

## 12 Simone de Beauvoir's existentialism: freedom and ambiguity in the human world

In July 1940, Simone de Beauvoir began a routine of going to the Bibliothèque Nationale most days from 2.00 to 5.00 p.m. to read G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hitler's armies had invaded and occupied Paris earlier, on June 14, 1940. She was teaching philosophy classes at a girls' *lycée* and living in her grandmother's empty apartment. Her close companion, Jean-Paul Sartre, who had been a soldier in a meteorological unit of the French Army, had been captured and was now being held in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Beauvoir was relieved to receive a note from him sent on July 2 saying he was being well treated, but life in Paris was dismal. Food was scarce, and the German troops were grim reminders of Parisians' lack of political freedom. Her reading routine helped soothe the dread, isolation, and alienation she felt. Beauvoir had always been a very earnest student. She had passed the demanding aggregation exam in philosophy at the young age of twenty-one. To supplement her knowledge of classical philosophical texts, she learned German and read texts in phenomenology. In 1935 she had read Edmund Husserl's *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* "without too much difficulty."<sup>1</sup> She also read Heidegger and translated long passages into French for Sartre.<sup>2</sup> Back when she was in college, her prodigious work habits had earned her a special nickname among her friends: *Castor*, or the beaver. Poring over a difficult philosophical text in a foreign language for three hours a day might seem a strange way to get through such times, but with her it made sense.

It was during these dark days that Beauvoir and Sartre both wrote major parts of the works that established them in the public eye: her novel *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*), published in August 1943, and

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, published in June 1943. It was in a letter from the prisoner-of-war camp that Sartre first announced the title to her.<sup>3</sup> Both his stint as a soldier and his captivity in the camp provided him with large swathes of time he could devote to writing. Beauvoir shared in the birth of this work through their intensive correspondence, long conversations during his army leave, and her close reading of his notebooks. She found these ideas to be tremendously exciting, and some of them found their way into the novel she was writing. Sartre was influenced in turn by the insights in the long-polished draft of the novel he had read closely when he returned to Paris on army leave.<sup>4</sup> This interchange of ideas was nothing new to them. They had already established a close intellectual collaboration at this point, one that they maintained for the rest of their lives.

It is Beauvoir's close personal and intellectual relationship with Sartre, in fact, that has stood in the way of accurately assessing her contributions to existentialism. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* was taken to be the decisive formulation of post-war French existentialism. Because of her close ties to Sartre, Beauvoir has until recently been seen primarily as his philosophical disciple, someone who applied his ideas in her fiction and non-fiction. Some even saw *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's major work, groundbreaking in so many ways, as mainly an application of Sartre's ideas. Later in life Beauvoir tended to reinforce this impression. She was not a philosopher, she declared, Sartre was, so she adopted his philosophical ideas.<sup>5</sup> For her, a philosopher was someone who created a grand system like Hegel or Kant or Leibniz.<sup>6</sup>

But my opening vignette shows that Sartre was not the only philosophical influence on Beauvoir, despite her testimonials. While she did not write a systematic work of philosophy, she wrote two well-received philosophical essays, as well as theoretical articles for *Les Temps Modernes*. She also wove existentialist themes into her novels. In what follows I will show how, in these works, she developed important existentialist ideas that were distinctly her own. She began *She Came to Stay* in 1938; *The Second Sex* was published in two volumes in France in 1949. To my mind, these dates mark out her existentialist period. The central thesis of *The Second Sex* – that one is not born but becomes a woman – is undeniably an existentialist one. However, in that text she begins to move away from

the existentialist focus of her earlier work, returning instead to a central theme of Hegel's – the dialectic of Lordship and Bondage – which had made a big impression on her in her reading sessions in 1940 at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

### 12.1 *SHE CAME TO STAY*: THE DEATH OF THE OTHER

Beauvoir chose a quotation from Hegel's chapter on Lordship and Bondage for the epigraph of *She Came to Stay*: "Each consciousness seeks the death of the other." In a letter to Sartre written in July 1940, she documents when she first encountered this idea, saying that it filled her with "intellectual ardor."<sup>7</sup> The novel narrates a complex romantic entanglement between four people who are more or less fictional counterparts of Beauvoir, Sartre, and two of their former students. Told from the point of view of Beauvoir's fictional counterpart, Françoise, the text is studded with passages about the impenetrability of another consciousness. Françoise reflects that the consciousness of her female rival is "like death, a total negation, an eternal absence, and yet, by a staggering contradiction, this abyss of nothingness could make itself present to itself and make itself fully exist for itself."<sup>8</sup> This metaphysical threat – the other woman's power to define her from the outside – leads Françoise to murder her in the end. The above quotation is just one place where connections to Sartre's theory of the for-itself and his account of the Look, presented in *Being and Nothingness*, are evident.<sup>9</sup> It is a matter of scholarly debate whether the parallels between the two works are due to Beauvoir's appropriation of Sartre's ideas, or vice versa.<sup>10</sup> However, the very existence of such a debate makes it clear that *She Came to Stay* is an existentialist novel.

