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Morality from Meaninglessness in Simone de Beauvoir's "The Ethics of Ambiguity"

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Morality from Meaninglessness in Simone de Beauvoir's The Ethics of Ambiguity

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
the College of Arts and Humanities.

By
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Under the mentorship of *Drs. Elizabeth Butterfield* and *Finbarr Curtis*

ABSTRACT

In her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, French existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir delves into the human condition and the possibilities for morality that arise from her understanding of such. Beginning with the assumption that there is no externally objective meaning or value to humanity, Beauvoir presents humanity as fundamentally free to create meaning and values for themselves. Beauvoir argues that humans are all simultaneously free to choose, yet limited in our choice by the facts of our situations, a paradoxical state of being she labels as our fundamental ambiguity. It is because of this ambiguity, she asserts, that we must will ourselves free in order to intentionally create meaning for ourselves and assume our ambiguity. It is only once one has done this that they can become genuine moral agents. However, Beauvoir concludes that one who denies the freedom of others has an evil and contradictory will, for one must will all humans free in order to be free themselves. Through an examination of her use of the word "evil" and the extent to which her process of assuming ambiguity translates into the objective existence of any value, particularly the "absolute" of freedom, this paper seeks to determine whether or not Beauvoir is justified in asserting the existence of good and evil, particularly in declaring any act or intention "absolutely evil."

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Morality from Meaninglessness in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

"There exists no absolute value before the passion of man."

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

How ought I to behave? In pondering this question philosophers have created moral theories for the sorts of obligations they claim humans have to behave according to a certain set of principles or values. But what many of these theories rest on is the assumption that there *is* some fundamental, universal moral obligation to impose on humanity, existing somewhere outside of human creation of meaning. That is, many philosophers, even those who believe morality arises within the subject, have still posited the objectivity of moral obligation itself. However, not all philosophers have accepted this initial assumption as a given truth. There are those who challenge this initial assertion of value and posit instead an initial state of amorality for individuals. Such a claim seems to abandon the possibility of absolute value, something which intuitively seems necessary for the existence of ethics at all.

Simone de Beauvoir, a twentieth century existentialist philosopher, wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as an exposition of ethics from this perspective of initial meaninglessness for humanity in the philosophy of existentialism. Prior to her work, such thinkers as Fyodor Dostoevsky had explored the absurdity of human existence in the absence of any external value systems (like a God), and with this inferred the absence of concrete morality. However, Beauvoir approaches the human condition very differently, claiming that human existence is fundamentally ambiguous rather than absurd. It is from

this distinction that Beauvoir founds her existentialist ethics, for rather than positing the meaninglessness of human existence, Beauvoir understands human existence as existence with an initial *lack* of meaning.

In this thesis I will examine the ethical claims Beauvoir makes in her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and determine whether she is successful in creating moral obligations for humans. I will then seek to determine whether such an ethics is possible from a perspective of initial meaninglessness, or whether moral obligations established through this perspective are unjustifiable altogether. I will argue that Beauvoir's system of ethics is immensely valuable as an attempt to create morality out of meaninglessness, and fulfills her goal insofar as she was attempting to create a system of guidance for moral action, but that her foundational assumptions are not supported well enough to establish her system concretely.

The Sartrean Man

Much of the work done by Simone de Beauvoir was in conjunction with or as an addition to works published by Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* being no exception. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* served as the grounds for Beauvoir's ethics, allowing her to explore humanity's struggle for 'being' through the terms already laid forth by Sartre, and using this as a springboard for her ethics. It is therefore necessary to explore Sartre's ontology in order to understand how Beauvoir uses a similar idea as the foundation for her existentialist ethics. As noted by Thomas C. Anderson, the fundamentals of Sartre's ontology relevant to the construction of a theory of ethics

include the individual's desire to be God, and their failure to do so.¹ By this claim that man seeks to be God, Sartre intends that people wish to have a justified, necessary existence.² That is, a person is a contingent being whose existence as a being is meaningless before one creates meaning for oneself. However, this meaninglessness is not inherent in human existence, for in order for there to be meaninglessness there must be a *lack* of meaning where there might be some meaning. The individual thus "makes himself a lack of being" so that they can overcome their assumed meaninglessness and justify their own existence. Here the individual's desire to be God is evident, for only a God can "escape contingency through being its own foundation," but to create necessity of being from contingency is impossible and contradictory. Thus, Sartre declares that the human passion which drives one to desire to be God is "useless," for it can never attain an impossible end.

This does not, however, make the assigning of meaning to one's being impossible, for the individual can still create meaning in the gap made by the lack of meaning one has created for oneself. And while none can become God, the individual still seeks to overcome their contingency and become a being-in-itself. That is, all still desire to be in complete coincidence with themselves, existing entirely in conjunction with their will. It is necessary, then, in order for the individual to found meaning oneself, for it to come from oneself, for only then can they be self-identical. Though one's will lacks external justification and "has no reason to will itself," the individual is still able to

¹ Thomas Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), 16.

