



“Neither One Nor Two”: Aligning De Beauvoir and Irigaray’s Use of Ambiguity

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Abstract

Despite their differences, Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist critique of the gender binary and Luce Irigaray’s model of sexual difference run parallel in their resistance to absolute, gendered notions of activity and passivity. Both streams of thought—while ontologically distinct—are interested in presenting “relative” alternatives to the negated feminine subject. With attention to De Beauvoir’s vision of ambiguity, this paper will argue that Irigaray’s “vulvic” and “phallic” subjects are compatible with existentialism’s beings “for-itself” and “in-itself”. Further, by embracing the potential for both sexes hold “finitude and transcendence,” Irigaray’s strategic essentialism may be read as radically continuous with (as opposed to departing from) *The Second Sex*.

Keywords: Existentialism, Strategic Essentialism, Feminist Ontology, Ambiguity.

DESPITE BEING FREQUENTLY positioned at opposite poles of French feminist philosophy, Luce Irigaray writes effusively of Simone de Beauvoir that "to respect Simone de Beauvoir is to follow the theoretical and practical work of 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."¹ This compliment of course precedes critiques; Irigaray's use of psychoanalysis and strategic essentialism puts her in conflict with De Beauvoir's feminism of equality. Distinct from existentialist notions of "existence preced[ing] essence"² Irigaray's project of sexuation seems inextricably tied to anatomical difference. Her psychoanalytic schema is based on phallic and arguably vulvic models of subjectivity, abstracted versions of the bodily 'penis' and 'vulva' which appear to resist Beauvoirian notions of the female body as a 'factic situation.'³

Nevertheless, this paper will seek to position Irigaray and De Beauvoir side by side in their mutual resistance to absolute, gendered notions of activity and passivity. First, I will introduce the problem of the negated feminine subject using Marilyn Frye's **A/not-A** formula. I will then interpret De Beauvoir's existentialist critique of this gender binary and Irigaray's model of sexuate difference to locate the intersection of their projects. Finally, I will argue that Irigaray's 'vulvic' and 'phallic' subjects are compatible with a Beauvoirian vision of ambiguity in which both sexes embrace "finitude and transcendence."⁴

Published thirty years apart, even the titles of *The Second Sex* and *This Sex Which is Not One* converse in response to the same question. Posed most famously by De Beauvoir, the problem of "what is a woman?" unifies her with Irigaray by locating their mutual target.⁵ In a social ontology dictated by patriarchy, men become the reference point for existence. To be

1 Luce Irigaray, "Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference" (New York:Routledge, 1993), 13.

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: Modern Library Press, 2004) 344.

3 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Knopf, 1953) 673..

4 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 684..

5 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 13..

male in the words of feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye is to be “the A side of a universal exclusive dichotomy: **A/not-A**,” automatically a positively defined subject, the ‘default’ human.⁶ Occupying the other half of this formulation (**not-A**) are women relegated to the negative status of non-male.

To begin in De Beauvoir’s terms, this non-male ‘Other’ is defined only by what she lacks in relation to man’s essential position.⁷ While men *and* women are biologically and linguistically sexed, man is afforded “both the positive and the neutral,” meaning he gets to embody the universally human and the specifically masculine.⁸ In other words, he is everything while she is nothing. Both Beauvoir and Irigaray refer to this privileged masculine subject as ‘*the one*.’⁹ While De Beauvoir uses this label to denote man’s status as the only positive subject, Irigaray is interested in how it figures into a Lacanian phallogentrism she endeavours to critique.¹⁰ The symbol of the phallus, like the **A** in Frye’s formula, dominates a traditional symbolic order of sexes “narrowly focused on sameness.”¹¹ It represents a masculinized subjectivity which is active, unitary, and dependent on a passive object to fulfil its desires.

Irigaray writes that “in order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman’s body, language...And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity.”¹² Because of his reliance on an object to instrumentalize, the phallic subject creates a ‘phallic economy’ founded on an active/passive dualism. Everything centres around the active penis; one either has a penis, or one lacks a penis. Female genitalia is only understood as a passive lesser or reversed penis within the phallic economy, exactly like De Beauvoir’s negated ‘Other.’ This centralization of the male subject,

6 Marilyn Frye, *The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women*, (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 994.

7 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 15.

8 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 15.

9 Luce Irigaray, “Chapter Two: This Sex Which is Not One,” *This Sex Which is Not One*, (Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.

