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Submission

A PHILOSOPHICAL TABOO

From Penelope patiently weaving the shroud as she waits for the return of Ulysses in the *Odyssey* to Anastasia reveling in the commands of Christian Grey in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, from *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*[1] to *Desperate Housewives*, from Annie Ernaux's *The Possession*[2] to the actresses claiming for men a "right to bother" women, literature, movies, TV shows, and the news all stage and aestheticize a female submission that is chosen, sometimes professed, and appears as a source of satisfaction and pleasure. However, philosophy and feminist thought say very little, if anything, about this female submission. From a feminist point of view, considering that women could, in one way or another, choose and savor this submission appears as right wing, antifeminist, or even misogynistic; this idea seems to belong to the exclusive domain of those who believe in a feminine nature that would destine all females to

a definitive submission to men. From the point of view of philosophers, especially canonical political philosophers, submission is a moral vice that goes against human nature. To submit oneself to another is to renounce one's most precious natural right: freedom. It thus seems impossible to *think*[3] this phenomenon whose multiple manifestations we constantly encounter nonetheless.

Anyone who wants to study female submission is presented with a general philosophical problem: the analysis of the concept of submission repeatedly stumbles upon the commonly held idea that wanting anything other than one's freedom goes against human nature. For this reason, in the history of philosophy, submission is rarely discussed; and when it is, it is seen as either a moral vice or a pathology. Rousseau thus writes in *The Social Contract*: "To renounce one's freedom is to renounce one's quality as a man, the rights of humanity, even its duties. There is no possible compensation for someone who renounces everything. Such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature, and to deprive his will of all freedom is to deprive his actions of all morality."[4] There is something so taboo in the idea that human beings could submit themselves without being forced to that in the history of Western philosophy only the French philosopher of the sixteenth century Étienne de La Boétie and the creator of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, have truly taken seriously the enigma of submission, albeit on different levels. La Boétie, in *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, is the first to wonder what makes the masses decide to obey a tyrant who dominates them when this tyrant only has power because the masses submit to him. La Boétie proposes a series of explanations, but ultimately he does not manage to conceive

of this submission as something other than a moral vice of the masses, a faulty oversight of their natural freedom. Freud, in three texts that constitute the foundation of the psychoanalytic conception of masochism,[5] addresses not the masses' submission to a tyrant but what he calls masochism, the phenomenon of drawing pleasure from one's own moral or psychological pain. He conceives of masochism as the opposite of sadism. Freud easily proposes a psychoanalytic explanation of sadism, but his theory struggles with what he calls "the enigma of masochism." He identifies it as a pathology but does not manage to fully explain it. In general, philosophy fails to take seriously the fact that some people might want to obey other people and take pleasure in doing so.

When focusing specifically on female submission, the problem becomes even more complex. Historically, women's submission, unlike men's, has not been thought of as being contrary to human nature. Quite the opposite, submission is prescribed as the normal, moral, and natural behavior of women.[6] This valorization of submission goes hand in hand with the idea of an essential and natural inferiority of women compared to men: it is because women are viewed as incapable of being free in the way that men are, or that such a freedom is seen as a potential danger, that their submission is good. To consider that women submit voluntarily is, in such a context, sexist. It presupposes a difference of nature between men and women, on the basis of which women would be inferior to men. This inferiority is seen as both a weakness and an immorality: on the one hand, women submit to men because they are naturally weaker than men. They are passive in this submission. On the other hand, their weakness makes them morally inferior: women are

basking in a submission that perfectly fits their nature and that they sometimes choose, whereas for men, who are authentically free subjects, submission is a moral vice.

In sum, we are at an impasse. Either we talk about female submission in its complexity, without remaining silent on the appeal that submission can have, which ostensibly places us on the side of the sexist tradition that makes submission women's natural destiny. Or we posit that men and women are equal and, in that case, women's submission, like men's, is either a moral vice or a pathology and is not really within the scope of philosophical inquiry. In the case of the latter, the only possible explanation for the valorization of female submission in cultural works is to see it as a manifestation of male domination in these passive victims that women would be. Thus, either one takes the appeal of submission for women seriously and adopts the sexist position of an immutable female nature, or one refuses the idea of a natural inferiority of women and, in that case, submissive women who are satisfied with this submission appear as passive victims or submissive beings that are guilty of not cherishing their freedom.

