

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

by

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR  
AN ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

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**ABSTRACT**

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The construction of an existential ethics has long been claimed to be an impossible task. If there are no moral absolutes nor objective values to adhere to, then what choices are we to make? Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* challenges the claim that the construction of an existential ethics is a doomed task by providing a realistic foundation required for ethical action. She constructs a theoretical framework that is firmly grounded in the phenomenological foundation. And she produces an ethics that works in tandem with the attitudes of people when engaged in concrete situations of existence. Beauvoir introduces the concept of moral freedom in order to create the space for an authentic morality capable of being realized within the situational relationships characteristic of the human condition.

In this thesis I wish to defend Beauvoir's existential ethics as perhaps the only viable ethical system within existential philosophy. By offering an existential ethics, Beauvoir acknowledges the profound impact of the moral experience and offers a solution to attain authentic moral freedom through the liberation of others.

## Simone De Beauvoir: Ethics of Ambiguity

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## INTRODUCTION

Only with it [phenomenology] as a base can one succeed in constructing an ethics which man can totally and sincerely adhere to.<sup>1</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir produced her philosophical work within the lineage of the phenomenological tradition. The systematic insight of the situated subject, which had been initially explored and posited by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, served as the foundation for the French existentialists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Beauvoir's adherence to the imbedded nature of consciousness, as it is always being engaged in concrete situations of existence, enabled her to view the medium of literature as an expression for her philosophy. Literature was the opening for Beauvoir to examine and construct her existential philosophy because it also enabled her to produce works that examined the relations between people in a personal and reflective way. All of Beauvoir's literary works are rooted in her adhesion to human beings as situated subjects, as ambiguous beings who are constantly engaged in the tension between their consciousness and materiality. The attempt by philosophers to reduce "mind to matter, or matter to mind"<sup>2</sup> is a radical attempt to reduce man's ambiguous nature and escape the conflict arising out of our contradictory situation. By constructing an ethics from the acknowledgement that we are ambiguous beings, Beauvoir maintains her existential position while defending its moral significance and application.

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le cérémonie de entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981),223; quoted in Kristina Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2001),11

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Mahon, *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir* (Ney York, St. Martin's Press, INC.),35

The basis for an existential ethics is that there are no moral absolutes. We cannot guide our ethical conduct from a universal or a god's eye perspective because there is none. "Man"<sup>3</sup>, Beauvoir writes:

[b]ears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well. A God can pardon, efface, and compensate. But if God does not exist, man's faults are inexplicable<sup>4</sup>

Because man is free, he is responsible for his actions and choices. Beauvoir, like Sartre, holds that every human is born into this life free, meaning that he is ontologically free and is thus responsible for making his own moral decisions. Yet, the question arises: If there is no God and no universal moral standards, what stops me from making the most horrendous ethical decisions? As Dostoevsky put it in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'If there is no God isn't everything permitted?'<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir would answer no; just because it is up to us to choose what choices we make does not imply that such choices are arbitrary and lack consequences. I posit that Beauvoir rejects the implication that an existential ethics represents a rejection of values by introducing two new types of freedom: (1) moral freedom and (2) power. To attain moral freedom, one has to acknowledge one's ambiguous situation and make the choice to engage in projects that enable freedom for oneself and others. Moral freedom is different from ontological freedom because the latter does not have to do with choice. We are all born ontologically free. Power, for Beauvoir, is different from moral freedom because it has to do with material and economic

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<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's use of "man" is incompatible with current gender neutral pronouns. Although I disagree with her masculine terminology, I will use the pronoun as she did due to my referencing of her work. My thesis will not touch on the reasons why she used "man" nor will it address her later work *The Second Sex*.

<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1948), 16

<sup>5</sup> Mahon, *Existentialism*, 39

factors. To have power is to be unconstrained by material and economic forces. Both moral freedom and power render her ethics as an inseparable aspect of what it means to be free.

According to Kristina Arp, in *The Bonds of Freedom*, moral freedom is the “conscious affirmation of one’s ontological freedom.”<sup>6</sup> It is attained through actions taken to liberate others from oppression. Moral freedom is our responsibility to other beings to will their freedom. Not all human beings act morally, a fact that is not lost on Beauvoir. The ability to achieve moral freedom is not easy and most people never attain it. In the second part of *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir presents a detailed account of the stages of ethical development and the ways in which people fail to attain moral freedom. Without introducing another form of freedom, as Beauvoir did, the implications of ontological freedom played no bearing in the oppression of people nor the ethical actions permissible in the liberation of the oppressed. Beauvoir’s emphasis on the ambiguity of the human condition allows her to focus on the embodied aspect of freedom and the actions and choices it entails.<sup>7</sup> Existentialism, without Beauvoir’s *Ethics of Ambiguity*, would be condemned as being unable to defend any ethical position.

In chapter one, I will explain Beauvoir’s philosophical background and the primacy of her phenomenology in the construction of her ethics. Beauvoir’s conception of the situated subject enabled her to create her ethics and subsequent philosophical writings. Because she was an existential phenomenologist, the human being as an embodied consciousness was a starting point for her examination of an existential ethics.

