

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S EXISTENTIALIST ONTOLOGY

Kristana Arp

The ancient Athenians believed that their forebears sprang directly from the earth rather than being created by gods or born of human parents. In some version of the myth, the ancestor was depicted as having a man's form above the waist and a snake's form below: "Having emerged from the earth, he still in part resembled the creature that slips to and fro between the upper and lower worlds."¹ At the beginning of her 1947 work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that there is a fundamental ambiguity to human life. According to her, every human, like the chthonic ancestor of the Athenians, exists at the same time in two realms: "he is still part of the world of which he is conscious."² Rooted as they are in the earth, humans can transcend their material origin in thought but they can never escape it.

She cites many ways that this ambiguity is manifested in human life. Humans live and they die. They can retreat to an internal realm of consciousness free from external restraints, but they always exist as bodies, as things "crushed by the dark weight of other things."³ They can discover seemingly eternal truths, including the truth of their own ambiguity, but they are always tied to the fleeting moment of the present. Each is a unique individual immersed in the collective whole of humanity.

Most philosophers, she says, try to escape the tension that accepting this basic ambiguity entails by constructing systems that privilege one of a pair of opposed terms. In the modern Western tradition the prevalent distinction is between mind and matter, or the corollary distinction between mind and body. Materialist philosophers attempt to reduce one side of this pair, mind, to the other, matter. Idealists of different stripes attempt the opposite. Dualists, on the other hand, settle for a permanent stand-off, with both co-existing in the individual human being, in Francis Jeanson's words, "like eternal strangers."⁴ Spirit and Nature are the names that Hegel gives to the two opposing poles. More ingeniously, he attempts "to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to

reconcile all of them." But Beauvoir repudiates Hegel's "marvelous optimism."⁵ Siding instead with Kierkegaard, she characterizes the ambiguity of the human condition as tragic. Like the conflicts at the heart of Greek tragedy, it cannot be overcome but must be played through to the end.

But why can it not be overcome? Beauvoir gives no argument here. Rather she implies that there is a relation of dependence existing between the poles. She says of the human being: "he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends."⁶ The individual is dependent on the human community for its birth and sustenance. There is an "original helplessness from which man springs up."⁷ Likewise, the existence of consciousness is dependent on the human body and its continuing functioning. For this reason, death, as Beauvoir stresses, is inevitable and indeed possible at any moment. And because consciousness is interwoven with the body a human can become an object for another human.⁸ Finally, without consciousness there can be no revelation of enduring truths. But consciousness depends on the body, which exists in time, not in an atemporal realm.⁹

The ambiguity of the human condition cannot be overcome because of the dependence of consciousness on the body and the self on others. Materialist philosophers, given that they accept the distinct existence of consciousness at all, would readily endorse this conclusion that consciousness is dependent on something material. Beauvoir does not attempt a refutation of materialism in this essay, noting only that if mind could be completely reduced to matter morality would not be possible: "moral consciousness can exist only to the extent that there is disagreement between nature and morality."¹⁰ Many philosophers before her have argued that materialism denies free will, which makes ethics impossible. But Beauvoir seems to be pursuing a different line of reasoning, that is, that the relative independence of consciousness, its ability to transcend material conditions is shown by the very experience of moral

obligation.¹¹ Humans judge that the way things are is not the way they ought to be and set about to change them.

The ambiguity of human existence not only makes ethics possible. The dependence of consciousness on the body, which is at the mercy of external forces, the dependence of my life on the lives of others is what makes ethics necessary. If each human consciousness really were “a sovereign and unique subject”¹² over which the forces of nature and the wills of others had no power, there would be no need for morality. Because it is ambiguous, human existence is fragile. Since human beings can be abandoned, hurt, and killed, morality is a central concern of human life. Furthermore, the dependence of consciousness on the body is what renders humans ultimately vulnerable to moral judgment. As Beauvoir notes in her discussion of violence, sometimes the only way to reach those who have hurt, who have killed is through their bodies.

