# THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

ADVANTAGES OF AMBIGUITY:

THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

By

AMY LEASK, B.A. HONS

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

MASTER OF ARTS (1999)

McMaster University (Philosophy)

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Advantages of Ambiguity: The Moral Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir

AUTHOR: Amy Leask, B.A. Hons (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. S. M. Najm, Dr. E. Boetzkes

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 102

# Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir is known as a prolific novelist, a passionate political activist for the women's movement, and the long-time companion to the existential philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre. Her ideas as a philosopher, however, are often overshadowed by these alternate identities. The aim of this thesis is to reaffirm the value of de Beauvoir's philosophical contributions, in particular, those which pertain to moral philosophy.

In order to achieve this, I will first attempt to distinguish de Beauvoir's philosophy from that of Sartre. From a moral standpoint, de Beauvoir presents a more explicitly moral version of existentialism, one which takes as its focus the self-other tension left unresolved in Sartrean ontology. Second, and more importantly, I will discuss the broad scope of de Beauvoir's moral theory. Her own application of this theory to the situation of women may be complimented by possible applications to racial, environmental and other moral issues.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this particular thesis lies in its methodological approach. Although studies of de Beauvoir's thought are numerous, those which deal exclusively with her philosophical works are rare. As a corrective to this, this thesis is based exclusively on examinations of de Beauvoir's philosophical works. This should not be interpreted as a rejection of de Beauvoir's contributions to existentialism and to moral philosophy through literature and autobiography. Instead,

this thesis should be viewed as giving proper credit to her philosophical works as being

worthy of examination on their own.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Sami Najm and Dr. Elisabeth Boetzkes, whose wisdom and humour have been invaluable throughout this process. Thank you to Ben, friends and family for supporting me, despite my own occasional ambiguity.

*And the turtles, of course...*
*all the turtles are free*
*As turtles and, maybe*
*all creatures should be.*
Theodor S. Geisel

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

The philosophical writings of Simone de Beauvoir are misunderstood and

misinterpreted in a number of ways. Both the contents of the works and the contexts

within which the works are understood have fallen prey to significant oversights, and

consequently, examples of unfounded criticisms are abundant. In several critical works,

de Beauvoir's contributions to philosophy are overlooked altogether. Despite the

distinctly existential content and subject matter of de Beauvoir's fiction, autobiographies,

and her philosophical pieces, her works are often left out of the canon of recognized

existential thought. John MacQuarrie, for example, omits de Beauvoir from his survey

work concerning existentialism.[1] MacQuarrie devotes an entire section of his work to the

connections between existentialism and literature, without any acknowledgment of de

Beauvoir's numerous works of existentialist fiction. Similarly, MacQuarrie devotes a

section of his work to the ethical dimensions of existentialism, without any mention of de

Beauvoir's extensive discussions of this topic. MacQuarrie does, however, acknowledge

the contribution to existential thought made by figures such as Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky

and Kafka. My intention is not to question McQuarrie's inclusion of such figures, for their

literary works may indeed be interpreted as containing existential sentiment. However, his

omission of de Beauvoir, who contributed both literary and philosophical works to

existentialist thought, is indicative of a general attitude toward her. Admittedly, de

_____

[1] See Existentialism

1

Beauvoir was most prolific as a novelist and autobiographer, as her fictional works and volumes of memoirs far outnumber her explicitly philosophical pieces. However, numerous other existential philosophers are also recognized as accomplished novelists, playwrights and poets, including Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel. Moreover, their philosophical works are not regarded with any less seriousness because of their alternate interests. On the contrary, their literary works are often discussed as extensions of their respective philosophical viewpoints. Although my own discussion will not involve an examination of de Beauvoir's novels or autobiographical works, two crucial points must nonetheless be acknowledged. First, it may be argued that de Beauvoir's fiction contains the same existential sentiments as those of both her contemporaries and her predecessors. If one is to give credit to Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky as existentialists, one must extend at least some degree of recognition to de Beauvoir, whose contribution is both historically and theoretically close to the modern existentialist movement. Second, for the same reasons that Sartre is not commonly reduced to a mere playwright, de Beauvoir may not be dismissed as a mere novelist. In addition to their respective literary works, each contributes numerous philosophical pieces. In either case, to exclude de Beauvoir as a contributor to philosophy is to put forth an unfortunate double-standard, one which McQuarrie is not alone in supporting.

There are critics who not only fail to acknowledge de Beauvoir's contribution to existentialism, but also persist in faulting existentialism as a whole for difficulties which de Beauvoir herself attempts to remedy. Colin Wilson's <u>Introduction to the New</u>

Existentialism is an attempt to expose such failings and remedy them through a re-

formulation of existentialist principles. Wilson describes Sartrian ontology as

"fundamentally pessimistic" and without "the possibility of future development".[2] Wilson

makes these claims with particular attention to Sartre's inability to establish a satisfactory

connection between self and other. As my discussions of de Beauvoir will demonstrate,

much of her philosophical contribution involves an attempt to make concrete and

immediate connections to other individuals. The inadequacies Wilson cites in Sartrean

thought, and which he aims to remedy with his own formulations, are addressed

thoroughly in de Beauvoir's discussions, and thus his complete oversight of her

contribution is unfortunate.

In his survey work, <u>Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty</u>,

George Alfred Schrader Jr. makes the criticism that existentialism pays little attention to

ethics. Schrader comments:

> Another criticism which has been made of existential philosophy is
> that no one of the existentialist writers has contributed an ethical theory.
> A possible exception would be Simone de Beauvoir's <u>The Ethics of</u>
> <u>Ambiguity</u>, which is hardly sufficient to meet the objection.[3]

Although Schrader does make mention of de Beauvoir, his hasty dismissal of <u>The Ethics</u>

<u>of Ambiguity</u> is, as I hope to illustrate, somewhat unfounded. De Beauvoir may not be

any more successful at establishing an ethic than her existentialist contemporaries, but she

---

[2] Wilson, p.9
[3] Schrader, p.29

does go farther in bringing moral dimensions to this philosophy. Moreover, Schrader's

failure to mention her other ethical discussions, including The Second Sex, is indicative of

an excessively narrow philosophical outlook.

Fortunately, not all critics are guilty of such blatant omissions. There are those

who *do* acknowledge de Beauvoir's contribution to philosophy. However, recognition of

de Beauvoir as a philosopher is often tainted with distortions, as many critics make this

acknowledgment only with reference to her novels. The practice of seeking philosophical

content in de Beauvoir's novels is not itself questionable. On the contrary, it may be the

case that her novels serve as excellent complements to her philosophy, just as Sartre's

plays and Camus' novels may be seen as expounding upon their own existentialist thought.

However, two problematic tendencies are exhibited in the comparisons made between de

Beauvoir's literature and her philosophy. First, works which examine de Beauvoir's

philosophical writings exclusively, without resorting to comparisons with her fiction, are

practically non-existent. Karen Vintges, Judith Okely, Mary Evans, Terry Keefe, and

numerous other critics who devote considerable attention to de Beauvoir's works, all

include detailed analyses of her fiction as a complement to her philosophical writings.

Although these critical comparisons are not questionable in themselves, the lack of works

without such comparisons suggests an inability, or even a refusal to fully acknowledge de

Beauvoir's philosophical works for their own merit. In an attempt to avoid this difficulty,

I will conduct my own discussions without reference to her fiction. In this, I do not intend

to imply that her fiction is not a valuable extension of her philosophy, but rather that her philosophical works are worthy of analysis on their own.

There is a second, and more troubling tendency with respect to the connection of de Beauvoir's fictional works to her philosophy. As Toril Moi explains, it is commonly assumed that all of de Beauvoir's fictional characters are autobiographical.[4] Again, such connections are not problematic in themselves. However, the supposition that de Beauvoir's fiction is largely autobiographical, when combined with the practice of seeking her philosophical viewpoints in her fiction, is indicative of a greater injustice committed against de Beauvoir. There is, throughout critical discussions of de Beauvoir, a troubling inability, and in some cases, an outright refusal to separate the woman from her philosophy. Several critics go so far as to directly connect developments in de Beauvoir's philosophy with various events in her personal life. For example, Mary Evans asserts that much of what de Beauvoir criticizes in her examinations of gender relations is in reaction to the inadequacies of her parents' marriage.[5] Similarly, Catharine Savage Brosman traces de Beauvoir's interest in moral philosophy back to her spiritual upbringing. Savage comments:

> ...She came from a pious milieu in which misconduct was severely censured on both religious and social grounds; this upbringing marked her so deeply that, despite her later rebellion, she did not shake off her interiorized sense of moral imperatives.[6]

---

[4] Moi, p.30
[5] Evans, p.9
[6] Savage, p.102

The speculative nature of these ventures into de Beauvoir's personal motivations is itself questionable. It is difficult to determine, with any degree of accuracy, what any author's true motivations are, and even an author's own assessments of these motivations may vary greatly over time. Moreover, the practice of including psychological motivations as a foundation for philosophical viewpoints is perhaps inexcusable. To assume that a philosophical work is a product of personal events is to risk overshadowing the merit of the work in itself. For reasons which I will discuss in the following chapter, an existentialist thinker would find such reduction particularly questionable, if not altogether insulting.