² Anderson, *Sartrean Ethics*, 17.

give oneself “reasons for being that he does not have.”³ Indeed, Beauvoir asserts that “man makes himself a lack of being *in order that* there might be being,” where one is intentionally ascribing meaninglessness to oneself so that they may create a meaning for oneself. This meaning is, of course, not objectively assigned, leaving the creation of meaning up to the individual entirely.

For Beauvoir, this desire to create meaning is inherent in all humans, and it is through this initial a-meaningful state of human existence that our ambiguity is made clear. Building on Sartre, Beauvoir uses his conception of the human condition as the groundworks for human ambiguity. According to Sartre, each human is both facticity and transcendence, meaning that each person has aspects of their existence that are situational and factual, as well as having an internal will to transcend one’s facticity and determine one’s own future. A being-in-itself, like an inkwell, is pure facticity, for it is entirely quantifiable and understandable through the facts of its existence. A being-for-itself would be a God, a pure transcendence, enclosed entirely in its will and in complete coincidence with itself. Humans are neither of these completely, for we are both at once, and each one limits the other. This is our ambiguity. It is up to the individual, then, to determine how they will assume this ambiguity.

Recognizing Ambiguity and Assuming Failure

Existentialism, Beauvoir states, is the best way to explore this ambiguity, for “from the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity.”⁴ In

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1948), 12.

⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 9.

this way, existentialism deals with the truth of human existence. Through delineating the truth of one's assignment of a lack and subsequent creation of meaning, Beauvoir reveals the basis of her ethics. Because the individual seeks meaning where one creates for oneself a lack of meaning, and because their hopes of being like a God will never succeed in making them into such a being, there is room for an ethics, for it is in humanity's very failure that an ethics arises. "Without failure, no ethics," says Beauvoir, for if a person were already perfectly in coincidence with oneself through the fulfillment of their passions and facticity simultaneously, then "having-to-be" would have no meaning.⁵ After all, "one does not offer an ethics to a God," the very embodiment of perfect coincidence with the self.⁶

Existentialism, then, allows the individual to take on "the task of realizing" one's ambiguity.⁷ While humans will always fail to be God, it is possible for one to desire the tension created through this, for one's very failure defines them as human, and they are thus able to assert their existence as human. One is in this way converted from a lack of being to a "positive existence" through the assumption of their failure, which, if they are content with their existence, allows one to coincide "exactly with himself."⁸ That is, the individual is able to assume their ambiguous nature and assert their fundamental failure as their reason for being, hence justifying their own existence and establishing oneself as an absolute.* Thus the individual's vain attempt to 'be' is no longer useless, but "finds its

⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 10.

⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 10.

⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13.

⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13.

*For Beauvoir, an absolute is that which is self-justified, needing no external justification for existence.

validity insofar as it is a manifestation of existence.”⁹ It is through this assumption of failure that the individual rejoins oneself, but only so far as they are able to accept their failure to perfectly ‘be.’ Only by putting their own will aside can one recognize the truth of their existence, and assert their own existence as an absolute which “must seek its justification within itself and not suppress itself.”¹⁰ Then one’s instincts, desires, plans, and passion are incapable of failing because they have not set up as the ultimate ends any absolute “toward which [one’s] transcendence thrusts itself.”¹¹ Rather, the individual considers such things in conjunction with their own freedom, which projects them. Thus, the “genuine man” refuses to accept absolutes outside of himself.

This rejection of foreign absolutes is the fundamental action of the genuine man, for looking to an external absolute to justify and necessitate one’s existence is to disregard the truth of one’s condition. Only the individual who lives genuinely then can be a genuine moral agent, for only the genuine person sets up values for oneself through their honest assumption of ambiguity. That is, the genuine individual recognizes the truth and limitations of their human condition and creates values through this assumption of their ambiguity. It is only the genuine person, then, who is capable of advancing out of amorality into active moral agency, and therefore into the domain of an ethical system.

As such, one who exists genuinely must constantly agree not to simply ‘be,’ “abandon[ing] the dream of inhuman objectivity.”^{12*} With this rejection of foreign

⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13.

¹⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13.

¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

¹² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

*By ‘inhuman objectivity,’ Beauvoir means pure facticity (an inanimate object) or, like a God, perfectly coinciding with the self (pure transcendence *and* pure facticity simultaneously).

absolutes comes the rejection, too, of foreign values. According to Beauvoir, the genuine person will “refuse to believe in unconditioned values which would set themselves up athwart his freedom like things.”¹³ Values established outside of the individual and in no relation to their freedom can have no genuine meaning for the genuine person. Rather, “value is this lack-being of which freedom *makes itself* a lack; and it is because the latter makes itself a lack that value appears.”¹⁴ That is, value is not absolute, and thus lacks being, but just as one makes oneself a lack of meaning in order to create meaning, one’s freedom makes itself a lack of value in order to create value. As Beauvoir states, “it is desire which creates the desirable, and the project which sets up the end.”¹⁵ In this way, “it is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged.”¹⁶ Thus for the individual, who exists and outside of which nobody else does (for nonexistence is not anything), “it is not a question of wondering whether his presence in the world is useful, whether life is worth being lived.... It is a matter of knowing whether he wants to live and under what conditions.”¹⁷ It is up to the individual, then, to determine those conditions and seek to realize them.*

¹³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

¹⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

¹⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15.