10 Emily Zakin, “Psychoanalytic Feminism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 16, 2011.

11 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

12 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 24.

or in Irigaray's terms 'phallograticism,'¹³ is reflected in all spheres of patriarchal societies. Some examples include disparities in medical research on women's health, unequal representation in political bodies, and continued pressure for women to occupy a passive domestic sphere.¹⁴

When combating this oppressive model within an existentialist frame, there is an important distinction made between the 'absolute' and the 'relative' Other. De Beauvoir emphasizes that the masculine subject finds "in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed, he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object."¹⁵ The existential subject *must* engage in a struggle to define themselves in contrast to an object. When two male subjects ('ones') encounter each other, for example, they participate in what Sartre describes as 'the Look' in which they both become objects relative to the other's gaze. There is a reciprocal exchange while each tries to "set himself up as the essential," and simultaneously recognizes his status as the objectified Other in the eyes of an opposing subject.¹⁶ This is 'relative' Otherness: not a fundamental category, but a temporary state in a struggle for centralization and power, equivalent to the 'life-and-death' stakes of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic.¹⁷

The stakes of this battle are high. Beauvoir uses existentialist language of immanence and transcendence to denote the radical difference between subject and object. To become an object is to lose the free subject's capacity to transcend circumstance and instead fall "back into immanence,

13 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 33.

14 UN Women—Headquarters, "Facts & Figures," n.d. (2011) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures#:~:text=Gender%20inequality%20is%20a%20major>.

15 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 17.

16 Sartre, "Self Negation," *Being and Nothingness* from *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, (New York: Modern Library Press, 2004) 392.

17 J.D. Feilmeier, "Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic" *Central College*, <https://central.edu/writing-anthology/2019/07/08/hegels-master-slave-dialectic-the-search-for-self-consciousness/#:~:text=Hegel%27s%20Master%2DSlave%20dialectic%20tells,as%20a%20threat%20to%20itself>.

stagnation...the brutish life of subjection to given conditions.”¹⁸ For example, a person who is told he has been born to pursue a certain occupation transcends his circumstances by asserting agency and choosing his own career. An object, on the other hand, fulfils its predetermined function. It is ‘immanent’ because, like a leaf being pushed by a river’s current, its inability to exert agency leaves it totally vulnerable to circumstance. This ‘brutish life’ is exactly the fate of the feminine ‘absolute’ Other, distinct from the ‘relative’ in that she is “an object which will not oppose him, which does not require a reciprocal relation.”¹⁹ Only by robbing women of their potential agency can men secure fixed positions as subjects within existential gender relations and eschew the risks of objectification. Having pre-emptively lost the battle for power, to be a woman is to surrender to immanence.

This problematic condition is likewise elucidated in Irigaray’s schema. Where De Beauvoir probes the negative existential status of those ‘*not men*,’ Irigaray centres the body, questioning the symbolic status of the vulva as a ‘non-sex.’²⁰ In the same way that the ‘absolute’ subject requires its ‘absolute’ object, the phallic economy requires that the vulvic become “the negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ.” In order to fulfil phallic standards of pleasure, the vagina is reduced to the passive vessel for his penetration (the active clitoris a ‘little penis’ far inferior to its male counterpart).²¹ Translated into Beauvoirian terms, the vulvic becomes the immanent object over which the phallic subject transcends. His status as the only ‘designatable organ’²² depends on the absolute negation of the feminine; any complication of this binary would undermine the monopolization of subjectivity which defines him. In other words, the **A** is contingent upon the **not-A**. Further, within the gender binary these positions are necessarily fixed.

18 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 27.

19 Frye, *tNoD*, 993

20 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 14.; Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

21 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

22 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

Crucially, De Beauvoir's analysis of women's status under patriarchy is fundamentally opposed to notions of fixity. While she acknowledges sexual difference at a biological level, she warns against attaching innate qualities of passivity or subordination to sex itself. Instead, she argues that:

When an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior. But the significance of the verb to be must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become.' Yes, women on the whole are today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?²³

This is De Beauvoir's answer to the **not-A**; women's position as the 'absolute' Other is not essential but sociohistorically instituted.²⁴ There is nothing about her biology or nature that condemns a woman to immanence, instead, she has been compelled to relinquish her capacity for transcendence in the patriarchy's battle for subjectivity. The **not-A** is a myth, a seductive lie to which both sexes contribute that conceals the fact that all humans share the same existential condition. Despite different factic situations and lived experiences, all sexes have access to transcendent self-making *and* risk being limited to the realm of immanence.²⁵ Neither is a an 'absolute' active subject or passive object, both are 'relative.' What links their shared humanity is the tension between two polarized states, and it is exactly this quality of ambiguity that intersects with Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference.

23 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 23.

24 Debra Bergoffen, and Megan Burke, "Simone de Beauvoir", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) Aug 17, 2004.

