

CONCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM IN BEAUVOIR'S
THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

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This paper will consider Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, finished in 1946 right before she started *The Second Sex*, as the final mature version of her existentialist ethics. Of course Beauvoir had been writing on ethical themes for some time up to this point (e.g., in her essay *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and her novel *The Blood of Others*).¹ But *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is important, I contend, because in it Beauvoir develops a new conception of freedom that allows her to set existentialist ethics on a firm philosophical foundation for the first time. Her fellow existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre came to grief in all his attempts to construct an existentialist ethics because he lacked such a philosophical foundation and eventually gave up on the project.

In what follows I am going to explain Beauvoir's new existentialist conception of freedom and compare and contrast it to certain conceptions of freedom found in Locke, Rousseau and Kant. Beauvoir's views on freedom are too often identified with Sartre's. I will show how they differ by fitting Beauvoir's ideas within a much wider historical tradition. Locke, Rousseau and Kant developed conceptions of freedom that have important similarities to Beauvoir's. And the ways that their conceptions differ from hers highlight the distinctive features of her new conception.

First I want to stress that, as the many books written on the subject have already attested, an existentialist ethics must be based on freedom.² Since one of the central tenets of existentialism is that all values spring from human freedom, there is simply nothing else left to fill this role. Certainly any appeal to a transcendent deity is ruled out, at least in the atheistic existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre (as opposed to Kierkegaard, say). But although everyone seems to agree that an existentialist ethics must be based on freedom, only Beauvoir explicitly identifies what kind of freedom it should be based on.

It certainly is not as though Sartre does not have enough to say about freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. As anyone who had read the book knows, he goes on for pages and pages about the true nature and extent of human freedom. But the type of freedom that Sartre is discussing is what has been called by subsequent commentators ontological freedom.³ And it is apt to call it ontological freedom for it is the freedom that is, Sartre declares, "the being of man."⁴ According to Sartre all humans

always possess this freedom whatever their circumstances. Furthermore, Sartre pronounces with much drama, this freedom is absolute, total and infinite.⁵ “Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free,” he says, “he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all.”⁶ The type of freedom that Sartre is preoccupied with in *Being and Nothingness* is equivalent in many ways to the freedom of the will that has been the subject of the free will versus determinism debate. The way this debate has been framed, people either possess free will or they do not. As Bernard Williams has remarked, “. . . the freedom of the will that has been the subject of the classical problem, if it comes at all, does not come in degrees.”⁷ The ontological freedom that according to Sartre all humans possess does not come in degrees either.

Sartre makes a distinction between ontological freedom and another type of freedom that he judges is not of philosophical interest, which he calls freedom of obtaining. He says, “the empirical and popular concept of ‘freedom’ which has been produced by historical, political and moral circumstances is equivalent to ‘the ability to obtain the ends chosen.’”⁸ Sartre readily accepts that this second type of freedom, unlike ontological freedom, is not absolute; it always admits of degrees. Eschewing Sartre’s terminology I want to call this second type of freedom freedom from constraint. For one thing, this term, with its deliberate echo of David Hume (Hume insists liberty is opposed to constraint, not necessity⁹), points to the fact that Sartre is wrong when he implies that this type of freedom is not of philosophical interest. This second type of freedom, freedom from constraint, is what philosophers like Hobbes, Locke (in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and Hume explicitly define liberty to be. Hume, for one, declares that it is nonsense to talk about any other kind of liberty.

Thus Sartre identifies two types of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*: what I am calling ontological freedom and freedom from constraint. The distinction between these two types of freedom is undoubtedly important. Careful attention to it can defend Sartre from many of the criticisms of his most ill-informed critics.¹⁰ But neither of these types of freedom, it turns out, can serve as the foundation of an existentialist ethics. In his essay “Existentialism is a Humanism,” which addresses the ethical implications of *Being and Nothingness* (and which, by the way Beauvoir carefully edited for him for publication¹¹), Sartre states that the ethical person is involved in “a quest for freedom as such.”¹² The question is: what sort of freedom does the ethical person quest after? It cannot be ontological freedom. After all, Sartre spends much of *Being and Nothingness* insisting that all people are already free in this sense. The possession of ontological freedom alone cannot have any ethical significance. Sartre nowhere suggests, on the other hand, that what the ethical person should seek is freedom from constraint. Indeed the few remarks that he makes in “Existen-

tialism is a Humanism” and *Being and Nothingness* that the ethical person wants freedom as the source of all values indicate that what he means by freedom here is ontological freedom, as contradictory as this may be.¹³ If Sartre had suggested, as I cannot imagine he would, that freedom from constraint should serve as the ethical goal of existentialism, he would only have raised a host of other questions. Maximizing my freedom from constraint necessarily conflicts with others maximizing theirs: who should decide who should have how much freedom from constraint? These are the same questions that have bedeviled liberal political theory.