¹⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15.

¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15.

*In reference to conditions, Beauvoir is referring to one’s creation of the historical facticity of oneself and all others through their actions in the present. These conditions are not material, but situational, whereby one’s actions shape and limit the possibilities for their future actions. This will be explained further under the section “Realization of Freedom.”

Responsibility for the World

The moral weight placed on the individual for the conditions one lives in is the point at which Beauvoir most vehemently opposes the ‘all-permissibility’ type morality addressed by Dostoevsky.^{18*} While both Beauvoir and Dostoevsky assert the freedom of humanity in lieu of any external absolute, the latter implies everything to be permissible, while the former puts it into the hands of individuals to decide for themselves the sort of world in which they are willing to live.

Proponents of ultimate a-morality such as Dostoevsky may ask, “if man is free to define for himself the conditions of a life which is valid in his own eyes, can he not choose whatever he likes and act however he likes?”¹⁹ Beauvoir says no; the very opposite of authorizing all license must be the case, “because man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements.”²⁰ The individual alone is purely accountable for their actions because “he bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself.” Thus where an external power like God could erase or compensate for one’s faults, a world in which there is no God leaves every person to suffer the consequences of their actions. This is the point at which Beauvoir begins to build her ethics from the foundation of a lack of objective, external value.

¹⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976).

*It is worth noting that not everyone agrees that Dostoevsky made such a claim, including Slavoj Zizek in his opinion article “If there is a God, then anything is permitted.” For the purposes of Beauvoir’s argument, however, I am operating under her assumption that Dostoevsky did at least imply such a claim as all-permissibility in the absence of external value.

Slavoj, Zizek, “If there is a God, then anything is permitted,” *ABC* (April 17, 2012).
<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/if-there-is-a-god-then-anything-is-permitted/10100616>

¹⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15.

²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 16.

Because the individual has no external objectivity to hold them accountable then, it is up to one to create a world in which they would be willing to live. Beauvoir asserts that according to existentialism the world we live in is not a given world but “a world willed by man, insofar as his will expresses his genuine reality.”²¹ On the surface this seems like a reiteration of Dostoevsky’s assertion of all-permissibility. However, as we will see later, it is the distinction of what is *genuine* that most pointedly separates existentialism from this all-permissibility. At the present, it is important to emphasize the rejection of foreign absolutes being the event that shifts the responsibility for not only oneself but also some aspect of the factual situation around them (i.e. the conditions in which one lives and acts) onto the individual.

It is worth noting that, beyond rejecting absolutes outside of oneself, Beauvoir also asserts that it is impossible for an objective ethics to exist at all because every person is separated by individual experience and subjectivity, such that no external collectivity of the whole would be possible. It is because of this that “an ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.”²²

Attempts to create universal ethics from human subjectivity having failed to solve the problem of ethicality, this problem is still left unresolved. However, Beauvoir claims that it is precisely *because* there is still a problem to solve that ethics can even exist.²³

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 17.

²² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 18.

²³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 18.

Thus any valid system of ethics must be one which recognizes the separation of individuals from one another while still establishing a guiding principle applicable to all.* Freedom becomes this guiding principle on which Beauvoir builds her ethics, for it is the one value intrinsic to all people and therefore the one and only absolute.** To regard freedom as a whim, then, is to regard it dishonestly, for it is precisely because of humanity's freedom that we alone have the responsibility to create a world we want to live in, a world in which the conditions of one's life coincide with the desires they have for the conditions they'd like to live in. As will be shown, this responsibility to oneself is then extended to all others as well, allowing Beauvoir to establish a principle upon which her ethics can be applied to all of humanity.

Realization of Freedom

How does the individual's freedom shape their ethics? Are humans situated in such a way that, as Marx claimed, the undesirability of a situation is imposed upon the subject, moving them to express their will in opposition to these alienating conditions through revolution?²⁴ Beauvoir thinks not, for each subject has possession of their own will and is not imposed upon by objective, external meaning embedded in each situation. Rather, meaning "surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project."²⁵ One is not, then, a passive subject whose will is influenced by their situations,

*That is, rather than attempting to create a universal code of ethics with established rules and maxims, Beauvoir sought to establish her ethics of ambiguity as a system of guidance for moral actions.

**This will be explained in more detail in the next section.

²⁴ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>

²⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 20.

but one who judges the desirability of their situations through the extent to which such situations reflect one's own thrusting towards being. The individual is positioned in the world not as an existent whose actions reflect the meaning of external conditions, but as an actor in control of their own agency.