Yet another passage in *She Came to Stay* introduces a different philosophical theme, one that became very important for Beauvoir in her later work and one that is uniquely her own. This passage occurs at the beginning of the novel as Françoise walks through the empty theater where she is working late at night.

When she was not there, the smell of dust, the half-light, the forlorn solitude, all this did not exist for anyone; it did not exist at all. Now that she was there the red of the carpet gleamed through the darkness like a timid night light. She exercised this power: her presence revived things from

their inanimateness; she gave them their color, their smell. She went down one floor and pushed open the door into the auditorium. It was as if she had been entrusted with a mission: she had to bring to life this forsaken theater filled with darkness ... She alone released the meaning of these abandoned places, of these slumbering things. She was there and they belonged to her. The world belonged to her. (*SCTS*, p. 12)

In a subsequent essay, "Literature and Metaphysics," Beauvoir contends that there is a particular type of novel, the metaphysical novel, which presents a "metaphysical vision of the world."<sup>11</sup> The passage above is such a metaphysical vision. The ability to bring the sleeping theater back to life, which Françoise experiences in this passage, is what Beauvoir later named disclosure. "Disclosure" is the English word chosen by the translator of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to render the French word "*devoilement*." Sartre used the terms "*devoilement*" and "*se dévoiler*" in *Being and Nothingness* (there translated by Hazel Barnes as "revelation" and "to reveal"), but in a casual way.<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir brings the concept of disclosure into the foreground in her philosophical essays.

When Beauvoir has Françoise reflect that maybe without her the theater does not exist at all, she touches on a classical philosophical question: is there a world external to my consciousness? (In a later discussion with another character, Françoise concludes that the world does not vanish when no one is present, it just recedes into the misty distance.) However, neither in this novel nor in her subsequent work does Beauvoir really try to answer classical philosophical questions such as these. Rather, she is exploring what the phenomenologists call "intentionality," the relation between consciousness and the world of which it is conscious. Her concept of disclosure, prefigured in this passage from *She Came to Stay* and subsequently developed in her later works, owes much to two central figures in phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

When Heidegger uses the terms "*erschliessen*" and "*Erschlossenheit*" in *Being and Time*, they are translated into English as "to disclose" and "disclosure."<sup>13</sup> Heidegger uses the German term *Dasein* to refer to a human being – and to human *being* in general – which he characterizes as "being-in-the-world." By this he means that each of us exists within the world as it is disclosed. Beauvoir shows the influence of Heidegger on her thinking when she makes disclosure of the world a defining feature of

human existence in her philosophical essays. But Heidegger is actually pointing to a more basic and holistic level of experience of the world. For him, the world is always already disclosed; it does not stand in need of disclosing. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, disclosure is a more active and voluntary operation. The reason is that Beauvoir retains a quasi-dualistic ontology, in which the disclosing consciousness stands over against the world disclosed. In his "Letter on Humanism," published in 1947, Heidegger strongly criticized what he saw as the underlying metaphysical assumptions of Beauvoir's and Sartre's existentialism. Existentialist humanism, he says, enthrones the "subject" as a "tyrant of being" who deigns "to release the beingness of being into an all too loudly bruted 'objectivity'" – a remark that uncannily fits the attitude that Françoise takes toward the objects she surveys in the empty theater.<sup>14</sup>

Heidegger drew from, but ultimately rejected, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Beauvoir also drew from Husserl, especially in formulating her concept of disclosure. In Husserl's phenomenology, the contribution that consciousness makes to shaping the world of our experience is revealed by what he calls the transcendental *epoché*. To perform the *epoché* one must abstract from the question of whether the objects of consciousness actually exist. Whether or not these objects exist, they exist for us. They have meaning and significance, which ultimately derive from ourselves. In this respect, Beauvoir's concept of disclosure is closer to Husserl's notion of meaning constitution than to Heidegger's notion of disclosure. Beauvoir often speaks of how human beings give meaning and significance to the world. For her, the world that surrounds us is "the human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings."<sup>15</sup>

## 12.2 "PYRRHUS AND CINEAS": FREEDOM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Beauvoir's first philosophical essay of her existentialist period, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," was written during the war and published right after the Liberation of France in 1944. It addresses an issue central to existentialism: what gives meaning to human life? The title comes from a story told by Plutarch. Asked by his advisor, Cineas, what he will do after he has conquered the whole world, Pyrrhus

says he will rest. Cineas replies: "Why not rest right away?"<sup>16</sup> The French essayist Michel de Montaigne held Cineas' words to represent wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Beauvoir, in contrast, takes the side of Pyrrhus, though she does not endorse his imperialistic ambitions. There is nothing external to us that justifies our actions, but that does not make them pointless either. Neither God nor the good of humankind, neither death nor the pleasure of the moment, neither destiny nor the clockwork of the universe suffices to give meaning to human life. The only thing that does is a freely chosen goal. Life is meaningful because human beings make it so. Thus Beauvoir gives an existentialist answer to what is perhaps *the* existential question.

