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## A Different Voice in the Phenomenological Tradition: Simone de Beauvoir and the Ethic of Care

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### Introduction

In terms of her philosophical orientation, Simone de Beauvoir is usually identified merely as an existentialist. Up until now not enough attention has been paid to the phenomenological roots of her thought. Of course existentialism in its most well-known form, i.e., the early work of Jean-Paul Sartre, is itself an extension of the central phenomenological themes of Husserl and Heidegger. But Beauvoir, it can be argued, incorporates phenomenological perspectives into her work to an even greater degree than does Sartre. Witness, for instance, the way that she interweaves Merleau-Ponty's views about the lived body into her analysis of women's experience of their oppression in *The Second Sex*.<sup>1</sup> Another central feature of Beauvoir's work is the way that it incorporates the foundational phenomenological concept of the situated subject. A central tenet of phenomenology, fully validated by existentialism, is that the living subject always finds itself "in situation," that is, in a highly particular and particularized complex of circumstances. This insight founds much of Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex*, especially in the second volume of the work, titled in the original "L'expérience vécue."<sup>2</sup> Even Beauvoir's earlier writings on

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<sup>1</sup>See Kristana Arp, "Beauvoir's Concept of Bodily Alienation," in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 161–77.

<sup>2</sup>The present English translation of *The Second Sex* constantly obscures Beauvoir's connections to the phenomenological tradition. It has other problems as well. See Margaret A. Simons, "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing From *The Second Sex*," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 5 (1983): 559–64.

ethics, I have found, assume a phenomenological understanding of the subject as situated.<sup>3</sup>

That Beauvoir was a feminist is a fact that no one I think will contest. As Debra Bergoffen's paper in the present volume attests, one of Beauvoir's central accomplishments is to draw out the full implications of the concept of the situated subject by pointing out what other phenomenologists have overlooked—that the subject is always gendered. This revolutionary and long overdue insight that a woman's experience, at least given present-day social conditions, is necessarily different from a man's serves as the basis of the practice of feminist phenomenology, as other papers in this volume explore.

In this essay, however, I am going to concentrate not on Beauvoir as a founder of feminist phenomenology, but rather on Beauvoir as a precursor of the ethic of care tradition in feminist ethics. I will call on the phenomenological concept of the situated subject in order to speculate on why it is that Beauvoir's ethical thought exhibits this distinctive character. For one problem with placing Beauvoir's work within the purview of feminist ethics is that Beauvoir did her writing on ethics *before* she identified herself as a feminist (one might even say before feminism as we know it existed). Her essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which I will concentrate on here, was published in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Only after this did she begin the work that would become *The Second Sex*. And it was only when she began this work that she realized that the central defining fact about her life was that she was a woman.<sup>5</sup> However, even though she did not adopt an explicitly feminist perspective in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, there are marked parallels between the position that she takes there and the approach to ethics subsequently taken by feminist theorists in the ethic of care tradition.

In order to exhibit these parallels I am going to bring Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* into conjunction with a landmark work in the field of feminist ethics, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*.<sup>6</sup> Reading these two works together generates some surprising insights into Gilligan's work as well as into Beauvoir's. Furthermore, these two theorists, although widely separated from each other in terms of discipline and intellectual approach, not to mention time, can be brought into a dialogue on the nature and scope of the relation of care as well as its possible limitations. In what follows I will argue that Beauvoir, when considered as part of

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<sup>3</sup>I present the case for this in Kristana Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: The Existentialist Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991). Henceforth referred to as *EA*.

<sup>5</sup>See Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1964), 94.

<sup>6</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the ethic of care tradition, has some real contributions to make to further discussion of these central issues.