Because the individual is not then 'mechanical,' one "must be conscious of his own freedom and the freedom of others."²⁶ Only then are people able to "become indignant or to admire," passing judgments and assigning responsibility to others for their actions.²⁷ As an ethics, existentialism posits that, contrary to denying the individual the ability to wish for anything different when one realizes oneself as free, the individual discovers "a principle of action whose range will be universal" when one turns toward their own freedom.²⁸ Beauvoir asserts that this principle is revealed through the will for one's disclosure of being, which the genuine man is capable of coinciding with. Through this desire for disclosure of being, "the world becomes present by [one's] presence in it."²⁹ That is, by separating oneself from the world as an individual actor (disclosing one's being), the individual is able to assert oneself as a freedom. This freedom, then, is "the source from which all significations and values spring," and the "original condition of all justification of existence."³⁰

Here Beauvoir reveals as *the* universal principle freedom itself, not as an external absolute but one intrinsic to the very condition of humanity. Thus, only freedom can apply to everyone genuinely, and only freedom can justify values or existence. Beauvoir

²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 21.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 21.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 23.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 23.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 24.

states that “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision.”³¹ Through the disclosure of one’s being and the simultaneous realization of one’s freedom, the individual’s freedom sets itself up as an absolute from which all values spring.

A Role for Evil

If the individual must be genuine to will oneself free, and must will oneself free to be genuinely moral, is it possible to have an evil will? To answer this, Beauvoir sets herself up against Kantian ethics, the epitome of rational, moral factualism in which there are clear moral rights and wrongs.³² Beauvoir claims that despite this position of moral factualism, “it is very difficult to account for an evil will” in Kantian ethics because the individual establishes moral values through pure rationality, completely autonomously, whereby it would be contradictory for the will to “expressly reject the law which it gives to itself.”³³ It does not seem possible, in Kantism, to deliberately act in a way contrary to the moral laws one has set up for oneself through reason.

Thus while both existentialism and Kantism are humanisms that allow for the establishment of values by the individual (and in fact require that values be established in this way), existentialism breaks from Kantism in the understanding of the fundamental condition of humanity: While Kant asserted the initial existence of a person as a positive will, existentialism asserts that humans are first defined as a negativity, from which one must establish oneself (one’s freedom) as a positivity, i.e. willing oneself free. That is, for Kant humans are initially free to rationally determine the moral laws, whereas

³¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 24.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 33.

existentialism claims that humans initially have the potential to be free but must positively assert themselves as free to express that freedom. Because of this, the individual has within them “a perpetual playing with the negative, and he thereby escapes himself, he escapes his freedom,” allowing humans to remain a negativity indefinitely or revert to negativity at any point, and with this allowing the possibility of an evil will.³⁴

Beauvoir concludes from this that existentialism is “the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place” for it gives “a real role to evil.”³⁵ Where metaphysics (e.g. external value types) reduces evil to error, and other humanisms (e.g. Kantism) cannot account for evil, existentialism explains the role of evil and the dangers of real failures. Because there are real consequences to the actions and decisions of every person, there are real dangers for every individual. Additionally, because every person begins existing as a negativity, it is possible for people to make bad decisions through dishonestly regarding their own existence, motivated by “the anguish he feels in the face of his freedom.”³⁶ How then does one establish an evil will? To understand this, we must first explore Beauvoir’s understanding of the ways in which one may even become moral.

Leaving Behind Childhood

According to Beauvoir, life as a child is morally simple as compared to adulthood. A child accepts from the beginning the values imposed upon them from the authority figures in their life, and with those the acceptance of absolute goods and evils. Still, the child is free to “play at being,” feeling that the consequences of his actions and

³⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 33.

³⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 34.

³⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 34.

whims affect only himself, having no disruptive effect on the established world around him; the child is “protected against the risk of existence.”³⁷ As a child, one can imagine oneself as a completed being, a fully realized project, without the risk of imposing upon any other’s project. Thus like the Sartrean waiter who plays at being “waiter” in its entire essence, the child can play at being whatever they imagine.³⁸ Even if the child’s life is situationally undesirable, they are still able to escape the anguish of freedom because “his whims and his faults concern only him.”³⁹

However, for most people this “infantile” world does not last beyond childhood. Somewhere in adolescence, Beauvoir claims, people recognize the hypocrisy and flaws in the figures they took as absolute authority figures, and realize that the values that had been set up for them by these figures are really human-made.⁴⁰ That is, in the words of Clementine Beauvais, “in childhood, one is kept under the illusions, carefully created by adults, that universal moral principles exist,” but in leaving childhood this illusion is shattered.⁴¹ It is through this realization that one can no longer live entirely free from responsibility for the world around them; they are cast into adulthood and thus into the realm of those who have a real effect on the world around them. In leaving childhood behind one discovers their own subjectivity and that of others. It is at this moment that the individual must decide: how will I respond to the discovery of my freedom?

³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 36.

³⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington House Press, 1956), 59, <http://dhspriority.org/kenny/PhilTexts/Sartre/BeingAndNothingness.pdf>

³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 36.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 39.

⁴¹ Clementine Beauvais, “Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguity of Childhood,” *Paragraph* 38.3 (2015): 332.

Every person who recognizes their own existence, Beauvoir says, casts oneself into the world by making oneself a lack of being, but “contributes to reinvesting it with human signification.”⁴² That is, one discloses some aspect of being for oneself and finds in their existence in the world sources of that being. Some people, she argues, do not ever make the first step toward recognizing their existence, making themselves “blind and deaf” to the passions that are their very human condition.⁴³ She proceeds to describe several ways in which the individual, after recognizing the human-made nature of morality, can choose to ignore their ambiguity, living dishonestly through their ingenuine delineation of their own human condition.