Thus it is humans’ hybrid nature—their ambiguous existence—that makes ethics both possible and necessary. Beauvoir goes on to assert that existentialism is the only philosophy that faces up to the basic ambiguity of human life.¹³ (As I will soon discuss, whether Beauvoir’s fellow existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre recognizes the true extent of this ambiguity is open to question. Nonetheless, Beauvoir’s own brand of existentialism certainly does.) Thus, for Beauvoir, not only is existentialism able to provide the foundation for an ethics, which many critics have denied, it is better positioned to do so than are other philosophies. This is because an existentialist ethics is, as Beauvoir’s title proclaims, an ethics of ambiguity.

II

How exactly does existentialism provide the philosophical basis for Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity? Beauvoir’s thesis is that human freedom is the source of moral obligation. Because we are free, she argues, we should completely realize our freedom by accepting its burdens rather than running from them. However—and this is the surprising new angle that Beauvoir brings to existentialist thought—my realizing my freedom does not necessarily conflict with others realizing their freedom.

Not only does others’ freedom not limit my own freedom, in order for me to completely realize my own freedom I require the freedom of others and thus have a moral obligation to defend and nurture this freedom. The starting point for this argument is a statement that she says comes from *Being and Nothingness*: “Man, Sartre tells us, is “a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that there might be* being.”¹⁴ To understand what Sartre means by this statement and what point Beauvoir is trying to make by quoting it requires a brief review of Sartrean metaphysics.

Beauvoir asserts that existentialism is a philosophy of ambiguity. But actually Sartre’s ontology is a dualistic one in which what exists is divided up into “two regions without communication”: the for-itself—consciousness—and the in-itself—non-conscious reality.¹⁵ Thus, to return to the quote Beauvoir takes from Sartre, the being that the for-itself lacks is the in-itself. Furthermore, the for-itself makes itself a lack of being by nihilating the in-itself. To demonstrate this thesis Sartre gives the example of searching for Pierre in the café. The busy café is full until he enters looking for someone who is not there. Thus, “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world”.¹⁶ Consciousness or the for-itself is a lack of being and this lack of being springs from its own activities.

The second part of the statement that she quotes from Sartre is more crucial for Beauvoir’s project of founding an existentialist ethics. This claim is that humans make themselves a lack of being in order that there might be being. Or as Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*: “the for-itself is . . . the nothingness whereby “there is” being.”¹⁷ Sartre’s statement has a deliberately paradoxical ring to it, but it is easily understandable as a re-interpretation of Husserl’s thesis about the intentionality of consciousness. Husserl’s original insight is that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. What consciousness is conscious of is something meaningful. Sartre ties the production of this meaning back to consciousness, as does Husserl.¹⁸ In Husserl’s terms, consciousness constitutes the meaning of objects in the world, and the meaning of the world itself. For, Sartre, the in-itself is not capable on its own of achieving the unity

of a world. Consciousness, which is a lack of being, brings about that there is a world, or being. Thus a human is a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being.”

Yet Sartre departs radically from Husserl in retaining the category of the in-itself, a category of being existing apart from and underlying the for-itself. While the meaning of being originates through consciousness for Sartre, this “adds nothing” to being: “the fact of revealing being as totality does not touch being any more than the fact of counting two cups on the table touches the existence or nature of either of them.”¹⁹

Strictly speaking, then, the being that exists because humans exist as a lack of being is not being *per se* or the in-itself according to Sartre’s ontology. It is being as it appears to consciousness, or what Sartre calls the phenomenon of being, in order to distinguish it from the being of phenomena or the realm of “transphenomenal and non-conscious being”²⁰ that Sartre claims to prove in his “ontological proof” is implied by the revealing activities of consciousness. But, as the quotes I have taken from *Being and Nothingness* demonstrate, Sartre himself does not stick to this more exact terminology, often speaking of being when he means the phenomenon of being and sometimes equating being with the world. Beauvoir also uses the term “being” in this loose sense in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and equates being with the world, that is, the world revealed to human consciousness.

Beauvoir thus builds on the ontological framework set up in *Being and Nothingness* in the beginning stages of her argument. But Beauvoir’s argument does not necessarily presuppose the full-blown version of Sartre’s ontology I have sketched briefly here. In particular there seems to be no role played in it by Sartre’s category of the in-itself. In founding her ethics Beauvoir concentrates only on the relation between individual human beings and “the human world established by man’s projects and ends,”²¹ not on the relation between humans and the in-itself. In constructing her argument about the intertwining of human freedoms, then, Beauvoir’s focus is more Husserlian than Sartrean.

