

Contingent ontologies

Sex, gender and 'woman' in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler

STELLA SANDFORD

The pre-eminent place of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in the development of gender theory and feminist philosophy is undeniable. References to *The Second Sex* in historical and theoretical work in gender theory appear as if obligatory, not only because of the immense debt which many feminist scholars feel they owe de Beauvoir personally, but also because of the recognition that it was in great part *The Second Sex* that made gender theory itself possible. The use of the word 'gender' to refer to socio-cultural forms of identity, or to culturally and institutionally normative sets of rules governing patterns of behaviour, did not appear in English until the 1960s. No French word appears in *The Second Sex* which could neatly and unproblematically be translated as 'gender' with these particular meanings. Still, one sentence in *The Second Sex* is taken to be epochal: 'On ne naît pas femme: on le devient'; 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'¹ That quotation is rarely continued. But de Beauvoir goes on: 'No biological, psychical, or economic fate determines the figure that the female human being presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.' On the one side, then, the human female, an apparently biological category; on the other, this biological category figured in society, a production of civilization described as 'feminine'. In other words, it would appear, the Anglophone sex/gender distinction *avant la lettre*.²

For some, it was the sex/gender distinction that allowed second-wave feminism to get off the ground, and few feminist scholars would disagree on the fact, if not the nature, of its historical importance. More recently, dating perhaps from the mid-1980s,

a concerted critique of the sex/gender distinction has not mitigated this sense of historical importance, or even historical necessity. But developments in feminist theory – in particular the claims being made on behalf of various feminisms of difference – and the coming into being of queer theory have contributed to a certain relegation of the sex/gender distinction to the past.³ Thus, while it is probably the case that a notion of gender, understood as a predominantly social category in opposition to the biological category of sex, is still the main theoretical tool in most feminist scholarship and in feminist-led discussions of social policy, the association of de Beauvoir with the sex/gender distinction assigns *The Second Sex* the same fate as the distinction itself: historically important and interesting, the sex/gender distinction and *The Second Sex* are seen as being of only limited contemporary theoretical relevance.

This article attempts to locate the significance of *The Second Sex* in the here and now, rather than in the historical past. To this end, Judith Butler's various readings of de Beauvoir can be seen as exemplary of a certain misreading. From an initially enthusiastic account of de Beauvoir, Butler has moved to an increasingly critical (but always ambiguous) position based on de Beauvoir's purported theoretical reliance on the sex/gender distinction. But what if there is no such distinction in *The Second Sex*? And what are the consequences of, and reasons for, Butler's reading one into it? Following these questions through, *The Second Sex* may be read in such a way as to provide grounds for a critique of Butler's *own* theoretical position on the ontological status of sex, gender and the body in her work of the *Gender Trouble* period, and shed light on what is, I will

argue, the radicalized form of ontology at work in her later writings.

Sex/gender: same difference

Although Butler usually refers to de Beauvoir as a sex/gender feminist (that is, a feminist who subscribes to the theoretical distinction between sex and gender), in an early essay from 1986, 'Variations on Sex and Gender', Butler offers a sympathetic reading of de Beauvoir as having already moved beyond the distinction. In a characteristic move, Butler isolates one sentence and meditates on its assumptions and contradictions before drawing out of it a conclusion which need not previously have been evident and which might, indeed, run counter to accepted interpretations. 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman': at first sight this is, Butler says, a dislocation of gender from sex, a recognition that being born with a certain chromosomal or genital configuration does not dictate *how* these facts of biology, the fact of biological sex difference, will be interpreted in the human world and thus *how* one's sex will be lived as gender – where gender is not a thing that I have or which I appropriate but a complex set of cultural norms and values in which I always already find myself and others situated. 'Becoming', Butler suggests, is best understood as something like 'existing' in the transitive sense: 'No longer understood as a product of cultural and psychic relations long past, gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, an active style of living one's body in the world.'⁴ In other words 'gender' is the cultural interpretation of 'sex', and 'sex' (how one is born) does not determine this interpretation in any significant way, although this latter *is* the presumption of certain naturalistic and biologicistic discourses which utilize the sex/gender distinction.

This appears to be consistent with de Beauvoir's more general assumption that biological givens are in themselves meaningless, and that 'the body', therefore, is lived as always already culturally interpreted. But if this is the case, in what sense, Butler asks, is de Beauvoir justified in referring to the natural fact of sex at all?

If we accept the body as a cultural situation, then the notion of a natural body and, indeed, a natural 'sex' seem increasingly suspect. The limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy than by the weight of the cultural institutions that have conventionally interpreted anatomy.⁵

The natural body or a natural sex would in fact be cultural inscriptions, and hence not 'natural' at all. Accordingly, de Beauvoir's theory, ostensibly premised on a sex/gender distinction, would rather seem implicitly to ask, Butler says, 'whether sex was not gender all along'.⁶ And since it is Butler's Foucauldian position that sex has no more ontological substantiality than gender, Butler's essay would also seem implicitly to ask whether de Beauvoir was not *Butler* all along.