As has been shown, the assumption of ambiguity by the genuine person is the willing of oneself as free, and thus allows them to escape the amoral world of childhood and enter the realm of real moral agency. It is possible, however, for the individual to choose to *not* will oneself free. Although the establishment of one’s freedom sets itself up without permitting contradiction when one realizes this freedom (one cannot, after all, will oneself *not* free), Beauvoir asserts that one can *evade* the choice to will oneself free.

⁴⁴ The serious man - the very antithesis of the genuine man - denies his own freedom by allowing himself to be engulfed in the object of his project rather than to establish his project as a “positive,” or an end that arose from within himself rather than from without.

⁴⁵ It is then “in servitude of the serious [that one’s] original spontaneity strives to deny itself,” avoiding the choice to establish one’s own freedom.⁴⁶ In this way the individual

⁴² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 41.

⁴³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 25.

⁴⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 26.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 26.

prevents oneself from realizing their ability to transcend their mere facticity, seeking rather to preserve oneself as simply a fact in the world. The genuine person who realizes their ambiguity then is one who accepts the limits of their facticity yet transcends that mere facticity by establishing their own freedom to choose and create new possibilities for oneself through the creation or justification of values (that is, one creates for oneself an open-ended future). The serious man, on the other hand, is one who pretends that values, and indeed the world, are ready-made and purely factual; he encloses himself in his facticity and lies to himself about his ability to freely choose values for himself.

Beauvoir gives several other examples of ways in which people can avoid genuineness after entering the adult world and realizing the human-made nature of moral values.* Like the serious person, the sub-man is dishonest with oneself about their ability to transcend facticity, though the sub-man goes further, reducing their transcendence entirely to nothingness.⁴⁷ This person rejects their own existence as a person, or an agent, believing they are 'human' in all the facts of such an existence, as though they were the biological equivalent of an inkwell. In this way they continually reject their own existence and with it any means of justifying such.

Another non-genuine person is the nihilist. This person flees their freedom and seeks to deny their own existence in its entirety *and* that of others.⁴⁸ They can be radical and dangerous to others and the world because, through the denial of their existence and thus of their agency, they refuse to accept the consequences of their actions but make

*As indeed Beauvoir claims all adults leaving childhood must; it is this very realization that casts one into the realm of adulthood and moral responsibility, whether they choose to accept such responsibility or not.

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 45.

⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 55.

others suffer those consequences regardless. However, it is possible for the nihilist to become genuine as long as they can establish oneself positively at the core of their being.

⁴⁹ That is, if the nihilist is able to establish meaning in the meaninglessness itself, they can become genuine through this assumption of their freedom.

The final example I will provide of a non-genuine person is the adventurer. This person is one who sets up as their project adventure, or the pursuit of excitement and delight, but establishes it as though it were the absolute, objective meaning of life. The adventurer pursues this project with enthusiasm and at all costs, sacrificing anyone and anything to achieve their end, for enjoying life is, for them, the only meaningful way to live. In this way, the adventurer surrenders their ability to create meaning by choosing for themselves an absolute (personal fulfillment) that they establish as an externally objective end. Thus, in their pursuit of this end they are “a freedom which remains indifferent to its content,”⁵⁰ for they often sacrifice the freedom of others in the process.

There are several other examples Beauvoir provides of non-genuine lives, but the details of each type of non-genuine life is less important than its implications. Fundamental to each of these non-genuine lives is dishonesty with oneself: the denial of other freedoms, of one's own freedom, or of one's facticity all constitute a dishonest perspective of one's human condition. In a state of dishonesty, one is not acting as a genuinely moral agent because one is not operating according to the fundamental truth of freedom through ambiguity. This does not, however, mean that the consequences of their actions are not as real as the consequences of the genuine person's actions, nor that they

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 55.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 58.

are not making real moral decisions. Rather, the non-genuine person is dishonest with oneself about their responsibility for their actions.

Therefore, genuineness is necessary for the moral agent of good because only they are capable of truly recognising their own freedom and that of others, and taking responsibility for their actions. Beauvoir asserts that one needs all humans to be free in order for oneself to be free, for “to will oneself free and to will that there be *being* are one and the same choice.”⁵¹ That is, to assume one’s own freedom and to will that there be freedom are the same, such that all who will themselves free must also will that all others be free as well.

However, it is still possible for the person who has genuinely assumed their ambiguity to relapse into dishonesty. Although the principle of freedom is absolute, the genuine person is not absolutely stationed in this position of genuineness, for honestly regarding their human condition does not necessitate that they will always act according to the principle of freedom. Indeed, it is possible for the genuine person to commit acts of evil, for their genuineness is not a fixed aspect of their facticity.

The Evil Person

As freedom is an absolute, where one wills freedom for oneself, one simultaneously wills freedom for all others as well. This is because every actor who assumes their ambiguity and asserts their freedom henceforth acts (so long as they are genuine) in the interest of freedom itself, for doing so is in their own interest. However, where one disregards or denies freedom, one commits an act of evil. In her essay on

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 70.

