

**WHY AND HOW  
WE SHOULD READ BEAUVOIR TODAY  
AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN  
FROM OUR READING**

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Review of Stella Sandford. *How to Read Beauvoir*. New York/London: W.W. Norton Company, 2007; London: Granta Publications, 2006. Pp. 118. ISBN-13: 978-0-393-32951-3; ISBN-10: 0-393-32951-8 (Paperback) \$11.95.

How fortunate it turned out to be, a few weeks ago, that Amazon.com sent us "personal" e-mail suggesting we might, perhaps, be interested in a book called *How to Read Beauvoir* by Stella Sandford. Yes, we might, we both decided, although we ordered it with some trepidation, fearing a "Beauvoir for Dummies" sort of experience.

This slim book is nothing of the sort. In a mere 118 pages, Stella Sandford, Senior Lecturer in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University, offers us what Series Editor Simon Critchley calls in his short introduction "a masterclass in reading" Beauvoir (HTRB vi). Through a selection of ten or so short excerpts from a writer's work, each critic in the Norton "How to Read . . ." series -- there are fifteen titles now available -- explains how the texts reveal the central ideas of various philosophers and thinkers. Beauvoir is, notably, the first woman to figure as a subject in this series, and Sandford, a feminist historian of philosophy, is only the second woman critic to write one of its volumes. It is as a philosopher -- and rightfully so -- that Sandford invites us to read Beauvoir.

This seems a tall order for such a small book, and yet it succeeds.

### **Why we read Beauvoir**

Over the past sixty years, Beauvoir has been much written about, much appreciated and much maligned, her thought taken both too lightly and too seriously. Her thinking has been equated with that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Some critics have accused him of writing her books and some have accused her of writing his books. Beauvoir is often seen as primarily an author of memoirs; for some readers, she is known for no other work but *The Second Sex*.

It is Sandford's position that Beauvoir should first be read in the light of the philosophical traditions she inherited--which included Heidegger, Hegel, Husserl and, of course, Sartre--and from which she drew and adapted her thinking. The existential tradition as developed by both atheist and Christian thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had enormous influence in both popular and erudite circles when Beauvoir was completing her studies and as she undertook her writing (and thinking) life.



Sandford's insistence throughout is that, with each new project and across genres, in transforming previous or prevailing philosophical ideas, Beauvoir succeeded in transcending herself. Beauvoir's originality resides in the skill with which she created historically relevant, contemporary philosophical concepts based on selected systems of thought, the "constant development and revision of enduring themes and ideas" (HTRB 2). Beauvoir's efforts to bring a theory of morality to the existentialism of Sartre, and, by implication, to the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger, form a case in point.

### How to read Beauvoir

The first four chapters -- Anxiety, Ambiguity, Vengeance, and Bad Faith -- illustrate how Beauvoir worked on her theory of morality. These chapters trace Beauvoir's thinking as she begins to transform her interpretation of existentialist ideas in order to apply them to specific social and political problems. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 -- "Woman," Other, and Sex -- cover *The Second Sex* and issues of sex and gender. The last three chapters -- Sexuality, Perversion, and Old Age -- deal with Beauvoir's ever-evolving thought through some of her later works.

The passage Sandford chooses for her analysis of Anxiety is from *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), Beauvoir's first philosophical essay, which she all but repudiated later in *The Prime of Life* (1960). Sandford is quickly able to understand and praise Beauvoir's willingness to criticize her own early tendency to seek solutions to problems in the realm of ideas rather than in the way they might apply to human relations.

The second chapter takes up *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), a text in which Sandford also pinpoints major shortcomings in Beauvoir's attempts to render the social and political turmoil of the times -- the post-World War II years and the beginnings of the Cold War -- in philosophical terms. However, Sandford never falls into a negative stance in her judgment of Beauvoir's work. Her goal is to follow the evolution of an important thinker, demonstrating in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* the beginnings of a significant turning point in her philosophy. Her discomfort with the idealism of her own theory of morality up until then impels her toward solutions involving an active, relevant political response.

"An Eye for an Eye" (1946), a less well-known essay published in *Les Temps Modernes*, is the third text Sandford analyzes. It deals with the post-war purge, focusing on the trial and execution of Robert Brasillach, a collaborationist French writer. The importance of this essay for Sandford is that it blends philosophical speculation with concrete social commentary. Beauvoir refused to sign a petition for clemency for Brasillach. In her essay, she tries to come to terms with the role that she necessarily played in his subsequent trial and condemnation. She stands with the rest of us who equally bear collective responsibility for Brasillach's death.

Here the philosopher explores the themes of justice and vengeance. While "vengeance" is sought when human existence is threatened by evil and



must be reaffirmed against it, it differs from "social justice," an institutionalized practice that aims to punish "without hate" in the name of abstract universal principles. In the purge era, "official justice," Beauvoir says, robbed her of the opportunity for "vengeance." But in the long run, as Sandford shows, Beauvoir finds no form of punishment satisfactory. She considers punishment an ambiguous failure for both the individual and the collectivity.