Of course her central thesis about the basic ambiguity of the human condition does presuppose a dualistic ontology of a certain sort. According to her there is matter and there is consciousness and the human being is some strange blending of both. Yet while in this respect Beauvoir is certainly more dualistic than Husserl, she appears to be less rigid of a dualist than Sartre is. Beauvoir stresses the dark, submerged links between the non-conscious and the conscious more than Sartre does. Sartre says that the in-itself and the for-itself are regions without communication, whereas for her: “Man is still part of the world of which he is conscious.” In this regard Beauvoir’s ontological orientation appears closer to that of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty than to Sartre. Elsewhere Beauvoir says that for Merleau-Ponty consciousness “is not a pure for-itself, or to use Hegel’s phrase which Sartre has taken up, a “hole in being”; but rather “a hollow, a fold,” which has been made and which can be unmade.”²² Merleau-Ponty’s terminology aside, it is interesting to note the extent to which this description applies to her own position.

Furthermore, in Beauvoir’s description of this relation it is material reality which is seen to impinge on consciousness, rather than consciousness impinging on or negating the in-itself as in Sartre’s ontology. A human, she says, “experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things.”²³ She observes that one of the central ironies of humans’ development of technology is that it has led to weapons that can turn the powers of nature against humans to an extent undreamt of previously. The deaths these weapons cause offer irrefutable proof that consciousness exists at the mercy of external forces.

On the other hand, Sartre’s language when he talks of the for-itself nihilating the in-itself suggests that humans’ basic relation to non-conscious reality is one of domination. Consciousness is envisioned as a devouring consciousness, reminiscent of the life-devouring form of desire described at one point in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.²⁴ Perhaps the dominating stance that one consciousness takes towards another consciousness in Sartre’s analysis of being-for-others is prefigured in the nihilating stance that con-

sciousness takes towards the in-itself in his ontology. The ironic thing is that for Sartre, although the for-itself exists as the constant nihilation of the in-itself, this nihilation never actually achieves any hold on the in-itself, for these two regions are regions without communication. In this regard Sartre's ontology differs radically from the more naturalistic ontologies of Marx and of Aristotle, to which human interaction with non-organic nature is central. This failure of the for-itself to actually "touch being" is perhaps just another reason why humans are a "useless passion" for Sartre.

By contrast, one concrete example that Beauvoir gives of making oneself a lack of being in order that there be being presupposes that there is basic urge to merge with nature rather than to dominate it.²⁵ A human makes himself a lack of being by "uprooting himself from the world," she says, which goes against a deep desire:

I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone.²⁶

Albert Camus, a close friend of Beauvoir's during the period that she wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, testifies to a similar yearning: "How tempting to merge oneself with these stones, to mingle with this burning, impassive universe that challenges history and its agitations. A vain temptation, no doubt. But every man has a deep instinct either for destruction or creation"²⁷

Beauvoir refers to this same desire in *The Second Sex*, the work she started after finishing *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but here traces it back to the anguish caused when the infant is "separated more or less brutally from the nourishing body" of the mother at around six months of age:

Man experiences with anguish his being turned loose, his forlornness. In flight from his freedom, his subjectivity, he would fain lose himself in the bosom of the Whole. Here, indeed, is the origin of his cosmic and pantheistic dreams, of his longing for oblivion, for sleep, for ecstasy, for death. He never succeeds in abolishing his separate ego, but at least he wants to attain the solidity of the in-himself (sic), the en-soi, to be

petrified into a thing.²⁸

The perspective that Beauvoir takes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is that humans' failure to realize this basic desire is not a loss but rather a gain. For by making ourselves a lack of being, she says, we remain at a distance from nature. Due to the meaning-bestowing activities of consciousness the sky and the water exist before us.