25 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

However, before aligning their respective philosophies it is important to further emphasize their central conflict. The two arguments necessarily run parallel, but on separate planes; Beauvoir seeks to overcome difference while Irigaray uses it to construct a positive metaphysics of the feminine. Because she ties certain essential qualities to embodied experience, it would be absurd for Irigaray's psychoanalytic method to adopt a Beauvoirian appeal to an existential sameness. Nevertheless, Irigaray too dismisses the negative definition of female subjectivity (**not-A**) as an outright myth. In its place, she designs an alternative to phallogentrism which further complicates sexed notions of active transcendence and passive immanence. Her response to the **A/not-A** formulation is a new schema: **A/B**, in which negation is overcome by qualifying women beyond masculine terms. This complication of the phallogentric model begins with a critique of the masculine phallic subject.

She describes the phallic desire for the self-same as seeking "a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing" (the vagina).²⁶ This language cannot help but reference the Existentialist term: 'being *in-itself*.'²⁷ In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir refers to a distinction between the being 'in-itself' (she who is condemned to the 'brutish life' of determinism as described above) and the being '*for-itself*,' self-aware and projecting her consciousness beyond the factic determinants of her given circumstances.²⁸ De Beauvoir's use of these terms is linked to an existentialist tradition which prioritizes the activity of transcendence as a liberating force.²⁹ This human ability to move beyond a factic level is attached in phallogentrism to the active, masculine sphere. What's exciting about its use in Irigaray's work is the way she links the 'in-itself' to the phallic subject instead of a vulvic feminine. Because the **Not-A** is figured as a "hole-envelope...the masculine organ turned back upon itself" when the

26 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

27 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 27.

28 Jack Reynolds and Pierre-Jean Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre", The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) May 16, 2011.

29 Reynolds and Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre."

phallic encounters the vulvic, he is literally 'in-himself.'³⁰ In this way, Irigaray cleverly subverts phallogocentric dualism which would split the sexuate into a clean binary of masculine transcendence and feminine immanence. While he engages in "the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate" these acts of aggression and possession do not map easily onto notions of transcendence.³¹ Instead, the quality of 'oneness' which would seem to align him with the *active* side of 'absolute' subjectivity is instead exactly what condemns him to a degree of immanence.

In the words of De Beauvoir's intellectual counterpart Jean-Paul Sartre, transcendence is described as the freedom of an 'arrachement à soi'- a 'self-detachment.'³² Because he is unitary and his interactions with the Other are merely 'self-embracing,' the phallic subject lacks the ability to distance his consciousness from his facticity. In the context of the struggle between subject and object status central to Existentialism, he risks immanence despite his aggressive nature.

Following this subversion of 'the One,' Irigaray introduces her groundbreaking concept of 'at least two.'³³ This is the **B** side of her sexuate; what I call the 'vulvic,' positive reimagining of a feminine subjectivity. While the phallic symbolizes the penis, the vulvic indicates an abstracted female genitalia: particularly the labia ('lips'), the vagina and the clitoris. Taken together:

The geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness.³⁴

30 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

31 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 25.

32 Sartre, "Chapter One: The Origin of Negation," *Being and Nothingness* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1969), Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 25.

33 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

34 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

The vulvic is neither unitary like the phallic, nor dually split between active and passive components. Instead, Irigaray introduces a radically *plural* model, subversive on multiple levels. The first is most obvious: a positive figuration based on female genitalia disrupts a phallogocentric dismissal of the feminine as merely ‘non-phallic.’ This disruption is reinforced by Irigaray’s provocative writing style, which never shies from intentionally graphic descriptors. She hinges her argument on “that contact of *at least two* (lips),” whose perpetual touching is the basis of a female autoerotism; a feminine pleasure requiring no external Other to satisfy itself.³⁵

The vulvic’s passivity is activity; her plurality comprising both herself *and* the “other in herself.”³⁶ Where the phallic tries to assimilate the Other in his desire for the self-same and unitary, the vulvic is in a constant state of *nearness* to the object of her pleasure.³⁷ The ‘phallic economy’ of active and passive property is thus undermined, for neither state can be clearly delineated from the positionality of close contact.

This ambiguous zone is crucial and means that the vulvic and phallic subjects are not reducible to absolute, sexed versions of the ‘for-itself’ and ‘in-itself.’ While true that certain phallic qualities may be associated with ‘immanence’ and vulvic plurality with ‘transcendence,’ Irigaray’s vulvic upsets the Sartrean notion of a transcendence contingent on self-detachment. This is in part due to her essentialist view of embodied sex as transcendental as opposed to factic. It is also integral to a specific passage in which Irigaray describes the vulvic version of a being ‘for-itself.’ She writes of “the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.”³⁸ This quotation illustrates a form of transcendence distinct to the vulvic subject. Her expression of freedom is not a linear venture towards a single goal, but a “*diffuse touch*” in which she is in contact with her “body-sex”

35 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

36 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

37 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 31.