Remarks Beauvoir makes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* show that she was fully aware of the dead-end any attempt to found an existentialist ethics solely on the conception of freedom presented in *Being and Nothingness* runs into:

Now Sartre declares that every man is free, that there is no way of his not being free. When he wants to escape his destiny, he is still freely fleeing it. Does not this presence of a so to speak natural freedom contradict the notion of ethical freedom [liberté morale]? What meaning can there be in the words *to will oneself* free, since at the beginning we *are* free? It is contradictory to set freedom up as something conquered if at first it is something given.¹⁴

In this short passage Beauvoir both lucidly expresses the dilemma any existentialist ethics faces and begins to lay out the way out of it. The “so to speak natural freedom” she speaks of is what I am calling ontological freedom. It is the freedom that Sartre holds, and Beauvoir accepts, all humans always possess. Beauvoir contrasts this natural type of freedom to what she calls “liberté morale,” which I translate as moral freedom. For Beauvoir freedom is the highest goal: “Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else.”¹⁵ But the freedom that the ethical person seeks is a special kind of freedom, moral freedom, different in kind from the freedom of choice that all humans possess and indeed cannot escape from.

The way to achieve moral freedom is, in Beauvoir’s words, to will oneself free. Beauvoir realizes that this assertion also runs the risk of being contradictory. Given that all humans possess ontological freedom, one cannot will oneself not to be free. However, she responds, “one can choose not to will himself free,” for instance in “laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience.”¹⁶ In the middle section of the book Beauvoir gives an extended description of several character types who utilize their original freedom of choice to choose not to will themselves free—for instance the sub-man who, like Albert Camus’s character Meursault in *The Stranger*, refuses to engage himself in the world in any

way. Beauvoir also singles out a type she calls the serious man who denies that the values he holds sacrosanct are really the creation of his own freedom by bestowing an eternal immutable existence on them. Although Beauvoir does not use the term bad faith in discussing the serious man, she acknowledges that "*Being and Nothingness* is in large part a description of the serious man and his universe."¹⁷

Obviously, to achieve moral freedom one must give up bad faith. But this is not all that achieving moral freedom involves for Beauvoir. If it were, Beauvoir's ethics would be open to some of the same objections that have been lodged against Sartre's position in *Being and Nothingness*. These critics object that an ideal of authenticity alone is not strict enough to serve as a moral standard. Imagine, they say, a torturer who candidly admits that he freely chooses to act as he does and accepts full responsibility for it. Is not what he does still morally wrong?¹⁸ Yet, while this objection can be made against Sartre, it cannot be made against Beauvoir. For Beauvoir goes on to argue in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that there is more to willing oneself free than just giving up bad faith or the other ways of hiding from one's freedom that she describes in the center section of the book. Beauvoir boldly declares that, "To will oneself free is also to will others free."¹⁹ If one acts to curtail others's freedom then one cannot achieve moral freedom, no matter how "authentically" one acts in other regards.

Beauvoir not only claims that to will oneself free is to will others free; she gives arguments to support this thesis. (Sartre makes a similar claim in "Existentialism is a Humanism," but gives absolutely no argument to support it.²⁰) Beauvoir's arguments are drawn from the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Recapitulating Husserl's central insight that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, she asserts that freedom always discloses a "human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings."²¹ For Husserl these meanings can be traced back to consciousness; for Beauvoir they originate in shared human practices. Thus, in order for there to be a meaningful human world revealed by my freedom, there must be other free human agents. Second, drawing from Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of temporality, she stresses how freedom always directs itself toward the future. To will oneself free is to take a particular stance toward the future. Taking this stance requires interaction with others, she argues: "my freedom, in order to fulfill itself requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future."²² To will myself free I need to have others free in order that they can open the future for me in this way.

Beauvoir's existentialist ethics generates a standard that is more stringent than mere authenticity. Using the above arguments, she argues

that we have a moral obligation to nurture and defend the freedom of others. Therefore achieving moral freedom requires some sort of commitment to the personal, political and economic liberation not just of oneself and one's own group, but of others one comes into contact with as well. Beauvoir acknowledges how difficult this ideal is to realize. In the last section of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she describes some of the ethical dilemmas that acting out this commitment embroils one in. Existentialist ethics cannot provide hard and fast rules for resolving these dilemmas. The most that Beauvoir can offer is a method for sorting out the different alternatives that each particular situation leaves open.

Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom can serve as the basis for an ethics because it presents both a goal for people to strive for and a standard by which their actions can be judged. The goal is to realize moral freedom for oneself and for others. If one tries instead to deprive others of the exercise of their freedom, one is not acting morally. This conception of moral freedom represents a major contribution to existentialism and ethical theory. However, it is not completely unprecedented in the history of philosophy. In the space remaining I want to explore some connections between Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom and previous conceptions of it.