But then how can we explain that some of these works are written by women? Should we conclude that Catherine Millet, Annie Ernaux, and E. L. James are mistaken to such an extent that the experiences they mention should not even be considered? Against such an alternative between a sexist naturalization and an erasure of submission, one must directly confront these questions: Do women somewhat participate in patriarchy? If so, can this participation be considered voluntary or is it merely the result of the omnipotence of patriarchy? And, in

a more polemical way, is submission necessarily bad? Is there, minimally, a form of pleasure taken in submission?

Female Submission and Feminism

Far from being sexist, focusing on women's submission can be resolutely feminist. Feminism is a theoretical enterprise and a political program aimed at promoting a certain form of equality between men and women—what this equality means, exactly, is a topic of debate among feminists themselves. The feminist agenda has many components and, at the fore, at least two: to shine a light on women's oppression *as* women and to fight this oppression.

This first part leads feminism to offer a social critique, which aims at showing that gender inequalities have a systematic character and that they are widespread and ongoing in such a way that they constitute a structural system of patriarchal oppression. In this way, the feminist movement has historically strived to bring women's oppression—in the context of male domination—to light by identifying the injustices encountered by women, both on an individual and on a social level, as well as this oppression's structural and widespread character. This first, theoretical, part (shining a light on women's oppression) is a precondition of the second part (the fight against sexist oppression) because it allows us to understand how oppression works. For instance, it shows that men's domination over women functions in a way that silences women and that systematically devalues their experiences and work—especially care work.

This first part also makes it possible to identify the mechanisms of domination that feminists need to fight and, as such, contributes to the construction of the second part. For instance, since the silencing of women is identified as one of the mechanisms of male domination, one of the elements of the feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression is ensuring that women's voices are being heard and recognized as important, in opposition to the patriarchal system in which men speak *in place of* women. In this respect, studying women's submission is a feminist enterprise as it consists in listening to women's experiences and taking them seriously, and in not deciding in advance that they are victims, guilty, passive, or perverse.

Most feminists have, however, carefully avoided the topic of female submission.[7] This can undoubtedly be explained by concern about adding grist to the conservatives' mill; they would have seen in such a topic the proof that feminists themselves believe in the submissive, maternal nature of women. Chauvinists are swift to conclude that women are submissive because they "like it" and to deny the structural effects of male domination. Remarks about domestic violence, which imply that if battered women do not speak up or leave it is probably because what they are experiencing is simply not that bad, are a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. Evading talk about submission allows feminists to sidestep the risk of blaming the victims. This precaution is problematic, however, because it masks an important part of male domination: the complicity it elicits. One can, and must, study female submission without presuming that there is something typically or naturally feminine in this submission.

A concern here could be that in saying women are submissive, we might be implying that all women are and that there is nothing to do about that. To understand the fundamental difference between a study of female submission and the hypothesis of the eternal feminine—which is the name given to the theory of a natural submissive nature of women—one can turn toward linguistics and philosophy of language.[8] Two types of statements must be distinguished: (1) those uttered by the upholders of an eternal nature of women, who say "women are submissive"; and (2) those who say "some/most/all women are submissive" or "some/most/all women choose submission." The kind of generalization displayed in the first case, that is, generalizations that omit quantifiers, are called "generics" by linguists. The problem of generics is that they can—and are often taken to—imply that there is some necessary connection between the first and the second parts of their statement. In our case, it would mean that women are submissive by virtue of being women, that they are naturally submissive. In the second case, no hypothesis is made regarding the nature of femininity, but some singular experiences or forms of life are being taken seriously in their more or less widespread character. In using the second kind of statements, one is not stating that such a submission is good, bad, desirable, or normal; it only says that some/many/all women live in a situation of submission. Whereas the first statement can be seen as normative or essentialist, the statements of the second type are purely descriptive. Studying female submission is a feminist enterprise because it consists in describing an experience lived by women without considering this experience as absolute, natural, and necessary in order to be a woman.