In this essay Beauvoir takes a distinctly different approach to depicting the relation between two consciousnesses, or freedoms, from the approach she took in *She Came to Stay*. Whereas in the novel (and in *Being and Nothingness*) another consciousness represents a limitation or a threat, Beauvoir proclaims here that because each of us is radically free we need others to provide a foundation and context for that freedom: "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 off toward a new future by new projects" (PC, p. 135). According to Beauvoir's earlier understanding, the resistance to my projects represented by the other's freedom was a threat. Here it serves a positive purpose. I require another's freedom because "freedom is the only reality I cannot transcend" (PC, p. 31). Beauvoir here alludes to a metaphor from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: the dove requires the resistance of the air to lift its wings.<sup>18</sup> However, in "Pyrrhus and Cineas" she still envisages one individual's freedom to be radically separate from another's. She clings to the Stoic conception of freedom as consisting in an interior sphere that cannot be breached: "As freedom, 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" (PC, pp. 125–26). For this reason she claims that violence has no effect on the other's freedom, since it remains "infinite in all cases." Beauvoir will reject this position in her analysis of political and economic oppression in the last work from this period, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

As soon as *Being and Nothingness* was published, critics began to charge that existentialism excluded the very possibility of ethics.

In its closing pages Sartre had promised to devote a subsequent work to this subject. It never appeared, although many pages of notes and drafts were published after his death as *Notebooks for an Ethics*. If ethics is understood broadly to include the question that concerned, for instance, Socrates – how should we live our lives? – then Beauvoir is concerned with ethics in “Pyrrhus and Cineas.” For instance, when Beauvoir asks what gives meaning to life there, one answer she considers is devotion to another. Such devotion is often misguided, she argues, and even if honest and sincere, necessarily misses the mark, since the other is radically free. Just as violence cannot touch the other’s freedom, sacrifice and devotion cannot do anything for the other either. “I never create anything for the other except points of departure” (PC, p. 121). Some forms of devotion amount to an abdication of freedom, an attempt to escape its risk and anguish. The faulty reasoning goes: “Let’s suppose the other needed me and that his existence had an absolute value. Then my being is justified, since I am for a being whose existence is justified” (PC, p. 117).

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre holds any such attempt to flee one’s freedom to be “bad faith.” Even as early as her first philosophical essay, Beauvoir sees women in particular as liable to bad faith – attempting to escape the risk and anguish of freedom by assigning absolute value to the existence of another. In her novels from this period Beauvoir vividly depicts a range of female characters who fall into this trap. Elizabeth, a secondary female character in *She Came to Stay*, is one. Another is H el ene – the central character of Beauvoir’s novel about the French Resistance, *The Blood of Others* – who feels that loving Blomart, the other central character, fills up the emptiness, the nothingness, inside her. H el ene previously looked to religion to fulfill the same function, to make her feel that she “must exist.”<sup>19</sup> However, by the end of the book she realizes that everyone must justify their own existence for themselves. Beauvoir’s final novel from this period, *All Men Are Mortal*, is framed by a story of the relationship of two people – a man who has mysteriously acquired immortality and a vain, anxiety-ridden actress. The actress, Regina, believes at first that she too can achieve immortality by existing in this man’s eyes, but she finally realizes the cruel joke: his immortality renders everything in human life insignificant for him.

### 12.3 ARTICLES IN *LES TEMPS MODERNES*: EXISTENTIALISM AND POLITICS

Toward the end of 1945 Beauvoir published an essay, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," in the third issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, the new journal she helped found with Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others. She wanted to defend the new philosophical perspective she and Sartre were adopting from certain charges that had been lodged against it. Though neither she nor Sartre had coined the name "existentialism" – Gabriel Marcel had – both of them eventually adopted it. In her essay Beauvoir argues that existentialism is more honest and realistic than the sentimental idealism that many cling to, and more life-affirming than the "psychology of self-interest" that cynics and pessimists take refuge in.<sup>20</sup> Existentialism privileges human relationships: "Existentialists are so far from denying love, friendship, and fraternity that in their eyes the only way for each individual to find the foundation and accomplishment of his being is in these human relationships."<sup>21</sup> Of course, this description fits neither Sartre's account of the Look in *Being and Nothingness* nor Beauvoir's portrayal of dueling consciousnesses in *She Came to Stay*. However, in "Pyrrhus and Cineas" Beauvoir did come to regard individual freedoms as in some sense interdependent – a position that Sartre, too, seemed to adopt in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. In her subsequent essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues at length for this position.

In her memoirs Beauvoir describes how living through the events culminating in the Second World War taught her the importance of the political realm. After the war she and Sartre became ever more involved in political activities. Starting with her novel *The Blood of Others*, she began to address the political situation in her writing as well. In a second essay in *Les Temps Modernes*, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," Beauvoir examines different political stances through an existentialist lens. There she describes the balancing act that engaging in "lucid political action" involves.<sup>22</sup> An authentic ethics is political and an authentic politics is ethical. However, existentialism rules out appealing to any already existing set of moral standards and ideals. This is the "false objectivity" that Beauvoir has already

rejected in "Pyrrhus and Cineas." Political realists on both the Left and the Right who argue that the end justifies the means also forget that the ends they pursue are not objectively given. Human ends are given value through the free acts of the people struggling to achieve them.

