

## Part III

### Beyond *The Second Sex*

#### A. *Beauvoir's Ethics and Political Philosophy*

## “Pyrrhus and Cineas”: The Conditions of a Meaningful Life

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What is philosophy? Is it an abstruse subject that has little to do with human life? Socrates, the founder of Western philosophy, thought otherwise. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates announces that what they are discussing is important because it concerns how people should live their lives (Bloom 1968; see also Williams 1986). What philosophy is, is itself a philosophical question, of course. But one question that people ask themselves that might be considered philosophical concerns the meaning of life. What is it? And how can individuals find meaning in their own lives?

Academic philosophy today devotes little time to such questions. But one school of philosophy in the mid-twentieth century took these questions seriously: existentialism. Perhaps that is why it was so popular for a while. What does existentialism have to say about how we should conduct our lives? It holds that we ourselves give meaning to our lives and, furthermore, cannot justify our life decisions solely by appeal to external standards.

Some very long books have been written laying out the foundations of existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is the most well known. Those searching for a shorter more succinct introduction have turned to his essay “Existentialism is a Humanism” instead. This essay by Sartre, which began life as an impromptu lecture delivered to an overflow audience of Parisians hungry for intellectual stimulation after World War II, was hurriedly revised for publication by Sartre's fellow existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir, then rushed into print (Arp 2001, 79–80). In that essay Sartre claims that, while existentialism cannot give definite answers to personal moral questions, neither can other philosophies. But he does not address the larger question of what people should do to make sense of their lives as a whole. The essay by Simone de Beauvoir that is the topic of this chapter, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” does do so, and thus serves as a better introduction to existentialism than Sartre's essay.

Even after many books and articles have been written about Beauvoir's philosophical ideas, existentialism is still identified as Sartre's creation. A number of other chapters in

this volume highlight that this is incorrect. Beauvoir played an indispensable role in forming and expressing the central tenets of existentialism in the beginning. When Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" was published in 1946 Beauvoir had already produced four philosophical essays, plus two novels and one play based on existentialist ideas by that point.

"Pyrrhus and Cineas" was the first in this series of philosophical essays by Beauvoir. Published in September 1944, she had begun formulating the ideas in it as early as 1942 (Bair 1990, 639). Its topic is the one that Socrates felt was so important: how one should live one's life. Although it makes no grand pronouncements about the meaning of life overall, it examines different ways people choose to give meaning and direction to their individual lives. In Beauvoir's words, the questions she is asking are: "What, then, is the measure of man? What goals can he set himself and what hopes are provided him?" (Beauvoir 2004, 91). Her concern is people's actual lives, not abstract philosophical questions.

Although her essay is a better introduction to existentialism than Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism," the title of his is better. Who, after all, are Pyrrhus and Cineas? Pyrrhus was a great king of the second century B.C.E., who gave his name to the phrase "Pyrrhic victory." He supposedly remarked after a particularly hard-fought battle that one more like that would ruin him. At the beginning of this essay Beauvoir recounts Plutarch's story about a conversation that this same Pyrrhus had with his advisor Cineas. Pyrrhus is setting out to conquer a foreign territory. Cineas asks him what he will do afterwards. Pyrrhus replies that he will set off to conquer another. And after that, Cineas asks. Pyrrhus gives the same answer. Finally, after he conquers India, he will rest, Pyrrhus says. Why not rest now, Cineas asks.

To many, Cineas appears as the voice of wisdom in this interchange (Montaigne 1957). Beauvoir does not agree. At the end of her essay she concludes that Pyrrhus has the correct attitude to life, not Cineas. (She does not endorse Pyrrhus' goal of military domination, obviously, given her political convictions.) In the body of the essay she explains why Cineas is wrong.

## 1. Living in the Moment

"All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber," Beauvoir quotes the sixteenth-century French thinker Blaise Pascal as saying (Beauvoir 2004, 97). Cineas seems to share this conviction. In another of her philosophical essays, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," Beauvoir exposes the cynicism behind this stance, which reflects the pessimistic humanism deeply woven in French culture. Beauvoir's first target in her critique is a passive quietism that is allied to Pascal and Cineas' points of view: to escape from cares and worries, to really enjoy life, or at least to avoid suffering, you need to learn to live in the moment. Due to the increasing popularity of Buddhism and Eastern philosophy and the more hurried pace of daily life in the West today, more and more people are drawn to this point of view.