In sum, my enterprise here is a feminist one in part because it adopts the perspective of women themselves as a starting point of the analysis and thus takes women's voices and experiences into account in the analysis of male domination. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, the world is seemingly divided into two camps: people who believe society is structured by the domination men exert over women, and those who think this domination either does not exist or is not that significant. Feminist works show that this separation is problematic because it is grounded on the assumption that only men's perspectives and actions matter. Fundamentally, even though the aim is to describe and contest women's position in society, when one talks of "male domination," one perpetuates the custom, long highlighted by feminist epistemologists, of systematically seeing the world from the perspective of men, understood as neutral and objective.[9] It is *men* who dominate or don't dominate, who seduce, who propose, who orgasm, who cheat, and who rape. This is not to say that investigating male domination is bad because in focusing on men it reproduces the habit of focusing the perspective on men, but that it is a feminist task to look at the phenomenon of male domination from the perspective of women.

Submission from Women's Point of View

Challenging the presumed objectivity of the male perspective and its systematic adoption is necessary both on a political level and on an epistemological one—that is, on the level of the construction of knowledge. On a political level, it is impossible to promote any sort of equality between men and women if this

equality is to be built from a male perspective, that is, a perspective that may not take women's experience into account or fully understand it. For instance, some feminist philosophers have shown that classical political philosophy rests upon a distinction between a public and political sphere, which is reserved for men and in which individuals are conceived as independent from each other, and a private sphere, centered around the family, to which women are confined and in which people are linked to each other by relationships of love and dependency.[10] But classical political philosophy—up until the end of the twentieth century, according to Okin—conceals this distinction, despite depending on it, and thus excludes women from the political realm by default. Challenging the neutralized male perspective allows us to reveal the way male domination structures itself and makes itself durable.

As mentioned above, in addition to this political dimension, there is an epistemological one: challenging the hegemony of the male perspective and studying the world from women's perspective opens up a more complete understanding of the world that we inhabit. Marxists were the first to defend the idea that knowledge is situated and that the social position of agents grants them a specific perspective on the world. The perspective of the dominants and the one of the dominated do not open up the same understanding of the world. Yet what happens when one studies male domination and the issue of sex equality? The perpetuation of inequalities between men and women in Western societies, in which women have, overall, the same legal rights as men seems incomprehensible. If women have the same rights as men, have access to education, to jobs, to political offices, and yet find themselves in an inferior

position in these domains, isn't it simply that they are less good than men or that they would rather "stay at home"? The obvious response to the enigma of the endurance of male domination, when the adopted perspective is the male one, is that women are now agents like any others and that if they are in an inferior position it is probably because of an inferior or different nature. But what does one see when looking at male domination from women's perspective? That in the face of a patriarchal system, even if women are naturally equal to men and have the same rights, submitting to men may be a rational choice.

This is not to say that *all* women are submissive or that there would be some sort of specific essence that would destine them to submission. It is merely an observation: very often, looking at male domination from women's point of view—from what this domination does to them—is to see the complexity and the ambiguity of this submission. It also reveals what in it can be both appealing and pleasurable, as well as alienating. Studying women's submission from women's point of view is not to say that only women bear responsibility in the endurance of male domination. On the contrary, it demonstrates what male domination does to women, how it is lived by women, and how it shapes their choices and their desires in a way that classical philosophy, in its methodological sexism, cannot grasp.

A Matter of Perspective

To study submission, one must first be sure to know exactly what is at stake in it. To begin with, talking about "submission" rather than "domination" is to decide to shift the perspective on power. There are numerous studies on domination, especially

in political philosophy. But very few studies consider submission from the perspective of the submissive person rather than the dominant one. It seems to be taken for granted that submission does not need to be studied as such and that, in studying domination, one therefore understands submission, as if looking at domination in a mirror would provide us with a good understanding of submission. Against this tradition, La Boétie's originality in the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* lies in his examination of power from the bottom up, from the perspective of the tyrant's subjects, to understand what exactly their submission to the tyrant is. For all of his originality, however, La Boétie only thinks about submission in terms of the relationship between subjects and the tyrant or king, something he calls voluntary servitude and that is in a strictly political realm. Women's submission happens in the context of interpersonal relationships, not between the people and the government. In that sense, it does not belong to the political realm in a strict sense although it is political, since it concerns power relations; therefore his analyses are not directly useful in analyzing women's submission.