In his introductory essay to the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes* Sartre had called for a *littérature engagée*, or committed literature. As a faithful contributor to the journal, Beauvoir saw herself as a politically committed intellectual in this sense. For her, existentialism is a philosophy that has something important to say about political and social issues. Sartre stressed how the writer is always situated in a particular time, place, social stratum, etc. In these early years, neither Sartre nor Beauvoir recognized the important role gender plays in defining one's situation, and it was not until she began writing *The Second Sex* and looked deeply into what it was like to be a gendered subject that Beauvoir's political commitments took on mature form.

Another essay Beauvoir wrote for *Les Temps Modernes*, "An Eye for an Eye," takes up a specific issue of political morality: in it she argues that the execution of war criminals was morally justified. The crimes of the Nazis and their French collaborators are different from ordinary crimes because, in attempting through torture, humiliation, and other methods to reduce others to the status of mere things, they ignore their very humanity. Of course she recognizes that human existence has a material aspect, but that is not all there is to it. The "tragic ambiguity" of human existence is to be both a material thing and a consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Real evil – she even calls it absolute evil – comes about when one acknowledges only one's own subjectivity and treats the other solely as a material thing. Violent reprisal is justified because it turns the tables on the perpetrator of such evil. The victim reasserts his or her freedom and subjectivity, and the perpetrator viscerally grasps the material side of his or her existence. Each is equally human. However, because (as the phenomenological tradition emphasizes) one can only experience one's own subjectivity, the moral ideal is not strict equality for Beauvoir, but rather reciprocity. It is to recognize that "an object for others, each man is a subject for himself."<sup>24</sup> The affirmation of this reciprocity is, accordingly, "the metaphysical basis of the idea of justice."<sup>25</sup>

#### 12.4 THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY: EXISTENTIALIST ONTOLOGY AND AUTHENTIC FREEDOM

In "An Eye for an Eye" Beauvoir says that the human being "is at the same time a freedom and a thing, both unified and scattered, isolated by his subjectivity and nevertheless co-existing at the heart of the world with other men."<sup>26</sup> She returns to the ambiguity of human existence in the opening passages of her last philosophical essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, published serially first in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1946, and then on its own in 1947. There she stresses the inextricable connection between these two aspects of human life. A human being "is still part of the world of which he is a consciousness."<sup>27</sup> Consciousness emerges out of material reality and relates itself to it. Death and birth are two moments when the human being's material side is ascendant: "there is an original helplessness from which man surges up" (*EA*, p. 12). Human beings start life dependent on others, and they continue to be. Furthermore, the human body can always be "crushed by the dark weight of things" (*EA*, p. 7). In this essay Beauvoir traces the origins of existentialism back to Kierkegaard and claims that "from its very beginnings existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity" (*EA*, p. 9). She then turns to the opposition between consciousness and material reality explored in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the opposition between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. It is this duality, she says, that makes an ethics possible: "for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact coincidence with himself, in a perfect plenitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning. One does not offer an ethics to a God" (*EA*, p. 10). Since human existence is ambiguous in this way, existentialism, as a philosophy of ambiguity, is not only able to found an ethics; it is "the only philosophy in which ethics has a place" (*EA*, p. 34).

There is an initial challenge, however, that existentialism – or at least an existentialism like Beauvoir's and Sartre's that stresses the magnitude of human freedom – must face before sketching out an ethics. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre proclaims (and Beauvoir echoes this in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) that all values, including ethical values, are created and freely adopted by human beings. Since values have their foundation in freedom, an existentialist ethics must rest upon freedom. But Sartre and Beauvoir also hold that

human beings can never escape their freedom. If everyone is always free, why is it that not everyone acts morally? Beauvoir faces up to this problem in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and finds a solution. She posits that there are two different levels to human freedom. The first level, the freedom that all human beings possess, she calls natural freedom; perhaps a better term is ontological freedom. The second level she calls moral freedom. It is an authentic freedom that people achieve only when they accept their original ontological freedom and no longer seek to escape it through devotion to others, to religion, or to a false objectivity in the ways Beauvoir depicted in earlier writing. According to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, then, authentic freedom consists in willing oneself free.

