

Chapter 5

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHICS

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1. BACKGROUND

Thanks to the recent efforts of feminist scholars, Simone de Beauvoir's fame as the lifelong companion of existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is slowly giving way to a recognition of the originality of her own work as a philosopher, autobiographer, novelist, essayist, editor, and political activist. Her ethics, in particular, has received a great deal of attention, not only because she offers the first formal articulation of an existential ethics in her 1947 book, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (published in English in 1948 as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and hereafter abbreviated as EA), but also because the moral challenges she discusses there and elsewhere in her works seem as appropriate today as they were half a century ago.

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris on January 9, 1908. Aside from summer vacations at her relatives' homes in the French countryside as a young girl, a couple of years spent teaching in lycées outside of Paris after she obtained her *agrégation* in philosophy at the Sorbonne, and her regular travels as an adult, Beauvoir resided in Paris throughout her life and died there on April 14, 1986. As a member of the French Resistance, Beauvoir remained in Paris during the difficult years of the German Occupation, and toward the end of the war, she co-founded and co-edited with Sartre, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and others the political journal *Les Temps Modernes*.

Beauvoir's best known philosophical work, *Le deuxième sexe* (published in English in 1952 as *The Second Sex* and hereafter referred to as SS), was first published in France by Gallimard in two volumes in 1949. In this book, Beauvoir uses an existential framework to address the question "What does it mean to *be* a woman?" Focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the situation of Western women, her text incorporates insights from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, literature, sociology, anthropology, and biology.

Given its fame today as a "landmark" feminist text, it is easy to forget that the initial public reception of *The Second Sex* was far from positive. Indeed, the text

was sharply criticized by the media and by some of Beauvoir's own colleagues for the unconventionality of its subject matter as well as for the brutally frank condemnations Beauvoir offers of such venerated social institutions as marriage and motherhood. American feminists in the 1960s such as Betty Friedan took Beauvoir to task for her repeated assertion that the housewife leads an immanent existence, but these same women were nonetheless strongly influenced by her work, as have been the generations of feminist scholars that followed them.

After the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir decided to stop writing philosophy and turned her attention exclusively to literature. Philosophy, however, was never left behind. Her literary works develop the implications of central existential themes such as intersubjectivity, freedom, responsibility, death, and deception. Interestingly, Sartre claimed that she was the better philosopher of the two of them, while she claimed to prefer Sartre's literature to his philosophy.

In the 1990s, there has been what can legitimately be called a Beauvoir "renaissance." New generations of feminist scholars have been attracted to her work, not merely for its significant historical interest, but also because of her provocative analyses of gender, race, sexuality, and class oppression. Despite her protestations that her ideas were an extension of Sartre's and not original in their own right, recent Beauvoir scholars have shown the ways in which she departs from a Sartrean framework and, in so doing, extends the possibilities of existential-phenomenological thought.

By examining Beauvoir's ethics as it is explicitly presented in her early work and then turning to its nuanced development in her later work, we can best appreciate her sophisticated understanding of the ambiguities that characterize human existence from one moment to the next, ambiguities that nonetheless demand an unambiguous, ethical response.

2. CONFLICTS OF INTERPRETATION

With the recent surge of interest in Beauvoir's oeuvre, it should not surprise us if special attention has been paid to her ethics. After all, concerns about the responsibilities we have to ourselves, to others, and to our shared situation extend throughout her work. Moreover, one of her best-known philosophical texts, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, seeks to provide a concrete analysis of the ongoing demands of an ethical life. But despite the serious attention Beauvoir gives to the ethical dimensions of human existence—dimensions that cut to the very heart of our being with and for others—the ethics she offers often raises more questions than it answers.

Commentators have provided various readings of Beauvoir's ethics. These readings have appropriately focused not only on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but also

on other texts that take up ethical issues, such as *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944) with its discussion of the inevitability of violence and oppression and *The Second Sex* with its focus on the constraints placed upon women's freedom by their existence within, and subjection to, a set of interlocking patriarchal social systems. Yet despite this interest in the ethical implications of her work, there has been relatively little agreement among Beauvoir's commentators about what the central claims of her ethics are, or even about the role women, men, society, and women's own bodies play in an individual's possibilities for living ethically. A point on which there is relative agreement, however, is that for Beauvoir the ethical cannot be restricted to a separate sphere of existence, since ethical issues underlie all of the projects in which we engage. In other words, we cannot view the ethical as coming into play only on some occasions and not others, since it concerns the very manner in which we live our bodies, our relations with others, and our situations. This point of consensus has given rise to alternative readings, however, precisely because the ethical informs and is informed by all of the other key concepts that motivate Beauvoir's work, including transcendence, immanence, choice, commitment, freedom, oppression, consciousness, the body, the Other, and the situation.

One's understanding of the specific moral challenges posed by Beauvoir's conception of the ethical depends, I would argue, upon which aspect of human existence one takes as a starting point for one's analysis. For instance, if one begins from the standpoint of freedom and transcendence, two seemingly essential requirements for ethical existence for Beauvoir as well as for Sartre, then one's emphasis will be placed on how specific individuals can realize what Beauvoir calls "moral freedom." By contrast, if one focuses on the ethical demands placed upon us by the existence of others, then the emphasis will shift from the subjective to the intersubjective domain.