### I. Beauvoir's Ethics as an Ethic of Care

The pioneering new direction that Beauvoir takes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and her other work on ethics is to switch existentialism's focus on individual freedom to a concern with nurturing and defending the freedom of others.<sup>7</sup> In this regard her approach is much different from, if not directly opposed to the approach taken by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, others represent the only limitation on our freedom, a limitation that physical conditions alone can never impose. The presence of others displaces me from my central position as meaning-giver to my world. Worse, when the other turns his gaze on me, he strips me of my transcendence, alienating my subjectivity, which I can regain from him only by objectifying him in turn. For Sartre the original relation between subjects is one of hostile opposition, a struggle to the death, in Hegel's terms. Beauvoir subscribed to a similar view earlier in her philosophical development. For instance, she chose a quote from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "each consciousness seeks the death of the other," as an epigraph for her first published novel. And the epigraph is certainly appropriate for a novel in which one of the two central female characters kills the other in the last chapter.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, Beauvoir argues that others limit only my power to act, not my freedom.<sup>9</sup> In this work others' freedom is not directly opposed to my own, indeed for Beauvoir my freedom depends on and presupposes the freedom of others. She gives two interrelated and rather complex arguments for this central thesis, both drawn from the phenomenological tradition.

First, she draws on Husserl's theory of intentionality. According to Husserl, consciousness constitutes the meaning of objects in the world, and thus brings it about that the world exists as an organized totality. Beauvoir, following Sartre, identifies consciousness with freedom. So the way that she expresses Husserl's thesis is to assert that freedom always discloses a "human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings."<sup>10</sup> For Husserl these meanings can be

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<sup>7</sup>Beauvoir also wrote a long essay on ethics first published in 1944: *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944). Several shorter pieces on ethical themes published in *Les Temps Modernes* in the late forties were later published together in a small book: *L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>See Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, trans. Y. Moyse and R. Senhouse (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1954).

<sup>9</sup>*EA*, 91.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

traced back to consciousness, while for Beauvoir they originate in shared human practices. Because a meaningful world exists to be disclosed by human freedom, other free human agents must exist also. In this way my freedom presupposes the freedom of others.

Second, Beauvoir draws from Heidegger's analysis of temporality in *Being and Time*. Heidegger holds, she says, that "The future is the definite direction of a particular transcendence and it is so closely bound up with the present that it composes a single temporal form."<sup>11</sup> Her way of putting it is that freedom always throws itself into the future. But she goes on to point out how various historical movements were wrong to think of the future like a "Future-Thing" certain to come to pass. The future does not have the status of a present existent. It only exists as it is sketched out in the freely undertaken projects of human agents. And a person cannot create a viable future in isolation from others. The future that freedom directs itself towards must be brought into being through joint projects. Thus a person can only realize her freedom in interaction with others.

This connection between my freedom and the freedom of others is the source of my moral obligation to them. To be authentically free, to realize what Beauvoir calls moral freedom, is to desire and work for the freedom of others. To attain moral freedom is not just to be free—all humans are free for existentialism. It is to accept and actively desire freedom, to will oneself free. But one cannot be free in this way unless others are able to realize their moral freedom as well. Thus Beauvoir claims: "To will oneself free is also to will others free."<sup>12</sup>

Clearly Beauvoir's claim that my freedom is connected with others' freedom and that this connection is the source of moral obligations toward them represents quite a departure from the approach taken by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, one can see significant parallels between the position Beauvoir takes and the general approach that Gilligan has identified as an ethic of care. Gilligan characterizes the viewpoint of an ethic of care as one "where an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another."<sup>14</sup> This characterization certainly applies to Beauvoir's position.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>13</sup>Sartre does say something along these lines in his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism," which was written after Beauvoir published her first essay on ethics, "Pyrrhus et Cinéas," and before she started *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Beauvoir edited this essay for Sartre so the question can be raised whether Sartre was influenced by Beauvoir in it. In any case he went on to repudiate what he said there later in his life. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946). See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre by Himself*, trans. Richard Seaver (Outback Press, 1978), 74–75.

<sup>14</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 30.

If one accepts what Gilligan says about women's distinctive moral vision in *In a Different Voice*, it is not surprising that Beauvoir takes a different view of interpersonal relations from Sartre. Moral theory is necessarily rooted in experience and constantly refers back to experience. However, experience, as feminist phenomenology points out, is always gendered experience. Beauvoir was one of the first women writing philosophy who was taken at all seriously (ironically, this might have been precisely because of her connection to Sartre). Thus her work was one of the first places where the different voice alluded to by Gilligan could surface.