On the existentialist view, we cannot, by an effort of will, escape our freedom; however, as Beauvoir explains, we can fail to will ourselves free. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir presents five different personality types that represent five different ways that people live out this failure. The first she calls the sub-man, who retreats into apathy and inaction. Such people can be manipulated easily by fanatics and zealots, since unquestioning obedience to some external certainty can seem to give meaning to their lives. Fanatics and zealots do not question their values and ideals, but, as Beauvoir points out, in this they are no different than the vast majority of the conventional bourgeois. The latter are examples of Beauvoir's second personality type, the serious man – a type (as she notes) that Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre all singled out for scorn. A third type results from the psychic turmoil that attends the collapse of traditional values: the nihilist. Nihilists exercise their freedom by rejecting all the positive values that freedom creates, sometimes going so far as to destroy their fellow human beings who represent these values or actively choose to affirm them. Despite his penchant for destruction, the nihilist is a step higher than the serious man in Beauvoir's hierarchy. The nihilist is aware that values are the creation of human freedom, though this awareness fuels rage or coruscating pessimism. By contrast, Beauvoir's fourth personality type, the adventurer, experiences joy in living a life unrestricted by conventional expectations or values. Nevertheless, the adventurer's lack of commitment to shared goals or ideals cuts him off from meaningful connections with other people. The passionate man, in contrast – the final type Beauvoir describes – lives *through*

his connection to someone else, or to some cause or land or treasure. Unlike the serious man, the passionate man realizes that he is the one who invests what he loves with such great value. Yet he fails to achieve authentic freedom for this very reason. It is a private, personal passion that can lead him to neglect others, or even to use them as a means to pursuing that very passion.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir relates her idea that there are different levels of freedom to the concept of disclosure, the power human beings have to bring the world to life, which she had described in *She Came to Stay*. Consciousness always discloses a world. But having now elucidated the ambiguity of the human condition – our dual existence as consciousness and material reality – Beauvoir explores a different aspect of disclosure. Disclosure is now seen to involve “uprooting” oneself from nature, from the realm of inert matter into which one can at any moment – and indeed sometimes wishes to – sink back. In an interesting passage she writes, “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” (*EA*, p. 12). Even under the worst circumstances human beings disclose the world. As Beauvoir's sub-man and nihilist discover to their regret, consciousness always ascribes some meaning to its surroundings. Furthermore, no world that is disclosed is mine alone; rather, it is “penetrated with human meanings.” Even in the remotest corners of the earth, one is never wholly cut off from others: “One can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men” (*EA*, p. 71).

However, in order to achieve genuine freedom, Beauvoir says, one must will oneself to be free. Thus the two different levels of freedom she postulates involve two different attitudes toward disclosing the world. One can be a passive onlooker, or one can actively participate in forming and shaping the human world that one's consciousness discloses. To adopt the second attitude is to seek genuine freedom: “To wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as a freedom are one and the same movement” (*EA*, p. 24). But because in disclosing a world we remain in connection with other human beings, authentic freedom also has ethical implications. While some people may not want to acknowledge their dependence on others, the person aiming at genuine freedom brings this connection to the foreground and affirms it. To will oneself free is not just

to will the disclosure of the world; it is also to will “that there be men by whom and for whom the world is endowed with human signification” (*EA*, p. 71). For Beauvoir, this means that “to will oneself free is also to will others free” (*EA*, p. 73). The only way that others can actively, and not just passively, disclose the world is if they too strive for genuine freedom.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir draws upon phenomenological analyses of temporality in order to show how the actions of each individual depend on others to give them meaning. Past, present, and future are not separate points but different dimensions of a single experience. Beauvoir stresses how the present is always linked to the future in the unity of a single temporal form: “Only the future can take the present for its own and keep it alive by surpassing it” (*EA*, p. 116). Systems as varied as Hegel’s philosophy, political Marxism, and Christianity may attempt to bestow on the future “the immobility of being,” but the future has no real existence apart from its connection to presently living human beings. Furthermore, no human being can alone determine what the future will be. As Beauvoir says, “it is other men who open the future to me” (*EA*, p. 82). They open it by disclosing a world in cooperation (or in conflict) with me. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir holds the defining feature of oppression to be the way that it closes off the future and reduces life for its victims to “pure repetition.” The oppressed suffer because they need others to provide the opportunities for them to realize their freedom. Yet the oppressor suffers as well. Beauvoir points out that the oppressor, too, needs others to be free in order to develop *authentic* freedom – again showing the influence of Hegel on her thought. To achieve genuine freedom I need for others to be free – genuinely free – so that they can open the future for me.

#### 12.5 *THE SECOND SEX*: EXISTENTIALIST ROOTS, HEGELIAN INFLUENCES

Immediately after Beauvoir readied *The Ethics of Ambiguity* for publication she turned to writing *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949. In this text, which extends to 577 pages in the French original, Beauvoir left the essay form behind to produce a work so comprehensive in scope as almost to defy classification. Eventually translated into many languages, it has had a worldwide impact.

Most feminists consider it to have been the impetus behind what is called the "second wave" of feminism.<sup>28</sup> *The Second Sex* remains the book for which Beauvoir is best known today.

Beauvoir initially intended this project to be a continuation of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. It was to have had a personal focus, but one that would remain philosophical: she wanted to explain what it was to be both a woman and an existentialist.<sup>29</sup> Once she began to think about it, Beauvoir was surprised to discover how much being a woman had affected her life. Because her father's financial failures had made him unable to provide a dowry, her family expected her to pursue a career – a path that was unusual for a middle-class Frenchwoman of her day. Beginning in her college years, the male Parisian intellectuals with whom she came into daily contact treated her pretty much as an equal. Since her personal situation was atypical in these ways, to find out what it really meant to be a woman required a lot of research. Not only did she spend much time consulting texts at the library (very few of which she cites, unfortunately), she spent countless hours talking to women in France and the USA, where she traveled during this time.