According to Beauvoir, there are two different ways to interpret this advice. The first has nothing to do with Eastern philosophy. Long before Buddhism became known in the

West, the Roman poet Horace advised his readers to *carpe diem*, or seize the day, and put little trust in tomorrow. The emphasis here is on experiencing the pleasure of the moment. We are only open to these pleasures if we free ourselves from worrying about the future and obsessively rehashing the past, the thinking goes. The buried assumption is that the point of life is to enjoy it as much as possible, linking this point of view to hedonism, the philosophical position that pleasure is the highest good.

Beauvoir was in no way contemptuous of sensual pleasure. She insisted, for instance, in her later work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that any theory of political liberation is useless, if in it “the satisfaction of an old man drinking a glass of wine counts for nothing” (Beauvoir 2000, 135). Her memoirs also show that, for a philosopher, she was quite alive to the joys of the flesh. So it is not the emphasis on pleasure that leads Beauvoir to reject this approach to life.

The problem, she points out, is that a single moment has no meaning freed from all connection to the past or the present or the complicated being who is experiencing it. Sometimes it the moment’s connection to the past that makes it pleasurable, for instance, when Marcel Proust’s character tastes the tea-soaked madeleine and is transported back to the Sunday mornings of his childhood. At other times the pleasure comes from the context of the experience. Pleasure involves variation. One of the most pleasurable experiences is the relief that something unpleasant has ended, and unrelieved well-being can become boring. Sigmund Freud made similar observations in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “We are made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast, and very little from the state of things,” (Freud 1962). That is why it is hard to depict seriously what life in paradise would be like, Beauvoir notes (although it has been the topic of many cartoons).

For all these reasons, if one is serious about restricting awareness to the present moment, then one must give up on pleasure, Beauvoir points out. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophies fully accepted this consequence. For the Epicureans pleasure is the aim of life, but pleasure to them is only the absence of bodily or mental pain. The Stoics even denied that pleasure is a good. Today, popular adaptations of Buddhism and New Age spiritual teachings promote the doctrine of non-attachment to both painful and pleasurable stimuli. Many thought systems have acknowledged the deep connection between pleasure and pain. For example, romantic love, a source of great pleasure, leaves a person open to deep pain and disappointment.

This insight leads directly to consideration of a second way that this strategy of living in the moment can be pursued, in which enjoying pleasure is not the aim. Pleasure, after all, leads to pain, so both are to be shunned. The point is to contemplate each single passing moment shorn of any affective meaning. Ill-informed critics of existentialism charge that it preaches that life is absurd (Wikipedia 2015). Familiarity with Beauvoir’s work shows that this is definitely not the case. But this strategy of reducing human life to a string of disconnected instants would render it absurd. She repeats a joke about skiing (which both she and Sartre enjoyed): why go up the hill, if you are just going to come down again? But, according to her, if one chops up time into ever smaller units, even this level of coherence is lost. If you focus only on a single footstep, what sense does it make to talk about going up or down a hill? Shorn of the context of goals and motivations, human action is reduced to a series of meaningless motions.

Of course, people today who practice yoga and meditation or other Eastern spiritual disciplines, do not regard their lives in this way. Often their goal is stress reduction – help in dealing with the anxiety and sensory overload that goes along with contemporary life. Beauvoir’s criticisms are more philosophical. They target the metaphysical assumptions that certain of these schools of thought make to the effect that there is some true reality underlying appearances to which someone can break through to by following these disciplines.

Appealing to Hegel and Heidegger, Beauvoir makes some weighty philosophical pronouncements at this point: “Appearance is reality,” she announces. Human desires and fears may be transitory, but they are real, and the features of the world highlighted by them do not necessarily have a lesser ontological status than the level of reality revealed in deep meditation. Every human being, she says, “is constitutively oriented toward something other than himself. He is himself only through relationships with something other than himself” (Beauvoir 2004, 97–8). The influence of the philosopher Edmund Husserl on her thinking can be seen here – specifically his foundational concept of intentionality, which is sometimes summed up as: all consciousness is consciousness of.

Beauvoir’s own concept of transcendence, which she draws on many times in “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” is drawn from her extensive study of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl. For her, transcendence involves a constant reaching beyond given circumstances. It is the defining feature of human conscious life: “Every thought, every look, every tendency is transcendence.” After all, she has shown, even a momentary pleasure “envelops the past, the future, the entire world” (2004, 98). Due to this aspect of human life, it is impossible to confine it within the bounds of a single moment.