In chapter two, I will explore the ethical stages/personality types that, according to Beauvoir, fail to attain moral freedom. It is important to understand these types as they represent how moral freedom entails willing others free. None of the personality types promote the

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<sup>6</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 2

<sup>7</sup> Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4

freedom of others, nor recognize the obligation one has to oneself and others in willing moral freedom/authentic morality. Human beings are not static, and can, therefore, belong to different ethical types at different periods, or they can engage in behavior that typifies both at the same time. Beauvoir lays out these ethical stages to set up her later examination of the human being who attains moral freedom and his/her personality.

In the final chapter, I will conduct a critical evaluation of Beauvoir's examination and show how she is the only existential philosopher to successfully construct an ethics. I will also argue that, although Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre were similar in their existentialist thought, Beauvoir's emphasis on the importance of human relationships and the inherent interconnectedness we all share allows her to move away from Sartre and construct different types of freedom beyond ontological freedom. Beauvoir's implementation of moral freedom and power into her existential system is what enables her to move beyond her existential counterparts and construct a successful ethics. Beauvoir's ethics, by taking into account the ambiguity of the human condition, as well as the actual attitudes human beings have towards life, enables her to provide a solution for the liberation of human beings from oppression.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Phenomenological Tradition

#### 1.1. The Ambiguity of Existence

In the beginning of *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir characterizes the existence of man as being inherently ambiguous. The ambiguous nature of the human condition is a primary force behind Beauvoir's philosophy. This emphasis provides clarity for ethics within the context of the existential tradition. To be a human being is to be bound to our consciousness and our materiality, the internal and external. As a situated subject, "man is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness."<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir views Kierkegaard's understanding of man's ambiguity as tragic to be the most apt when acknowledging our ambiguous condition. There is no escaping our 'tragically' ambiguous nature because our existence is replete with the paradoxical condition of being situated in two separate realms. Yet, our fundamental ambiguity is uncomfortable for us to accept; it poses an inescapable tension that is impossible to remedy. The attempt to construct a systematic work to reduce our condition to either the material or non-material was a collective effort taken on by philosophers. Especially in regard to Cartesian dualism, this philosophical misstep proved to fundamentally ignore the inherent tension of our human condition. The ethical ramification of the dualist tradition has been plagued with error because of its inability to recognize man as dependent on both his external existence and internal consciousness. In regard to the ethical systems created through man's denial of his ambiguous nature, Beauvoir writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7

It has been a matter of eliminating the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment<sup>9</sup>

It is not acceptable to cower behind the illusion of dualist or materialist conceptions of things. The attempt by materialism to reduce the mind to matter renders morality impossible. In regard to contemplating ethics from a materialist perspective, Beauvoir writes: “moral consciousness can exist only to the extent that there is a disagreement between nature and morality.”<sup>10</sup> Materialism fails because it positions man as “wholly determined by the material world,”<sup>11</sup> and thus limits his consciousness to something merely physiological. Consciousness is always the active participation in the act of being in relation to something else. Beauvoir, in recognizing consciousness as relational instead of contested, posits that we are singular beings who are not divided, but ambiguous.<sup>12</sup> To be able to contemplate morality, one needs to begin with the phenomenological conception that man is an embodied subject and is rooted both in his experience at a particular time and his consciousness. Beauvoir does not attempt to exonerate herself from this stance, as it is the foundation for her ethical philosophy. To be a situated subject, is to be ambiguous. Beauvoir does not see our ambiguous nature as negative, but an inherent fact that must be accepted. Although our ambiguous nature is paradoxical, Beauvoir does not take it as being a “lack” or a negative aspect to our existence—it just is.

Beauvoir acknowledges that our ambiguous existence is not a comforting fact to accept. To know that we are to die and are physically vulnerable to any ailment or accident produces

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<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 8

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

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Existentialism: Remarks on Jean Paul Sartre’s *L’Être et Le Néant*,” in *Sartre and Existentialism: Existentialist Ontology and Human Consciousness*, edited by William L. McBride. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 20

<sup>12</sup> Debra B. Bergoffen, “Between the Ethical and the Political: The Different of Ambiguity,” in *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Wendy O’Brien and Lester Embree. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 189

anxiety. Anxiety is not desirable; neither is its occurrence something most people are open to face and accept. Beauvoir, coinciding with Sartre's terminology, uses the term "bad faith" to describe the effort by people who attempt to deny and run away from that which makes them human: their ambiguity.<sup>13</sup>

Although Beauvoir was not the first philosopher to explore the nature of our ambiguous condition, she was the first to ground her ethics in ambiguity. The journey to attain our moral freedom and that of others is impossible to start without accepting our ambiguity. To be human is to be a "strange amalgam of consciousness and fleshy materiality, of freedom and constraint, of transcendence and immanence."<sup>14</sup> To deny our ambiguity is to deny our ethical responsibility as ontologically free beings. A human being cannot attain moral freedom without the acknowledgment that he/she is ambiguous. To run away from ambiguity is to run from the engagement in authentically moral action.

## **1.2. The Case for an Existential Ethics**

Beauvoir's ethics are constructed from the foundation of the existentialist tradition. She does not attempt to distance herself from the propositions that make up the central tenants of existentialism, and I maintain that her biggest contribution to the existential philosophical tradition is in fact her ethics. Beauvoir's ethics, which at times can seem normative, are actually more concerned with our attitudes towards life and our engagement with other people.