Adopting this same bottom-up approach in an interpersonal context—instead of a purely political one—requires that we begin with a descriptive and conceptual understanding of submission. At first glance, the identification of submission is dependent on a form of othering: people have a tendency to think only people who are "other" are submissive. A paradigmatic example of submission in the public debate in France is the veiled Muslim woman who lives in a working-class neighborhood—it is against this very image that the name of the once popular NGO Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores nor

Submissives) was created.[11] From the point of view of French republicanism,[12] the Muslim woman is the paradigmatic manifestation of the absolutely submissive Other with whom it is impossible to identify.[13] In reality, however, we can identify a resemblance between a series of mundane, everyday experiences, which indicate that submission is not the morally faulty attitude of "others," of those who do not desire freedom: whether it is preferring to be under a boss's authority at work rather than be self-employed, even though this entails obeying someone; doing more than is asked by one's boss despite the negative impact this can have (this covers all instances of zeal at work—e.g., staying longer than required at one's place of work, working on weekends when we are not obligated to, etc.); recognizing one's inferiority to someone else, which justifies obeying him or her; or wanting to serve someone else without expecting anything in return (the unequal distribution of domestic work, for example). In the case of women in particular, submission is often presented as the experience of several subsets of women: veiled women, stay-at-home moms, battered wives. In reality, many women—not only categorical subsets—experience these forms or other forms of submission by the very fact of being women. There is submission in "dieting" or starving oneself to fit into a size 0. There is submission in the behavior of wives of academics or writers who are participating in the research and are not credited as coauthors. There is submission in taking up the entire mental load of the family. There is submission in accepting that men don't do their fair share of domestic work or parenting. Contrary to our first intuition about submission, most women are submissive in certain respects, and what distinguishes women from each other

is more the degree of their submission than the fact that some women are submissive and others are not. Since submission is not an exceptional but a shared and mundane experience, it is all the more necessary to understand exactly what it consists of and in what ways it differs from domination, with which it is almost always associated.

Which Women?

This book aspires to examine women's submission in the interpersonal relationships between men and women in Western societies. Such a restriction of the study can, at first glance, look heteronormative and hegemonic; I do not think that this is the case (and I hope it is not).

To begin with, there are good reasons to focus on heterosexual relationships when studying female submission. Female submission is an interesting locus of analysis because a structural dimension and an individual dimension are combined in it. Women's submission to men is prescribed by patriarchy, that is, the organization of society in a way that grants power to men and systematically disadvantages women as women. This submission is a component of the set of norms and ideological tenets of patriarchy and as such it is structural. There is also an individual dimension as women have enough leeway legally and socially for their actions to reflect, at least partially, their choices (it is always a certain person, in a certain situation, that submits to a certain other person). In non-heterosexual relationships, one can reasonably imagine that the structural dimension of submission is of lesser importance than in relationships between men and women: the few studies devoted

to the repartition of domestic work in lesbian couples support this hypothesis; they show that the unequal, gendered division of labor that is displayed in heterosexual relationships is almost completely absent among lesbian couples.[14] Focusing on heterosexual relationships does not imply that we see these as the norm but rather that we see in them the ultimate locus of the oppression of women by men.

I am restraining my analysis to Western[15] societies for two reasons. First, the greater women's freedom of choice, the more problematic their submission appears. The moral issues this book is focusing on appear when submission is not the result of clear coercion but appears as a choice. In this respect, focusing the analysis on the societies in which women and men are at least formally equal—that is to say, they have the same legal rights, overall—allows me to examine submission in its most morally complex forms.

Second, as we said earlier, one of the obstacles to a thorough examination of submission is the tendency to identify submission in others and not in oneself. In that regard, accusations of submission have been part of an imperialist process of othering women from non-Western worlds. The philosopher Uma Narayan, who highlighted these processes of imperialist othering,[16] studied the forms of epistemic injustice that often take place when women from the West study women's autonomy in non-Western societies. She shows that these accounts are too often haunted by two "specters of the other woman," that is to say, two stereotypical preconceptions that Western analysis imposes on them: the "prisoner of patriarchy," that is, the woman on whom patriarchal oppression is imposed by force to the extent that she has no freedom (the woman who is forced

to wear the veil, forced to marry, forced to stay inside); and the "dupe of patriarchy," or the woman who subscribes fully to patriarchal norms without seeing, when Western women would see it very clearly, the oppression that these norms establish and perpetuate.[17] A considerable literature in postcolonial, transnational, and decolonial feminist thought has established that the way in which Western feminists are embedded in imperialist power relations too often impairs their judgment regarding women from non-Western worlds.[18] The way in which submissiveness has been weaponized against Muslim women in France but also in the West in general convinces me that the possible harm created by culturalist imperialist representations is particularly acute where women's submission is concerned. In order to avoid these culturalist representations, I restrict the analysis to Western societies; most of my examples will come from France and the United States, which are the two countries in which I live and work.