## 2. The Universe as a Whole

Next, Beauvoir turns the telescope around to examine what is revealed looking through the other end. Instead of focusing on a single instant of experience, the next perspective she examines extends to cover the whole of time and space. The two perspectives are radically different, but complementary. The result is the same, Beauvoir points out: human life becomes bereft of meaning.

Who are these people who view human life against the backdrop of the universe as a whole? Beauvoir mentions Spinoza and Hegel. The Stoics, she points out, join an emphasis on the workings of the universe with (as in the journals of Marcus Aurelius) obsessive attention to the details of an individual life. To them, each moment of each single existence is the sounding of a single note in a boundless universal harmony.

Today, however, this second perspective has become identified in the public mind with the scientific worldview. It brings to mind the astronomer Carl Sagan rhapsodizing in his popular TV show over the billions and billions of stars in the sky. Science tells us that the universe is at least 13 billion years old and more than 91 billion light years in diameter. That may lead someone to ask: What importance does a single human life have in this immense expanse?

Responding to this question, Beauvoir echoes Descartes, whose maxim “I think, therefore I am” brought to philosophy’s attention the inescapable subjectivity of all experience. To return to my metaphor, a telescope shows nothing through either end

unless a person is looking through it. I myself am asserting these truths about the universe that I have written down. “By asserting, I make myself be,” Beauvoir herself asserts. In my case, my presence in the immense universe revealed by science cannot be denied. I can never reduce myself to nothing and dissolve myself within it: “Man cannot escape his own presence or that of the singular world that his presence reveals around him.” So to human eyes, our star has a priority: “Whatever the truth of the sun and of man in the heart of the all, the appearance of the sun for man exists in an irreducible manner” (Beauvoir 2004, 101).

Furthermore, I wish to add, the “impersonal infinity” of the universe revealed by science has never yet led a scientist to despair over his or her insignificance. The petty feuds and jealousies that erupt among scientists are legion. Exactly who is making these awe-inspiring discoveries is a matter of great importance, apparently.

It was not scientists who were upset by the new picture of man’s place in the universe revealed during the scientific revolution. It was directly at odds with Christian doctrine. Today in the West organized religion no longer has the powerful role in society it once had. Nonetheless, people continue to believe in God: 92% of Americans do, according to a Gallup poll (Gallup 2011). Believing in God can provide a refuge, Beauvoir hints, for those who are loath to accept that human life is as insignificant as our place in the universe seems to suggest. Monotheism provides a framework within which the individual human is reconciled with the infinite, which is identified with God. According to the religious worldview the existence of God gives meaning to human actions. But how exactly? Beauvoir considers this question next.

### 3. Religion

Why do one thing rather than another? A Christian has a ready answer to this question: because God wills it. But Beauvoir asks some tougher questions. What does God will? How can God will anything? With monotheism, God is “plenitude of being, there is in him no distance between his project and his reality” (Beauvoir 2004, 102). How could humans improve on God’s creation? How could he need our sacrifices and prayers? Though Beauvoir follows the usual practice and calls God a “he,” it makes no sense to ascribe human characteristics like desires to God, she argues.

Just as there are two ways to interpret the aim of living in the moment, one focusing on pleasure and one not, there are two ways to approach the question of what God wills. A strain of Catholic naturalism, which Beauvoir was familiar with from her youth, holds that the fruits of the earth were put here for us to enjoy, and we were put here to enjoy them (Bair 1990). But all religions draw the line somewhere. A Catholic priest can enjoy alcohol, but not sex. So the question of how to interpret God’s will remains.

At the other end of the spectrum lie those strains of religion that focus on sin, preaching that God commands us to overcome evil. If so, then God’s will is an appeal to human freedom. Strictly speaking, Beauvoir asserts, this God is no longer absolute, possessing infinite power. Instead, under this interpretation God is infinite transcendence. His demands on the faithful never cease. In this case, according to her, deciding what God wills is even harder, since his plan can no longer be found in his creation. God wants something from us, but what? Even those who think they hear God speaking must be

aware that it could be a delusion or even the devil instead. Kierkegaard writes about the intense spiritual conflict God's instructions to Abraham would cause in his *Fear and Trembling*.