The examples provided from Evans and Savage are, however, relatively benign when compared to some of the more personal attacks against de Beauvoir. Misguided as they may be in doing so, the personal details provided by Evans and Savage are intended to illustrate de Beauvoir's positive and long-standing commitment to philosophy and literature. In other words, these connections are drawn between her personal and philosophical endeavours with the aim of lending credence to the latter. There are, however, many critics who provide reference to de Beauvoir's personal life with the intention of discrediting her. Many such critics are quoted by Toril Moi in her own defense of de Beauvoir's philosophical contributions. Renee Winegarten is noted as saying, "Simone de Beauvoir is not at all generous to her father"[7], without regard to the fact that familial relations of an author are not, and should not be used as a basis on which

---

[7] Winegarten, as quoted by Toril Moi, p.21

to evaluate the validity of his or her philosophical claims. Michel Chrestien asserts, "Her passion-based politics turned Beauvoir into a ferocious enemy of France years ago."[8]. To arbitrarily deem her "passion" as a weakness, rather than a strength is at least questionable. That emotional demeanour should be used as a basis on which to criticize any philosophy is also unfounded. Pierre Domaize claims, "One should not go too easy on the simplistic manicheism of this female philosopher overcome by philosophical passion as others are overcome by debauchery"[9], implying that de Beauvoir's emotional states, as well as her gender are reasons to discount her ideas.

In addition to those who deem de Beauvoir emotionally unfit to contribute anything of value, there are also numerous critics who refuse to separate de Beauvoir from her romantic ties to Sartre, and many such critics use a distinctly pejorative tone to describe this relationship. The journalist Eric Neuhoff refers to de Beauvoir as Sartre's dog, faithful to him in life, but all too willing to soil his legacy shortly after his disappearance.[10] Again, it is unnecessary to include de Beauvoir's romantic relationship to Sartre in order to support her philosophical contributions, and it is an even greater injustice to use this relationship as a means of attacking her philosophy. As Toril Moi discusses, what all such attacks have in common is the intention to render de Beauvoir's philosophical contributions useless by unnecessarily linking them to her as a person, and

---

[8] Chrestien, as quoted by Toril Moi, p.21
[9] Domaize, as quoted by Toril Moi, p.21
[10] Neuhoff, as quoted by Toril Moi, p.28

moreover, portraying her as a deviant, a troublemaker, and an irrational woman. As Moi observes:

> ...The hostile critic's favorite strategy is to personalize the issues, to reduce the book to the woman: their aim is clearly to discredit Beauvoir as a speaker, not to enter into debate with her.[11]

If we are to adequately measure the validity and usefulness of de Beauvoir as a thinker, as opposed to an enigmatic and controversial celebrity, it is necessary to grant her leave of her personal attributes in the same fashion afforded her predecessors and contemporaries and devote proper and careful attention to the theory she puts forth.

On its own, any one of the lines of criticism mentioned above could form the basis for a lengthy discussion, and critical examination of all of them should be undertaken by those who wish to understand fully de Beauvoir's works in themselves, as well as within the context of her philosophical career as a whole. However, none of them are the points of focus of this thesis. My discussion will centre on de Beauvoir's discussions of ethics, which are perhaps one of the most distinctive features of her philosophy and, unfortunately, also one of the most overlooked segments of her work. The few critical works which give adequate attention to her ethics stands as a testament to the oversight of her contributions to moral philosophy. Wherever possible, this discussion will strive to avoid such pitfalls by focusing exclusively on her ethical works, without succumbing to the temptation to link de Beauvoir's philosophical claims to her personal affairs.

---

[11] Moi, p.23

The Ethics of Ambiguity is one of de Beauvoir's first works concerning ethics, and the most extensive ethical discussion presented by her. Beginning with the main precepts of Sartrean ontology, de Beauvoir insists that abstract and prescriptive ethical frameworks do little for moral agents, for they fail to adequately reflect our ontological status as free beings, and consequently they are not of great use in the making of choices, which is a fundamental concern in existential thought. More importantly, such abstract ethical standpoints are to be avoided because of their tendency to engender potentially dangerous moral attitudes. Although a great deal of detail and explanation is necessary to expand upon such claims, and will be provided in the course of the chapters which follow, it should suffice to say at this point that de Beauvoir is heavily criticized for not being completely successful in avoiding the abstract herself. I will not oppose this line of criticism, but rather I will attempt to expand upon it. Although de Beauvoir's theoretical intentions are admirable, it must be admitted that much is lacking in her establishment of a wholly situational ethics, for de Beauvoir makes few distinctive and positive claims of her own, and gives little practical discussion of those which are given. In several accounts, including de Beauvoir's own commentaries, The Ethics of Ambiguity is criticized on the basis of its failure to attain its main goal, namely, to establish an ethic that does not rely on universal duties or abstract mandates. What is successfully provided in The Ethics of Ambiguity is a series of moral cautions, in essence, a listing of moral attitudes which are to be avoided if one is to fully appreciate one's own freedom, while giving full acknowledgment to one's moral obligations to others. In short, while de Beauvoir gives

little detail as to what is to be pursued in an ethic, she does provide useful guidelines for

critiquing other frameworks. It is this portion of de Beauvoir's ethical framework which

shall serve as the focal point for this thesis. My intention is not to ignore the lack of

concrete discussion of ethics in The Ethics of Ambiguity, nor do I intend to minimize the

difficulties presented by it. Rather, I will focus on the more successful and effective

aspects of her ethics, namely the way her conception of moral responsibility to others

distinguishes her as a philosopher in her own right, the manner in which it presents an

interesting and useful picture of moral agency, and finally, the ways in which it serves as a

foundation for the more concrete focus of her later feminist philosophy.


In order to discuss de Beauvoir's successes, it is crucial to examine the ways in

which de Beauvoir's formulation of moral responsibility distinguishes her existentialist

thought from that of Sartre. Perhaps one of the most unwarranted charges against de

Beauvoir is that her philosophy is nothing more than a repetition of Sartre's ontology. In

the same spirit as that de Beauvoir's philosophy is tied to her romantic escapades with

Sartre, she is also referred to as Sartre's intellectual follower. She is notoriously known

as Sartre's pupil, despite the fact that they began their philosophical careers at roughly the

same time. Most commonly, de Beauvoir is reduced to being Sartre's philosophical

megaphone, a vehicle for his own thought. These myths are no doubt encouraged by de

Beauvoir's excessive modesty in claiming that Sartre was the better of the two

philosophers, and that her strengths lay in literary pursuits. De Beauvoir comments

"…Where Sartre's philosophy is concerned, it is fair to say that I took my cue from him,

because I also embraced existentialism for myself."[12] However, even de Beauvoir's own

humility must be countered if one is to fully appreciate her contribution to existentialist

thought, and more importantly, to moral philosophy. Sartre's philosophical pursuits are

primarily ontological. Notions of choice and freedom, although integral to any discussion

of ethics, are taken on as a means to support his claim that "existence precedes essence".

Although Sartre's existential thought *suggests* an ethic, it does so only on a tangential

basis, and not as an area of primary focus. Sartre does not reject the possible ethical

offshoots of his own ontology. A brief and abstract chapter of <u>Being And Nothingness</u> is

devoted to the moral implications of existential freedom. However, I will argue that

Sartre's account features responsibility on an almost exclusively theoretical and abstract

level, and thus does little to shed light on responsibility to others in a more concrete sense.

De Beauvoir, by contrast, expands upon the notion of "situation" as it is connected to the

ontological reality of human being, not only as a point of ontological concern, but as one

of immediate moral concern. One is morally responsible for others not only in the

Sartrean sense, which claims that with any choice, moral or non-moral, we set an

ontological example for all, but also in that our moral choices have concrete and

potentially harmful consequences for those with whom we interact on a daily basis.