In the later work *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's position is less sympathetic to de Beauvoir. Recent reworkings of the concept of nature, Butler says, and in particular the revelation of the cultural history of this concept, have 'call[ed] into question the model of construction whereby the social unilaterally acts on the natural and invests it with its parameters and meanings.' In so far as the 'radical distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the de Beauvoirian version of feminism', and in so far as this distinction replicates the nature/culture distinction now under criticism, this version of feminism will also be called into question.⁷ In fact, in an echo of her earlier essay, Butler's suggestion is that the sex/gender distinction, in so far as the second term is the social construal of the first, *calls itself* into question. If gender is the cultural interpretation of sex, 'what, if anything, is left of "sex" once it has assumed its social character of gender?'⁸

The point may be illustrated with reference to de Beauvoir. The first chapter of Part I of *The Second Sex*, 'The Data [*Les données*] of Biology', is extraordinary reading for a feminist today. One reads, as elsewhere in *The Second Sex*, that 'the individuality of the female is opposed to the interests of the species; it is as if she were possessed by foreign forces – alienated.' 'From puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned.'⁹ Menstruation, in particular, is described in detail, and I give just a taste of it here:

Blood pressure rises ... the pulse rate and often the temperature are increased, so that fever is frequent ... swelling of the liver, retention of urea, and albuminuria; many subjects have ... sore throat and difficulties with hearing and sight ..., glandular instability brings on a pronounced nervous instability. The central nervous system is affected, with frequent headache, and the sympathetic system [digestion, growth, circulation etc.] is overactive; unconscious control through the central system is reduced, freeing convulsive reflexes and complexes and leading to a marked capriciousness of disposition. The woman is more emotional, more nervous, and more irritable than usual, and may manifest serious psychic disturbance.¹⁰



This description of menstruation reads like the symptoms of a poisoning; one half expects de Beauvoir to conclude that it often leads to death. But there is a strategic element here. De Beauvoir seems to want to reveal every possible biological weakness in the female only so she can then declare that these ‘facts’, which cannot be denied, have in themselves no significance.¹¹ The facts (givens, data; *les données*) of biology, she says, take on the values that the existent bestows upon them.¹² It is a short step, then, to the questioning of these ‘facts’ themselves, as de Beauvoir herself appears to acknowledge at the end of *The Second Sex* in the chapter on ‘The Independent Woman’. ‘It is difficult to determine’, she says, ‘to what extent woman’s physical constitution handicaps her ... I am convinced that the greater part of the discomforts and maladies that overburden woman are due to psychic causes, as gynaecologists, indeed, have told me.’¹³ The ‘facts of biology’, then, would emerge only as already culturally interpreted, such that one such fact, the fact of one’s sex, ‘natural sex’, will turn out to have been gender all along.

Butler’s theoretical statement of this position, as outlined in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, is that ‘sex’, the presumption of binary sex difference, is an effect ‘of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*’.¹⁴ Moreover, ‘sex’ is an effect of gender that becomes reified in such a manner as to present itself precisely not *as* effect but as the *cause* of gender, as the more or less determining natural fact that works to stabilize, in the sense of justify and uphold, the very gender configurations from which it emerges. Sex then appears, Butler contends, as a substance, in the traditional philosophical sense of the

word. A substance would be an abiding essence, the mark of a self-identity which would wholly determine what one ‘is’. In line with a certain Heideggerian tendency in postwar French philosophy, Butler then makes no distinction between this ‘metaphysics of substance’ and the more general notion of an ontology. She speaks of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as ‘ostensible categories of ontology’, and of the ‘various reifications of gender’ that have constituted the ‘contingent ontologies’ of (gender) identity.¹⁵ Effectively, Butler opposes ‘ontology’ to ‘effect’, in the sense that an ontological understanding of gender identity is taken to be a falsely essentializing one, whereas a recognition of gender identity as effect is a recognition of its constructedness and of the possibility of its openness to change.

As the wording of these last remarks shows, it is, according to Butler, not just ‘sex’ which becomes falsely ontologized, reified, substantialized, but ‘gender’ or ‘gender identity’ too. Indeed *Gender Trouble* is described at one point as ‘a genealogy of gender ontology’, or ‘an investigation that maps out the political parameters of [the] construction [of gender] in the mode of ontology’.¹⁶ Furthermore, Butler’s notion of ‘the body’ is analytically indistinguishable from that of sex or gender. ‘The body’, she says (in inverted commas) is itself a construction: ‘Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender.’ This is a radicalized expression of the idea that there is no ‘natural body’. The ontological status of the body is, accordingly, as contrived as that of gender or sex: ‘That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.’¹⁷

In 'Variations on Sex and Gender' Butler credits de Beauvoir with a theory in which sex was already gender, but only because she makes de Beauvoir already a Butlerian thinker. That essay is really (and why not?) a meditation on what it means for Butler to say that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman; not what it means for *de Beauvoir* to have said this in the context of the other seven hundred or so pages of *The Second Sex*. In *Gender Trouble* Butler's position on de Beauvoir is more ambiguous. To the extent that 'there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman', Butler reads 'woman' as 'a term in process, a becoming'; that she then immediately identifies with 'gender', according to the sense in which she understands that word. This is even clearer later on, where the slippage between 'woman' and 'gender' is completely unmarked: 'Beauvoir, of course, meant merely to suggest that the category of women is a variable cultural accomplishment, a set of meanings that are taken up within a cultural field, and that no one is born with a gender – gender is always acquired.'¹⁸ This theory implies, Butler says, radical consequences which de Beauvoir herself did not entertain; that is, it implies the disintegration of the sex/gender distinction, although de Beauvoir herself seems to Butler to retain it:

de Beauvoir was willing to affirm that one is born with a sex, as a sex, sexed, and that being sexed and being human are coextensive and simultaneous. ... But sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex; indeed for de Beauvoir sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed – or so she thought – gender is the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body.¹⁹

By the time of *Bodies That Matter*, however, de Beauvoir has become for Butler not just any old sex/gender feminist, but *the* eponymous sex/gender feminist, in so far as she gives her name to a version of feminism – Beauvoirian feminism – that is more or less defined by its dependency on the distinction.²⁰