The truly godly can be recognized by their works, some respond. But what makes certain actions good, and others not? History records the vastly different ways societies have followed what they think is God's will. Yet, Beauvoir notes, "every society claims to have God with it." If instead I rely on my own spiritual intuitions only, "I hear only the voice of my own heart" (Beauvoir 2004, 105).

Religion does provide comfort and meaning for countless people around the globe. Beauvoir was raised a Catholic, but lost her faith as a teenager. She is not trying to convert people to atheism with her remarks here. Her point is that religion does not actually free people from having to rely on their own instincts and judgments in making the choices they do. "God, if he existed, would therefore be powerless to guide human transcendence," she says (Beauvoir 2004, 105).

#### 4. Humanitarianism

Secular Humanists criticize religion's focus on the afterlife: what a waste to worry about what happens to you after you die, instead of trying to improve your present living conditions. More and more people are now making this choice to devote their lives to serving humankind as a whole, instead of or alongside serving a supernatural being. In the twentieth century myriad organizations sprang up, dedicated to helping people in all corners of the globe. Young people especially are drawn to making an impact this way. I recently read online how one nineteen-year-old founded an organization promising to reduce the huge accumulation of plastic in the Pacific Ocean by means of a new method that uses natural ocean currents (IFLScience 2014).

Beauvoir is more sympathetic to this choice of a life goal than she is to the other perspectives on life she has examined so far. For one thing, it takes what she calls transcendence as its foundation. Devoting one's life to improving people's living conditions is a quest that is open-ended and ever changing. Neither success nor failure is a reason to stop. Humankind is "a perpetual surpassing of itself; an appeal in need of a response constantly emanates from it" (Beauvoir 2004, 106).

The first question Beauvoir raises is: can we speak of one humanity? Humanity is not merely the sum total of the more than seven billion humans who live on earth today. She does not say so, but in defining humanity certain moral standards are applied from the outset. The interests of warlords, human traffickers, and genocidal armies are not taken into account. And they are not excluded solely because of their toll on human life. In World War II the forces defending humanity against Hitler killed over seven million people.

Nor is humanity simply the set of all morally worthy people: "In order for us to be able to act *for* humanity, it must demand something from us ... it must appeal to us in a single voice" (Beauvoir 2004, 106). One cannot act for the sake of humankind without deciding what counts as a legitimate human need – a difficult process. The capabilities approach pioneered by the economist Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum offers

one approach to this question. For them, reducing poverty should not be the only goal: good health and loving relationships are genuine human needs, as well.

Some social theorists hold that there is a natural solidarity that springs up among people with common interests. Solidarity is a Marxist term and Beauvoir’s critique of this idea of a unified humanity is directed at them. When Beauvoir wrote “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” the Communist Party had many members in France. They were very active in the French Resistance during World War II. Her criticism is a familiar one: Marxism is too deterministic; it envisions “a natural economy according to which the place of each one is defined by the place of others.” Beauvoir charges that Marxists envision humanity as a “pure passivity” (Beauvoir 2004, 107). Human initiative to take action cannot be explained under this model.

Even if the question of who one is aiming to help is decided, another obstacle arises: one part of humanity always seems to be in conflict with another. The internet has brought to our attention all the different wars taking place around the globe. There is a horrifying amount of violence. Sometimes it is easy to identify who the bad actors are, but not always. And many times a humanitarian is forced to choose sides. Aid workers can be caught on the front lines and forced to make instant decisions. Beauvoir explores ways to approach making such agonizing choices in her later work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Arp 2001). Here she says only: “One will always work for certain men against others” (Beauvoir 2004, 108).

Strictly speaking, then, a person cannot serve the interests of humanity as a whole. Even if one’s goal is insuring the future harmony of all well-intentioned people, some of these people are lined up against each other at the beginning. If one takes a sufficiently lofty perspective – a perspective Beauvoir identifies with Hegel—perhaps these conflicts do not matter: “if we envision the totality of its history, we see the apparent separation of events and men vanish; all moments are reconciled” (Beauvoir 2004, 110). Beauvoir was an avid student of Hegel (Arp 2012) so she does not reject this outlook out of hand. But, true to her phenomenological roots, she returns the focus to the “living subjectivity” of the individual human being (Beauvoir 2004, 111). How could this Hegelian outlook bring any comfort to a defeated soldier? – or the family of a dead one, I might add.