Moreover, de Beauvoir's assertion in her later works that one's situation, and hence one's

status as a morally responsible being, may be strongly linked to social ranking, economic

status and gender, is a notion which Sartre does not attempt to incorporate. De Beauvoir

goes on to evaluate the consequences of several ontological viewpoints which overlook

---

[12] From an interview with Alice Schwartzer, <u>Simone De Beauvoir Today</u>, p.190

this vital moral responsibility. Sartrean ontology may form the backbone of de Beauvoir's theories, but the distinctively ethical focus of her work is very much her own, and is shaped largely by her attention to moral responsibility to the "other".

De Beauvoir's unique conception of moral responsibility is also the keystone in the feminist philosophy for which she has been both praised and attacked. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir re-examines the notion of "Other" which is presented in Sartrean ontology, and attempts to reformulate Sartrean "bad faith" to better reflect the complex nature of oppression. Our status as beings conscious of our own consciousness necessitates a basic ontological alienation from other subjects, and even in Sartre's abstract conception, this necessary separation does not negate our responsibility to them. In this particular work, de Beauvoir focuses on an alternate conception of "the other", one which is not based on ontological alienation between individuals, but rather on distorted notions of alienation constructed to serve the interests of an oppressor. It is this sort of conception which de Beauvoir asserts is applied to women in the common association of the female sex with irrationality, and physicality, in essence, everything the male sex deems as negative and wishes to avoid. The moral responsibility to others outlined in The Ethics of Ambiguity plays into this practice as a corrective. In attaching such negative and unnecessary baggage to this bastardized notion of "the other", the group which benefits from this conceptual framework not only appears to evade responsibility for "the other", but also blinds "the other" to her own moral responsibility. What is most questionable in this warped notion of "other", as de Beauvoir struggles to establish throughout The

Second Sex, is its gross ontological inaccuracy, but more importantly, its tremendous capacity for moral harm. Through examination of theories in biology, psychology, history, anthropology and sociology, de Beauvoir seeks to illustrate that there is nothing inherent in the female sex which justifies such ontological misrepresentation, nor does being female entail a diminished level of moral responsibility.

For the reasons previously mentioned, I will endeavour to establish de Beauvoir's conception of moral responsibility as useful, both theoretically and practically. The chapter which follows will be devoted to an in-depth discussion of the inner workings of de Beauovir's Ethics of Ambiguity, beginning with its existential underpinnings and concluding with the ethical guidelines which not only expand upon Sartrean ontology, but which should be regarded as more than a mere tangent. Conceptions of ambiguity, freedom, and choice will serve as key notions in this particular segment of the discussion. Bearing all of this in mind, I will then examine in detail the difficulties which arise from this ethical discussion, including the problematic tension between universal duties and particular situation which de Beauvoir seems unable to resolve. This will include a comparison of de Beauvoir's suggested moral cautions with basic models of Kantian and Utilitarian ethics. Following this will be a discussion of that which is successful in de Beauvoir's moral philosophy, the positive and redeeming role this conception of moral concern for others plays in her philosophy of moral conduct. Finally, this discussion will branch out beyond her explicitly ethical discussions, to encompass the more wide-ranging and more concrete consequences of her moral theories, namely, the crucial role they play

in her feminist philosophy, as well as other possible ramifications they may have on other specific avenues of moral concern. As a final note, it must be stated that this particular discussion will strive to examine de Beauvoir's philosophical writings as philosophical writings. Although her literary works and autobiographical volumes are, without a doubt, useful in understanding de Beauvoir on a more intimate basis, in order to avoid temptation to fall into the practice of linking personal details with philosophical standpoints, her philosophical works will serve as main sources, with very little reference to other genres of work.

## Chapter 1

De Beauvoir's exploration of ethics begins with a restatement and reevaluation of the ontology posited by Sartrean existentialism, in particular, that which is presented in Being And Nothingness. Bearing this in mind, it may be argued that no account of de Beauvoir's line of thought would be complete without at least a basic examination of the main precepts put forth in this work. This chapter is intended primarily as an outline of de Beauvoir's discussions of ethics, and because of this, I will attempt to avoid reducing her ethical philosophy to a mere re-statement of Sartre's ontology. De Beauvoir assumes the basic tenets of Sartre's ontology, but she does so in a unique and critical manner. As I will attempt to show in this chapter, de Beauvoir pulls Sartre's conception of freedom out of its exclusively ontological framework. Not only does she add to Sartre's conception of Being by following it through to its moral consequences, but she does so first by addressing ethics exclusively, using ontology only as a backdrop, and second by reconstructing the notion of bad faith in order to better accommodate responsibility to others. In keeping with this, my first chapter will endeavor to present de Beauvoir's ethics by giving a brief overview of Sartrean ontology and then by attempting to demonstrate the extent to which de Beauvoir's own thought both departs from it and improves upon it.

## De Beauvoir's Sartrean Foundations

Being And Nothingness is a long and complex philosophical discussion, and consequently, it is a challenge to summarize. However, a useful notion with which to begin this analysis is Sartre's claim that "Existence precedes essence." This statement lies at the heart of all that Sartre posits in his ontology, and is consequently implicit in all of de Beauvoir's works concerning ethics. A useful explanation of this notion is found in Sartre's later work, Existentialism And Ethics, in which Sartre himself attempts to clarify this proposition. He comments:

> What is meant here by saying existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself...only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.[1]

Sartre makes two crucial assertions. First, humans have no given essence. Second, any essence which may be conceived is to be created and not discovered. What is implicit in this statement, as well as throughout Being and Nothingness, is a refusal to reduce human beings, both on an individual level and generally, to any notion of *this* or that *type* of being. Sartre presents a rejection of any essentialist conception of Human Being. Instead, he asserts that Human Being is created and re-created with every free choice. Further, Sartre rejects any naturalistic conception of Human Being. What humans may be inclined to do by nature is to be transcended through our freedom, as opposed to accepted and given as motivation for our behaviour. I am not said to *be* anything, but rather I am engaged in an ongoing process of *becoming,* a process which is terminable only with my

---

[1] "Existentialism and Ethics", p. 82

demise and determined only by my free choice. What I become should not be reduced to any overarching universal notions of human nature, nor should it be attributed to my upbringing, my social status, my economic level, or to any other configuration of external factors. Even my own emotional states are not to be viewed as limitations or impediments to my ability to choose freely. In the Sartrean view of Being, humans are inevitably free. This is to say that humans are obliged to choose for themselves and consequently, are to be ultimately held accountable for their own choices. Inherent in this free existence is the possibility of its denial. Just as I may choose to embrace my freedom and accept full responsibility for my actions, I may also choose to believe in the non-existence of my freedom, and act as if I were compelled to do this or that. To ignore this freedom and to behave as if some internal or external factor or factors compel me to do so, is to engage in what Sartre refers to as "Bad Faith". It is to willingly turn a blind eye to the freedom which is ours not by choice, but by virtue of our existence as humans.

Two issues arise from Sartre's claims concerning freedom and bad faith. First, within this ontology lies what seems to be a paradox: we have no choice but to choose. In response to this, Sartre comments, "I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being."[2] On this basis, the freedom posited by Sartre's ontology appears more a prison than a liberation, for all of the comfort and continuity of being able to account for one's actions with the presence of coercion or

---

[2] Being and Nothingness, p.710

determinism is denied. Sartre does not shy away from this line of concern, and no attempt

is made to disguise the malaise this conception of freedom presents. Even in Sartre's

view, it is admittedly easier to account for what seems to be the inability to overcome

obstacles in one's life by referring to things beyond one's control. However, it is simply

not ontologically accurate. Although I may not be able to dictate the possibilities with

which I am presented, I am always free to decide how I react to such possibilities. In light

of this, a second question arises: Given the immediacy and difficulty of things beyond my

control, how am I to discount them as impediments to my freedom? Again, Sartre does

nothing to mask the difficulties with which human beings are presented. The set of factual

conditions in which one exists is referred to as one's "situation". According to Sartre, not

only are there choices even within the most difficult situations, but one has no choice but

to choose. Abstaining from choice is a choice within itself. It is in this claim that Sartre

attempts to evade accusations of quietism, or the tendency to become mired in indecision

and inaction. As Robert D. Cottrell explains:

> Although Beauvoir and Sartre insist on one's absolute freedom
> of choice, they of course recognize that certain given factors
> affect that choice. These factors constitute what Sartre calls
> one's situation. The degree to which an individual is distinctly
> human is measured by the extent to which he transcends his
> particular situation.[3]

What may be extracted from Sartre's response to both of these objections is that the

specific content of one's choice is not the main focal point of ontological freedom, for this

---

[3] Cottrell, p.97

varies from situation to situation. What is emphasized in Sartre's ontology is the act of choosing itself, for it is in this that one chooses to accept freedom and consequently takes responsibility for the direction of one's existence. No conglomeration of circumstances within a situation is sufficient to excuse me from being accountable for myself and enter into bad faith. This is only a very limited account of Sartrean ontology, but it should suffice as a basis on which to examine Sartre's conception of responsibility, and then compare it to that which is presented by de Beauvoir.

