoir's tendency, largely through her appropriation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, to identify women's condition throughout history and even with respect to their role in human reproduction as a form of "slavery." The troubling irony of this move, Gines observes, is that "women slaves or enslaved women are largely disregarded in Beauvoir's analysis" (263). Following the intellectual historian Sabine Broeck, Gines understands what she calls the "logic" of the "woman-as-slave analogy" to have "deeply racist effects" (265). Broeck suggests that the binary opposition of slave and master has an "unspoken third term" namely, "the position of being abjected from this struggle," which is equivalent to "the early modern position of factually enslaved people of African origin."² As I understand Broeck (and I have read the article from which Gines quotes, which, as far as I can tell is the only place in which Broeck discusses this claim), the idea is that the aspiration to be a master is a function of the Hegelian slave's noticing a difference between himself or herself and an actual (abjected) slave, that is, a person who has no chance of becoming a subject. Insofar as the Hegelian object—a white woman, on Gines's reading of Beauvoir's analysis—is not literally enslaved, the abjected slave points up to her that she, unlike an actual slave, has the capacity to demand recognition from the subject, that is, of course, the unenslaved (i.e., white) man. Thus, in identifying woman as occupying the position of the Hegelian slave, Beauvoir ironically, and disturbingly, not only erases the fact of actual human slavery and, in particular, Black women's slavery, but also "perpetuates a white feminist strategy of exploiting the suffering of those actually enslaved to garner support for the cause of white women" (267).

Gines explicitly says in the last paragraph of her paper that her criticisms of Beauvoir should not stop people from reading *The*

Second Sex. We just need to acknowledge and analyze its shortcomings and "serious implications," rather than apologize for them—which, I infer from the way she refers to and cites my work in numerous places in her paper, she believes me to have been doing. I am prepared to take this call and this criticism seriously. There are all sorts of what I tend to call "howlers" in *The Second Sex*. For example, I personally find the just-so stories in the sections on history painfully compressed and often incredible. Beauvoir's mid-20th-century pop Freudianism also hurts my ears. Her discussions of women's bodily woes in the Biology chapter are sometimes melodramatic and even insulting, as when she states that during a woman's menstrual period "she feels most acutely that her body is an alienated opaque thing; it is the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that makes and unmakes a crib in her every month; every month a child is prepared to be born and is aborted in the flow of the crimson tide."³ I understand that my frustration with these and other moments in *The Second Sex* is in very obvious ways not comparable with the serious charges Gines is in effect laying at Beauvoir's doorstep. So let me be quick to add that I agree with Gines that—if I can put the point this way, to save some time—in *The Second Sex* there is nary a hint of what we today would call an intersectional analysis of women's condition. When you put Beauvoir's comparing women to Blacks, Jews, and proletarians together with the fact that the woman she describes in many of the chapters in Book II of *The Second Sex* seems to have the money and the freedom to worry about her appearance or her sexual identity or the cleanliness of her house, or whether she's "frigid," and so on, you certainly can find reasons to construe Beauvoir as largely unconcerned with anything other than capitalist, Christian white women.

² Gines, 265. Gines is here quoting Sabine Broeck, "Re-Reading de Beauvoir 'after Race': Woman-as-Slave Revisited," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 14:1-2 (2011), 178.

³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*," translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York, Random House/Vintage, 2011), 41.

That said: if Beauvoir's shortcomings, parochialism, and insensitivity amount to the exploitation and abjection of Black women and men and the demeaning or erasure of other groups to which she compares (white) women, then I can't see a reason why anyone should read the book except heuristically, as a reminder of how easily, and dangerously, an author's privilege can distort her perception of how things actually are in the world. If Gines's Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* exploits the suffering of others to further the interests of white women, then it follows that by holding Beauvoir up as a model feminist thinker, I, as a white woman, have been exploiting the suffering of others, and in particular Black women. And that would be a human failure of such proportions that I would not know how to go on as a philosopher.

I take Gines's words personally not just because I am a white woman who for 15 years has been urging feminists to return to Beauvoir's text, but also because Gines cites my work often in her paper. On p. 253 of her essay, for example, she implies that I have sought to canonize Beauvoir. In the context of attributing that goal to me, Gines quotes a claim of mine that "Beauvoir's aspirations to write about being a woman are inextricably intertwined with her discovery of what I argue is both her own philosophical voice and **a model for doing philosophical work** that lies waiting to be appropriated by both feminists and philosophers." This sentence appears in my book *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, which I wrote at a time—the turn of the present century—at which the vast majority of feminist thinkers believed we had already absorbed whatever *The Second Sex* might have to offer us.⁴ The "model for doing philosophical work" that we find in *The Second Sex* is important, I argued, insofar as it shows us what it looks like to hold one's (ordinary) personal experience in the same space as one's (robustly) philosophical writing—that is,

with writing that has aspirations to make claims about how things are with the world that go beyond one's personal experience. *This* model is what, for me at least, makes *The Second Sex* an invaluable book for anyone who finds impossible or distasteful the idea of theorizing about How Things Are in a way that is false to, or drifts away from, one's own, on-the-ground experience of the world.

Of course, in adopting such a model, a philosopher always, at every turn, incurs a standing risk of *equating* her own experience with How Things Are and thereby not only of eliding, erasing, denying, and distorting other people's experience, but also perpetuating their suffering. My view is that if academic philosophy is to be anything other than an intellectual game we play in the academy, we are obliged to take that risk. All of us are products of our time, of the *Zeitgeist*, of our own aporias, and the tenacity of our convictions. We may thereby make it the case that we are unreadable—in the sense both of not being legible and being off-putting, perhaps horrifyingly so—to certain contemporaries and some future readers. This is not something we can control. Each of us has to decide if, e.g., Hegel's overt sexism makes his work unreadable. His view of women as non-rational animals may be deal-breakers for some people. Others—even the future selves of these same people—might find Hegel's proto-standpoint theory in the master-slave dialectic tremendously fruitful, perhaps even for thinking through the nature of Hegel's self-contradictions. Martha Nussbaum claimed 20 years ago that "to do feminist philosophy is simply to get on with the tough work of theorizing in a rigorous and thoroughgoing way, but without the blind spots, the ignorance of fact, and the moral obtuseness that have characterized much philosophical thought about women and sex and the family and ethics in the male-dominated academy."⁵ I am suggesting

⁴ Columbia University Press, 2001, 10. The boldfacing in the quotation in the previous sentence is not in the original.

⁵ Nussbaum, "Feminists and Philosophy," *The New York Review of Books*, October 20, 1994, accessed July 28, 2015 <http://www.nybooks.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/articles/archives/1994>

that philosophizing about anything that matters in the world beyond our profession entails putting your own ignorance and obtuseness on display. It also requires making judgments about whether your own or other people's philosophical risk-taking has turned out to constitute a moral or political or social failure of monstrous proportions. I thank Kathryn Gines for giving me an occasion, painful as it may be, to reflect on my case.

[/oct/20/feminists-and-philosophy/](#). Nussbaum in this piece is reviewing the first edition of *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004). I discuss this quotation in another context in Chapter 1 of *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).