## II. Dependence and Bad Faith

Before I go on to discuss the potential contributions that Beauvoir's thought can make to the ethic of care tradition I want to explore one of the ways that Beauvoir might be seen to diverge from this tradition. For while there are significant parallels between the position that Beauvoir takes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and what has subsequently come to be called an ethic of care, I certainly do not mean to claim that the approaches taken by Beauvoir and a writer like Gilligan are essentially identical. One issue on which they appear at first glance to differ is the issue of dependence.

Beauvoir does appear to speak in that different voice that Gilligan celebrates when she says: "No existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others."<sup>15</sup> But in the sentences immediately following these Beauvoir continues: "The idea of such a dependence is frightening, and the separation and multiplicity of existents raise highly disturbing problems."<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir's horror of emotional dependence, expressed most strongly in her depiction of certain female characters in her fictional works,<sup>17</sup> is certainly not echoed in the stories of the women presented in *In a Different Voice*. Beauvoir sought after and achieved a high degree of independence in her own life and preached the value of independence for other women in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir also did not share the reservations about abortion expressed by several women in Gilligan's abortion decision study; instead she felt a deep ambivalence about motherhood.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>EA, 67.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. Translation amended.

<sup>17</sup>The character of Paule in *The Mandarins* and the central female characters in Beauvoir's short story collection, *The Woman Destroyed*, spring most immediately to mind. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, trans. L. Friedman (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956) and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

<sup>18</sup>See Julie K. Ward, "Beauvoir's Two Senses of 'Body' in *The Second Sex*," in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, 223–42 for a discussion of Beauvoir's attitudes toward maternity.

Nonetheless, there are some points of convergence in the treatments of the topic of dependence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *In a Different Voice*. For instance, further on in this same passage Beauvoir disparages those who, in their fear of their dependency on others, run from it and take refuge in the detached activities of critical thought. (She says it is men who do this, but it is hard to tell whether she means males specifically. Beauvoir wrote before the days of sex-neutral usage and used the terms “man” and “men” to refer to all humans.) For Beauvoir our dependence on others is a consequence of our freedom. To run from our dependence on others is to avoid the full realization of one’s freedom, which is equivalent to succumbing to what Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* calls bad faith. Interestingly enough, Beauvoir does not use the term “bad faith” in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and only rarely elsewhere, although she employs this concept of an evasion of one’s freedom there and throughout her work.<sup>19</sup>

Gilligan is also critical of a certain sort of emotional dependence she sees some women to be mired in that involves looking to others to make their choices for them. Women must overcome this dependence, she holds, in order to achieve a more mature understanding of what they owe to others. Gilligan does not uncritically promote the value of caring in women’s lives, a fact which is sometimes overlooked by her critics. Rather she depicts a process of moral evolution that women undergo in relation to their understanding of care. Gilligan does reject Kohlberg’s scheme of the stages of moral maturity, at least as far as women are concerned, but she replaces it with her own three stage scheme. In the first stage of the “sequence in the development of the ethic of care” a woman is concerned primarily with her own survival.<sup>20</sup> Then she comes to see this as selfish and goes on to equate morality with the conventional feminine posture of self-sacrifice. Gilligan dubs this stage the stage of goodness. In the third and final stage, the stage of truth, the woman develops “a new understanding of the interconnection between other and self” and care becomes something “self-chosen” for her.<sup>21</sup>

It is in characterizing the transition from the second to the third stage, the transition from goodness to truth, that Gilligan becomes critical of a certain kind of emotional dependence. In telling the story of Denise, who is struggling to make this transition, Gilligan alludes to “the psychology of dependence” in which Denise’s understanding of care was at first confined. Her assumption was “that she is responsible for the actions of others while others are responsible for the choices she

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<sup>19</sup>One recent book even charges that Sartre stole the idea of bad faith from Beauvoir. See Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 74.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

makes.<sup>22</sup> This understanding of responsibility is backwards, Gilligan says. Gilligan sounds an existentialist note when she asserts that the transition from goodness to truth is effected by accepting responsibility for one's own choices.<sup>23</sup>

The rationale that Denise at first gives for her action, like the reasoning initially engaged in by other participants in the abortion decision study, seems like a clear-cut case of bad faith. The first time she became pregnant by her married lover, Denise had an abortion only because he told her to do so. Later she blamed him for it. Another woman facing the prospect of a second abortion, for which she would feel much more guilt than for the first, went to the welfare office hoping they would refuse her financial support, thus "forcing" her to have the abortion. But the important thing for Gilligan is that both of these women came to see these strategies for what they were—ploys to evade responsibility for their own choices. The women eventually gave up the dishonesty involved in their pleas of victimization.<sup>24</sup> For this reason both women can be seen to be making the crucial transition to a more morally mature conception of care.