Sandford addresses the central existential issue of "bad faith" via Beauvoir's travel volume *America Day by Day* (1948), examining a passage especially fascinating for Americans in which Beauvoir brought us face to face with her visit to the South, where she took on the issue of segregation. Before traveling south, she had been warned not to write anything about "the black question" on the grounds that, as a mere short-term visitor, she could not possibly understand it. Typically, she took the problem on squarely. The passage is an excellent illustration of the larger theme of bad faith. In it, she describes the bad faith of racist southerners, which stemmed from their refusal to acknowledge that they were responsible for the situation. Sandford says that Beauvoir manages to bypass bad faith by choosing to write about the race problem, to which she could easily have turned a blind eye.

In the next three chapters, Sandford truly warms to her subject, using *The Second Sex* (1949) to illustrate themes she herself has obviously considered in depth over time. In the first of the cited texts, Beauvoir asks what it means "to be a woman." This is an existential question, for it leads her to examine what it means to exist as a woman and to the realization that no one would be likely to ask what it means to exist as a man. Sandford posits that beginning with the introductory pages of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir takes on, indeed she invents, an entirely novel field of inquiry: the philosophical analysis of sexuality.

In the chapter called Other, Sandford chooses a passage where Beauvoir characterizes woman as the other. Hegel theorized that a self-conscious being can recognize itself as such only by being recognized by another self-consciousness. But a second self-consciousness poses limits on the freedom and desires of the first. For Beauvoir, this situation is not inevitable, and thus she describes the situation of women compared to that of men as "bizarre and unjust."

Sandford shows how Beauvoir's concept of the Other was innovative. Beauvoir moves beyond Sartre's ideas in *Being and Nothingness* when she characterizes being Subject as being in reciprocity with another Subject rather than accepting Hegel's "master-slave" relationship. For Beauvoir, much as is true in the South, the black is not essentially different from the white. Thus Woman is not by her essential nature Other, but rather has been rendered so through the course of history.

The third passage from *The Second Sex* brings us to the famous: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Sandford points out that the fact that American and British feminist movements co-opted Beauvoir's ideas actually curtailed them. The movements created a dichotomy between "sex" and



“gender,” whereas Beauvoir’s thinking did not: “The sex/gender distinction leaves the domain of sex itself unquestioned and unchallenged, whereas Beauvoir’s existentialist analysis of the relation between the female and the woman does not” (HTRB 77).

For Sexuality, Sandford selects a short passage from *The Mandarins* (1954) describing Anne’s and Lewis’s first sexual encounter. Countering critiques of *The Mandarins* that call it a rigid novel of ideas, Sandford quotes Beauvoir’s statement in “Literature and Metaphysics” (1946) that there can be no absolute distinction between literature and philosophy because they are different forms of rendering explicit the metaphysical reality which is the essence of human existence in the world. Sandford suggests that we miss the point if we read *The Mandarins* as autobiographical or a mere *roman à clé*. Beauvoir was describing the metaphysical reality of a fundamental ambiguity of human existence -- that of sexuality. Thus the interlude with Lewis is part of the political theme of female sexuality -- a sexuality linked to the metaphysics of Anne’s very existence.

“Must We Burn Sade?” (1951), another essay from *Les Temps Modernes*, takes on the subject of perversion. While recognizing that Sade’s books had little literary merit and acknowledging that she did not admire the man, Beauvoir was still able to use him constructively to criticize the “abstract universality” of the Revolution and the Terror (HTRB 95), the “conservative morality and hypocritical bourgeois universalism” (HTRB 97) of Sade’s time, and, by extension, of her own. With her sense of reciprocity -- as opposed to Hegel’s concept of the Other -- Beauvoir now balks at Sade’s revolt as being purely individual. Lacking any detachment from himself, he could not confront reality and recreate it.

The final chapter is, fittingly, a selection from *Old Age* (1970). Beauvoir put her finger on it when she characterized old age as “obscene.” Like blacks or women, society has also turned the elderly into the Other, reduced to being a mere essence or even a different species. Beauvoir always feared growing old. Here, we learn why. Human beings temporalize time. The meaning of human existence can be understood only on the basis of this relation to time. This affords a certain priority to the future, whereas an old person faces, according to Beauvoir, “a limited future and a frozen past” (HTRB 102). The old man is defined by *exis*, not by *praxis*. He no longer does anything. Beauvoir reveals that old age is existentially -- not just biologically -- a radically transformed state of being. If, as existentialism would have it, human existence is the surpassing or transcending of the past in a projection towards the future, then old people are no longer human.