Woman: the excluded middle

Yet is there a sex/gender distinction in *The Second Sex* and if not, what is there? The assumption that there is such a distinction comes from the interpretation and translation of certain terms into recognisable categories of second-wave Anglophone feminism. In *The Second Sex* one finds the words *sexe* (obviously), *la femme* or *les femmes* (woman, or women), *la féminité* (femininity, a noun), *féminin*/*féminine* (an adjective) and *la femelle*, or *les femelles* (the female, or females), also

femelle as an adjective, often with the word *humaine* – that is, in phrases such as 'the human female'. De Beauvoir will also often refer to the irreducible duality of sex difference, the undeniable fact that there are two sexes (even though, note, she is not unaware of the phenomenon of intersex²¹). It seems plausible, then, to interpret this sex difference, the fact of the division of human beings (and other animals) into *mâle et femelle*, as the 'sex' of the sex/gender distinction. In the Introduction, in some very gratifyingly arch paragraphs, de Beauvoir mocks the idea that 'femininity' is in danger:

All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today, as always, they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality which is femininity.²²

Both the idea of 'femininity', then, and the idea of 'woman' would seem to refer to something like 'gender', in contradistinction to 'the female' as 'sex'. 'Femininity' as gender is perhaps obvious, but being a 'woman' less so to the Anglophone ear, which tends to associate this with sex. However, if 'One is not born, rather one becomes, a woman', it must carry the signification of gender. One is born sexed female, then, and one becomes a woman, one becomes feminine, *et voilà*, the sex/gender distinction.

It is also the case, however, that for de Beauvoir women are said to be women 'in virtue of their physiological structure',²³ and she often enough speaks of the duality of the sexes in the same breath as men and women for it to be problematic to think of 'woman' wholly in terms of the English word 'gender'. And, one might point out, that while Simone de Beauvoir 'became' a woman, Jean-Paul Sartre did not; nor without surgical and/or chemical intervention was he likely to. Becoming a woman, in 1949 at least, isn't something unconnected to being a female.

My suggestion is that the notion of 'woman' in *The Second Sex* is not simply translatable into the category of 'gender', indeed that it cuts across or problematizes the traditional sex/gender distinction.²⁴ In the Anglophone world *The Second Sex* suffers from its reduction to one sentence: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Transposed into the idiom of post-1960s' Anglophone feminism, a feminism dominated at the theoretical level by sociology and political theory (which is no bad thing), the sentence

no longer carries with it the philosophical position from which it arises. Her perspective is, de Beauvoir says, that of ‘existential ethics’,²⁵ and from this perspective what it is to be a woman is not assumed but investigated as a mode of being-in-the-world. What de Beauvoir takes to be distinctive about this approach is its attempt to grasp man, as she says, ‘in the total perspective of his existence’.²⁶ The first part of *The Second Sex* deals critically with biologism, psychoanalysis and historical materialism precisely because each attempts to understand the human being, or the human female in particular, from a limited perspective. Without rejecting the insights of the biological sciences, of psychoanalysis and of historical materialism, their contributions to an understanding of the human being will, de Beauvoir says, be placed within the context of man’s [*sic*] total existence; they will be considered as resting on an underlying ‘existentialist foundation that alone enables us to understand in its unity that particular form of being which we call a human life’.²⁷

Fifty years later, readers may well find the ideas of ‘a total perspective’ and the ‘unity’ of a life phantasmatic, utopian or worse. But let us not leap to conclusions. For the most basic existential assumption, which *is* the basis of the total perspective, is that any good definition of the human being is most importantly a purely formal statement of a condition or a structure that in fact resists all definitions which would be decided or closed: ‘when we have to do with a being whose nature is transcendent action’, de Beauvoir says, ‘we can never close the books’.²⁸ As a human existent, there is no truth of what a woman *is*, because, de Beauvoir says, ‘an existent *is* nothing other than what he [*sic*] does’.²⁹ There is no substantive content to any good definition of the human being, either masculine or feminine, because the human being is not defined by any essence.

The metaphysical presuppositions of this position are called ‘freedom’ and (its correlate) ‘facticity’. What de Beauvoir often describes as the ‘ambiguity’, sometimes even ‘tragic ambiguity’,³⁰ of human existence is the paradoxical relation between these two: being both free to make oneself what one is and yet factually bound in ways which impede this freedom (a position, note, which distinguishes her philosophically from Sartre). At the same time facticity is, if you like, the material upon which freedom works, the dependency according to which independence is defined. De Beauvoir says: ‘humanity is something more than a mere species: it is a historical development; it is to be defined by the manner in which it

deals with its natural, fixed characteristics, its facticity [*elle se définit par la manière dont elle assume la facticité naturelle*].³¹ The facticity of the body cannot be separated out from the situation in which that body is interpreted and lived, and the situation includes non-material elements such as the dynamics of an erotic relation, ideological conditions and representations, and one’s ‘relation to the world’,³² which might include moods and attitudes, for example. More specifically, it is the ‘total situation’ which defines what it is to be a woman and, note, which appears to exclude certain human females from this definition. Reading an Anglophone sex/gender distinction into *The Second Sex*, however, Butler interprets de Beauvoir’s continuing to speak of ‘the facts of biology’ as the residue of a Cartesian dualism, in which talk of the ‘fact’ of sex difference translates into the (illegitimate) positing of the metaphysical substance of ‘sex’, a positing which is contradicted or undermined by what is theoretically necessitated elsewhere.³³

Genre trouble

Butler seems to be compelled, then, to interpret de Beauvoir as at once consonant and dissonant with her own theory of gender. These interpretations always turn on de Beauvoir’s relation – negative or positive – to the sex/gender distinction. When de Beauvoir is seen as having overcome the distinction – as recognizing that sex was gender all along – Butler approves. When, on the other hand, *The Second Sex* is read as based on or otherwise committed to some version of that distinction, Butler distances herself theoretically from it. The one reference to de Beauvoir in *Bodies That Matter*, for example, refers not to the woman or her work but to a genre named after her – ‘the de Beauvoirian version of feminism’ – to which the ‘radical distinction between sex and gender’ is said to be ‘crucial’.³⁴