## Self Vs. Other

For the reasons given, it is fairly evident for Sartre that one is responsible for one's self, at least on an ontological level. Responsibility to others, however, is much more problematic because ontological connection to others is quite complex. With so much emphasis placed on individual choice and freedom, it appears difficult, if not impossible to establish any sort of co-existence with other humans. In choosing my own ways of transcending my situation, it would seem inevitable that my interests should come into conflict with those of other free beings. Sartre not only acknowledges the likelihood of conflict, but attempts to incorporate it as a necessary part of his ontology. As beings who are conscious of our own consciousness, we know ourselves as subjects in an immediate sense, that is, we are directly acquainted with the contents of our own individual consciousness. However, we inevitably find ourselves unable to achieve the same awareness and understanding of other human subjects, simply because the consciousness

of the consciousness of other beings is beyond the scope of our own consciousness. This

is to say that we can never know other subjects *as subjects*, but rather only as objects. In

reference to his conception of "the other", Sartre explains:

> He is conceived as *real*; and yet I can not conceive of his real relation
> to me. I construct him as object, and yet he is never released by
> intuition. I posit him as *subject*, and yet it is as the object of my thoughts
> that I consider him.[4]

The "other", in Sartre's conception, is a slippery entity, not accessible enough to me in an

immediate sense to be understood as a subject, and yet not so alien and inanimate that he

or she may be dismissed as a mere object. To further complicate matters, much of what

we choose with respect to ourselves is done in reaction to how we might appear in the

eyes of another. At the same time, I must also recognize that I appear as an object to

other subjects in much the same way as they appear to me. From all of this, the question

arises: How am I to be conceived of as responsible for others when I am not only alienated

from them as subjects, but in many cases their interests, goals and actions, in essence, their

freedom itself, stands in direct opposition to my own? As Sartre himself admits:

> ...Between the Other-as-object and me-as-subject there is no common
> measure, no more than between self-consciousness and consciousness *of*
> the Other. I can not know myself *in* the Other if the Other is first an
> object for me[5]

The conclusion to which Sartre is inevitably drawn is that coexistence among human

beings is inherently turbulent by virtue of its ontology. I have no choice but to choose,

---

[4] Being and Nothingness, p.310
[5] Being and Nothingness, p.328

and yet with every choice, I risk either sacrificing some measure of my own good, or else I risk imposing on the good of other beings. Sartre's continual grudge against the presence of others is present throughout his philosophical and literary works.

What *should* prevent a human being, specifically one who is not acting in bad faith, from choosing blatant self-promotion lies in our ontological obligation to continuously create ourselves through our free choices. For Sartre, by choosing for myself, I not only make a powerful statement concerning what is a valuable choice in my own particular situation, but I set an ontological example or an abstract standard of what human being *should* be. In all such instances of free choice, I affirm myself as a free being, and I affirm all humans as free beings. This must not be mistaken for affirming what human being *is*, for in Sartre's conception, there is no pre-existing, external standard by which to judge the value of one's choices. In choosing, I should not measure my choices by any prescribed good. Instead, I should recognize that to freely choose an option is to affirm its value, that is, to declare it as a "good" choice. However, the "good" way of being is not simply left to the discretion of individuals. Sartre is quite forthright in his rejection of relativism. In his view, what is acceptable for one human being, namely freedom, should be chosen with respect to what will be acceptable for all human beings. A statement or affirmation of value need not entail prescriptive, static, or unchanging absolutes, but it should not be reduced to a mere matter of taste. As a human being, I may be condemned to construct modes of Being as I go along, but this process is hardly a matter of my own individual

fancy. My free choices stand as ontological standards of the "good" way of being for all human beings. As Sartre explains, "For every man, everything happens as if all mankind had its eyes fixed on him and were guiding itself by what he does."[6]

It is in this aspect of his ontology that Sartre briefly addresses ethics. He states, "...though the content of ethics is variable, a certain form of it is universal."[7] The universal portion of ethics, for Sartre, is ontological freedom. This statement provides a useful summary of Sartre's existential ethics, in that it encapsulates the negation of prior standards of good in favour of a "good" which is constructed through freedom of choice. At the same time, Sartre acknowledges that such choices are not undertaken in strict relativism, as all of one's choices have ontological bearing on others. What is "good" is not determined by any prescribed standard, but rather through the act of choosing one option over another. If I do not choose options which give full weight to my freedom and enable me to transcend my situation, by extension, I devalue freedom as a whole, and thus set a standard of "bad faith" for all humans. While choosing the specific details of an ontologically sound existence may fall on the shoulders of the individual, in at least an abstract sense, it affects the being of all other individuals.

## Linking Sartre to De Beauvoir

This too is only a small segment of the detailed account concerning the human

---

[6] "The Humanism of Existentialism", p.39
[7] "The Humanism of Existentialism", p.58

condition given by Sartre, and criticisms of this ontology as well as the brief discussion of

ethics which accompanies it would merit a lengthy discussion of their own. However, in

order to make the connection to de Beauvoir's ethics, it is necessary at this point to

examine the areas in which Sartre's existential ethics fall short. It may be argued that

these difficulties stem chiefly from the fact that Sartre's account of existential thought is

first and foremost an ontological framework. Any ethical concerns which are associated

with this ontology are treated as tangents, as minor offshoots of a more pressing

philosophical problem, and consequently, they are not given sufficient attention. As Sartre

explains, "Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts."[8] According to Sartre,

ontology is only capable of giving a brief glimpse of various ethical situations which may

arise from human reality. Herein lies the first difficulty with Sartre's treatment of ethics.

Devoting a lengthy work such as Being and Nothingness to ontological pursuits is not in

itself problematic, it is merely a matter of philosophical focus. However, one must

question how any philosopher could outline any notion of reality without also giving full

attention to the seriousness of the ethical concerns that will necessarily arise from it. An

ontology such as Sartre's, which is founded upon ethically charged concepts such as

freedom, choice and responsibility, is especially susceptible to criticism for omissions of

this sort. The fact that de Beauvoir makes a philosophical career of attempting to correct

this particular omission stands both as an indication of the tremendous disservice Sartre

does to his ontology in never venturing into its ethical consequences in detail, as well as an

---

[8] Being and Nothingness, p.795

indication of de Beauvoir's own valuable philosophical insights.

This first criticism is symptomatic of an even greater discrepancy. It may also be argued that Sartre's notion of ethical responsibility is at best, a vague, theoretical construction. In an abstract sense, it is quite conceivable that one may make free choices which may be recognized as a model of Human Being. However, the rhetorical elegance of Sartre's thought does not compensate for its inability to explain how existential ethics translates into concrete terms. First, in Sartre's conception, one could conceivably decide for all of humanity without ever interacting with other members of it. Sartrean ontology appears solipsistic in that all one is required to do in order to affirm freedom universally is to embrace one's own freedom. Second, Sartre fails to resolve self-other tension to any satisfying degree. It would seem that Sartre's ontology advocates using whatever means are necessary to overcome the obstacles of one's situation and in doing so, to affirm one's freedom. Willfully limiting my situation in order to accommodate the interests of others would be to frustrate my freedom, and thus to choose this avenue would be, in Sartre's framework, an act of bad faith. To do so would be to frustrate my freedom by making it more difficult to transcend my situation. Sartre may escape the solipsism of which he is accused on an ontological level, but on an ethical level, he remains largely isolated, for he seems to leave almost no room for concern for the welfare of others in any immediate or direct sense. Sartre's account is phenomenologically incomplete in that it doesn't address in any significant detail the manner in which one should act when encountering real human

beings, and moreover, precisely *how* one is to weigh one's own freedom against that of another.