Domination and Submission

There are commonly three meanings of the word "submission": it can refer to a disposition to obey, the action of submitting oneself and obeying, and the action of surrendering after a battle. Especially because of this third meaning, submission has a negative overtone and is thought of as surrendering, literally or figuratively. Contemporary debates on sadomasochism led to an attribution of a sexual connotation to "submission" and strongly bound sexual domination with sexual submission. The negative overtone of submission is not as sharp in this sexual context, but it remains.

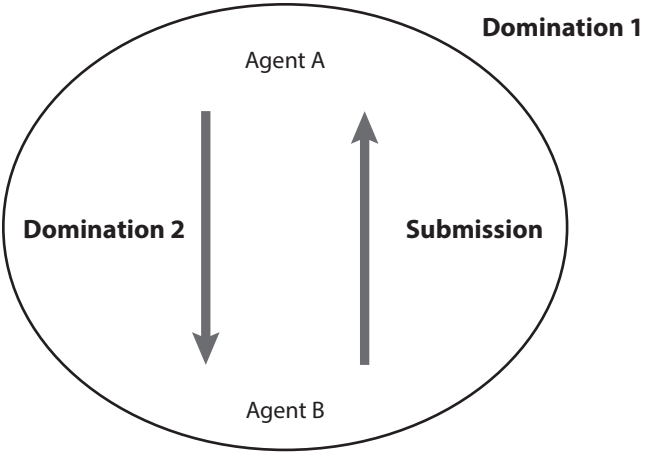
The first difficulty one encounters when seeking to distinguish between submission and domination is the linguistic ambiguity of the verb "to submit." Contrary to the verb "to dominate" for instance, which is mostly transitive,[19] the verb "to submit" can be both transitive (to submit someone) and reflexive (to submit oneself to someone). In its transitive uses, "submit" has a similar—although slightly different—meaning than "dominate": it concerns an action conceived from the perspective of the person who accomplishes it and that consists in exerting one's power over one or more people, hence modifying their possibilities of action. One of the central uses of this verb pertains to the vocabulary of war: to submit an enemy is to succeed in dominating him enough so that he would have no other option than surrendering and placing himself under (*sub*) the orders of the victor. In this case, to submit someone is to fully dominate someone and to do so with the use of force. It is possible to dominate someone through one's knowledge, charisma, or natural authority, whereas one is only submitted by force and constraint. This understanding of the action of submitting as a subset of the action of dominating that is specific in terms of its force explains why "dominated" and "submitted" seem to mean the same thing.

Speaking, for instance, of the domination or the submission of the working class is nonetheless not equivalent. Saying that workers are dominated is to recognize that a power is exerted on them and limits, or at least modifies, their ability to act. To talk of their submission adds a negative overtone because what is then emphasized is their dependency and their obedience to the power that is exerted on them.[20] In saying that workers are dominated, one perceives them as an impersonal

mass on which an arbitrary power exerts itself, whereas if their attitude is seen as submission, one repersonalizes them to a certain extent, by insisting on their behavior in the face of the domination that they are subjected to: their situation appears to be voluntary. When I write about "submission," I seek to describe the action or the situation of the person who submits, that is, who chooses, in a way, their submission. Throughout the remainder of this book, and in order to avoid any ambiguity, this is the only use of the term I will retain: submission is the action or the attitude of the person who submits.

The action of submitting oneself appears paradoxical because it is an activity in passivity: what the subject decides, whatever the degree of rationality or complexity of this decision, is to *not* be the one who decides. Of course, one can decide to submit because one has no other available choice, but in any case it is a decision, if only a decision to not act against the power exerted on oneself. In this respect, two types of will can be distinguished in submission: an active will, which would be a positive will to be submissive, or a passive will, which would be resigning oneself or not resisting the power that is exerted. In any case, one can only talk about submission when there is no active resistance to power, when the attitude or the action expresses a will of the agent. Submission is thus, at a minimum, the result of a will to not actively resist domination.