As I mentioned earlier, many modern philosophers explicitly define liberty to be what I have been calling freedom from constraint. For instance, John Locke defines liberty as "the power of doing, or forbearing to do, according as the mind shall choose or direct" in his *Essay*.²³ Hume defines liberty similarly as "a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will."²⁴ In these two definitions what Locke and Hume call liberty is linked with power. (In fact, Locke's treatment of liberty vs. necessity occurs in the section of the *Essay* entitled "On Power.") Significantly, Beauvoir also uses the term "power." What she calls power she opposes to both moral freedom and ontological freedom. She says, "to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like."²⁵ This conception of power—which, though it surfaces also in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, she does not develop further—is similar to modern conceptions of freedom as freedom from constraint. In conceiving power to be separate from freedom, Beauvoir is making a move similar to the one Sartre does in *Being and Nothingness* when he distinguishes between freedom of choice (ontological freedom) and freedom of obtaining (freedom from constraint). Like Sartre, Beauvoir recognizes that ontological freedom does not admit of degrees, whereas power or freedom from constraint does. She says, "the freedom of man is infinite, but his power is limited."²⁶ Thus Beauvoir also recognizes that there is a third way of conceiving of freedom. She just redefines this conception of freedom found in Locke, Hume and Sartre as a power to not a freedom from. There are

advantages to conceiving of this type of freedom in this way, which I cannot go into here.²⁷

I just quoted Locke's definition of liberty in the *Essay*. However, Locke uses a different conception of freedom in his *Second Treatise of Government* and this other conception is much closer to what Beauvoir and other writers have called moral freedom. Without government in the state of nature, Locke writes in the *Second Treatise*, all humans are in a state of "perfect freedom." Indeed one would expect that in the state of nature people would enjoy the greatest amount of freedom from constraint. But Locke insists, "though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license." This perfect freedom is still limited by "the bounds of the law of nature." Locke even goes so far as to declare that a person in the state of nature "has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for."²⁸ This claim shows most dramatically that Locke is definitely not equating liberty with freedom from constraint at this point. For I do have sufficient freedom from constraint to kill myself or others not only in the state of nature but in civil society. That many have the freedom to do things like this is shown by the unfortunate fact that some do.

Thus the freedom that Locke ascribes to humans in the state of nature is closer to what Beauvoir calls moral freedom than it is to freedom from constraint. Of course this "perfect freedom" is in Locke's sense natural, that is, it is the "state all men are naturally in," whereas for Beauvoir moral freedom is something we aspire to and must achieve. But there is the same connection between exercising my own freedom and insuring the freedom of others in Locke as in Beauvoir. Locke attempts to link the two by appeal to an "omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker" who creates us "sharing all in one community of nature."²⁹ Beauvoir, as I have just described, appeals to much more complex arguments in order to link my moral freedom with that of others.

Locke distinguishes further between the liberty of the state of nature and the "liberty of man, in society," which he links with having "a standing rule to live by, common to everyone of that society, . . ."³⁰ Obviously, enacting the social contract reduces an individual's freedom from constraint, making one subject to laws regulating one's behavior. But there is a trade-off, social contract theorists are quick to point out: one gives up one kind of freedom in order to gain another. This trade-off is most explicit in the social contract theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau conceives the freedom of those who live in a truly natural state to be freedom from constraint, not a proto-moral freedom as in Locke's state of nature. What he calls natural liberty, "has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned."³¹ But the citizen gives up this freedom entirely on entering civil society in return for what Rousseau calls civil liberty, social

freedom and moral freedom: "What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and the absolute right to anything that tempts him and he can take; what he gains by the social contract is civil liberty . . . man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes him the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom."³²

Rousseau's conception of moral freedom turns out to be quite different from Beauvoir's, although the terminology Beauvoir uses when she introduces her conception of moral freedom—her contrast between *liberté morale* and *liberté naturelle*—suggests that she might have been originally influenced by Rousseau. What Beauvoir calls natural liberty is what I have been calling ontological freedom, whereas by natural freedom Rousseau means freedom from constraint. More importantly, for Beauvoir achieving moral freedom has nothing to do with citizenship or participation in the state. Indeed Beauvoir implies that attaining moral freedom for oneself and others requires fighting against the state, at least in those situations where the state is an instrument of oppression (as it certainly was in Nazi Germany and Vichy France). Furthermore, for Beauvoir there can be no question of forcing people to be free, as Rousseau phrases it in his notorious justification of state coercion. Beauvoir justifies the use of force, even violence, against oppressors: "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied," she says.³³ But in Beauvoir there is no general will, only individual wills, whose decisions with regard to their own fates must be respected.