If, however, as I have suggested, there is no clean sex/gender distinction in *The Second Sex*, Butler’s insistence on reading it into the book needs to be explained. In one sense, it reveals that it is less de Beauvoir than Butler herself who cannot exorcise the ghost of this distinction, despite the radical implications of her own gender theory. Furthermore, its spectral presence in Butler’s text – even if only in the mode of its being disavowed – exerts a significant effect on what is, I would argue, the more important distinction in *Gender Trouble* between the *ontological* and the *performative*. Butler argues, recall, that ‘sex’, when posited as a prediscursive given, is to be understood as ‘the effect of the apparatus of cultural

construction designated by *gender*'.³⁵ 'Sex', that is, is produced as an effect which disassembles its constructed status and masquerades as the ground upon which all constructions of gender are then built, as a foundational *ontological* category. As effect, however, sex (and also 'the body') is precisely the effect of gender *as performative*,

performative in the sense that the essence or identity that [it] otherwise purport[s] to express [that is, sex and 'the body'] are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.³⁶

Thus, as sex will turn out to have been (the effect of) gender all along, so ontology will turn out to have been (the effect of) performativity.

Perhaps because of the dissolution of the sex/gender distinction in *Gender Trouble*, Butler will also refer to the restrictive fixity of *gender* categories as 'ostensible categories of ontology'.³⁷ Here the phrase 'gender categories' refers to what, in a previous sentence, Butler calls, in inverted commas, 'men' and 'women'. Later on, as well, the idea of 'gender as substance' is equated with 'the viability of *man* and *woman* as nouns'.³⁸ In *Gender Trouble* the 'constructed character of sex and gender' is also expressed as the denial of the 'being' of sex and gender: 'The presumption here is that the "being" of gender is *an effect*, an object of a genealogical investigation that maps out the political parameters of its [gender's] construction in the mode of ontology.' '[S]ex', Butler says, 'will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not "to be")'.³⁹ As gender performatively constitutes *as effect* the identity which it is only mistakenly said *to be*, Butler opposes the 'effect' (of performativity) to 'ontology', but only in order to collapse this distinction in the same way as the sex/gender distinction was undone. An 'effect' is precisely an effect of signification, that is, an effect in and of a discursive epistemic field that remains open so long as it is not allowed to congeal into the false self-identity of an apparently ontological category. Ontology, Butler says, in the last paragraphs of *Gender Trouble*, is 'not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground'. Accordingly, *Gender Trouble* is not just 'a genealogy of gender ontology',⁴⁰ but a *genealogy of ontology itself* – that is, an attempt to demonstrate that ontology was effect all along. The radical conclusion *must be* that 'being' itself is an effect of discourse.

It is possible that the reason why Butler reaches this idealist conclusion has to do with the origins of the idea of the performative in the purely *linguistic* analyses of J.L. Austin. As the speech act is the model for all performative acts in *Gender Trouble*, Butler is led, or slips, from a semantic to an ontological nominalism, which, in its latter guise, entails the idealist conclusion. This actually plays itself out as a slippage between epistemological and ontological claims. The model of the performative speech act provides Butler with the idea that saying something is at the same time doing something, and this very quickly seems to become the idea that what naming or positing something *does* is to bring that thing into being. In a move akin to the nominalist claim that, for example, a posited universal has no (real) existence outside of or prior to its being named or posited, Butler seems to suggest that 'sex' or 'the body', *posited as prediscursive*, is in fact an effect of the discourse which posits it, or, as she also says, 'discursive formation[s]'.⁴¹ That which is posited as prediscursive, *precisely because it is posited*, in fact belongs to the order of discourse, and cannot be said to exist prior to or outside of it. Sex ('prediscursive anatomical facticity'⁴²) belongs in fact to the order of language and culture where gender is usually located; this is the sense, then, in which sex will turn out to have been gender all along.

If this argument works at all, it is as an *epistemological* claim about the knowability of certain things. In the most straightforward sense this means that the sex/gender distinction breaks down through its own epistemic absurdity. If sex is only *known* through its linguistic/cultural articulation as gender, it must be, in itself, unknowable. Gender is the transcendental condition for sex, and sex in itself, thought of as outside of, or prior to, these conditions, is a metaphysical presupposition akin to a noumenal object, something in which we no longer believe. At first sight, this looks like (and works successfully as) a form of Kantian transcendentalism which aims to dispel a certain dialectical illusion (specifically, the dialectical illusion of or stemming from the assumption of the metaphysical substantiality of 'sex'). Butler herself would no doubt object to both the 'epistemological' reading and the comparison with Kant. In *Gender Trouble* she makes a distinction between analyses in terms of epistemology and 'signifying practices'.⁴³ The idea of 'signifying practices' is taken to be one which refuses the subject/object dichotomy on which 'epistemology' is said to be based. This is, however, a restricted understanding of epistemology which one need not necessarily follow. As well as the various contemporary epistemological

discourses – feminist and otherwise – one could cite Kant (or at least a certain reading of Kant’s notion of the transcendental unity of apperception) as an example which *begins with* a problematization of the subject/object dichotomy.