De Beauvoir, as I will attempt to show in the remainder of this chapter, is explicitly concerned with the ways in which human agents ought to interact with one another, not merely in an ontological capacity, but also in an explicitly moral light. It is not, in de Beauvoir's conception, bad faith to choose to worsen one's situation for the sake of the freedom of others, so long as this sacrifice is undertaken *as a free choice*. Such sacrifices are thus not only in accordance with ontological freedom, but are also morally required. In short, while Sartre places absolute value on the individual, de Beauvoir constructs her moral philosophy around concern for the more social aspects of human being, that is, the ways in which the individual exists within a collective. In essence, while Sartre defends responsibility to others in a theoretical light, de Beauvoir attempts to demonstrate the ways in which one is morally responsible for others in a more immediate sense.

## An Ethic of Ambiguity

A useful place at which to begin this examination is with an account of The Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir's most extensive work concerning ethics. Other works, such as Pyrrhus et Cinéas, are also useful in the analysis of de Beauvoir's moral philosophy, as they echo the ideals presented in this broader work. However, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, my discussion will focus exclusively on the former. The title of this work is

quite telling, for it is in terms of de Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity that this work, as well as those related to it, describe the ontological condition of human beings, as well as the moral concern for others which must follow from it. Like Sartre, de Beauvoir speaks of our inevitable ontological freedom, as well as the necessity of choice which constitutes this freedom. Like Sartre, de Beauvoir outlines the ramifications of choosing to ignore freedom, as a "Being in the making", or an individual without a prescribed or fixed essence. I should strive to be the embodiment of an ongoing process of transcending myself and the factual aspects of my situation. Like Sartre, de Beauvoir discusses the possibility of "bad faith" and insists on the importance of avoiding laying blame for one's actions and choices on things beyond one's control. Free choices alone should be the deciding factor in this on-going self-construction. However, beyond these stipulations, de Beauvoir diverts from Sartre in that she takes into account one's immediate connection to others. Human Being is ambiguous in that an individual must, in order to avoid falling into "bad faith", embrace their freedom to choose, but must also accept the vital role others play in their situation. A human being is, by necessity, part of his or her world, and is at the same time engaged in an ongoing struggle not to be limited by it. This world includes others not just as objects, but as subjects whose freedom must be protected as fiercely as one's own. This is illustrated by de Beauvoir's reference to "An individual in the collectivity on which he depends."[9] As is the case with Sartre's ontology, de Beauvoir's discussions of ethics convey an inherent tension between our self-interest/self-

---

[9] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 7

definition and our inevitable connection to the world of other beings. Thus, de Beauvoir retains the notion of acknowledging one's inevitable freedom to construct Being through one's choices, but at the same time, gives equal attention to the self/other dilemma presented by the human ontological situation. In order to affirm my own freedom, I must choose to protect that of others, and in keeping with this, to deny or limit their freedom is to deny my own.

It is on the basis of this sort of ontological ambiguity that de Beauvoir conducts her examinations of ethics, for in her estimation, a justifiable system of ethics must encompass this ambiguity. In order to achieve this, an ethic must avoid several common forms of moral justification. First, I am not justified in relying on my own past moral deliberations. To deliberate in such a manner is to ignore the particularities of my *present* situation. Second, I am not justified in relying on the opinions of others. This includes choices made by others, as well as the ratification of my own choices provided by others. Terry Keefe closely examines this second condition in her own discussions of de Beauvoir's ethics, and reminds us that we may only affect the external conditions of other people's lives. Because of this, the most one may hope to do is *appeal* to others to support one's own decisions.[10] Acceptance from others is neither guaranteed nor consistent, and thus to seek this sort of justification is misdirected moral energy. In general, any appeal to authority is unacceptable, as it stands as reliance on factors beyond

---

[10] Keefe, p.76

one's own freedom for justification . There is no agent beside myself who is more

intimately acquainted with my own situation, nor is there any other agent with the freedom

to transcend my situation for me. Third, and most importantly, I am not justified in relying

on universal or abstract ethical precepts for justification of my choices. Divine or

theological mandates fall into this third category. With respect to this, Keefe explains that

even divine mandates must be interpreted by individual moral agents, and thus

responsibility still falls to these agents.[11] Non-religious principles are equally unacceptable

if they rely on the same sort of universal abstraction. Any or all universal ethical principles

might be justifiable if human life operated on absolutes. However, as de Beauvoir

contends, human life is strictly situational, varying greatly between individuals and riddled

with particularities. Phenomenologically, abstractions simply do not provide adequate

descriptions of what it is to be a human being who makes moral decisions in a complex

and concrete situation. De Beauvoir insists:

> Any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires and
> real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside
> certainty to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his
> own drive.[12]

As Sartre maintains, and de Beauvoir agrees, the only thing in human existence which

operates absolutely is ontological freedom, and furthermore, this is a matter of ontological

necessity, in addition to its moral value.

---

[11] Keefe, p.75
[12] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p.158

In order to form an accurate picture of de Beauvoir's discussions of ethics, it is crucial to examine the role of ambiguity in moral conduct. It is an act of "bad faith", and therefore unacceptable to justify my moral decisions on the basis of anything other than my own valuing of them within the context of my own individual situation. This is to say that each moral choice must be evaluated and undertaken on its own, without reference to other scenarios or choices and without reliance on abstract, universal moral mandates other than freedom as justification. The ambiguity of one's moral situation arises from the fact that one is not at liberty to fall into unmitigated self-interest. I must embrace my own freedom in moral deliberation, but I am not at liberty to choose whatever I fancy and declare it morally right without regard to consequences to others. I am not only completely responsible for myself, but also for the freedom of other human beings. In a very immediate and concrete sense, others form part of my situation, as I do theirs. In stipulating this, de Beauvoir not only surpasses the largely theoretical construction presented by Sartre, but opens numerous new avenues of ethical thought. As Karen Vintges comments, Sartre's ontology presents a "nomadic" ontology in that he focuses almost exclusively on the freedom of the individual. De Beauvoir's modifications, however, make this ontology moralistic through concern for the concrete situations of others, as well as their freedom to transcend these situations.[13]

Having shared in Sartre's assertion that the ontological situation of human beings

---

[13] Vintges, p.88

is accompanied by some degree of alienation, de Beauvoir also addresses the moral

discomfort this alienation implies. Others do "steal the world" from us in the sense that

they too are agents seeking to satisfy desires, pursue goals and engage in their own

projects. The impulse to hate other subjects because of this, or even to act out against

them is therefore understandable. However, to act on these frustrations would, in de

Beauvoir's estimation, be naïve. If we are not in bad faith, we realize that we are vitally

connected to other human beings whose activities often seem to impede one's own. De

Beauvoir cautions:

> If I were really everything there would be nothing besides me;
> the world would be empty. There would be nothing to possess,
> and I myself would be nothing.[14]

What is expressed in this statement is that an individual agent defines him or herself, and

his or her acts of freedom in reference to the freedom of others. For better or for worse,

one is situated in a world of other beings, and a choice is made in bad faith unless it is

made with this recognition. From this it follows that the very freedom in our capacity to

choose and pursue projects exists solely with respect to the freedom of others, for "Only

the freedom of others keeps each of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity."[15]

Mary Evans expands upon this statement in observing that:

> …Freedom and the responsibility to choose are almost synonymous.
> The unfree, the amoral person is, to de Beauvoir at this point, the
> person who fails to acknowledge that an essential part of their
> humanity is their ability to choose, and to allow others to do the

---

[14] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p.71
[15] Ibid, p.71

same.[16]

The latter part of this, that is allowing others to be free, is particularly significant. What requires clarification in Evans' comment is the notion of being "unfree", for in de Beauvoir's conception there is only willful ignorance of freedom. On the basis of one's ontological relations to other human beings, de Beauvoir asserts that morality is fundamentally based on conflict with other human beings, for there would be no need for ethics or morality if I were not at risk of losing something through my relations to others. It is in these conceptions that de Beauvoir's thought again differs fundamentally from that of Sartre. Sonia Kruks gives an accurate assessment of this divergence in stating that "Sartre assumes the freedoms in conflict to be not only autonomous but also equal."[17] This is to say that Sartre insists that one may only affirm freedom universally through the promotion of one's own. De Beauvoir, however, asserts that it is only in the active protection of the freedom of another that our own individual freedom has any status. As Kruks explains:

> ...She [de Beauvoir] suggested that there might be situations of oppression in which freedom, such as Sartre describes it in *Being and Nothingness*, ceases to be possible. Freedoms, she suggested, are not self-sufficient but interdependent.[18]

As Kruks implies, our own freedom is both theoretically and concretely dependent upon that of others, and although it may not be dissolved completely, our awareness of it is

---

[16] Evans, p.103

[17] Kruks, 289

[18] Kruks, 288

nonetheless vulnerable to attack. It is this vulnerability which makes oppression, or the

blinding of others to their own freedom, possible, but it is also what makes it morally

questionable. For de Beauvoir, to avoid bad faith is not only to assume that one is

completely responsible for one's own choices, but also to recognize that these choices

must include concern for the immediate and concrete situations of other beings.