Whereas we cannot know whether Beauvoir was influenced by Rousseau's notion of moral freedom, she explicitly contrasts her conception of moral freedom to Kant's conception of autonomy.³⁴ The passage from Kant that has the clearest links to Beauvoir's treatment of moral freedom is from his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* where he contrasts what he calls negative freedom with positive freedom. The negative definition of freedom is, "As will is a kind of causality of living beings so far as they are rational, freedom would be that property of this causality by which it can be effective independently of foreign causes determining it."³⁵ This conception of freedom as being independent of causal determination is like, although perhaps not identical to, the existentialist conception of ontological freedom.³⁶ Kant goes on to state that a "positive concept of freedom" as autonomy flows from this negative definition. Autonomy, according to Kant, is the ability the will has to give a law to itself. But the only law the will—as pure practical reason—can consistently give itself is the moral law, which is for Kant the categorical imperative.³⁷ Therefore, Kant concludes, "a free will and a will under moral laws are identical."³⁸ Kant identifies freedom with morality so strongly that some commentators object that according to his theory acts that are not moral

are not free.³⁹ Beauvoir herself remarks that in Kantian ethics “it is very difficult to account for an evil will.”⁴⁰

For Kant, as for Beauvoir, then, moral freedom develops out of another more basic type of freedom. Kant’s conception of moral freedom is also similar to Beauvoir’s in that for him, unlike for Rousseau, moral freedom is not tied directly to participation in the state. But here the similarity ends. There is no echo of the great emphasis Kant places on rationality and universality in Beauvoir’s thought. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* she says, “The error of Kantian ethics is its having pretended to be able to abstract from our own active presence in the world.”⁴¹ Instead of a formal commitment to the absolute worth of rational beings, Beauvoir’s ethics demands a concrete commitment to other flesh and blood humans.

Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom turns out to be different in distinctive ways from the conceptions of past theorists. Her unique achievement was to take this idea and introduce it into existentialism, thus providing a philosophical foundation for an existentialist ethics, the only consistent foundation for it that has yet been offered. Her views on freedom were not identical to Sartre’s. This needs to be acknowledged and her ideas need to be given more attention than they have been heretofore.

1 Simone De Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944); *The Blood of Others* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948). Several shorter pieces on ethical themes were published in *Les Temps modernes* in the late forties which were later published together in a small book. *L’Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1986).

2 See, for instance, Thomas C. Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979) and David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986).

3 See, for instance, Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) p. 441. Henceforth referred to as BN. Sartre and all the other philosophers quoted in this paper, even Beauvoir, use the word man to stand for all humans. I of course do not endorse this usage, but have to use it myself in quoting them.

5 See, for instance, BN, p. 531.

6 BN, p. 441.

7 Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 3.

8 BN, p. 483.

9 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Section VIII, Part II, p. 96.

10 Sartre does not claim that our freedom from constraint is absolute or infinite, as some of his critics assume. Such a claim would be obviously false.

11 See Simone de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991), p. 391.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 45.

13 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 45 and BN, p. 627.

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), p. 24. Henceforth referred to as EA.

15 EA, p. 24.

16 EA, p. 25.

17 EA, p. 46.

18 See David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, p. 165 for a summary of this objection.

19 EA, p. 73.

20 See Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 46.

21 EA, p. 74.

22 EA, p. 82.

23 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: New American Library, 1964), Chapter XXI, Section 10, p. 167.

24 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section VIII, Part II, p. 95.

25 EA, p. 91.

26 EA, 28. She ascribes this insight here in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas to Descartes*, strangely enough, as does Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. See BN, p. 484.

27 See Kristana Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: The Existentialist Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir*, forthcoming.

28 John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), Book II, Chapter II, pp. 4–5.

29 Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Book II, Chapter II, p. 5.

30 Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Book II, Chapter IV, p. 13.

31 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), Book I, Chapter 8, p. 65.

32 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter 8, p. 65.

33 EA, p. 91.

34 EA, p. 33. In her memoirs she records how she used Kant as “a focal point or a sounding board” for her own philosophical ideas, much to Sartre’s dismay. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 547.

35 Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1959), p. 64.

36 Thomas Hill, for one, sees negative freedom to involve more than this. See Thomas Hill, “Kant’s Argument for the Rationality of Moral Conduct,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 66 (1985): 3–23. Kant has many different conceptions of freedom and identifying and differentiating between them is a complicated matter. See Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990).

37 “The proposition that the will is a law to itself in all its actions, however, only expresses the principle that we should act according to no other maxim than that which can also have itself as a universal law for its object. And this is just the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality.” *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 65.

38 Ibid.

39 See Robert Paul Wolff, *The Autonomy of Reason* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), pp. 135–36. Hill describes this objection, but rejects it. See Thomas Hill, “Kant’s Argument for the Rationality of Moral Conduct.”

40 EA, p. 33.

41 Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, p. 91.