In order to understand precisely the relationship between submission and domination, it is important to see that the term "domination" is equivocal. When one talks about domination, one can refer either to a *relation*—for instance, male domination is the name commonly given to the relationship between the social group of men and the social group of women in a



Domination as a relation (1), domination as an action (2), and submission.

patriarchal society—or to an *action*—this male domination happens through actions of domination, and acts of domestic violence are among them. A relation of domination is a vertical, hierarchical, asymmetrical relationship between at least two agents in which one agent—the one who dominates—can decisively influence the actions of the other agent—the one who is dominated. Once this difference is apparent, what submission is appears clearly: in a relation of domination (that is domination in the sense 1) between an agent A and an agent B, there can be an action of domination (in the sense 2) of A over B and an action of submission of B to A.

There can be relations of domination with no submission—this is the case when domination happens through violence and constraint—and therefore where domination in the sense 1 relies only on domination in the sense 2. In that case, there is no submission in the sense that there is no real *will* to obey

from the person who obeys, since the alternative is obedience or death. A domination without submission is a domination grounded on violence and thus, by its very nature, is an unstable domination since as soon as violence disappears domination vanishes with it—contrary to a domination that would be grounded at least partly in a complicity of the dominated. It is also possible to imagine a situation in which there would be no action of domination (i.e., no domination in the sense 2) and where domination in the sense 1 would only rely on submission; this is what is commonly called voluntary submission. A possible example of this kind of submission is one in which a masochist seeks a woman who would agree to be his master, for instance, as it appears in the works of Sacher-Masoch, the Austrian writer from whose name the term "masochism" is derived. Most often, however, the relations of domination are produced by a mix of actions of domination and actions of submission.

With Beauvoir

The diagram of domination allows us to better grasp our subject: studying women's submission consists in studying the action or the situation of women when they take part, as inferiors, in a relation of domination that they do not resist. It implies looking at male domination not from the perspective of the dominants but from the perspective of those who submit *themselves*. Instead of describing women's subordination in an external and objective manner, it means wondering what it is for a woman to be a woman living in male domination and thus describing a subjective, from the bottom-up experience of domination. It

means purposefully not starting from the idea that submission would be in women's nature, or against women's nature, that it would be immoral, or the sign of an oppressed false consciousness shaped by patriarchy. To the contrary, the ambition of this book is to study, without preconceptions, the submission women experience, how it manifests itself, how it is lived, and how it can be explained.

In order to do so, the argument of this book progresses through a close reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*,[21] likely the most read and best-selling philosophical text of the twentieth century—probably even in the history of philosophy.[22] Yet its reception has been ambivalent: its philosophical importance began to be recognized when feminist theorists started distancing themselves from it and viewing it as outdated. The result is that the relevance of Beauvoir's analyses for understanding the current oppression of women has not received enough attention in recent years.[23] This book aims to demonstrate that the submission of women is a crucial topic for both feminism and philosophy and that Beauvoir's thinking provides deeply original, important, and relevant ways to understand it. In order to do so, this book provides a detailed philosophical analysis of *The Second Sex* to show the following:

(1) Beauvoir's conception of gender difference enables her to highlight and to historicize the relationship between femininity and submission.
(2) Beauvoir provides the first detailed account of what submission is thanks to her original appropriation of the phenomenological method.

(3) Beauvoir's theory of oppression as othering demonstrates that submission constitutes a social destiny for women to such an extent that women can even take pleasure in it.
(4) Beauvoir builds a philosophy of the body that shows that patriarchy makes women's bodies belong to men before belonging to women themselves.
(5) Beauvoir's theory of freedom explains both why women submit to men and how they could emancipate themselves.

This book is not primarily a book on Beauvoir's philosophy, but it argues that the best way to understand women's submission is to *think with Beauvoir*. Yet the depth and significance of Beauvoir's contributions cannot be fully appreciated in isolation from their intellectual context, as is always the case in philosophy. Therefore, the argument of the book leads us, at times, to discuss other philosophers with whom Beauvoir is in conversation, but only insofar as it helps our inquiry on submission. In using the philosophical analyses deployed in *The Second Sex* to understand women's submission, this book thus also aims to contribute to the philosophical scholarship on Beauvoir and to argue (against a view held by some contemporary feminist theorists) that her analyses are far from outdated and that her philosophy allows us to think more clearly about the world we live in and to make it more hospitable.[24]

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