Existentialism, which is primarily concerned with freedom and responsibility, provides people with the awareness that we are morally responsible for our decisions and, thus, our moral freedom. Existentialism is not concerned with human nature (because it denies that there even is

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<sup>13</sup> Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 33

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

one), but with the human condition/existence. While Sartre is the philosopher recognized as coining the phrase “existence precedes essence” in his lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, such a proposition was maintained in the existential tradition since Soren Kierkegaard. Because the human condition is ambiguous, being that people are both an “epistemological subject and object,”<sup>15</sup> human beings are responsible for making authentic moral choices. We are condemned to make these choices because we are condemned to be (ontologically) free. There is no outside force that gives us meaning or universal values; therefore, it is up to us to create projects that enable us to justify ourselves through them. Beauvoir makes the case that although we are free to make decisions, it does not mean that our choices are exempt from consequences, nor are they arbitrary. There are behaviors that are morally appropriate and others that are morally reprehensible.<sup>16</sup>

According to Josef Mahon, Beauvoir’s conviction that there is in fact an existential ethics can be summarized in the following way:<sup>17</sup>

- (a) Imperfect beings need an ethics
- (b) Human beings are ambiguous
- (c) Therefore, human beings are imperfect
- (d) Therefore, human beings need an ethics
- (e) Existentialism is capable of supplying such an ethics

Simone de Beauvoir challenges the critics who maintain that an existential ethics is impossible due to its denial of objective values. She rebukes this challenge by grounding her ethics in freedom.

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<sup>15</sup> Mahon, *An Existential Ethics*, 37

<sup>16</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “An Existentialist Ethics” in *Existential Ethics*, edited by William L. McBride (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 1

<sup>17</sup> Mahon, 37

The reason that Beauvoir is able to construct an ethics within existentialism is because she posits that we not only have ontological freedom, but moral freedom. She accepts that we are born with an absolute ontological freedom, but such a freedom does not directly entail ethical behavior. Every human being, regardless of his/her ethical character, is born with ontological freedom. Even the most tyrannical and oppressive human beings, such as Adolf Hitler and Josef Mengele, were born with ontological freedom. Because ontological freedom alone cannot provide us with ethics, Beauvoir comes to existentialism's rescue by developing her conception of moral freedom—a freedom of relational engagement and liberation. Moral freedom is a “conscious affirmation of one's ontological freedom,”<sup>18</sup> and requires the effort to not only will ourselves free, but the freedom of others. Beauvoir's acknowledgment of our interconnectedness grounds the phenomenological concept of the situated subject as not only being rooted in the materiality of our situation, but also the primacy of our dependency on other beings. Her philosophy is rooted in our relational and ethical obligations to one another. In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she writes:

I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship... To will oneself free is also to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person concrete action to be achieved.”<sup>19</sup>

People cannot divorce themselves from their dependence on others, and the attempt to deny our situation as relational beings prevents us from recognizing our own moral freedom as well as the moral freedom of others. It is only through the recognition of other beings, that we become ethically authentic. Yet, the attainment of acknowledging and acting upon our desire to

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<sup>18</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 2

<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 72-73

will others free is not easy, nor is it a comforting prospect to most. The majority of people fail at achieving an authentic moral character due to their inability to accept their ambiguity and interdependence amongst other free beings. The following chapter lays out the stages that Beauvoir develops in the second section of *Ethics of Ambiguity*, where she describes the many ways in which people fail to achieve moral freedom.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ethical Stages

In Part Two of the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, entitled “Personal Freedom and Others” Beauvoir takes account of the different personality types or ethical stages that exemplify the way human beings fail to achieve moral freedom. The following stages are important in understanding Beauvoir’s ethics because they illuminate the moral failings that arise out of self-deception and selfishness. Each state, although different, all universally fail because of the structured inability to recognize the freedom of others as a condition to the attainment of moral freedom.

It is interesting to note that Kristina Arp does not explore the stages of childhood and adolescence within Beauvoir’s development of character ethics. I consider this development unfortunate because the generic sequences of early development play a significant role in Beauvoir’s later ethical stages. Adults, Beauvoir argues, long for and romanticize the experiences they had as a child (such as: joy, carelessness, lack of responsibilities) and, as a result, are comfortable reverting back to the child like characteristic of believing in absolute values. But, unlike children, adults are responsible for the consequences of their actions because they are aware of their freedom. Beauvoir argues that oppression “lies in nostalgia for the world of our childhood.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Monika Langer, “Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on ambiguity.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97

## 2.1. Children

Beauvoir begins “Personal Freedom and Others” by quoting Descartes that “man’s unhappiness is due to his having been first born a child.”<sup>21</sup> There is an undeniable connection linking the choices a human being makes as an adult, and the experiences he/she had as a child. Beauvoir gives credence to this stage as it highlights the initial bond we have to creating ourselves out of facticity. Beauvoir states that, “The Child’s situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit.”<sup>22</sup> Children look at adults as people who have completed themselves and have all the answers. Children are shielded from engaging in the tension of their ambiguity. The child belongs to the serious world. To belong to the serious world is to believe that values have an a priori existence, that is, as existing necessarily and independent of us.”<sup>23</sup> As children, we do not question the values bestowed on us by our parents, nor the roles and creations visible to us. But unlike the serious man, who is responsible for acknowledging his ambiguity and making moral choices, the child is unable to recognize his transcendence and is free to engage in his childishness. Children live in the moment, the “now,” therefore, they are unable to engage in free actions precisely because “such actions require actors who are able to project themselves onto the future (of desired goals) and relate to their pasts.”<sup>24</sup> There is no significant effect that arises from the child’s whims because his ethical character is simply a construction of the world in which his caretaker(s) make visible for him. Beauvoir claims that children do not make moral choices. This is the case precisely because a child lacks the ability to make temporal connections between the