Accordingly, consider the following claim:

‘the body’ is itself a construction, as are the myriad ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?⁴⁴

If we take ‘signifiable existence’ to mean something like ‘identifiable essence’, and ‘the mark of gender’ to be one of its transcendental conditions for knowability, then no noumenal essence *is* identifiable without these conditions, and as an epistemological claim this is not outrageous. As it stands it is something like the ontological agnosticism which Kant, when he is most ‘Kantian’, tries to maintain with the ultimately ‘problematic’ status of the noumenon in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. ‘Problematic judgments’, Kant tells us, ‘are those in which affirmation or negation is taken as merely possible (optional)’. The concept of the noumenon is similarly ‘problematic’ as, although its objective reality may not in any way be known, the concept is in itself not contradictory: ‘the concept of a noumenon is problematic, that is, it is the representation of a thing of which we can neither say that it is possible nor that it is impossible’.⁴⁵ Kant then associates the problematic concept with the quasi-necessity of the ‘as if’, the ‘heuristic fictions’ of the concepts of reason,⁴⁶ the unthinkable unconditioned totality of conditions. It is not idle to wonder whether the notion of ‘matter’, as deconstructed in Butler’s later work, may not enjoy the same status and the same conceptual quasi-necessity. This may be no more than the admission that ‘pure’ epistemological discourses, free of any ontological assumptions, are not possible. Butler’s critique of Kant in *Bodies That Matter* would of course make her balk at this suggested connection. That critique, however, is based on the presumption of a distinction in Kant between the phenomenon and the noumenon where the latter is understood in its ‘positive’ sense,⁴⁷ whereas Kant himself inclines more to the ‘negative’ sense of the noumenon, as the above quotations show. ‘Kantian’, then, is not necessarily a critical adjective (if you will pardon the pun), and epistemology need not be a demonized discourse. The theoretical problems arise, though, when Butler takes this (as I see it) *epistemological* thesis to dissolve the

validity of *any* possible *ontological* claim, or, rather, violates a Kantian ontological agnosticism (which, nevertheless, doesn’t deny the conceptual necessity of some sort of ontological assumption, even if it is ‘as if’) by seeming to make *negative* ontological claims. Thus, despite the fact that the claim that the very *being* of the body – its ontological modality – is conditioned in and through the mark of gender is coherent and, to my mind, plausible, as an *existential ontological* claim, it is not one that Butler would allow, because for her ontology is a necessarily *essentialist* discourse.

De Beauvoir’s thesis on the other hand, was from the very beginning not epistemological but *existential*. Her claim is not that ‘the facts of biology’ are in themselves unknowable outside of the discursive limits of their performative articulation as, say, femininity, but that ‘the facts of biology’ are only interesting to the human being in so far as they are lived or ‘existed’ in the total, concrete existential situation in which, and only in which, they are meaningful designations of the being of being-human. The important difference is that the being-always-already-interpreted of ‘the facts of biology’ does not, for de Beauvoir, entail the dissolution of their ontological status, and this is because hers is precisely an *existential* – that is, a non-essentialist – *ontology*.

The dissolution of the sex/gender distinction – effectively, the dissolution of sex into gender – in Butler’s *Gender Trouble* parallels the dissolution of the ontology/performativity distinction – effectively, the dissolution of ontology into performativity – or the dissolution of ‘being’ into ‘effect’. *The Second Sex*, on the other hand, is inconceivable without de Beauvoir’s continued attachment to a notion of ‘being’ irreducible to epistemic or performative effect. And although Butler may interpret this as a residual essentialism, apparently manifested in the maintenance of the ‘sex’ of the sex/gender distinction, for de Beauvoir herself there is no necessity for ‘being’ to congeal into essence and pose itself as foundational. On the contrary, the whole argument of *The Second Sex* is the denial of this necessity and the exposure as false of all and any attempts to essentialize ‘being’ when it is the being of being-human that is under consideration. In the Introduction to Book Two (mysteriously placed before Book One in the English translation) de Beauvoir says:

When I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I obviously refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand the phrase ‘in the present state of education and custom’ after

most of my statements. It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.⁴⁸

The Second Sex describes the being of being a woman, in so far as this mode of being is one that is prescribed by the total situation of certain human beings in the contingent, historical, socio-cultural circumstances of mid-twentieth-century Europe. The most obvious objection to this would be the observation that women's lives are by no means homogenous, and that the idea of 'being a woman' refers to a false unity of experience. But de Beauvoir would not disagree. De Beauvoir's whole point is that the injunction 'to be women, remain women, become women' is the attempt to impose an artificial essenti-



ality on to the lives of human beings whose essence is, on the contrary, *existence*. For both de Beauvoir and Butler, then, it is the metaphysical substantialization of this mysterious thing, 'woman' or 'femininity', that constitutes the object of critical investigation, with the aim of its dissolution in the name of a political project of social change.

In Butler's *Gender Trouble*, however, the dissolution of false, essentializing ontologies collapses into the dissolution of ontology itself, even the dissolution of *being* itself.⁴⁹ Unwilling to entertain the idea of an existential ontology, which would be approached at the level of the ontic – at the level of *beings* – not essentially but existentially understood, Butler appears to be committed to a certain discursive idealism, despite herself. This is, of course, the standard worry in criticism of *Gender Trouble*, but it is one that Butler

herself encourages with the implication that the being of the body, for example, is a discursive effect.

Bodies That Matter, and especially the essay that gives the book its title, is framed as a response to these criticisms – superficially, an attempt to correct the 'idealist' interpretation which goes hand in hand with a voluntarist (mis)understanding of gender as a kind of wardrobe of identities. Reading *Bodies That Matter* as continuous with the project of *Gender Trouble*, talk of the 'discursive limits of "sex"' (the subtitle of *Bodies That Matter*) would seem to refer to the limits of what is to count as a possible object of knowledge, a body that matters, within a certain epistemic frame: 'To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes [it is not, in other words, a constructivist idealism]; rather it is to claim that there is no

reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.' That is, 'the constative claim is always to some degree performative',⁵⁰ which means that the constative claim is a continual re-creation of its objective referent through the structure of reiteration, and the sense in which (or *how*) that referent exists outside of or before its discursive articulation is at the very least problematized.