Her conclusion is concisely summed up in the now well-known passage at the beginning of the introduction to the second volume of the French text: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society."<sup>30</sup> This passage suggests the extent to which *The Second Sex* is an existentialist text. In accord with the central existentialist idea that existence precedes essence, *The Second Sex* argues that there is no special essence, or distinct biological nature or way of thinking, that only a certain portion of the human species possesses. In three successive chapters in the first volume Beauvoir shows how those who ascribe women's subordinate position in society to biology, psychological developments, or economic history are wrong. Of course, her criticisms were aimed at the intellectual opinions and social situation of her own time. Conditions have changed since she wrote *The Second Sex*. But addressing such changes lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

Beauvoir's chapter on biology has been the subject of much controversy. Feminists have charged that she describes women's experience of their bodies in unnecessarily negative terms. To pick one passage out of many, she compares human females to other female

mammals by saying “in no other is the subordination of the organism to the reproductive function more imperious, nor accepted with greater difficulty” (*TSS*, p. 44; *DS I*, p. 69). Nonetheless, at the end of this chapter she explicitly adopts a perspective that seems to neutralize the philosophical importance of these observations. Female biology is different from male biology, and the female plays a different role in human reproduction, but that does not mean that the female has a fixed biological destiny. The proper perspective to take on the body is that of the phenomenological tradition – Beauvoir mentions Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre in this regard – in which “the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation” (*TSS*, p. 46; *DS I*, p. 72).<sup>31</sup> Given Beauvoir’s previous emphasis on the ambiguity of human existence as both consciousness and material reality, it is not surprising that she ascribes importance to female biological functions. But from her existentialist perspective this is not the end of the story: “Woman is not a fixed reality, but a becoming,” since, existentially speaking, no human being, male or female, is ever a fixed reality (*TSS*, p. 45; *DS I*, p. 72).

The approach that psychoanalytic schools of thought take to explaining women’s behavior has the advantage that it concentrates on “the body lived by the subject” (*TSS*, p. 49; *DS I*, p. 77). Phenomenologically speaking, it seems unlikely that a human female’s experience of her body could ever be the same as a male’s. Unfortunately, Freudian psychology cannot succeed at explaining what it is like to live as a woman, because it takes the male body as its starting point. The female body is conceived as a deviation from the norm. The young girl’s realization that her body lacks what the young boy’s body has – the penis – is supposed to be decisive for her psychological development. But Beauvoir argues that having a penis only seems important to the young girl because the importance of being male is everywhere evident to her. Beauvoir seems to have more sympathy with a psychoanalytic approach than does Sartre, however, who presents a detailed critique of Freud’s thought at various points in his work. She even advances her own account of the difference between the ways the young girl and the young boy experience their genitalia, and the consequences of this for their development. Yet in the end Beauvoir finds psychoanalytic explanations wanting because there is something more fundamental than anatomy and sexuality that determines one’s experience of the

world: "All psychoanalysts systematically refuse the idea of *choice* and its corollary, the notion of value: and herein lies the intrinsic weakness of the system" (*TSS*, p. 56; *DS I*, p. 85). To trace the roots of women's social inferiority back to forgotten or hazily remembered childhood incidents is to interiorize the process. Beauvoir's existentialism sees the individual subject always in relation to the world, and to the other people who populate it. Without the mediation of history and society, a human being with female anatomy could not "become" a woman.

Yet Beauvoir also rejects the explanation for male dominance given by Marxist theories of historical materialism. Although such explanations have a wider scope than psychoanalytic ones, they also neglect fundamental questions of why human beings come to adopt the value systems they do. Why did private property become the focal point of male-dominated economic systems? Beauvoir offers her own account of what drove certain key transitions in human history, though the chapters containing Beauvoir's speculations on what separated women from men in the early stages of human history have also been harshly criticized by feminists. In these sections of *The Second Sex*, as elsewhere, she returns to key elements of Hegel's thought – in particular his dialectic of Lordship and Bondage. According to Hegel, in order to advance to self-consciousness a consciousness must be willing to risk its life in a struggle to the death. Beauvoir speculates that this route was closed to females in prehistory because of the biological roles they played in human reproduction: "to give birth and to breastfeed are not activities, they are natural functions; they do not involve a project, which is why woman finds no motive there to claim a higher meaning for her existence; she passively submits to her biological destiny" (*TSS*, p. 73; *DS I*, p. 110). Thus, because they did not participate in war or hunting, females did not even rise to the level of the bondsman in Hegel's dialectic. Quoting Hegel, Beauvoir holds that they remained consigned to an animal type of life.