Beauvoir's ethics, Anne Morgan explains this concept as such: that which deprives human freedom is absolutely evil, for it is set against the absolute of freedom.⁵²

An example of an absolute evil provided by Beauvoir is the lynching of African Americans in the United States (an example which was still contemporary for Beauvoir).⁵³ Morgan justifies Beauvoir's labeling of this action as absolute evil due to the nature of the act being to deny the freedom of others. Morgan asserts that the lynching of others serves not only to deny the freedom of the victims through the extinguishing of their lives, but that it also denies them the possibility of freedom, for every successful act of lynching further establishes the facticity of African Americans, such that the white lynchers justify their oppression of African Americans through these acts (for their successes further establish in their historical situation the understood inferiority of those they are targeting).⁵⁴ Thus through these actions, the present and future freedom of African Americans is cut off and denied. Lynching, then, is "evil" because it denies absolutely the freedom of others.

In this way, the evil person has sought their own freedom in the denial of freedom to others, but according to Beauvoir, "since man wants there to be being, he cannot renounce any form of being without regret."⁵⁵ The person who willfully denies the freedom of *others* is then acting dishonestly, for to wish for one's own freedom is to wish for the freedom of all humans, yet the evil person actively denies the freedom of others.

⁵² Anne Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Freedom and Absolute Evil," *Hypatia* 23, no.4 (October-December 2008): 75-89.

⁵³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 90.

⁵⁴ Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics," 86.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 95.

They treat other freedoms not as transcendences but as mere things, simply means to their own end.⁵⁶ This actor then is simply oppressive, with no justification for their actions.

Furthermore, dishonesty denies not only the freedom of others but the possibility of any meaning or freedom at all for the individual who denies others, for if every individual is simply a “zero,” nothing at all, then there can be no collectivity.⁵⁷ Just as any whole is made of parts, in order for there to be any society or ‘others’ for one to impose their own will over against, there must be individuals who have individual wills to influence. To deny these wills and with them their freedom is, then, to deny not only their transcendence but their very existence as things which can justify one’s own existence. Thus the evil person dishonestly denies the freedom of others while also denying their own transcendence over such facticities.

Interestingly, the evil actor in the case of lynching is also a contradictory actor, for they assert their own radical freedom through the radical denial of other freedoms. Thus the evil person acts in a way that, blinded by their dishonesty, they work against their own interest in the process of acting against the interest of others. This is not to say, however, that they are not responsible for their actions, for each adult who leaves the infantile world of childhood yet who does not assume their ambiguity (thus living dishonestly) has chosen this perspective willingly and has thus willingly denied freedom. Therefore, because this dishonesty was intentional and every act that one takes in this state of being is intentionally chosen according to their assumed perspective (say, of the serious life for example), they are still just as responsible for their actions and the

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 100.

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 100.

consequences of such, for they have decisively acted in an immoral way despite their denial of responsibility.

It is here that Beauvoir is able to justify her use of the term “absolute evil.” When taken altogether, the act of lynching African Americans can be understood as absolutely evil because its denial of freedom is evil, and its oppressive nature without justification (for it serves the interest of no one) deems it “absolutely” evil. This is because the absolute is that which is self-justified, and evil acts have no justification. Thus acts that deny freedom absolutely (in others and in the actor oneself - a necessary conjunction for Beauvoir) are absolutely evil.

What then should be done about this evil? Beauvoir’s ethics do not stop at the identification of evil, for simply allowing for evil without addressing it would not be sufficient for a system of ethics. Beauvoir asserts, then, that it is up to those who recognize the evil actions of others to stop the actors from continuing to act in this way. She states that “we have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom,” and that “a freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.”⁵⁸ It is not clear what it would mean to deny the freedom of an evil person, but there is a clear moral obligation in this statement. Thus Beauvoir’s ethics can, I think, be summed up as such: Freedom, which is possible for all humans and which all should desire for all, is defensible when it supports this goal and reprehensible when it denies this goal, for freedom which supports freedom is to be encouraged, and freedom which denies freedom is to be denied.

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 91.

Evaluation of Beauvoir's Arguments

Beauvoir's argument for ethics is compelling, but there are a few points of clarification that seem necessary in order to uphold and implement such a system. Whether these are sufficiently damaging to her overall argument is yet to be seen.

Initially, when distinguishing between the child and the adult, Beauvoir makes the claim that the crucial difference is one's attitude toward external values. The child, she asserts, is ignorant of their position in the world as an agent, blindly accepting the values imposed upon them by their authorities and society, and blissfully unaware of the potential for their actions to create consequences outside of themselves. For the child, their actions weigh only upon oneself, and not on the world, for they are not an actor in the world as the authorities are, nor an establisher of values. However, upon entering adulthood, Beauvoir asserts that the adolescent discovers the human-made nature of values, and only continues to accept them as absolutes if one lies to oneself about the nature of those values and their own ability to create values of their own, or otherwise accept those values as their own.