This 'further formation of the body' is theorized in *Bodies That Matter* through the idea of 'materialization', a term which is meant to replace the more misleading 'construction' used in *Gender Trouble*, and to cut across the philosophical dualism of materialism

versus idealism. And although there is little overt or explicit sign of it in the text, what Butler then has to say about a certain 'radical linguistic constructivism'⁵¹ functions effectively as a critique of her earlier position. According to one implication of such a constructivism, she says, 'sex' becomes a contrived premiss or a fiction and 'gender does not presume a sex which it acts upon, but rather, gender produces the misnomer of a prediscursive "sex," and the meaning of construction becomes that of linguistic monism, whereby everything is only and always language',⁵² which is a pretty fair description of the account of 'sex' in *Gender Trouble*. *Bodies That Matter* is, then, not so much a continuation as a significant revision of the position in *Gender Trouble*. In an interview conducted just prior to the publication of *Bodies That Matter* Butler comes closer to admitting this: 'I think I overrode the

category of sex too quickly in *Gender Trouble*. I try to reconsider it in *Bodies That Matter*.⁵³

Déjà vu/déjà lu?

This reconsideration is no simple reinstanciation of the ‘fact’ of sex as an irreducible, biological given. Neither, however, is the ‘materialization’ of sex to be understood as the conjuring up of a conceptual opposition out of nowhere, based on no physical body or physical differences. It is not meant, Butler says, to ‘dispute the materiality of the body’ but to ‘establish the normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed, and, in particular, how it is formed through differential categories of sex.’⁵⁴ ‘Materialization’ refers to the ways in which ‘regulatory norms’ or ‘language’ ‘delimit’, ‘contour’, or even ‘schematize’ the body⁵⁵ into the sedimented categories of sex, where these categories refer not only to the physical differences through which they materialize but also to the laws and presumptions (primarily heterosexuality) which they carry with them – heavy baggage.

Using a slightly different terminology one might say that the concept of ‘materialization’ is an attempt to explain both that and how the physical characteristics of a body which *in themselves* have no significance come to be figured as significant: ‘I do not deny certain kinds of biological differences. But I always ask under what conditions, under what discursive and institutional conditions, do certain biological differences – and they’re not necessary ones, given the anomalous state of bodies in the world – become the salient characteristics of sex.’⁵⁶ This position is also clearly stated in the preface to *Bodies That Matter*, where Butler acknowledges the commonsensical point that bodies

live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts’, one might sceptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere constructions. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. But their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means.⁵⁷

Again:

It must be possible to concede and affirm an array of ‘materialities’ that pertain to the body, that which is signified by the domains of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age, weight, metabolism, life and death. None of this can be denied. But the undeniability of these ‘materialities’ in no way implies what it means to affirm them, indeed, what interpretative

matrices condition, enable and limit that necessary affirmation.⁵⁸

But haven’t we been here before? In 1949, to be exact, when de Beauvoir claims,

Certainly these facts [of biology, these physical differences between men and women] can’t be denied – but in themselves they have no significance [*ils ne portent en eux-mêmes leur sens* – they do not bear their meaning within themselves].... Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the body on a basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science.... It is not as a body as such, but as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfilment ... the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them.⁵⁹

Always already interpreted *as* this or that, affirmed as this or that through whatever discursive means, de Beauvoir’s insistent ‘facts of biology’ (the ‘facticity’ of the body) refer to something more like the materialization of the matter of bodies and bodies that matter. Accordingly, the ‘facticity’ of the body would be wrongly interpreted as one term in an ontological distinction that grounds an attachment to the ‘sex’ of the sex/gender distinction. Could it be the case, then, that it was in fact *Butler* who was *de Beauvoir* all along?

Well, no. Although one may find at least one disparaging reference to ontology as ‘fixity’ in *Bodies That Matter*,⁶⁰ the most significant difference between this and the earlier *Gender Trouble* is the acknowledgement of the necessity for the theorization of the *ontological* status of the body and/or sex, or the tacit acknowledgement of the need for a radicalized notion of ontology in general. Granted, Butler does not actually use the ‘o’ word, but to what else is ‘materialization’ meant to refer? Speaking again of the shift away from the earlier notion of ‘construction’, Butler says that she proposes, in its place, ‘a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*’.⁶¹ As this shows, Butler’s revised position owes more to Aristotle or to Greek ontology more generally than to de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir’s existential ontology is concerned only with the being of the being-human (that is why it is ‘existential’, after all), whereas Butler’s ‘materialization’ would seem to refer to something like a non-dualistic, dynamic, *historical* ontology of human *and* non-human being, that which we call ‘matter’.⁶² Their differences notwithstanding, however, the idea of ‘materialization’ would seem to acknowledge the de Beauvoirian point that ‘being’

may be (indeed, must be) understood in other than the essentialist terms of the metaphysics of substance.

Reading retrospectively, something like this belated acknowledgement of the possibility of radicalized ontology may even be glimpsed in *Gender Trouble*. Indeed, this may even be the only coherent way of reading *Gender Trouble*. ‘That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’:⁶³ this claim may now be re-read as an assertion of the non-essentialist ontological status of the body *as performative*, as a social(ized), historical ontology of the body – that is, one which does not take its ‘being’ as fixed or foundational but ‘in process’, an idea acknowledged, perhaps, in Butler’s earlier reference to ‘contingent ontologies’.⁶⁴ Elsewhere Butler speaks of Lacan’s displacement of the (ontological) question ‘What is/has being?’ in favour of the allegedly ‘pre-ontological’ question ‘How is “being” instituted and allocated through the signifying practices of the paternal economy?’⁶⁵ Her own words, however, suggest that the shift is *not* one from ontology to pre-ontology, but from essential to (something like) existential ontology – precisely from ‘What is/has being?’ to ‘How is being?’⁶⁶ And even then, if the ‘What is?’ question is determinately associated with essential ontology and nothing else – that is, if we are not allowed to ask the ‘What is?’ question – we are also compelled to see Heidegger (philosophical architect of the critique) and Butler’s more recent favourite, Aristotle, as nothing but metaphysicians of substance.