To support her explicitly ethical conception of existential freedom, de Beauvoir

attempts in The Ethics of Ambiguity to answer possible objections that the existential

insistence on freedom provides no ethical basis on which to act. Critics may question how

we are to justify sacrificing ourselves for the sake of another if we are ontologically

obliged to embrace and support our freedom as an individual. At first glance, it would

seem a difficult balance to achieve. In response to this, de Beauvoir introduces and

devotes considerable attention to the phenomenon of oppression, something which

Sartre's account of ethics does not examine in any significant detail, but which is

nonetheless a crucial concern in existential morality. De Beauvoir conceives of

oppression, whether it be deliberate or accidental, as the impeding of another human

being's awareness of their own freedom. In doing this, one alienates an individual from

the very freedom which is at the foundation of their existence as a human being, and thus

obscures their ability to transcend their situation. In essence, to oppress someone is to

lead them into "bad faith" with respect to their own freedom, and as de Beauvoir notes:

> Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten
> mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned

to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity.[19]

It is important to note that in her account of oppression, de Beauvoir does not intend that any human being may negate the freedom of another, for one cannot take away what is present by ontological necessity. De Beauvoir takes great pains to emphasize that oppression is neither a natural, nor a necessary phenomenon. The fact that in numerous instances, the oppressed rises up in opposition to his or her oppressors stands as evidence of this assertion. Oppression is an artificial, and often carefully calculated practice of putting "blinders" on others. Ontologically speaking, one may never completely eliminate the freedom of any other human being, but under conducive circumstances, one may convince them not merely of its impediments, but of its non-existence. This may be achieved in several ways, including the offering of certain conveniences or comforts to those willing to turn their backs on their freedom. It is also possible to appeal to some conception of oppression as part of the "natural" order, which entails convincing others that they are inherently inferior. Finally, one may also oppress through violence and abuse, such that individuals fear for their lives, let alone for their freedom. However it is conducted, the questionable nature of oppression is two-fold. On one level, those who oppress others in the name of any notion of a "natural" order, or out of supposed socio-economic necessity are being injurious to themselves in that they are willingly engaging in bad faith. To say one has no choice, or that oppressive behavior is the way it is "supposed to be", or that one individual or group is by nature superior to another is to adopt bad

---

[19] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p.83

faith with respect to one's own behaviour. More importantly, it is a failure to realize that only through the protection of the freedom of others may we affirm our own individual freedom, for others form a vital part of our situations. The types of "bad faith" which lead to this sort of moral disregard are numerous, and de Beauvoir provides several paradigmatic examples. The "sub-man" is one who reduces himself to the brute fact of his existence. He feels only part of the world, and is unconvinced that he may separate himself and rise above it in any way. The "serious man" vehemently insists on unconditional values, without a view to his own freedom or to any end which may be pursued. The "nihilist", who desires to be nothing and escape the burden of existence altogether, lives in ignorance of the fact that death is the sole means of accomplishing this. There are several other paradigms provided, and some are more successful in avoiding bad faith than others. However, none of them own up to the ontological and moral necessity of responsibility to others. Consequently, all of them leave the way clear for the morally and ontologically reprehensible act of oppressing other human beings.

Having examined de Beauvoir's ambiguous ontology and its moral components, one is then left to question how, precisely, one is do justice to her ideas. De Beauvoir makes an important qualification in stating that "Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods."[20] In keeping with this assertion, de Beauvoir makes no promise of providing specific rules or methods for

---

[20] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p.134

establishing non-oppressive relations with others. Instead, de Beauvoir suggests a number of cautionary measures which need to be considered both in confronting an oppressor, and in bringing awareness of ontological freedom to those who have been blinded to it through oppression. With regard to the latter, if I am to avoid bad faith, I am always obliged to intervene in some measure to make others aware of the illusion with which they have been served. To stand idly by and merely observe oppression is to devalue all freedom, including my own. However, I must be cautious that I do not impose my own will on the oppressed, even if it appears to be in their best interest to do so. Catharine Savage summarizes this moral stipulation concisely in stating, "To will for others is a contradiction: one would have to assume their liberty. To attempt to do so is tyranny."[21] In other words, while one is responsible for ensuring that others have the freedom to choose, it is morally reprehensible to take responsibility for the content of the choices themselves. Any awkwardness on the part of the oppressed which may accompany the realization of this freedom is simply a necessary part of learning to transcend their situation. This is undoubtedly a difficult balance to achieve, particularly without reference to external, overarching moral mandates. Nonetheless, one is not justified in avoiding such intervention, for as de Beauvoir reminds us, we are responsible for all we can do to protect the freedom of others, in addition to all that we actually do.[22]

The complexities of opposing oppression may lead one to question whether

---

[21] Savage, p.105
[22] The Ethics of Ambiguity., p.138

violence is necessary and/or permissible in pursuit of this goal. This is particularly

pertinent to the notion of opposing an oppressor, for one must ascertain to what lengths

one is expected to go in opposing this limitation of the freedom of others. In response to

such concerns, de Beauvoir comments, "Violence is justified only if it opens concrete

possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save."[23] Again, de Beauvoir suggests

*guidelines* for judging whether or not violence is warranted in the preservation of

freedom, but ultimately leaves the discretion solely in the hands of the individual moral

agent. Just as I must exercise care when intervening to make the oppressed aware of their

true freedom, I must also step cautiously into confrontations with oppressors, whether

these confrontations be violent or peaceful. Dethroning a tyrant does not automatically

guarantee the liberation of his or her subjects. In many cases, oppression is far too

complex to be eliminated merely by overthrowing an oppressor or group of oppressors.

When left ignorant of their own freedom, the oppressed may still act destructively toward

one another. Moreover, if the oppressed is reliant upon their oppressor for their livelihood

and/or personal safety, then the abrupt elimination of an oppressor may place the

oppressed into even more dire circumstances, making transcendence of their situation even

more exasperating. In either case, opposition to an oppressor should only be attempted in

addition to, and not instead of raising awareness in the oppressed.


The preceding discussion also raises the question whether de Beauvoir is

---

[23] Ibid., p.136

advocating an ethic of deontological or consequentialist persuasion. This is an important question because de Beauvoir devotes considerable energy in <u>The Ethics of Ambiguity</u> to discussing the merits and drawbacks of both ethical frameworks. Her reaction to the traditional Kantian model of deontology is easy to anticipate. Deontology is, by definition, a duty-based ethic, and the notion of duty implies that which is given in principle prior to any particular moral situation. De Beauvoir deems this ethical framework inadequate for several reasons. First, and most obviously, such duties are universal in nature, and as a result, they tend to be inflexible. As a result, deontology leaves little room for the fluctuation and variations in situations. On a level perhaps more offensive to existentialist sensibilities, deontology is founded on principles external to the individual moral agent. In the Kantian viewpoint, justification is to be found not in the consequences to moral agents, but in the correct application of abstract and universal ethical principles. To an existentialist, the value of a moral decision is found in the very act of choosing this or that moral option, and not in the degree to which a choice corresponds to pre-established duties. In essence, this system of ethics is not reflective of the phenomenological framework in which moral deliberation actually occurs.

De Beauvoir's questioning of the utilitarian approach as a valid, useful and representative model of ethics is not as vehement a rejection as in the case of deontology. However, it nonetheless illustrates the significant difficulties utilitarianism presents when viewed in light of existential ontology. As with deontology, de Beauvoir finds significant

difficulty with the utilitarian tendency to universalize ethics with its mandate that one

should always seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number of agents. In defense of

this system, de Beauvoir vehemently supports the notion of being bound to all, as is

demonstrated by her emphasis on moral responsibility to others. Utilitarianism is worthy

of praise insofar as it requires consideration of other agents on a broader scale.