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<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 35

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mahon, *Existentialism*, 46

<sup>24</sup> Lior Levy, “Thinking with Beauvoir on the Freedom of the Child.” *Hypatia* 31, no.1 (2015), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hypa.12220> (accessed November 21, 2018).



present and future. As she states, “In order to adopt a moral attitude towards one’s actions one must be aware that what one does today will still matter tomorrow.”<sup>25</sup> Children are unable to recognize their subjectivity because they are unable to project themselves forward in time, and they also lack the ability to critically reflect on their choices or their situation. The recognition of one’s subjectivity does not present itself until late adolescence or, rather, by the time one is an adult. At this time, one is completely equipped with the reflective faculties to act on the situation they one engages in rather than accepting it as absolute.

Because children are unable to recognize themselves as subjects, therefore unable to recognize their freedom, they cannot be morally free beings. It is only when a child reaches adolescence that he/she faces the burden of his ontological freedom and what such a freedom entails. In regard to the adolescent being, Beauvoir writes that “Freedom is then revealed and he must decide upon his attitude in the face of it.”<sup>26</sup> Authenticity and responsibility, in existentialism, is all about the attitude we choose to take when we accept our ontological freedom and the burden such a freedom places on the choices we choose to make. Beauvoir writes that “to exist is to make oneself a lack of being; it is to cast oneself into the world.”<sup>27</sup> The significance of the human being disclosing himself as a lack of being is that this lack entails meaning making. One can disclose him/herself as a lack of being by either as one hopes to be but is not yet or as one chooses not to be.<sup>28</sup> Disclosure entails meaning and choice; therefore, man is responsible for initiating his own significance and meaning in the world. Furthermore, as soon as one is aware (adolescence) that world around him is not endowed with ready-made meaning, he/she is responsible for creating that meaning. After explaining childhood and adolescence in

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<sup>25</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 69

<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 40

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

<sup>28</sup> Mahon, *Existentialism*, 49

*Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir then lays out the ways in which human beings fail to attain moral freedom.

## **2.2 The Sub-Man**

First in Beauvoir's so called 'hierarchy' of man is the sub-man. This man is the lowest on the ladder in terms of what it takes to will oneself to be free. Being the metaphorical sheep, the sub-man apathetically succumbs to his own view on the insignificance of his role in the world and goes through life being in perpetual fear of making choices that will disrupt his accepted facticity. Beauvoir writes that the sub-man, due to his attempt at reducing his existence to a wholly material and static state, conducts himself on the basis of a "fundamental fear in the face of existence."<sup>29</sup> By denying his ontological freedom, he refuses to engage in the inherent ambiguity of life and detaches himself from the implicit requirement of freedom by not making choices. He refuses, out of ignorance, to rise up to the challenge that being an ontologically free human places on him. The sub-man is a dangerous man. He is malleable to the choices of others because he does not accept his own ability to make choices. Beauvoir points out that those recruited to violently oppress others are often of this type. According to her, "In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements organized by the fanaticism of seriousness and passion, movements where there is no risk, those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from the sub-men."<sup>30</sup> The sub-man is dangerously attached to the readymade values imparted on him by those in authority.<sup>31</sup> He doesn't question because he denies his freedom and, consequently, denies his autonomy and transcendence.

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<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42

<sup>30</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 44

<sup>31</sup> Mahon, *Existentialism*, 50

Kristina Arp uses Hannah Arendt's description of the Nazi, Adolf Eichmann, in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as an exemplary figure of the sub-man. Arendt describes Eichmann as a joyless enlister who subordinated himself to the Nazi creed and Hitler's commands.<sup>32</sup> During his 1961 trial, Eichmann told the court that he was in fact a Kantian, abiding by the principle to always follow the moral law. Eichmann professed that he was just doing what he was told and lamented on how he lived his life as if he were "under a spell."<sup>33</sup> Not only did Eichmann completely distort Kantian ethics, as if the murdering of Jews was an action rationally adjudicated as being a kingdom of ends, but his failure to take the initiative and make his own choices makes him a perfect example of the sub-man. His behavior also characterizes the belief that the sub man has that human beings are not interdependent. To deny our inextricable interdependence is to will oppression.

The sub-man lives a meaningless and barren existence. Because he denies his own consciousness and refuses to construct his own meaning to life, he finds himself lost in a world that is extrinsically empty. The sub-man denies the ethics of men who have willed themselves free. According to Beauvoir, "Ethics is the triumph of freedom over facticity, and the sub-man feels only the facticity of his own existence."<sup>34</sup> He evades acknowledging that which constructs the human condition, the desire to disclose and, therefore, relegates his existence to an almost inanimate state. The sub-man does not experience joy because he does not experience or allow himself to experience passion and desire. Because the sub-man lives in fear and is terrified of engaging in projects out of the inability to accept possibilities and failure, he takes "refuge in the

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics, the Master Slave Dialectic, and Eichmann as a Sub Man." *Hypatia* 24, no.2 (2009), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01031.x> (accessed November 23, 2018), 50

<sup>33</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 57

<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 44

ready-made values of the serious world.”<sup>35</sup> By not wanting to take ownership of his freedom, the sub-man submerges his freedom in the values imparted to him by society.