If the reason for the unhappy idealist implications of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (the collapse of ontology into performativity) is based on the unwarranted presumption of the necessarily essentialist nature of *any* notion of ontology – and its association, therefore, with the ‘metaphysics of substance’ – this metonymic slippage is recognized and addressed in *Bodies That Matter* with what is meant to be the resolutely non- or anti-idealist notion of ‘materialization’. If Butler seems increasingly unwilling to acknowledge de Beauvoir as a philosophical precursor to this project of radicalized ontology, this would be because of Butler’s allergy to the tainted word ‘ontology’ (an allergy which we need not share), but also because her reading of a sex/gender distinction into *The Second Sex* positions ‘sex’ as the (essential) ontological ground of gender, existentially (or, we might now add, performatively) understood, foreclosing the possibility of ontology as existential, or otherwise.

On the other hand, Butler clearly is able to think through the status of ‘sex’ in a more radical way than de Beauvoir, who does, in the last instance, tend to

assume binary sex difference as beyond dispute.⁶⁷ Drawing on a variety of theoretical resources – notably Foucault and Wittig – Butler is able to problematize the assumption of binary sex difference, or at least to begin to think about the ways in which the male/female, man/woman distinction, *as conceptual*, is not an unproblematic, unmediated representation of *what is*, in an ahistorical or naively realist sense.⁶⁸ This may be one of the most challenging aspects of Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, but that does not relieve us of the responsibility of rising to it, especially if our identities and pleasures are not to be unnecessarily limited. The (ostensibly un-Butlerian) basis for Butler’s move beyond de Beauvoir here rests on a radicalized social and historical ontology. Metaphysical substantialization may very well be the illusion of an epistemic or performative effect, and sex may very well have been gender all along. But not all being *is* thus substantialized and there is no necessity to understand ‘being’ in this way. Paradoxically, was this not what de Beauvoir was saying all along?

Notes

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe [DS]*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, Vol. II, p. 13; *The Second Sex [SS]*, trans. H.M. Parshley, Picador, London, 1988, p. 295.
2. *Conceptually*, of course, something like a sex/gender distinction was already operative in, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Penguin, London, 1987) and J.S. Mill’s 1869 essay ‘The Subjection of Women’ (in *Three Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985). In both of these texts it is the detachment of the cultural attributes of ‘femininity’ from biological sex – the argument that actually existing ‘femininity’ is *not* predominantly determined by biology – that forms the basis for the critique of the prejudices of their peers. The sex/gender distinction is not, however, explicit; neither employs the word ‘gender’, which, for both, would have had a primarily grammatical meaning. It is interesting that Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Fontana, London, 1983), first published in 1976, has no entry for ‘gender’. Under ‘sex’, however, he notes the turn to the use of ‘gender’ in the 1960s and quotes (p. 286) Gladstone in 1878 as a precursor: ‘Athene has nothing of sex except the *gender*, nothing of the woman except the form.’ Even this, however, could be read as a reference to the grammatical meaning of the term, i.e. ‘she’ has nothing of the woman, but ‘she’ is still (grammatically) ‘she’.
3. Moira Gatens, ‘A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction’ (in Judith Allen and Paul Patton, eds, ‘Beyond Marxism? Interventions After Marx’, *Intervention*, no. 17, 1983), is perhaps the best-known challenge. Gatens’s essay (reprinted in her *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996) makes a strong case for the dependence of the sex/gender distinction on a discredited (and implicitly rationalistic) body/mind dualism in which the body is mistakenly conceived as neutral and passive. However, Gatens’s alternative account of the ‘imaginary body’ is undermined by the fact that it treats the notions of ‘sex