Inspired by Hegel, Beauvoir develops a new philosophical concept in *The Second Sex* – the concept of the social Other – in order to explain the unique position that women have occupied throughout history. In *She Came to Stay* Beauvoir had focused on how the dialectic of self-consciousness plays itself out between individual subjects. She returns to this idea in *The Second Sex*: "the subject

posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object (*TSS*, p. 7; *DS I*, p. 17). But reflecting the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, with whom Beauvoir studied at the Sorbonne, *The Second Sex* goes further by analyzing how this dynamic operates between different social groups: “The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies” (*TSS*, p. 6; *DS I*, p. 16). Ultimately, this Hegelian concept of the social Other becomes the dominant theoretical construct of the work, even to the point of eclipsing Beauvoir’s original existentialist perspective.

Women, Beauvoir says, are the absolute Other, and their situation has been such that they have been unable to escape this status. Unlike other social groups, women have never turned the tables on men, making them into the Other in turn. Beauvoir suggests that this is because for woman “the tie that binds her to her oppressor is unlike any other” (*TSS*, p. 9; *DS I*, p. 19): males and females are necessary to each other. By thinking of woman in this way, as the absolute Other, Beauvoir is able to make sense of the wildly different – even contradictory – ways that women have been represented in the myths and literatures of various cultures. The female has been associated in turn with nature, artifice, life, death, animality, nurturing, sexuality, danger, and purity. In all these cases, woman is defined as what man is not. Men, being dominant in the culture, themselves define what it is to be a man.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s emphasis on the ambiguity of human existence retreats into the background. Instead she turns to a pair of opposed concepts from her earlier existentialist writing: immanence and transcendence. Immanence is associated with sinking back into the material side of existence, passivity, confinement to the present. Transcendence is conscious activity, a reaching beyond the situation one finds oneself in at any moment. In *The Second Sex* transcendence is similar to what, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she called authentic or moral freedom. It involves an active disclosure of the world and involvement with others: “It is the existence of other men that wrests each man from his immanence and enables him to accomplish the truth of his being, to accomplish himself as transcendence, as flight towards the object, as a project” (*TSS*, p. 159; *DS I*, pp. 231–32).

However, the account of transcendence in *The Second Sex* differs from *The Ethics of Ambiguity's* account of how individuals need each other in order to realize authentic freedom, for it emphasizes the role of *conflict* in this process. The ideal outcome of the conflict is "the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement" (*TSS*, p. 159; *DS I*, p. 232), she says, hearkening back to her earlier definition of justice as reciprocity in "An Eye for an Eye." But, she contends, most males are not up to this challenge. Luckily for them, the existence of women as they have been shaped historically, culturally, and socially allows men to avoid this difficult step. Woman is constituted as a creature who does not exist as transcendence but as immanence – not wholly a material entity but "nature raised to the transparency of consciousness" (*TSS*, p. 161; *DS I*, p. 233). Thus Beauvoir draws from the Hegelian dialectic to explain how the male opposes himself to the female, but she postulates another possible outcome to it besides death or enslavement. By relegating women to immanence, men do not have to face up to the threat that another transcendence poses. That is why "no man would consent to being a woman, but all want there to be women" (*TSS*, p. 161; *DS I*, p. 234).

In the long chapters on the different stages of a woman's life in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explores how young women come to internalize this notion of themselves as the Other: "It is a strange experience for an individual recognizing himself as subject, autonomy and transcendence, as an absolute, to discover inferiority – as a given essence – in his self" (*TSS*, p. 311; *DS II*, pp. 46–47). In her earlier existentialist novels and essays Beauvoir had shown how at some level all human beings long to escape their freedom. *The Second Sex* goes into much detail about why women are presented with many more opportunities to give in to this temptation than are men. Women live among men in a male-dominated society. Thus "refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (*TSS*, p. 10; *DS I*, p. 21). Beauvoir's readiness here to see women as complicit in their own oppression has drawn objections from some feminist readers.

Beauvoir describes how at puberty the young woman's body, the emanation of her subjectivity, becomes something other than her,

an object that arouses new and sometimes startling responses from others: "She becomes an object; and she grasps herself as object; she is surprised to discover this new aspect of her being: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with her self, here she is existing *outside* of her self" (TSS, p. 349; DS II, p. 90). At this point the woman internalizes the alienation from her own body that is encouraged by the culture.<sup>32</sup> A new temptation arises: narcissism. Some women become intoxicated and take pride in this body they see in the mirror, which is theirs but somehow separate from them. Beauvoir places her analysis of female narcissism in a section at the end she labeled "Justifications," which also contains chapters on "The Woman in Love" and "The Mystic." Narcissism, romantic love and extreme religiosity are ways for women "to achieve transcendence through immanence" (TSS, p. 664; DS II, p. 455). Women, she says, seek to find in romantic love something essentially different from what men look for. Beauvoir's novels contain a number of unflattering portraits of women desperate to continue unsatisfying love affairs. *The Second Sex* provides the full context that allows their behavior to be understood.