In many respects the sub-man and the serious man are very similar, yet unlike the sub-man, the latter does in fact disclose his being, even if only by way of choosing society’s values to further his absolutist convictions. Therefore, the transition from the sub-man to the serious is not a difficult leap as both cling to serious values.

### **2.3. The Serious Man**

The serious man is the most popular ethical character for human beings. Although one step above the sub-man, the serious man still denies his freedom and poses a serious threat to his fellow man. He is dangerous because he will cast the needs of others aside if recognizing the needs of others conflict with his values. According to Beauvoir, “the serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned.”<sup>36</sup> He creates his world through the submission to societal absolutes and remains steadfast in affirming his unconditional values. The serious man is similar to the child, as both create themselves in the image of their authoritative figureheads. Yet, unlike the child who is given values without having a choice, the serious man has a choice, but he gives himself values which are not of his choosing. He runs away from his responsibility by being dishonest with himself and others, grappling unto titles and fixed identities to objectify his being. For Beauvoir, the context of our freedom is always in fluctuation; it is not a fixed point of contact and is to be chosen and reevaluated constantly. The serious man disowns his freedom because he is comfortable with the facticity of what is known. He fails to examine himself and the pretext behind his action; therefore, he lives

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<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 44

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 46

a life determined by an illusionary essence. For Beauvoir, the serious man denies his freedom; he allows someone else to dictate his actions and beliefs. Moreover, “As soon as the idol is no longer concerned, the serious man slips into the attitude of the sub-man. He keeps himself existing because he is not capable of existing without a guarantee.”<sup>37</sup>

Beauvoir acknowledges the vast amount of philosophical literature, from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, that has detailed the negative affects of the serious man and his perpetual flight from responsibilities. She also gives credence to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* as being “in large part a description of the serious man and his universe.”<sup>38</sup> The serious man acts in bad faith, precisely because he constantly reaffirms his alleged lack of freedom and intentionality by choosing to cling to the world of facts. Sartre depicts this seriousness as a response to being unable to cope with one’s ontological freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, he expresses how seriousness arises out of its “reassuring, materialistic, substantiation of values...as coming from the world rather than my freedom.”<sup>39</sup>

For Beauvoir the serious man poses severe political and social implications, as he acts with a deep callousness for his fellow man. He is the fanatical character—the tyrant and the fascist. Beauvoir details his creed and political impact as follows:

It is the fanaticism of the Inquisition which does not hesitate to impose a credo, that is, an internal movement, by means of external constraints. It is the political fanaticism of the Vigilantes of America who defend morality by means of lynchings. It is the political fanaticism which empties politics of all human content and imposes the State, not for individuals, but against them<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 50

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, (New York: Citadel Press, 2001; reprint, 1956), 78

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 50

When a human being discovers that he/she is unable to become the thing or object he/she so desperately tries to merge with, he/she “decides to be nothing.”<sup>41</sup> The attitude that one adopts when one’s seriousness has been turned against one is that of nihilism.

#### **2.4. The Nihilist**

The ethical character following the serious man is that of the nihilist. When the external object of the serious man’s fixation becomes meaningless, the attitude of nihilism begins to take shape. Kristina Arp articulates Beauvoir’s position on the nihilist as connoting the symptoms of what it is to deny life. He creates his meaning, unintentionally, by advocating its lack. Although Beauvoir credits nihilism with taking account of the truth that there is no extrinsic meaning to our existence, she sees this attitude as a failure because of the way in which the nihilist distorts the significance of his ambiguity. She acknowledges the starting point of his thinking, but advocates that such a turning point leads to a rejection of life. According to Beauvoir, “The nihilist is right in thinking that the world possesses no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and make himself exist validly.”<sup>42</sup> Living is not a lack, but an opportunity to create meaning and to create oneself in a world that is inherently devoid of any meaning. Beauvoir does not advocate for a gloomy perspective towards living, as she sees the opportunity to create our own meaning as an exciting and exhilarating prospect. Regarding the widespread view that nihilism is universally a pessimistic position, we should note that it does not always enable a defeatist engagement in the lack. Nihilism can also yield artistic and literary creativity. Beauvoir acknowledges the movement of Dadaism as an exemplary performance of nihilism. Dadaism represents the “negation of the word by the word, the act by

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>42</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 57

the act, of art by art.”<sup>43</sup> But, even such works and the artists that produce them are not immune from slipping back into engagement with the serious.

Nihilism, on the one hand, provides the being who participates in such a world view with a certain truth: the truth that “the world in itself possessed no meaning.”<sup>44</sup> But, the error in taking on the nihilist view is that by desiring so intensely to make oneself nothing, the nihilist destroys his freedom. The desire to be nothing is, essentially, the desire still to be something. By being transfixed by the idea that annihilates his being, the nihilist still clings to his nothingness as “another sort of being.”<sup>45</sup>

While the nihilist rejects existence, the next ethical character, what Beauvoir calls ‘the adventurer,’ finds joy in the absence of justification for his lack of being. I agree with Beauvoir’s claim that the adventurer is closest to reaching a “genuinely moral attitude.”<sup>46</sup> This is the case precisely because the adventurer is constantly engaged in the lonely journey to discover meaning without needing a justification for living.