This urge to merge with nature that Beauvoir postulates can also be tied to humans' enduring desire to achieve being, a desire they also cannot realize, according to existentialism. For Sartre (and Beauvoir also repeats Sartre's formulation in a few places), what humans attempt to achieve in futilely striving to *be* is that impossible union of the for-itself and the in-itself that is God. But if for Beauvoir wanting to be is equivalent to wanting to be sky and water, it is not the same thing as wanting to be God, unless the deity that is being invoked is the pantheistic god of Spinoza. Now, Spinoza certainly thought that his theology could serve as the foundation of an ethics, but it is the transcendent God of the Judeo-Christian tradition that usually has been appealed to by Western civilization as the foundation of ethical values. Beauvoir, like Sartre, was consistently critical of theological ethics and saw this appeal to a transcendent God to be linked to humans' futile desire to achieve being. But for Beauvoir it is not that humans long to be God so much as that they long for there to be a God: "When a man projects into an ideal heaven that impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself that is called God, it is because he wishes the regard of this existing being to change his existence into being."²⁹ One cannot sink back into nature. But the next best thing might be to see oneself as a part of nature as created by God according to a divine plan. Thus religion answers the need humans have to aspire to the status of being in this way.

To sum up, although Beauvoir uses a quote from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* as the starting point of her argument, she gives a different twist to her version of existentialist ontology. She relies heavily on Sartre's thesis, which originated with Husserl, that the meaning of being and thus the existence of a world

must be traced back to human consciousness. Her thesis about human ambiguity makes use of an opposition between two poles of human existence that correspond roughly to Sartre's concepts of the for-itself and the in-itself. But her conception of the relation between these two poles differs quite a bit from Sartre's. Beauvoir stresses that we cannot escape our

existence as material beings, whereas for Sartre the for-itself, which defines human existence, constantly negates the in-itself or material reality. For Beauvoir we must fight a temptation to slip back into the nature from which we emerged, while for Sartre humans must give up their vain desire to be God.³⁰

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Parker, "Myths of Early Athens," in Jan Bremmer, ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1986), p. 193. See also Benjamin Powell, *Athenian Mythology: Erichthonius & the Three Daughters of Cecrops* (Chicago, Ares Publishers Inc., 1976) for more discussion of the myth.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), p. 7. Henceforth referred to as EA.
3. EA p. 7.
4. Francis Jeanson, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 15.
5. EA p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p.12. Writing as she was in the late 1940's Beauvoir adhered to the prevalent practice of using "man" and the masculine pronoun to refer to all human beings whether female or male.
8. I do not read Beauvoir as holding, à la Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, that a human is always an object for another consciousness.
9. I do not mean that the existence of 'eternal' truths depends on the existence of the body, or even on the existence of human beings. The point is only that our awareness of these truths is dependent on the functioning of the human body.
10. EA p. 10.
11. Thus I see Beauvoir to be making a point similar to the one Kant develops at much greater length in his Second Critique, where he argues from the "fact" of morality to the existence of human freedom.
12. EA p. 7.
13. Francis Jeanson also considers the recognition of the fundamental ambiguity of human existence to be the main accomplishment of existentialism, but surprisingly enough, he does not refer to Beauvoir at all in this context, even though he titles the third part of his book (written after *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was finished) "Toward the Morality of Ambiguity." Francis Jeanson, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality*, p. 175. See also p. 15.
14. EA p. 11. I have been unable to locate this exact quotation in *Being and Nothingness*, but it is easy to find many similar pronouncements there.
15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. lxiii. Henceforth referred to as BN. I do not mean to imply that Sartre is a dualist in the Cartesian sense. In his chapter on the body in *Being and Nothingness* he decisively rejects mind/body dualism in favor of a more phenomenological approach. I am just saying that his ontology is dualistic in that it posits these two categories.
16. BN p. 24.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
18. "Consciousness passes beyond the existent, not toward its being, but toward the meaning of this being" (*ibid.*, p. lxiii).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
20. *Ibid.*, p. lxii.
21. EA p. 11.
22. Simone de Beauvoir, "La Phenomenologie de la Perception de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Les Temps modernes*, 1 (1945): 366-67.
23. EA p. 7.
24. "Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object. . ." G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 109.

25. In a further example, however, that of the skier on the slope that Sartre also uses, Beauvoir reverts to a metaphor of domination: "I cannot appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession." See EA p. 12.
26. EA p. 12.
27. Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Phillip Thody, ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969), p. 130.
28. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 268–69.
29. EA p. 14.
30. I delivered a version of this paper at the May 1998 meeting of the Long Island Philosophical Society. Gertrude Postl was my commentator. My colleague Kenneth Bernard also read a version of the paper. I thank them both for their feedback. I also want to thank the Research Released Time Committee of Long Island University for their support.

Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY 11201