## Conclusion

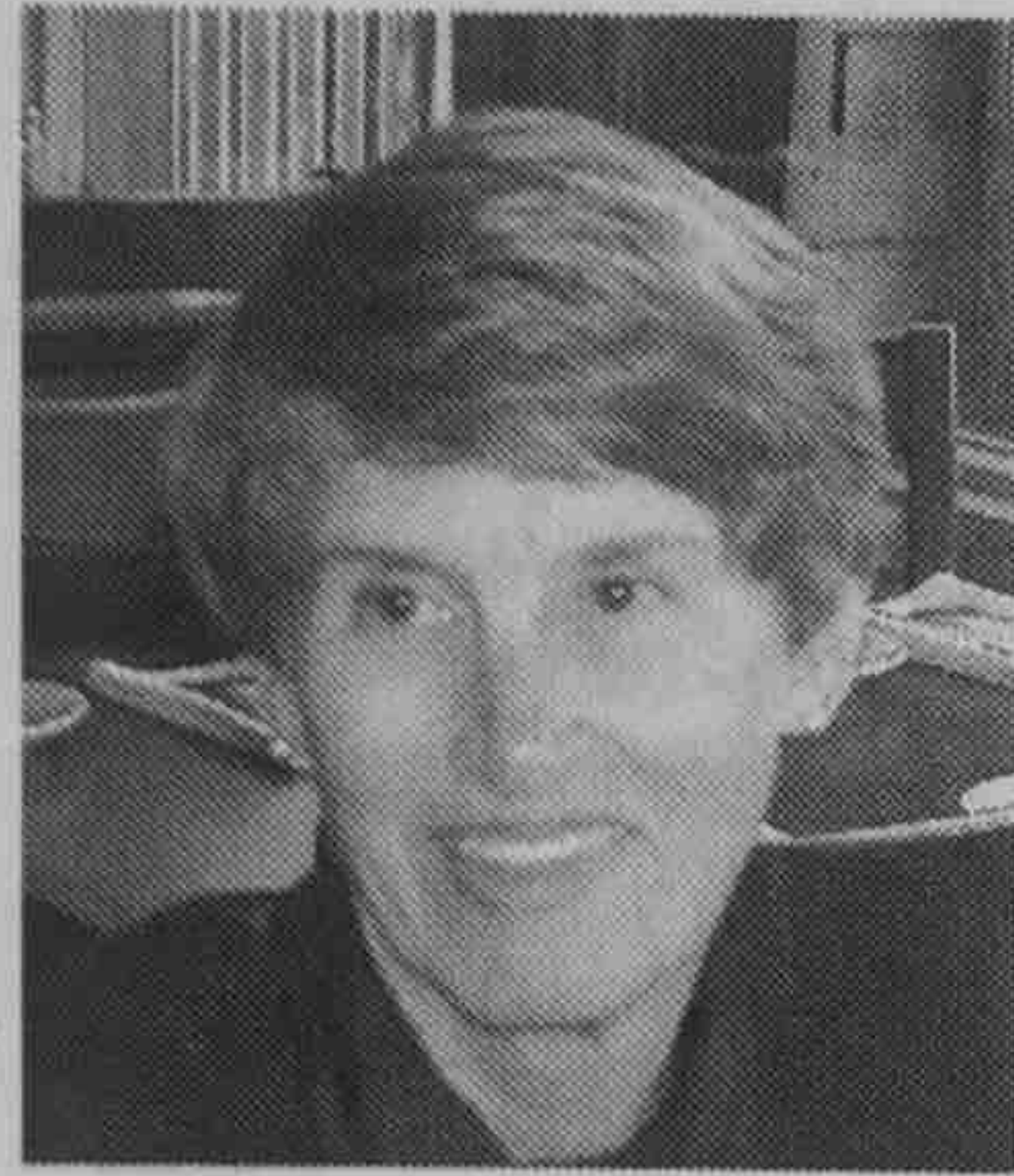
We warmly recommend this little volume to anyone teaching Beauvoir or wishing to review her ideas and works. We also might recommend the other books in the Norton “How to Read . . .” series as an introduction to Derrida, Heidegger, Sade, Lacan, and Sartre, among others. We agree with Sandford that



Beauvoir is best approached through her philosophy. Readers err when they take up Beauvoir's memoirs, *The Second Sex*, or her novels without a solid grounding in her philosophical thought. Sandford's introduction will also help newcomers to Beauvoir acquire a solid foundation for reading and appreciating the body of her works.

We believe Sandford's choice of texts is excellent largely because it looks to little-known works for examples that could also be found in more accessible works. With her concise but well-chosen documentation, Sandford supplies English-language readers with a short bibliography of newly accessible translations of the works featured in her analysis, thereby allowing the reader to "see" more than just the titles he or she already knows. In addition, Sandford is not afraid to go back to essays that Beauvoir herself outgrew and show how they fit into the tradition and line of her thinking.

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