## 2.5. The Adventurer

The next stage is that of the adventurer. Kristina Arp, when describing Beauvoir’s intellectual and physical exploration through uncharted terrain,<sup>47</sup> posits that she herself demonstrated aspects of this type: the adventurer. Beauvoir admires the adventurer because, unlike the nihilist, he embraces living while acknowledging the lack of justification for his existence. The adventurer performs actions for the sake of the meaning he endows to them, and not for the ends which are in themselves devoid of meaning. Beauvoir writes of the adventurer:

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<sup>43</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 54

<sup>44</sup> Mahon, *Existentialism*, 54

<sup>45</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 52

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>47</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 60

“He throws himself into his undertakings with zest, into exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, politics, but he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only to his conquest.”<sup>48</sup> Unlike the nihilist who so desperately yearns to “be” in the face of knowing that he is a lack of being, the adventure fully embraces this lack and throws himself into self-initiated actions of expression. Arp notes that Beauvoir’s ethics, and its emphasis on joy, counters the criticism of existentialism as supportive of despair and hopelessness. Her ethics are quite the opposite, in that it leverages the amount of joy found in acknowledging and embracing our ambiguity. Because the adventurous man is not searching for the justification for his existence, he takes “delight in living.”<sup>49</sup>

Although Beauvoir’s adventurous man upholds the ethical characteristics she promotes, he fails to attain moral freedom because he is solipsistic. He fails to realize that he is dependent upon the world and those around him. Beauvoir writes that, “if existentialism were solipsistic, as it is generally claimed, it would have to regard the adventurer as its perfect hero.”<sup>50</sup> The moral failing of the adventurer lies in his insensitive to others and his unwillingness to will the freedom of others due to selfish immersion in his own projects. He can easily slip into an attitude of indifference or manipulative contempt for his fellow man. His selfishness prevents him from exercising moral freedom.

After the adventurer, there is the passionate man. The passionate man is interesting because Beauvoir places him at a higher stage than the adventurer. He is the antithesis to the adventurer and is more akin to the serious man by way of clinging to absolutes. While the serious man takes ideas as absolute, the passionate man “infuses his absolutes with subjectivity.”<sup>51</sup> By attaching himself so fiercely to another object (person), the passionate man becomes enslaved to

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<sup>48</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 58

<sup>49</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 58

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>51</sup> Mahon. *Existentialism*, 56



his desire, and he becomes detached from those around him who do not share his passionate attachment. Therefore, the passionate man fails to engage in his relationally dependent subjectivity and thus, his moral freedom.

## 2.6. The Passionate Man

The passionate man is the antithesis to the adventurer because he is entirely attached to the goals and objects he holds as absolutes. Although this sounds familiar to the attitude of the serious man, Beauvoir maintains that they are radically different in terms of how they establish the context for the meaning of their absolutes. According to her, “What characterizes the passionate man is that he sets up the object as an absolute, not, like the serious man, as a thing detached from himself, but as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity.”<sup>52</sup> Unlike the serious man who becomes subservient to what he holds as absolute ideals, the passionate man is desirous only of a particular person or an object. Arp writes that it is because of this projected desire that the “passionate man experiences his lack of being.”<sup>53</sup>

A literary example of the passionate man is represented by the twenty-six men in Maxim Gorky’s *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl*. In this short story, twenty-six men are enslaved in a chamber and find no meaning in life except the collective love they have for Tanya, a young girl that visits them every morning. The main interlocutor is a nameless individual among these men. He expresses the passionate man’s ability to experience his lack of being in the presence of what he loves. When speaking of Tanya, he writes:

We had found something, which for each of us had to remain forever sacred...perhaps we loved something that was not truly good, but there was after

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<sup>52</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 64

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

all twenty-six of us and so we always wanted to see that the rest of us held sacred what was most precious to each of our hearts.<sup>54</sup>

In the desire to obtain Tanya and make her “theirs,” the twenty-six men deny her freedom. The passionate man’s desire to deny the distance between himself and that which he “loves” only reaffirms his inability to see another person as a free being. The passionate man, however, while engaging in his devout pursuit of capturing another as an “object,” can become dangerous. In his total lust and admiration for the person or ideal he so adamantly loves, he possesses no desire to will the freedom of others. He is trapped in his lust, and apart from that which is the immediate object of his passion, all others become reduced to insignificant beings. Beauvoir asks, in regard to the disposition of the passionate man, “why not betray, kill, grow violent?”<sup>55</sup> If the passionate man regards the universe and things within it as merely means to obtain the things which have engaged his being,” then he denies himself his freedom as well as the freedom of others.

The importance of the preceding ethical characteristics is that they illustrate the ways in which human beings fail to attain moral freedom. After acknowledging these personality types, Beauvoir next turns to address the ways in which human beings can exemplify authentic moral traits. In the following chapter, I will address the ways in which Beauvoir supplements ontological freedom, by introducing moral freedom. Beauvoir writes that, as human beings, we are setting “freedom free”,<sup>56</sup> especially when we consciously affirm our ambiguity and will ourselves and others free.

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<sup>54</sup> Maxim Gorky, “Twenty Six Men and a Girl.” In *Penguin Books of Russian Short Stories*, ed. David Richards (London: Penguin Book, 1981), 214.