Today, few people are familiar with Hegel. But many do believe in human progress. It was Martin Luther King who affirmed, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King 1991). Beauvoir shows how this idea of progress assumes a Hegelian-type reconciliation of opposing forces. It envisions succeeding generations as a passive medium acted on by the forces of history the way the moon’s gravity moves the tides. However, from a subjective perspective, this motion forward is anything but smooth. Furthermore, what might first be judged to be a great boon to humanity could turn out to threaten its very survival, as the development of the atomic bomb showed. You cannot control how the people of the future will use what you have created, Beauvoir points out, so how can you know that you are working for their good?

Beauvoir admits that there are some goals on which people can agree. The scientific community transcends nationality, and scientific results must survive scrutiny by everyone in it to be accepted. But as my previous example of the atom bomb shows, these results do not always lead to the betterment of humanity. And once these agreed-upon goals are accomplished, there are always more that lie ahead. Some religions

predict an end of days, but progress marches endlessly forward. People's lives may get better and better in the future, but we will never live in a heaven on earth, whatever that might be like.

While some teenagers are inspired to start internet campaigns to tackle tough environmental problems, other young people wonder whether the world holds any place for them at all. With billions of people in the world, how could one person's life – or death – matter, they wonder. Beauvoir has words of encouragement for them – and for the more introspective among us, as well. Yes, there is no place marked out ahead of time for any person. Beauvoir explains why in dense philosophical prose: "Absence does not precede presence; being precedes nothingness, and only through man's freedom do voids and lacks spring up in the heart of being" (Beauvoir 2004, 107). She is appealing to some of the central tenets of existentialism here laid out in greater depth in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. The concrete example he gives is more illuminating: the bustling cafe is full of people until he enters searching for Pierre. For someone searching for Pierre, suddenly something is missing (Sartre 1956, 40–2). Beauvoir stresses that each person must create his or her place in the world; other people cannot do it for you. To use a present-day example: a company sends out a job advertisement. If one particular young woman applies, it might be the perfect job for her. But if she does not apply, or skips the interview, then the company will hire someone else who does just as well there. Other people in her life have conflicting visions of her future. Her father might have his heart set on her becoming a surgeon like him, but what the country really needs are more primary care doctors. But, once she makes the choice between these options, she will become a doctor who answers the needs of particular patients.

## 5. Death

In her conclusion to the first half of "Pyrrhus and Cineas," Beauvoir stresses the finitude of human existence. However, for her, the reason it is finite is not because we all eventually die. Heidegger holds that the background awareness of the ever-present possibility of dying shapes the experience of life. We exist as Being-toward-death, in his terms, and can only achieve authentic existence if we come to terms with that. Beauvoir rejects this view. In the place of Heideggerian angst before death, existentialism highlights the anguish we feel in the face of our freedom: "The nothingness that anguish reveals to me is not the nothingness of my death. It is the negativity at the heart of my life that allows me to constantly transcend all transcendence," Beauvoir writes (Beauvoir 2004, 114). It is not death, not the passing of time, that makes human life finite, but rather the way we are constantly transcending our present experience by positing one goal after another. Even an immortal would experience life this way (See Beauvoir 1992).

In this first half, Beauvoir addresses questions that most people ask themselves at one point or another: What is the right perspective to take on my life? What can I do to give it true meaning? Beauvoir does not give any definite answers. Perhaps her point is that there are no simple answers to such questions. But at the end of this first section she announces one thing she is sure of: "A man alone in the world would be paralyzed by the manifest vision of the vanity of all his goals. He would undoubtedly not be able to stand living" (Beauvoir 2004, 115).

## 6. Devotion and Generosity

Beauvoir does not get around to explaining why we need others for our lives to have meaning until the end of “Pyrrhus and Cineas”: “I need them because once I have surpassed my own goals, my actions will fall back on themselves, inert and useless, if they have not been carried forward toward a new future by new projects,” she sums up (Beauvoir 2004, 135). Fulfilling my existence as a transcendence requires interaction with other people. Not only do I need others to assist me in my projects, I need them so that my projects matter in the first place. I even need them as opponents in certain cases. Through others, we escape “the contingency and gratuitousness of pure presence” (2004, 129). Beauvoir uses the image of an arch to capture how individual humans interacting with other human individuals create a joint reality without the support of metaphysical assumptions.

Instead, Beauvoir opens this second section by demonstrating that there are limits to what one person can expect from another. Previously, she explored the pitfalls involved in devoting one’s life to God or an abstract humanity. Other people have a concrete presence in one’s life that these two other entities lack. What about devoting one’s life to specific people? Is this a way to justify one’s existence?