The phenomenon of self-deception or bad faith, then, makes an appearance in Gilligan's account of the perils of dependence as well as in Beauvoir's. Yet the way that bad faith enters into their respective accounts is quite different. Beauvoir describes how one can run from one's dependence on other humans by attempting to ascend to a timeless objective realm of universal truth. (I think that it is fair to say that this is more typically a male response in our culture.) The women whose stories Gilligan relates do not run from their dependence on others so much as try to hide from themselves through it.

Again, the concept of the situated subject can be called into play in order to account for the differences between these two attitudes towards dependence. Dependence on others was experienced as threatening by Beauvoir, whereas Gilligan's subjects find it to be a refuge. Unlike the women in Gilligan's studies, Beauvoir explicitly identified herself as an intellectual (or rather, more accurately, struggled to define herself as an intellectual against the background of the sexist conventions of her time).<sup>25</sup> Unlike them she was exposed to the various temptations and pretensions of the life of the mind. And as the intellectual domain was almost exclusively a male preserve at this point, for her to adopt more conventional feminine values would have threatened her precarious place there.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>25</sup>See Toril Moi, *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) for an analysis of these conventions.

### III. Interdependence and the Limits of Responsibility

Beauvoir shares the viewpoint of the ethic of care tradition because, while she might find the fact that human existence involves dependence on others frightening, she accepts it as a reality. Thus, although there are significant differences between Beauvoir and present-day writers in feminist ethics, they hold some basic assumptions in common. Furthermore, it is fruitful to see Beauvoir as a part of this tradition because her work contains insights that can be applied in further formulations of an ethic of care. One way to see this is to compare, again, Beauvoir's analysis of self-other relations in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to Gilligan's treatment of the same topic in *In a Different Voice*.

As I have shown, Gilligan sees emotional dependence to be deeply problematic for women. In place of dependence Gilligan explicitly holds out a new ideal for women to realize in their relations with others: interdependence. But Gilligan nowhere tells us what interdependence is like. However, she does specify at one point the conception of the relation between self and others she thinks should be rejected. To conceive the relation between self and others as one of opposition, she implies, is characteristic of a less mature stage in women's moral development and thus should be overcome. According to this oppositional model, another person always stands opposed to you with a separate set of claims that must be weighed against your own. Thus you have two options: you can either ignore or belittle the claims of others or you can privilege the claims of others, ignoring or belittling your own. This last option is the one most usually taken by those women whose understanding of care is confined within the conventional femininity of Gilligan's second stage:

This morality, though seen as arising from the interplay between self and others, is reduced to an opposition between self and other, tied in the end to dependence on others and equated with responsibility to care for them. The moral ideal is not cooperation or interdependence but rather the fulfillment of an obligation, the repayment of a debt by giving to others without taking anything for oneself.<sup>26</sup>

But Gilligan does not offer a positive characterization of this contrary ideal of interdependence. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, Beauvoir constructs a new model of self-other relations that can be used to understand what type of relation with others interdependence might involve. Granted, Beauvoir does not speak of interdependence. Instead she develops her own distinctive concept of moral

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<sup>26</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 139.

freedom, a moral ideal to be realized by accepting one's own freedom and actively engaging oneself with other free individuals. Drawing on her familiarity with different philosophical theories of intersubjectivity, Beauvoir describes the type of bond with others realized in moral freedom. Basically she takes the existentialist concept of the project, always conceptualized as an individual project by Sartre, and reconceptualizes it as a joint project (although she herself does not use such terminology). To be genuinely free, to achieve what Beauvoir calls moral freedom, the individual needs to interact with other genuinely free individuals in joint projects.