<sup>55</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 66

<sup>56</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Prime of Life* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 434

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Critical Evaluation of Beauvoir's Ethics

#### 3.1. Simone De Beauvoir: A Superior Existential Ethics to Sartre

There is a radically prevalent notion that Beauvoir's philosophy is only a philosophical supplementation to that of Sartre. It is claimed she produced unoriginal material and was highly dependent on Sartre's own existential foundation. I adamantly reject this presumptive and baseless claim. Instead, I wish to posit that Beauvoir's ethics, as put forward in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, are substantial and unique in their own right. Even the editors of a popular philosophical text, *Great Traditions in Ethics*, wrote, when introducing a selection from *Ethics of Ambiguity*, that when considering the relationship between Sartre and Beauvoir, it is "difficult and perhaps unnecessary to distinguish between their separate contributions to ethics."<sup>57</sup> I posit that Beauvoir answers the question of whether morality can be constructed from existentialism. Sartre, however, left unanswered this question in *Being and Nothingness*. I maintain that her ethics not only serve as supplementary material for existentialism but, more importantly, her existential ethics must be recognized as important in its own right.

Beauvoir's goal, when creating her ethics, was to emphasize the relational context between existing consciousnesses. As opposed to Sartre, who held that "one consciousness necessarily makes the other consciousness an object in its own attempt to assert subjectivity,"<sup>58</sup> Beauvoir emphasized the reciprocal nature of two consciousnesses interacting with one another. Beauvoir places her whole ethics on the shared recognition of two (or more) interdependent ontological

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<sup>57</sup> Ethel M. Albert, Theodore C. Denise, and Sheldon P. Peterfreund, ed., *Great Traditions in Ethics* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1975) quoted in Margaret A. Simons "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship." *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986), 165

<sup>58</sup> Sally J. Scholz, *On De Beauvoir* (Villanova: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2000), 36

beings. We are not solitary beings; therefore, we cannot advance our own freedom without advancing the freedom of others. If we are all ontologically free, there must be another type of freedom that yields ethical behavior. This is the case precisely because ontological freedom necessarily entails being. In order to present an ethics for existentialism, Beauvoir presents another type of freedom. This freedom, which she calls ‘moral’, gives weight (in its social and political context) to the ontological freedom with which we are born.

When considering Sartre’s publications during the time Beauvoir was writing *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, his narrative on the establishment of ethics was tentative and quite devoid of any position on their actual application. For example, if we were to examine Sartre’s philosophical essay, *The Hands* 1948, he appears to be quite “pessimistic about the possibility of moral action.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Sartre’s position on the ethical implications of existentialism are not developed in *Being and Nothingness*. He writes that, “Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts.”<sup>60</sup> Beauvoir adheres to Sartre’s ontological freedom, but by arguing that “human freedom is the source of moral obligation,”<sup>61</sup> she recognizes a new type of freedom that specifically concerns morality. In order to achieve moral freedom, one must adopt an attitude that recognizes the choice either to will oneself free or deny one’s freedom. As Beauvoir states, the attainment of my “moral freedom depends on others being able to attain it.”<sup>62</sup> This view compliments her emphasis on the interdependence of human beings.

As previously stated, Beauvoir promotes two new forms of freedom in *Ethics of Ambiguity*: (1) moral freedom and (2) power. Both of these freedoms are dependent on one another, as the latter serves as a foundation for the development of moral freedom. In the

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<sup>59</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 77

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, *Being in Nothingness*, 625

<sup>61</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 50

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

following sections, I will go into detail on what these two freedoms represent and their consequences for Beauvoir's existential ethics.

### 3.2: Moral Freedom and Power

Beauvoir writes that, "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision."<sup>63</sup> Moral freedom, unlike ontological freedom, is a choice. Because ontological freedom need not be willed to be attained, the need for a new freedom is necessary to construct an ethics.

Moral Freedom is developed through our relationship and interactions with others, and thus does not exist in a vacuum. Beauvoir denounces the stoics "abstract notion of freedom"<sup>64</sup> because it fails to acknowledge humans as situated beings. Moral freedom, she claims, is not a value per se, but the end we should aim to obtain. If people do not want to be moral, then they will not become moral. Beauvoir, through phenomenological observation, makes the case that it is a critical error to view freedom as a transcendent value. Beauvoir, in her ethics, adopts the point of view of "phenomenological observation,"<sup>65</sup> which entails closely inspecting people's desire for providing meaning to their life. To see moral freedom as something absolute would subjugate us to the status of the serious man.

Freedom is the source from which all significance and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else. At the same time that it requires the realization of concrete ends, of particular projects, it requires itself universally.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 24

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>65</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 92

<sup>66</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 24

As human beings, we have the choice to disclose ourselves and make ourselves a lack of being. If we so choose to do this, we can engage with other free beings and “disclose the world together.”<sup>67</sup> Beauvoir actively grounds her ethics in the relational dependence we share with one another.

Because Beauvoir’s conception of ethics takes place in the context of the socio-political and concrete spheres of existence, she also creates another form of freedom, which she calls power. Power, she claims, provides the foundation for moral freedom.