The consequences of emphasizing the subjective dimensions of freedom rather than its intersubjective dimensions (or vice versa) can be quite serious. For if one concentrates too narrowly on those places where Beauvoir describes freedom as the transcendence of the givens of one's own situation, the danger is that her ethics appears to be too solipsistic since the attainment of moral freedom appears to be a purely individual project. On the other hand, if one concentrates too heavily on the passages where she emphatically maintains that one's freedom cannot be achieved unless others are also free, then freedom (and an ethical existence) seems impossible to achieve, since millions of oppressed peoples continue to exist in the world. Rather than privilege one domain at the expense of the other, it is essential to appreciate that for Beauvoir, attaining one's moral freedom is never merely an individual project, but always a social and political project as well. Thus the very project of "willing one's freedom" always occurs within a broader context in which my freedom both enables and is enabled by, constrains and is constrained by, the freedom of others.

To do justice to the ways in which “willing one’s freedom” is both an individual and a collective project, let us begin by examining Beauvoir’s ethics, first from the standpoint of what she, following Sartre, calls being-for-itself, and then from the standpoint of what both call being-for-others. After examining these two dimensions of her ethics, I will address another of Beauvoir’s ethical concerns that has hitherto received relatively little attention, namely, the relationship between morality and deception.

3. FREEDOM AND FACTICITY

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir repeatedly suggests that the exercise of moral freedom involves an affirmation of our transcendence in the face of the continual constraints offered by others, by the contingencies of the situation, and by the demands of our own bodies. In some of the most famous early passages from this text, the Sartrean tension between the transcendence associated first and foremost with the consciousness of the for-itself and the immanence associated with the materiality of the in-itself is explicitly invoked. “The goal which my freedom aims at,” Beauvoir tells us, “is conquering existence across the always inadequate density of being” (EA, 30).

My transcendence only becomes meaningful, for Beauvoir, if it is positively assumed through a concrete engagement with the givens of the situation. The situation therefore provides the content as well as the context for an ethical existence, but my ability to detach myself consciously (through reflection) from my situation in order to evaluate the possibilities it presents to me is absolutely essential to the ethical “justification” of my existence. On this account, the situation provides a necessary obstacle to my freedom. The situation is necessary because it forces me to engage my freedom concretely, which is the only way in which my freedom can become meaningful to myself and to others. It is also an obstacle because my freedom must triumph over the constraints the situation places upon the realization of my projects. As a necessary obstacle, however, there is always a danger that the situation will triumph over me, and that I will fail to transcend it but will instead become mired in its immanence.

Beauvoir herself recognizes this possibility. She describes it as contributing to the constant threat of failure that haunts my existence from one moment to the next. For as Beauvoir makes clear, there are not one but many ways to fail: “one may hesitate to make oneself a lack of being, one may withdraw before existence, or one may falsely assert oneself as being, or assert oneself as nothingness. One may realize his freedom only as an abstract independence, or, on the contrary, reject with despair the distance which separates us from being. All errors are possible since man is a negativity, and they are motivated by the anguish he feels in the face of his freedom. Concretely, men slide incoherently from one attitude to another” (EA, 34).

Undoubtedly, these are all very different kinds of failures, and Beauvoir goes on to discuss them through the examples she provides of the subman, the serious man, the nihilist, and the adventurer. The subman clings to his facticity, thereby failing to recognize and act upon his transcendence, while the serious man's unquestioning acceptance of a set of fixed values absolves him of the need to take responsibility for them. The nihilist responds to the anxiety of his freedom by attempting to *be* nothing (EA, 52). The adventurer comes closest to living ethically because the meaningfulness of his actions flows from the commitments he has made to them, but he operates too solipsistically to be granted ethical standing unless he wills the freedom of others at the same time that he wills his own freedom.

In all these examples, with the exception of the adventurer, the individual's failure to become ethical is directly due to his failure to live the tension between freedom and facticity; instead of affirming this tension as an inescapable feature of human existence, he tries to resolve it by negating his freedom (subman), by negating his facticity (nihilist), or by sacrificing his freedom to a self-created facticity (the serious man). The adventurer alone does justice to both his freedom and his facticity, but he too fails if he does not recognize that his own freedom depends upon his securing the freedom of others.

The failure of the adventurer is qualitatively different from the failures of these others because it highlights the indispensable role the Other plays in determining the ethicality of my existence. Indeed, the limitations of viewing the tension between freedom and facticity as the sole ground for Beauvoir's ethics is revealed especially poignantly at this point in her discussion. Before moving on to discuss the possibilities and failures associated specifically with the Other, however, it is important to take stock of what is at stake in Beauvoir's depiction of ethical existence as seeking to affirm freedom as an "absolute end" over and against the factual demands of the situation.

Precisely because this account is so Sartrean, understanding the ethical primarily as an exercise of transcendence over the immanent aspects of existence exposes Beauvoir to the same criticisms Sartre faced regarding the dualist ontology of *L'être et le néant* (translated into English as *Being and Nothingness* and hereafter abbreviated as BN). Not merely the situation as such, but also the individual's own body is relegated to the sphere of immanence that threatens, if one's will is not strong enough, to lead one to abandon the movement of transcendence. Indeed, the claims Beauvoir makes about women's bodies, for instance, in "The Data of Biology" chapter of *The Second Sex*, frequently relegate their bodies to the status of immanent objects that represent an ongoing threat to their transcendence as this latter is apprehended both by the individual herself and by others.

It is paradoxical, Beauvoir observes, that female members of the species that is the most independent and individualized are also the most enslaved by the



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