For the most part the analysis of women's current situation in *The Second Sex* is descriptive, not prescriptive. Beauvoir mobilizes her philosophical knowledge and understanding to explain how women come to be alienated in their bodies and relegated to an inferior social position, but she does not say much about why this is wrong, nor about what should be done about it. Her reliance on Hegel's dialectic of Lordship and Bondage – which posits a drive to defeat or subjugate other consciousnesses – may make men's treatment of women comprehensible but it also makes it hard to hold them culpable. It is notable that Beauvoir has to revert to the standpoint of the existentialist ethics propounded in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to explain why the subordination of one half of the human race to the other is wrong:

The perspective we have adopted is one of existentialist morality. Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by a perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into 'in-itself', of freedom into facticity; this is a moral fault if the subject consents to it;

if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. (*TSS*, pp. 17; *DS I*, p. 31)

The freedom that entails a reaching out to other freedoms and an expansion into an open future is the authentic freedom that she described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. To deny women the capacity to develop authentic freedom is to commit a moral wrong.

In "An Eye for an Eye" Beauvoir called the fascists' attempt to reduce their victims to purely material existence an "absolute evil." Though the treatment accorded women throughout history has not been so harsh, it is wrong for the same reasons. It is a diminishment of women's true humanity. Therefore, women's situation needs to be changed. How? In one of the few places where she addresses this question Beauvoir again returns to the perspective of existentialist ethics:

[I]n woman ... freedom remains abstract and empty, it cannot authentically assume itself except in revolt: this is the only way open to those who have no chance to build anything; they must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future. (*TSS*, p. 664, *DS II*, p. 455)

In the decades that followed the publication of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir did engage in political action on behalf of women around the world. This was one way that she continued to fulfill the existentialist ideal of the committed intellectual.

## 12.6 CONCLUSION

Simone de Beauvoir was one of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century. Her rich, deep, and wide-ranging scholarly work *The Second Sex* has had a direct or an indirect effect on the lives of many. Although the situation of women (at least in some parts of the world) has changed since the time she wrote it, *The Second Sex* remains relevant. And though there were other intellectual influences on it as well, it is clearly one of the most significant works to have emerged from the existential tradition. The philosophical ideas that Beauvoir developed in her existentialist writings prior to *The Second Sex* also deserve attention. Her concept of ambiguity, with its stress on the material origins of human existence, seems especially promising. It provides an alternative to the excessively dualistic opposition between being-for-itself and

being-in-itself found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Here, perhaps, connections can be made to the naturalism that seems to be all the rage in philosophy today. But Beauvoir's naturalism, if you can call it that, is an existential naturalism that insists that the natural world is at the same time a human world of consciousness and freedom. Our relation to nature must always retain an element of ambiguity, but given the dangers facing the natural world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Beauvoir does well to remind us that a human being "is still part of this world of which he is a consciousness" (EA, p. 7).

## NOTES

1. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 162.
2. Beauvoir, *Adieux*, p. 172.
3. Sartre, *Lettres au Castor*, vol. II, p. 285.
4. Sartre, *War Diaries*, p. 197; Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, p. 258.
5. Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex*, pp. 57, 190.
6. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, pp. 10–11.
7. Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, p. 328.
8. Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, p. 291. Henceforth cited in the text as *SCTS*.
9. Hazel Barnes traces what she sees to be the correspondence between Sartre's treatment of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness* and the stages that the characters go through in *She Came to Stay*. See Barnes, *The Literature of Possibility*, pp. 121–37.
10. See Fullbrook and Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, and Barnes, "Response to Margaret Simons," for the arguments on either side. Daigle and Golomb, *Beauvoir and Sartre*, provide a greater range of opinions.
11. Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," p. 275.
12. Barnes does not include either "disclosure" or "revelation" in her "Key to Special Terminology" at the back of the English translation of *Being and Nothingness*.
13. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 105–6.
14. Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," p. 234. Heidegger's essay is directed at Sartre's essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*. There is no evidence that Heidegger ever read Beauvoir.
15. Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 74.
16. Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," p. 90. Henceforth cited in the text as *PC*.

17. Montaigne, "Of the Inequality That Is among Us," p. 196.
18. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 47.
19. Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, p. 83.
20. Beauvoir, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," p. 209.
21. Beauvoir, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," p. 213.
22. Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," p. 189.
23. Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye," p. 248.
24. Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye," p. 249.
25. Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye," p. 247.
26. Beauvoir, "An Eye for an Eye," p. 258.
27. Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 7. Henceforth cited in the text as *EA*.
28. The "first wave" was the political activity that led to women getting the vote in the United States and Great Britain.
29. Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 380.
30. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 283; *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. II, p. 13; henceforth cited in the text as *TSS* and *DS* respectively. In my citations I have indicated the page numbers of the English translation first, and then the page numbers from the original French text: (*TSS*, p. 267; *DS* II, p. 13). The English page numbers refer to the recently published translation, which has important advantages over the first translation made in 1953.
31. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a close friend of Beauvoir's in her youth. She had a very favorable opinion of his ideas on the body, as her glowing review of *Phenomenology of Perception* in the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945 shows. See Beauvoir, "A Review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*."
32. I analyze this process in my "Beauvoir's Concept of Bodily Alienation."