Sartre’s theory that we can never be denied our ontological freedom is never negated by Beauvoir. It is a central tenet of her philosophy. Yet, she acknowledges that there are factors that can curtail our attainment of moral freedom. Beauvoir says that “the freedom of man is infinite, but his power is limited.”<sup>68</sup> This is because power is the “freedom from material and social constraints,”<sup>69</sup> and can, therefore, be denied by outside and oppressive forces. Arp suggests that because power is a necessary foundation for one to attain moral freedom, the act of oppression not only denies people their moral freedom but also their power because power yields moral freedom. Therefore, Arp maintains that Beauvoir indicates that there is a material foundation to our attainment of moral freedom. Because freedom for Beauvoir is not an abstract notion, it must have grounding in the material world. Although she never explicitly says that there is a material basis for our attainment of moral freedom, such a conviction is consistent with her phenomenological view that human beings are both conscious and material situated subjects. A human being’s power can be limited by his/her facticity, which means his/her materialistic and situated context. I agree with Arp’s construction that when a person is oppressed, he/she is not so much denied moral freedom as his/her power. Beauvoir faces the conflict presented in

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<sup>67</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 30

<sup>68</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 28

<sup>69</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 2

reconciling the two forms of freedom. However, due to her conception of ethics as infused with the ambiguity of human existence, there is no way of escaping the dilemma.

### **3.3: Choices and What It Means to Will Others Free: The Ethics of Political Liberation**

Beauvoir grounds her ethics on the insight that human beings are of an ambiguous nature, being both of matter and consciousness. “Man is still part of the world of which he is a consciousness.”<sup>70</sup> Human beings are both consciousness and physical bodies that die. In order to realize our moral freedom, we must realize the moral freedom of others. Such a realization entails action and an engagement in making difficult choices. Beauvoir acknowledges that the commitment to liberating others from oppression is not easy. Willing the freedom of others demands that we make difficult decisions. Beauvoir does not think that choices are arbitrary. In fact, she combats the criticism of existential subjectivism, by laying out ‘a standard of utility’ for which to justify our actions when fighting against oppression. Yet, it is important to note that Beauvoir’s utility is not that of the utilitarianists. She offers a standard of utility that is compatible with her existential phenomenological position. Her method is not confined to some universal prescription based on unconditional duty or a categorical imperative, but open to the constant tension inherent in the “perpetual contestation of means by the end and the end by the means.”<sup>71</sup> Beauvoir acknowledges that the method she offers is not immune from failure; it is not foolproof. Because man is always rooted in a particular situation, his perspective is too. It is impossible to see into the future; therefore, our intended consequences are never guaranteed. People are ontologically free regardless of their actions or ethical disposition. Beauvoir is an existentialist and her ethics does not waver from the formidable tenet of our inherent ontological

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<sup>70</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 53

<sup>71</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 155

freedom. Whether or not man wants to be a disclosed being, he is, simply due to the fact that he exists. Ontological freedom does not concern Beauvoir because it is implicitly known; it does not entitle human beings to engage in morality. Hitler was ontologically free. So, ontological freedom does not entail moral freedom. Moral freedom is only created when I am actively willing the moral freedom of others; when I am desirous for their liberation.

Beauvoir's thesis is that we have a "moral obligation to attempt to overcome oppression."<sup>72</sup> Because her starting point is the acknowledgment of our ontological freedom, she aims at a higher point of freedom that requires effort. It is not enough to just have ontological freedom. We should desire more precisely because ontological freedom is the state we are born into.

Oppression does not strip away someone's ontological freedom. As long as we are alive we are ontologically free. But oppression does strip away power, the material basis for the attainment of moral freedom. When one is oppressed, one is constrained by material and economic factors that limit one's engagement with having freedom (power).

The attainment of moral freedom does not exist in a vacuum. To attain authentic morality is to engage in political action, and social practices. It also means acknowledging the implicit relations that binds us as human beings. Because we have an obligation to will the freedom of others—to free them from oppression—the engagement in the political gives way to the most profound moral dilemmas human beings face. Beauvoir's contemplation of the issues that arise within the political sphere is perfectly consistent with the philosophical thrust of the phenomenological existential tradition. Such a tradition "holds that a human subject always finds itself in situation, that is, in a highly particularized complex of circumstances."<sup>73</sup> We cannot

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<sup>72</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 124

<sup>73</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 112



escape our relationships with others, nor can we totally escape from the material environment we find ourselves situated in. Beauvoir's ethics is founded upon the human being, construed as a concretely situated subject. Through this insight, she offers a way in which we can help liberate others from oppression.

## CONCLUSION

As I conclude this discussion of Beauvoir's ethics, I call attention to the following statement by Beauvoir:

Therefore, not only do we assert that the existential doctrine permits the elaboration of an ethics, but it even appears to us as the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place.<sup>74</sup>

Beauvoir demonstrates that an ethics can be derived from existentialism. By promoting an ethics that illuminates the actual moral experience of a human being without being prescriptive or universal, Beauvoir generated a philosophy that could actually be implemented. Unlike other ethical systems, which derive universal truths from contrived notions of what counts as absolute forms of morality, Beauvoir's existential ethics demonstrates that if there are no absolutes, then a human being must make choices. Morality is possible because of choice. Her ethics is the only clearly recognizable ethics in the existential tradition because it accounts for the ambiguity of our lived experience. Put differently, human beings are situated subjects, being both a material 'thing' and a conscious being, only an ethics that acknowledges our ambiguous situation is apt in offering a solution.

Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom is that which most radically differentiates her ontology from Sartre's. By introducing moral freedom, Beauvoir "tells us that we should be concerned about other people's freedom."<sup>75</sup> This unimpeachable concern for the freedom of others is ironically the very basis of her existentialist ethics.

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<sup>74</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 34

<sup>75</sup> Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 150

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