Such joint projects give meaning to the world and sketch out a future toward which each participant can aim. According to this conception, individual selves do not possess separate and conflicting sets of claims, which is the conception of self-other relations that Gilligan sees at work behind women's immature understanding of care. Beauvoir says, "a freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others."<sup>27</sup> In this way individual interests become shared interests, although certainly the viewpoint and interests of one interconnected group of free existences can conflict with that of another group. This type of interconnection between individuals might be what Gilligan means by interdependence or the morally mature understanding of the relation between self and others. Even the family could be seen ideally to involve this sort of common commitment to a joint project. Of course this ideal is not often realized in present-day circumstances.

Granted, to use Beauvoir's characterization of the bond with others realized in moral freedom to further specify what Gilligan means by interdependence is to take the ethic of care tradition in a different direction than it has gone up to now. For Beauvoir insists in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that there are limits to the responsibilities we bear toward others, whereas Gilligan nowhere mentions such limits. Beauvoir conceives the interdependence that characterizes moral freedom to be based on the free commitment of each individual to the joint project. If another refuses to make any such commitment, then that potentially limits the obligations that you have to him or her.

Furthermore, if another opposes your chosen project or attempts to undermine your moral freedom—your ability to join in joint projects—then your obligation to respect this person's freedom comes to an end. Beauvoir says:

We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns it. A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>EA, 90.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 91.

For example, Beauvoir's thinking on this issue can be applied to the case of the woman called Ellen interviewed in Gilligan's abortion decision study. Ellen's lover who made her pregnant thought, Gilligan reports without further comment, that she "should have the child and raise it without either his presence or financial support."<sup>29</sup> From Beauvoir's perspective one can question why his wishes should be taken into account.

Another way that the responsibility we take for others in moral freedom is circumscribed for Beauvoir is that we only have the responsibility to defend and nurture others' *freedom*; we are not necessarily responsible for what they do with that freedom. This issue is central to Beauvoir's novel about the French Resistance, *The Blood of Others*, where the central character sends his lover H el ene on a mission that leads to her death. The responsibility he claims for this outcome is denied when in her dying words H el ene insists that she chose for herself.<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir's thinking on this issue can be applied to the case of the woman called Denise in Gilligan's abortion decision study. Gilligan remarks critically of Denise that she assumes "that she is responsible for the action of others while others are responsible for the choices she makes."<sup>31</sup> By putting Gilligan and Beauvoir together we can see the real reason that Denise got it, in Gilligan's words, "backwards." Although a woman does have responsibilities to others, she is not responsible for the *actions* of others, whereas she is responsible for her own choices.

### Conclusion

There are points of convergence and divergence between Beauvoir's ethics and an ethic of care. Nonetheless, the similarities between the position Beauvoir takes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and what Gilligan describes as an ethic of care are striking. Because Beauvoir's thought is rooted in the phenomenological movement, she has a different theoretical perspective than Gilligan. But Beauvoir herself was a situated subject: her moral theory reflects her own experience of the world. Perhaps Beauvoir's experience of interpersonal relations was not so very much different from that of Gilligan's female subjects after all. Furthermore, I contend that those junctures where Beauvoir's analysis goes beyond what Gilligan says are precisely the places where Beauvoir's thought has a real contribution to make to the ethic of care tradition. I have also stressed throughout Beauvoir's strong and enduring connection to phenomenological schools of thought. That Beauvoir as a

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<sup>29</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 89.

<sup>30</sup>See *The Blood of Others*, trans. Y. Moys e and R. Senhouse (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948). See also Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 1988), whose interpretation of this novel brings this aspect of it to the fore.

<sup>31</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 82.

phenomenological thinker has an important contribution to make to the field of feminist ethics shows how the phenomenological tradition can serve as an important resource for feminist thought. As a gendered subject and as a phenomenologist, Beauvoir was a practitioner of feminist phenomenology even in her ethical writings of the 1940's, that is, long before anyone had conceived of such a field.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>I presented a preliminary version of this paper, "Can There be a Feminist Existentialist Ethics?" at the meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in Spring 1995. I want to thank my commentator, Julien S. Murphy, for her feedback. I also want to thank the Release Time Committee of Long Island University, Brooklyn for their continued support.