Beauvoir’s treatment of parental love in this regard is a departure for her. In her novels and in *The Second Sex* she has much to say about how romantic love presents a danger for women, keeping them from developing their own identity and becoming independent. Here Beauvoir discusses instead how parents’ devotion to their children can backfire and be a source of frustration for both parties.

Parents sometimes complain about their ungrateful children, but, Beauvoir argues, the children have legitimate reasons to complain, too. Parents freely chose to make the sacrifices they do. These sacrifices are a means to an end, but often it is the parents who choose this end, not the child. Devotion can even take on “an aggressive and tyrannical shape,” where the parents alone decide what the child needs (Beauvoir 2004, 118). Even if the parents allow the child to choose her own goals, they should not interfere in the child’s efforts to achieve them. Beauvoir gives the example of a child who wants to climb a tree; an adult happens by and quickly lifts her up into it, but what the child wanted was to climb the tree herself.

Is it possible to devote oneself to another without falling into these traps? The problem is that it is sometimes hard to understand what another truly wants. What someone says she wants can change from one moment to the next, as can what she actually wants. For instance, if a patient wants to disobey a doctor’s orders, should friends and family help her do so? One can take her personal history into account, but there is no privileged standpoint on it. “Just as one can never act for humanity as a whole,” she says, “one never acts for the entire man” (Beauvoir 2004, 120). Deciding cases like these is especially difficult for Beauvoir, since as an existentialist she denies there is an objective standard of morality that is applicable in all circumstances.

Still, these considerations are not an excuse for a life of apathy and disengagement. We ought to go on devoting ourselves to people, goals and causes, she says. Parents, in particular, do not have the luxury of assuming the role of innocent bystander in their children’s lives. Beauvoir here echoes the basic message of

existentialism: “One therefore devotes oneself amid risk and doubt. We must take a stand and choose without anything dictating our choice for us” (Beauvoir 2004, 120–1).

Furthermore, the outcome of our efforts on another’s behalf are always uncertain. Saving a person’s life does not mean you deserve credit or blame for what she does with that life: “I never create anything for the other except points of departure” (Beauvoir 2004, 121). Beauvoir applies the same logic to the question of how much a successful young person owes to his or her devoted parents. The fact of having given birth to someone “confers no right over a freedom” (2004, 121). Birth is only the starting point of a life of constant transcendence.

“The fundamental error of devotion is that it considers the other as an object carrying an emptiness in its heart that would be possible to fill,” Beauvoir writes (Beauvoir 2004, 122). To the parent, the child’s life is lacking something and the parent is determined to fill that need. Oftentimes the child’s values are not the same as the parents’ values, and as the child gets older that becomes important. Again, Beauvoir asserts, there are no objective standards to appeal to: “ready-made values whose hierarchy is imposed on me do not exist without me. What’s good for a man is what he wants as his own good” (Beauvoir 2004, 127).

Beauvoir next steers the discussion to the theme of generosity, sketching out what her ideal, a “lucid generosity,” entails (Beauvoir 2004, 124). That is all devotion boils down to really, once the reader accepts all the points she has just made. In this type of generosity, I know I can do nothing *for* another. If a person accepts my help, she will decide what to do with it. But knowing I have no control over what she does with my gift, I nonetheless freely choose to give it to her. I really can never pay back a kindness another has done for me. Sometimes it is insulting even to try.

## 7. Violence

These insights have another consequence. Beauvoir says: “If I can do nothing for a man, I can do nothing against him either.” Many might reject how far she stretches this principle. She holds that even physical violence does not affect a person at the core: “Violence can act only on the facticity of man, upon his exterior” (Beauvoir 2004, 124). Beauvoir even makes the same extreme claim that Sartre does in *Being and Nothingness* that torture victims remain free under torture.

Clearly, Beauvoir is disregarding the psychological effects of violence here. Her reasoning is driven by her conception of freedom, which, at this early point in her philosophical development, is heavily influenced by Stoicism, a model she eventually rejected. In this model “the other is radically separated from me: no connection can be created from me to this pure interiority upon which even God would have no hold” (Beauvoir 2004, 125–6). Later in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she develops a more complex conception of freedom that allows her to make a more nuanced assessment of the effects of violence (Arp 2001).