Nonetheless, utilitarianism operates on the assumption that one overarching principle may

serve as a basis on which to operate all moral deliberation. De Beauvoir remains

concerned that utilitarianism's concern for "the whole" exists and operates at the expense

of the freedom of the individual, which is of the highest priority to an existentialist thinker.

As de Beauvoir cautions, one simply cannot justify being responsible for so many if it

means falling into bad faith in regard to one's own freedom. This is not to say that

sacrifice for others is not praiseworthy, but rather that this sacrifice should be done in the

name of protecting freedom in general, that is, in order to express the factual nature of

freedom, and not merely for the sake of the maximization of a particular good such as

happiness. For de Beauvoir, reaching as many agents as possible may not always be the

most ethically defensible option. Examining the reasons for choosing the good of this or

that individual over that of another is of greater moral significance. Thus, while de

Beauvoir seems less harsh with this second ethical framework, it still falls short when

viewed through the lens of existential ontology.


What is implicit in de Beauvoir's criticism of both ethical frameworks is a rejection

of them on the basis of their prescriptive nature. To deem this or that particular good as universally good is to imply a prior conception of human being, and hence, to impede the freedom to choose being for one's self and in doing so, transcend one's situation. In de Beauvoir's view, all that is to be put forth in advance of moral deliberation is an adherence to the recognition and support of ontological freedom, a freedom which is not merely ethically prescriptive, but necessary by virtue of human existence. The merits and drawbacks of de Beauvoir's criticism of these two frameworks will be given in detail in the chapter to follow.

To conclude this chapter, it is useful to give a brief synopsis of de Beauvoir's discussion in The Ethics of Ambiguity. A startling feature of this work is its small number of positive assertions. In general, The Ethics of Ambiguity stands only as a list of what is to be avoided in an ethic. The archetypes provided, including "the nihilist", and "the sub-man", are illustrations of what ought to be avoided in moral attitudes. Similarly, her criticism of Kantian deontology and utilitarianism are used as warnings against the potential dangers of prescriptive ethical frameworks. However, no alternative to these frameworks is suggested, nor does de Beauvoir give concrete details of what constitutes the "right" moral attitude. De Beauvoir does give her own reformulated version of Sartrean ontology, with emphasis on her own unique ontological and moral necessity of giving priority to one's responsibility to other individuals. In this, she reaffirms the central role of freedom as the only acceptable universal in morality. However, beyond this, de

Beauvoir creates no ethical framework of her own, and the few positive assertions de Beauvoir makes with regard to freedom and responsibility to others are presented in a vague and abstract manner. Although de Beauvoir gives greater clarity to one's connections to others than Sartre, her account in this particular work still leaves much concrete detail to be desired. It is on this particular point of criticism that I will focus the following chapter.

## Chapter 2

Having outlined the main discussions presented by de Beauvoir in <u>The Ethics of</u> <u>Ambiguity</u>, it is now necessary to examine the troublesome consequences presented by the abstract nature of this work, in particular, its lack of an explicit ethical framework. My intention in this particular chapter will not be to present a cross section of all possible criticisms, but rather to focus on the line of criticism which accuses de Beauvoir of failing to present anything less abstract than those ethical frameworks which she critiques. Her discussions in this work, with only a few exceptions, focus almost exclusively on detailing what is *to be avoided* in an ethical framework. De Beauvoir seeks to avoid prescriptive, abstract systems of ethics on the basis that they do not phenomenologically reflect the particularities of human existence. However, in failing to explain in concrete terms how existential ontology is to be translated into its own ethic, de Beauvoir's never really yields a proper ethic of her own, but merely provides an abstract series of moral suggestions. In this particular part of the discussion, I wish to examine the troubling consequences which result from this lack of clarity, including the major difficulties de Beauvoir's discussions have in common with ethical systems such as utilitarianism and Kantian deontology, as well as several practical difficulties which are encountered in attempting to put her abstract theory into practice.

In light of the fact that I concluded the previous chapter with an examination of de Beauvoir's rejection of both deontology and utilitarianism as viable ethical systems, I will begin this chapter with an examination of the ways in which de Beauvoir's account actually fails to avoid some of the same difficulties which she points out in each of these ethical frameworks. As I outlined in the previous chapter, de Beauvoir commends utilitarianism for its inclusion of widespread consequences as a necessary element in the process of moral deliberation. With utilitarianism, moral agents are obliged to consider the widespread effects of their actions on other agents, and not rely exclusively on the sense of duty prior to moral choice. As positive and benevolent an individual's moral intentions may be, their choices may have far-reaching and potentially negative impact on other human subjects. "Meaning Well" is simply not sufficient. This explicit recognition of one's moral connection to other agents is somewhat comparable to de Beauvoir's own insistence that we recognize our responsibility to others on both an ontological and a moral level. For de Beauvoir, other humans form both an abstract and a concrete part of my ontological situation. Theoretically, I must affirm the freedom of others in order to fully realize my own. At the same time, I encounter these others not merely as theoretical entities, but as real beings, and my actions may have negative effects on their concrete situations. As Karen Vintges summarizes:

> ...In the name of our freedom, we must create ourselves as an
> individual identity, styling and developing our daily behavior
> in all its aspects, with the aim of contributing concretely to the
> quality of life of others.[1]

---

[1] Vintges, p.94

Because I am defined by my actions, namely, the ways in which I choose to interact with the others I encounter, what may be anticipated as consequences for myself must also be anticipated as potential consequences for others, and vice versa.

Beyond the utilitarian capacity for moral concern on a broader scale, de Beauvoir cautions that in making moral decisions which are likely to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number, we run the risk of overlooking the freedom of individual moral agents. Concern for others is absolutely crucial in order to avoid falling into "bad faith", but under no circumstances is the ontological importance of the individual agent to be overshadowed in the ontological, or the moral sphere. De Beauvoir *does* allow that some scenarios may arise in which the sacrifice of a small number of other agents, or perhaps even one's own self may be necessary in order to protect the freedom of others. However, she tempers this allowance with the cautionary note that no individual is ever able to ensure the good of all other agents all of the time. In fact, ontological alienation from other subjects would seem to preclude us from being able to adequately gage the happiness of others. In other words, there are significant limitations to the extent to which an individual may, in a concrete sense, ensure the happiness of all others. Hence, we as individuals must be cautious that we do not delude ourselves into thinking that we may sacrifice our own freedom for that of others without risking bad faith.

With this, a crucial issue arises. Utilitarianism, at least in the formulation examined by de Beauvoir, does not necessarily call upon a moral agent to take into account the

particular goods sought by *all* individual human beings. It merely necessitates a more than

cursory acknowledgment that our actions may potentially affect others in a profound

manner, and that we as moral agents should make at least some effort to take this into

consideration when engaging in moral deliberation. De Beauvoir seems to overestimate

the stringency of the rules presented by this ethical system. Utilitarianism, contrary to de

Beauvoir's criticism, does not call upon an individual to look out for the interests of *all*

other human subjects, if not for each distributively, then for all collectively. Rather,

utilitarianism calls upon a moral agent to acknowledge and accommodate the happiness of

others to whatever extent is within their capabilites. For these reasons, it may be said that

de Beauvoir somewhat distorts the moral task presented by utilitarian thinkers.

Despite her own criticisms of utilitarianism, de Beauvoir appears to present a

method of moral deliberation somewhat akin to that which is presented in utilitarian ethics.

The basic human good underlying de Beauvoir's ethic is different from that posited by

utilitarianism, for nowhere in existentialist theory is happiness put forth as a universal

good. Whether happiness is construed as freedom from pain, the maximization of

pleasure, or a balance of both, existentialism does not posit it as a goal of moral

deliberation, nor does it promise it as a consequence of correct moral attitudes. On the

contrary, in being ontologically alienated from other subjects, and at the same time being

morally obliged to protect their freedom, de Beauvoir's ontological framework could

potentially create much discomfort, a fact which both Sartre and de Beauvoir openly

accept. The recognition of freedom is posited as the ultimate good by de Beauvoir and

Sartre, not merely as a matter of moral importance, but also because it is through this recognition alone that anything, including happiness, is capable of having any value. It is with reference to this that De Beauvoir cautions, "The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else."[2] Thus, de Beauvoir espouses a principle which is not only ethically desirable, but also ontologically necessary. Because of its additional ontological value, the principle of freedom is broader in scope than valued moral principles such as happiness. However, if the concept of freedom is made to replace that of happiness in the utilitarian formula, one is left with a simplistic, but not altogether inaccurate picture of what de Beauvoir seems to present in The Ethics of Ambiguity. In essence, de Beauvoir is seeking a system of ethics in which a moral choice is classified as one which aims at the greatest *freedom* for the greatest number of individuals. To further qualify this statement, it must be said that no human individual is capable of negating his or her own freedom, nor are they able to negate that of other human individuals. We may only choose to delude ourselves and others. Thus, it may be said that what de Beauvoir's system presents as a means of avoiding moral bad faith, is the greatest *awareness* or *realization* of ontological freedom for the greatest number of individuals, and in turn the greatest avoidance of "bad faith". While utilitarianism posits its goal in an explicitly ethical framework, de Beauvoir attempts to encompass not only what we ought to do, but also what we are obliged to do if we wish to fully recognize our ontological status as free beings. We may choose to ignore, or to not fully utilize our own freedom, just as we may choose not to maximize the happiness of the greatest number.