38 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 29.

without being determined by its facticity ("fixed, congealed").³⁹

Irigaray's lyrical prose is clarified when contrasted with phallic activity, which considers itself the centralized subject distanced from an objectified Other upon which his "transcendence thrusts itself."⁴⁰ He operates within the either/or structure of dualism; in the struggle for subjectivity he must either transcend or be transcended. The vulvic, however, makes up for his disjunctive limitations by refusing the terms of dual subjectivity. She can hold the tension between activity and passivity because her transcendence is based on nearness, touch, and plurality. This reconception is highly relevant to De Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity.

Like Sartre, Beauvoir warns against the trap of the unitary being in-itself, but she is also careful to situate immanence as the necessary counterpart to transcendence within ambiguity. She concludes the *Second Sex* with her belief that:

If man and woman were equal in concrete matters; the contradictions that put the flesh in opposition to the spirit, the instant to time, the swoon of immanence to the challenge of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of forgetting, will never be resolved; in sexuality will always be materialized the tension, the anguish, the joy, the frustration, and the triumph of existence.⁴¹

Beauvoir is not advocating for the primacy of an absolute being for-itself. Instead, she centralizes ambiguity: the vacillating relationship between immanence and transcendence as the most desirable (and most human) outcome of gender equality.

³⁹ Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 29.

⁴⁰ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (Newburyport: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2018) Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 10.

⁴¹ De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

This subversion is exactly what is accomplished by Irigaray. The vulvic's plurality undermines phallogocentric dualism by introducing activity and passivity as overlapping co-constituents of an ambiguous subject. Because she is "two not divisible into one(s)" the vulvic need not, in Beauvoir's words "put the flesh in opposition to the spirit...the swoon of immanence [in opposition] to the challenge of transcendence."⁴² Far from the flaw phallogocentrism would make it out to be, she who is non-self-identical is inherently resistant to object-status. Her "incompleteness of form," (compared to his 'oneness') is what allows her to contain the paradoxes necessary for existence. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir emphasizes how the existential subject must accept their ambiguity by remaining joined with and distant from themselves.⁴³ One ought to be neither an absolutely transcendent God nor an immanent object, but *near* to and *in touch with* both states. It is clear then that the vulvic subject fits certain criterion highly relevant to Beauvoirian Existentialism. Likewise, in the case of the phallic, or 'absolute subject,' he is disempowered if he fails to affirm his ambiguity by finding within himself *both* the capacity for immanence and transcendence.

Nevertheless, when placing this vulvic model into an Existentialist conversation, there are certain mistakes to be avoided. To accept an A/B equation would contradict Beauvoir's assertion of a universal existential condition. While true that she affirms differences between sexes, Beauvoir would not concede their elevation to the transcendental level of symbols. She even goes so far as describing a feminism of difference as "equalitarian segregation ...result[ing] only in the most extreme discrimination."⁴⁴

Further, Luce Irigaray is not an Existentialist, and her psychoanalytic work should not be diluted to serve an opposing philosophical agenda. Still, it would be an equal disservice to isolate her contribution to feminism on the basis of gender essentialism. Her language of desire and sexual

⁴² Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 24.; De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

⁴³ De Beauvoir, *EoA*, 10.

⁴⁴ De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 22.

pleasure is both radical and traditional: it recalls Sartre's statement that freedom rests on the condition of "a desideratum," it speaks to immanence, to transcendence, and to Beauvoirian ambiguity.⁴⁵ It precedes the words of poet Anne Carson who wrote that "all human desire is poised on an axis of paradox;" a tension central to both De Beauvoir and Irigaray.⁴⁶ In response to a patriarchal frame obsessed with absolutes and a false divide between activity and passivity, these philosophers expand gender to fit both terms at once. The inherent capacity for transcendence and immanence is what makes us ambiguous beings. Where De Beauvoir encourages women to overcome the idea that their bodies condemn them to immanence, Irigaray proposes a distinctly feminine transcendence already essential to their embodied condition. Not only that, but her vulvic subject may be even *more* inclined towards the freedom of being 'for-itself' than the unitary phallus. While they disagree in their methods, Beauvoir and Irigaray cannot be entirely polarized. Their respective philosophies are near to one another, inseparable and always touching.

45 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1969) Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 433.

46 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 10.

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