It is from this distinction that she defines the genuine versus non-genuine, for only the genuine person is honest with themselves, and the non-genuine person (regardless of the form they take, e.g. the serious man) is dishonest with themselves. This assumption, however, seems flawed. To declare that all who accept external values as absolutes are aware of the human-made nature of the values, yet deny their own ability to make values for themselves and thus establish those values as external absolutes dishonestly is to assume that 1) all values *are* demonstrably human-made, and 2) all adults (excepting

those forever living an infantile life⁵⁹) are aware of the human-made nature of all values. Beauvoir has not demonstrated either of these claims absolutely, for although she believes that there is no God or external authority from which external values spring, she has not given any arguments to prove this assertion, and therefore, if she wishes to declare absolutely and not theoretically that this *is* reality and therefore *the* human condition, and not that if this *were* the case, that her arguments are true, she should establish the lack of these external authorities absolutely. Neither has she given evidence that the realization of the human-made nature of all values, should they turn out to be so, is part of the human condition and therefore recognized by every person entering adulthood, for it is feasible that one should forever (and, crucially, honestly) believe the absolute nature of moral values, as indeed Kant did. Thus her fundamental distinction between the genuine and non-genuine person seems clouded.

Perhaps Beauvoir means, through the discovery of the non-absolute nature of all values, that each person recognizes the exceptions that the authorities in their lives make to following those principles, and the imperfect application of these values in practice. However, even this discovery of hypocrisy does not necessitate that all should see the human-made nature of human values, for perhaps one may think that the values are still absolute but that the human application of these values is flawed. In this way there could be the discovery of the non-absolute implementation of absolute values.

Another possible interpretation of Beauvoir's argument here is that only those who do not perpetually live an infantile life are truly adults, and therefore only those who do see the human-made nature of human values are adults, or agents whose actions weigh

⁵⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 37.

upon the world. In this case, women, for example, whom she claims are often imposed upon by male authority, and who have been “kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, [having] no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads,” would not be considered adults even if they recognize the non-absolute nature of the values imposed upon them.⁶⁰

But what of the men who impose these values? Perhaps they, too, may be unaware of the non-absolute nature of the values they impose upon women, having been socialized in their youth to accept the very same values as absolutes. Would the men, too, not be adults, though they impose values upon others in a way that definitively has consequences for others? That is, knowing that their actions weigh upon the world and believing themselves each a “big imposing statue,” quite like adults, yet accepting the values they impose as absolutes established outside of themselves and over which they have no control, how would we classify these men?⁶¹ Would they, too, be “grown-up children”?⁶² Perhaps ironically it would seem there is ambiguity even in the distinction of those aware of their own ambiguity.

Given that it *is* true that non-genuine people are dishonest with themselves, it still holds that, according to this system, only those that are honest with themselves and have assumed their ambiguity are genuinely moral agents. All others, though their actions weigh upon the world and contribute to the ongoing facticity of their own and others’ situations, are not *actively* making moral decisions, although it would seem that in avoiding their ambiguity and responsibility and choosing to live dishonestly they are

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 37.

⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 36.

⁶² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 37.

responsible for all subsequent actions under this dishonesty, whether they are actively and intentionally evil or not. That is, the initial decision to avoid freedom and take responsibility upon recognizing the human-made nature of moral values was the foundational moral decision upon which all one's subsequent actions can be judged and for which they can be held accountable.

But again, this does not seem to exclude the possibility that one may dishonestly avoid responsibility but still not understand the absolute of freedom, and therefore unintentionally commit acts of evil under the value-system of their dishonesty. That is, despite Beauvoir's assumption that all who recognize the human-made nature of morality yet deny their responsibility are fundamentally lying to themselves, it seems possible that even one who dishonestly avoids responsibility may not understand exactly how their actions are evil and therefore unintentionally act evilly, even though they intentionally deny responsibility for their actions. Morgan recognizes this possibility as well, claiming that the doer of evil "may or may not have been in touch with the condition of his own ontological freedom," but she justifies the holding of such people accountable by declaring their actions intentional insofar as they were intentionally seeking to "destroy the ontological freedom" of others in the case of the absolutely evil actions of lynchers.⁶³ Even so, it would appear that there is still the possibility of the accidentally evil dishonest actor, for it would seem that only if one were truly aware that their actions were evil could they be held accountable.

However, even if there is the possibility of accidental evil, Beauvoir's ethics claim that *all* actions that deny freedom are to be deemed evil and must be stopped, *even*

⁶³ Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics," 86.

*if the actor is unaware that they are acting in an evil way.*⁶⁴ That is, there is moral accountability placed on those who, according to this theory of ethics, may not recognize the consequences of their actions as evil, for in their avoidance of freedom they may not recognize the absolute value of it. But then, according to Morgan, to be free is to have an open-ended future, and so even those who commit self-harming acts of evil are acting intentionally, and they are liable to be held accountable.⁶⁵ Through this understanding she is able to conceive of a way in which Beauvoir's ethics can be applied to all humans, even if they are unaware of the evil of their actions.