She also hints here what she expresses more fully in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that violence, if it is necessary to liberate oneself or others, is morally justifiable. Our need for others makes the conditions of my relations to them highly important. To be discounted,

not to be heard, not to matter deprives a person of a fully meaningful life. So, Beauvoir asserts, “I will therefore struggle against those who want to stifle my voice. To make myself exist before free men, I will often be compelled to treat some men as objects” (Beauvoir 2004, 136). If Beauvoir’s position seems a little strident here, one must keep in mind that she was writing during the Nazi occupation of France.

Yet, since we need other people to give our life meaning, according to Beauvoir, engaging in violence against others always carries a cost. It “is the mark of a failure that nothing can offset” (Beauvoir 2004). Along with political and economic oppression, it reduces another’s ability to interact with us. We need to be surrounded by others who can exercise their freedom by joining in our projects. Coercing them through violence to serve or not to oppose our projects is ultimately counterproductive. My project does not have real worth if it is only worthwhile in my own eyes. What I crave is the recognition and approval of my peers: “The man to whom I do violence is not my peer and I need men to be my peers” (2004, 138). To live under a system of political or economic oppression thwarts this need, even for the class in power. Others need to have the means to express their freedom, so I should try to improve the conditions they live under: “I ask for health, knowledge, well-being, and leisure for men in that their freedom is not consumed in fighting sickness, ignorance and misery” (2004, 137). Although Beauvoir emphasizes that I am not responsible for others’ choices, I am at least partially responsible for the situation they find themselves in. She condemns the complacency of those who, for instance, see the misery of the poor to be solely the result of their bad choices: “In abstaining from helping ... I am the very face of that misery” (2004, 126).

## 8. Success

In developed countries today people busily pursue success. It is the goal of most of their life plans. In the conclusion of her essay Beauvoir considers what success means. It does not consist in “calmly attaining a goal,” she says, because each goal once achieved quickly recedes into the past and is replaced by a new goal (Beauvoir 2004, 138). But neither does success involve checking off a series of items on a “bucket list.” Today especially, success is measured through the judgments of others using certain commonly accepted standards. Yet, Beauvoir remarks, “Other men do not have in their possession the values I wish to attain either” (2004, 140). We each want to make our own unique contribution, be appreciated for who we really are. The way Beauvoir puts it is that we want to be “necessitated in our singularity” (2004, 139).

Whether a person’s life was a success or a failure ultimately can only be assessed after the person dies, and sometimes not even then. Literary or artistic fame comes centuries later for some. What this means is that while alive, “We live in a state of indefinite procrastination.” No one know what the future holds. The only consolation Beauvoir leaves her readers with is that in embracing the risk and uncertainty that dogs our lives we are intimately aware of our freedom. Furthermore, “by throwing himself toward the future [a man] founds his future with certainty” (2004, 139). Our lives are finite. We may run out of time to do the things we planned, but, no matter what, we can make the present moment our own by affirming the values we bring to it.

## 9. Conclusion

In this short essay Beauvoir takes on a big question, a question often brushed aside by academic philosophy: what is the meaning of human life? Two of the approaches to this question she examines conclude that, in the grand scheme of things, human life is not really that important. We occupy a miniscule place in a universe unimaginably vast, modern science has shown us. In Christianity, the only religion that Beauvoir considers, it is God who orders the universe and each human life is only a part of his divine plan. Another worldview she examines, one that is becoming popular in the West today, owing to the influence of Eastern religions, holds only the present moment to be important, while the features of life we usually focus on – our personal stories, attachments to others, and goals are not. To someone dedicated to improving the lot of humanity, by contrast, saving and improving human lives is the goal. But, Beauvoir points out, in pursuing this goal one runs into all sorts of conflicts and complexities. Besides, there are very real limits to what one person can do for another person. She criticizes the selfless devotion that some parents lavish on their children. Her ideal of lucid generosity involves accepting the limitations she lays out.

Overall, what Beauvoir does in this essay is shrink the large and, hence, somewhat empty question – what is the meaning of life – down to size. The right question for her instead is: what is the meaning of my life? She shows us that there are no easy answers to that question. That is why “Pyrrhus and Cineas” is a good introduction to existentialism. Existentialism holds that we each give meaning to our own lives through our personal choices. Beauvoir demonstrates that this is what we all end up doing, whether we are aware of it or not. No external value system or life practice we might adopt provides a workable shortcut.

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