- difference' and 'sexual difference' (psychoanalytically understood) as if they were the same thing.
4. Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault', in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds, *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late Capitalist Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 131.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
 6. *Ibid.* See also Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 8: 'If "the body is a situation", as [de Beauvoir] claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.'
 7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 4. In fact Butler was already signalling the move away from her previous position on de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble*, where she says (p. 12) that 'Despite my own previous efforts to argue to the contrary, it appears that de Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms.'
 8. *Bodies That Matter*, p. 5.
 9. *SS*, pp. 57, 60; *DS I*, pp. 62, 64–5.
 10. *SS*, p. 61; *DS I*, p. 66–7.
 11. *SS*, p. 66; 'ces faits ... ne portent pas en eux-mêmes leur sens', *DS I*, p. 74.
 12. *SS*, p. 69; *DS I*, p. 76.
 13. *SS*, p. 706; *DS II*, p. 619.
 14. *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.
 15. *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 33.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 136.
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 111.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 111–12.
 20. *Bodies That Matter*, p. 4. Note that this is the *only* reference to de Beauvoir in *Bodies That Matter*. Butler also discusses de Beauvoir in two other early essays: 'Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution', in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds, *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992 (first published 1989); 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', *Yale French Studies*, *Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*, no. 72, Winter 1986. The argument in both of these essays is substantially the same as that of 'Variations on Sex and Gender'. Both reaffirm de Beauvoir as a sex/gender feminist, primarily through an interpretation of the 'One is not born...' quotation as an encapsulation of a theory of gender (acquisition), in which 'woman' is taken to be equivalent to 'gender'. Both also suggest that the theoretical possibility of questioning the alleged substantiality of the 'sex' of the sex/gender distinction is opened up by, though not pursued in, de Beauvoir's work.
 21. See *SS*, p. 47; *DS I*, p. 50.
 22. *SS*, p. 13; *DS I*, p. 12.
 23. *SS*, p. 18; *DS I*, p. 18.
 24. In an unpublished paper, read at the *Cinquantenaire du Deuxième sexe* conference in Paris, January 1999 ('Embodied Identity: Towards a Reinterpretation of Beauvoir's Anti-essentialism'), Annemie Halsema also denies that there is a sex/gender distinction in de Beauvoir's work, but argues this through an analysis of the idea of the body as situation (rather than, as here, through the notion of 'woman'). Sara Heinämaa, in 'What is a Woman? Butler and de Beauvoir on the Foundations of Sexual Difference' (*Hypatia*, vol. 12, no. 1, Winter 1997), similarly criticizes Butler for reading a sex/gender distinction into *The Second Sex*. According to Heinämaa, this leads Butler to interpret the book mistakenly as a theory of gender (acquisition). While I agree with Heinämaa on this, her reading differs from my own most significantly in her insistence on reading de Beauvoir primarily as a phenomenologist, *The Second Sex* offering a phenomenological description of sexual difference (see, for example, Heinämaa, p. 22).
 25. *SS*, p. 28; *DS I*, p. 31.
 26. *SS*, p. 91; *DS I*, p. 106.
 27. *SS*, p. 91; *DS I*, p. 105.
 28. *SS*, p. 66; *DS I*, p. 73.
 29. *SS*, p. 287; *DS I*, p. 410.
 30. See, for example, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Citadel Press, New York, 1991, p. 7; *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965, p. 10.
 31. *SS*, p. 725; *DS II*, p. 643.
 32. *SS*, p. 734/*DS II*, p. 654. See also *SS*, pp. 69, 391, 566, 608/*DS I*, p. 77, *DS II*, pp. 144, 426, 483; *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 41: 'the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world, which is why it is an object of sympathy or repulsion and why, it determines no behaviour' (translation modified); *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, p. 60.
 33. Butler contends that de Beauvoir's analysis is clearly limited by a theory of embodiment which uncritically reproduces (what Butler takes to be) a Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body, or an ontological distinction between consciousness or mind and body (*Gender Trouble*, p. 12). Butler objects to this distinction in a general sense, but in relation to de Beauvoir also in particular because of the gendered history of the distinction, a history that de Beauvoir fails to question.
 34. *Bodies That Matter*, p. 4.
 35. *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33.
 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 32.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 45. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Macmillan, London, 1990, p. 109 (A 74/5, B 100), p. 271 (A 254/B 310), p. 292 (A 286–7/B 343).
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 556 (A 681/B 709), p. 614 (A 771/B 799).
 47. See, for example, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 66. See also *Gender Trouble*, p. 38, where the idea of the pre-discursive 'outside' – later (implicitly) associated with the Kantian noumena (*Bodies That Matter*, p. 11) – is called an 'epistemic point of departure'. For an alternative reading of Butler as another sort of Kantian – one unable to escape the noumenal/phenomenal distinction – see Pheng Cheah, 'Mattering' (review essay of *Bodies That Matter* and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*), *Diacritics*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1996 (available electronically: http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/diacritics/26.1er_butler.html), pp. 116–18.
 48. *SS*, p. 31; *DS II*, p. 9.
 49. In *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998),

- Christine Battersby argues a similar point, noting, for example, that Butler takes the inadequacies of a metaphysics of substance to undermine the credibility of any metaphysics (p. 104; see also p. 106). Battersby argues for a radicalized ontology which 'does not deal with individualized substances' (p. 13), in which the notion of 'essence' is (re)thought in relation to a non-Aristotelian tradition in Western philosophy (see, for example, pp. 28–35). Battersby also takes issue with Butler's epistemological reading of Luce Irigaray, insisting instead on the (radicalized) ontological dimensions of her work (see, for example, pp. 100–102).
50. *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 10, 11.
 51. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 52. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 53. 'Gender as Performance: An Interview [by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal] with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy* 67, Summer 1994, pp. 32–3. See also Vikki Bell, 'On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, April 1999, p. 164.
 54. *Bodies That Matter*, p. 17.
 55. See 'Gender as Performance', p. 32; *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 2, 15, 16, 22, 30, 33.
 56. 'Gender as Performance', p. 34.
 57. *Bodies That Matter*, p. xi.
 58. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.
 59. *SS*, pp. 66–8, translation modified; *DS*, pp. 74–6: 'ce n'est pas en tant que corps, c'est en tant que corps assujetti à des tabous, à des lois, que le sujet prend conscience de lui-même et s'accomplit.'
 60. *Bodies That Matter*, p. 29.
 61. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 62. On Butler and Greek ontology, and for an extremely good, critical review of *Bodies That Matter* in general, see Pheng Cheah, 'Mattering'.
 63. *Gender Trouble*, p. 136.
 64. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 65. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 66. This latter formulation shows that the 'existential' reading is at times almost impossible to distinguish from the phenomenological approach favoured by, for example, Heinämaa (see note 24 above).
 67. And this despite the fact, as already cited, that even in 1949 de Beauvoir was not unaware of the phenomenon of 'intersex' (*SS*, p. 47; *DS* I, p. 50).
 68. Monique Wittig's most influential text here would be 'The Category of Sex' (1976) in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1998. At this point, no doubt, sceptics will be wanting to refer Butler, Wittig, et al. to the commonsensical and 'obvious' biological notion of sex difference. Biologists, however – feminist and otherwise – are increasingly abandoning the absolute division of human beings into K and Λ, an absolute division which is in no way confirmed at the level of chromosomal configuration, for example. No doubt we will be hearing more from the biologists in the future. For the time being, interested readers would do well to see Sara Heinämaa, 'Woman – Nature, Product, Style? Rethinking the Foundations of Feminist Philosophy of Science', in L.H. Nelson and J. Nelson, eds, *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science*, Kluwer Academic, The Hague, 1996: 'The problem is to explain how physiological diversity adapts to a social dichotomy' (p. 297).

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