This is a problem for me, for despite the success with which Beauvoir does make her ethics universal, it seems that she has done so on a unfair distinction. The specific qualifications of a person who is a genuinely moral agent are such that there will be many who never achieve a genuinely moral status. Even so, these people are to be held accountable by those who have realized the truth of morality, namely that freedom is the first and only absolute and is to be defended in all circumstances, even if it means denying the freedom of those who deny the freedom of others. In this way, those who are unaware of their evil, though they act intentionally and presumably out of what they think is their own self interest, are to be held responsible for doing what they potentially did not know was evil.

This brings me back to my point about dishonesty. The only way in which Beauvoir could justify the holding accountable of those who are not genuine moral actors but whose actions are morally reprehensible is if they were capable of being genuine

⁶⁴ Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics," 86.

⁶⁵ Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics," 86-87.

moral actors and simply refused to be. This, in my opinion, is the crux of her argument. Only if a) there *are* no values outside of human creation of meaning, such that all values are recognizably human-made, and b) those who, when they are old enough to reason and recognize inconsistencies in the morality of others, deny their own responsibility and thus live dishonestly, can there be any moral responsibility placed on those whose actions are evil though they do not recognize them as such. As I have explained already, I do not think Beauvoir has sufficiently defended either of these requirements.

Additionally, there is not much clarity in regards to the extent to which this system of ethics should be practically implemented. If the maxim for morality is “that which denies freedom should itself be denied,” to what extent should this denial occur? The way in which evil is defined seems to label every act of evil as absolutely evil for its opposition to the absolute of freedom, a delineation that allows for no scale of error or wrongdoing, though the call to action against wrong-doers is seemingly complete denial of freedom. This raises the question of what it means to deny freedom, and how far should we go in retribution to those who deny the freedom of others. Where a lyncher would be denied freedom in this system for their egregious acts against the freedom of others, what of the men in my earlier example who deny the freedom of women to escape their subjugation to men? They have denied women a freedom for sure, but the extent of this denial does not seem as absolute as the lynchers, though it would seem that their freedom ought to be denied to the same extent. Thus, while it is true that Beauvoir did not intend to scientifically delineate a moral law code, so to speak, as a system of ethics

meant to guide action there seems a greater need for clarification in the case of responding to those who violate the value of freedom established at its core.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* lays forth existentialist ethics with the claim that all humans are, according to our human condition, fundamentally ambiguous, whereby we are simultaneously both freedom and facticity, though neither fully. She additionally posits that there are no values outside of human creation of meaning, and that because of this, human existence itself is not inherently meaningful. It is up to each individual, she claims, to establish meaning for oneself and justify their own existence, a move that can only be accomplished through the assumption of one's ambiguity, or their failure to be self-identical (fully freedom *and* facticity). This assumption of one's human condition as their reason for existing (i.e. assuming their desire to be free while accepting that they never will be) allows them to be self-identical after all, and posits freedom itself as *the* absolute. Thus, willing oneself free wills the expansion of freedom itself in all of its forms, for freedom is the self-established meaning of each genuine individual's life. Freedom becomes, then, the only absolute, or self-justified and non-contingent thing, an absolute *intrinsic* to humanity rather than extrinsic, and for which sake all human action should strive to maximize. Beauvoir then establishes evil as that which denies or subverts freedom, an action that, because it is in opposition to the absolute of freedom, is absolutely evil. Her moral obligation for humanity then becomes to maximize freedom for all humans and deny freedom only where it limits freedom.

Beauvoir is able, in this way, to establish moral obligation for humanity from an initial position of meaninglessness for human existence. This is a grand feat, and one which seems too good to be true. From her delineation of evil, there arise several problems, the implications of which seem to seriously injure her theory. If evil is contradictory to the principle of freedom, then all actions that are deemed evil should be stopped and the actor denied their own freedom where they deny the freedom of others. This implies that, even for those who are potentially unaware of their wrong-doing, all are morally accountable for their actions anyway. This rests on the assumption that all people are capable of realizing the truth of their human condition and becoming genuine moral agents through the genuine assumption of this condition, and that any denial to do so is a dishonest yet morally foundational act. However, Beauvoir does not substantiate her claim that the human condition she asserts is in fact *the* human condition, for it rests on the assumption that there are no values outside of human creation, an assumption she has given no evidence to support. Beauvoir also fails to prove that, upon reaching an age that one is capable of recognizing the inconsistencies of the moral values and actions of others, all humans recognize the human-made nature of all values and must choose to either accept responsibility for their own values and actions (thus becoming a genuinely moral agent) or deny that they have responsibility at all (thus living dishonestly). Such a distinction is crucial to the success of her ethics, for if it is possible that one be honest in their assumption of external values or accidentally evil in their dishonesty, the moral implications of their actions fundamentally change.

Although Beauvoir's arguments as presented in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* are incredibly philosophically compelling and reveal an important possibility for the establishment of moral obligation from an initial condition of an absence of initial meaning and value, I do not think that she has sufficiently defended the conditions necessary for her ethics to succeed, conditions she assumes without clear argumentation for *why* they are fundamentally true. Without establishing these conditions as absolutely true, Beauvoir's existentialist ethics run the risk of falling apart. However, if these initial conditions *can* be supported and fully established, this existentialist ethics may be the greatest success for morality from meaninglessness perhaps ever written.

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