---

[2] The Ethics of Ambiguity, p.24

However, in de Beauvoir's ethics, we not only run the risk of being unethical, but also of being in bad faith. Although the abstract good at the foundation of the two theories may be different, the principle of maximization encompassed by each is somewhat similar. Each ethical construction posits the widespread distribution of its good to whatever extent is possible.

The similarities between de Beauvoir's discussions in The Ethics of Ambiguity and utilitarian ethics do not end with their shared interest in widespread distribution. Because de Beauvoir's own account is also quite abstract, many of the same practical questions arise in reference to practical application. To begin, it is difficult in either construction to find an obvious balance between individual good and that of the many. Utilitarianism deems it a moral requirement to sacrifice the good of an individual if it is likely to bring about the happiness of a greater number. However, it is often unclear how large a scope with which one must be concerned. Even if utilitarianism does not expect to protect the best interests of every agent, one is still left to question whether an agent is to be held responsible for moral consequences on a more global scale, or merely in terms of one's community, or immediate circle of loved ones. Further, it is unclear if we are implored by utilitarianism to be cautious of every action we take, or merely those which have blatant moral content. For these reasons, de Beauvoir is justified in accusing utilitarian ethics of being too abstract with respect to the role of the individual to enable us to make moral decisions with any clarity or decisiveness. However, it may be argued that because her own discussions present an equally abstract account, she inevitably encounters the very

same pitfalls which she criticizes in utilitarianism. De Beauvoir insists on the moral and ontological primacy of the individual subject, as the individual is the ultimate ontological locus of choice, action, and responsibility. As previously discussed, to ignore this primacy is to fall into bad faith. However, de Beauvoir also insists on tempering this concern for the individual with a view to both the ontological and moral consequences for other individual subjects. Her insistence on the universalizability of awareness of freedom would appear to be a call for a collective effort, and equilibrium between two such mandates seems difficult at best. It is difficult to determine where, precisely, one is to draw the line between sacrifice for the sake of the freedom of others, and avoiding bad faith concerning our own freedom as individuals. De Beauvoir asserts that the balancing of these mandates must fall to the discretion of the individual making moral decisions. Although this supposition is interesting in theory, it does not make it any easier to realize de Beauvoir's suggestions in any concrete sense. They are, in this sense, every bit as abstract and vague as utilitarianism.

This lack of balance is further complicated in de Beauvoir's discussion of oppression, in which she insists that the freedom of others must be actively promoted and protected in order for one's own individual freedom to be fully realized, and also because oppression pervades one's own concrete situation. Every human subject is obliged to do whatever is within his or her capacities to make the oppressed aware of the illusion under which they live, the illusion that they are bound by their situation, without the freedom to transcend it. At the same time, one must be careful to avoid making the situation of the

oppressed even more oppressive by imposing one's own will onto them. In such situations, one must maintain a balanced moral attitude in the sense that one must actively oppose the diminution of the freedom of others, while still doing all one can to avoid falling into bad faith with respect to one's own freedom. Again, while this presents an interesting theoretical account, as is the case with utilitarianism, it fails to give any concrete guidelines as to how the balancing of active opposition and lack of imposition is to be accomplished. Much clarification is necessary in order to determine what is to be done in situations where the relinquishing of my ability to transcend my situation, or even the deliberate worsening of my situation through free choice, will ultimately bring about a greater awareness of freedom in others. It would seem to be in bad faith to deliberately limit my choices to the point where I am less able to transcend my own situation. However, it also appears to be in bad faith to be aware of a way to raise awareness of ontological freedom in others, and to dismiss such awareness as potentially harmful to my own situation. It is one thing to strive to avoid prescribing easily recognizable solutions. It is another to lead the agent in a seemingly endless circle of moral dilemmas by not providing any concrete guidelines for applying this sort of concern for others. Not only does de Beauvoir inadvertently stumble into many of the same precepts of utilitarianism, but she also faces many of the same technical difficulties in bringing her abstract ethical suggestions into practice.

Despite her strong feelings against Kantian ethics, several crucial elements laid out in the framework of Kant's categorical imperative are not entirely opposed to those

posited in de Beauvoir's own account of ontological ambiguity. Kantian ethics advocates

the acceptance of only those moral choices upon which a universal maxim may be

established. In other words, in order to be morally defensible, an agent ought to act in

such a way that the principles or motivations underlying one's actions could be justified as

a universal rule. This, in some sense, reflects de Beauvoir's Sartrean views. As was

previously discussed, according to Sartre, all of one's actions are to be executed as if they

were to stand as an abstract model of which choices are "good". De Beauvoir adds that

others demand my attention in moral matters because it is in virtue of these others that I

define myself in an ontological sense. In short, it is in virtue of their freedom that I may

affirm my own. Admittedly, Kant's categorical imperative is concerned exclusively with

ethics, while the existentialist account begins with ontology. Although de Beauvoir aims

to go beyond Sartre's strictly ontological focus, her ethical concerns are still logical

extensions of this framework. Nonetheless, both the existential and the Kantian system of

ethics rest heavily on the principle of making the principles behind one's actions

universalizable, whether these principles be directed toward choosing a general way of

being, or used strictly as a means of evaluating moral behavior.

In a related sense, the notion of duty may also be said to form part of both

systems. In either case, one is obligated or duty-bound to choose "for all". The main

point of divergence between the ethics posited by Kant and the ontological model with

which de Beauvoir begins, lies primarily in the contention that certain duties are given

prior to the scenario to which they are to be applied. While de Beauvoir posits an ethic in

which one is obliged by ontological necessity to choose, and more importantly, to do so

with reference to the situation of other human beings, no specific prescribed duties are

seen as capable of forming an adequate basis on which to make moral judgments. Every

human situation is fraught with particularities which are not adequately reflected in a priori

duties. As a moral agent, I only know that I must choose and must be held accountable

for my own choices on an individual, and on a universal level. The particularities of *how* I

should choose are left entirely to my discretion as a free being, and I should decide solely

on the particular content of my own present situation.


A further similarity may be found in the Kantian notion of treating all humans as

ends in themselves, as opposed to using them as mere means to an end. This moral

mandate necessitates the recognition of the autonomy and moral worth of each agent,

beyond the confines of what may be accomplished *through* them. De Beauvoir also

implores us to avoid "using" others as if they were merely instruments with which to

achieve our own objectives. If an individual is to avoid "bad faith", he or she must

acknowledge their own "lack" of being. This necessitates thinking in terms of what one

could be, rather than in terms of what one is. This is to say that we must embrace the

ambiguity of our existence and attempt to avoid sinking into its facticity. Engaging freely

in projects is how we establish their value, and not by viewing these projects with

reference to pre-conceived notions of good. Those who do not embrace this "lack" of

being, that is, the possibility of not reducing themselves and others to any pre-established

way of being, may be prone to impinge upon others in pursuit of some established

standard of good. It is the use of others as means to an end, that is, as a means to compensate for one's refusal to deal with this ambiguity, which is at the heart of the attitudes espoused by the "sub-man", the "serious man" and the "nihilist". These attitudes inevitably lead to the objectification of other individuals, without adequate recognition that they too are subjects, and that our own ontological status as free beings is very much dependent upon their freedom. Consequently, it is the tendency to use others as means and not ends in themselves which is at the heart of oppression. To use another human merely as a means to an end, in de Beauvoir's estimation, is to endanger one's own status as an "end in itself", that is, as a free being. Both Kant and de Beauvoir acknowledge that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to completely avoid using others to further one's own goods. However, even if we must use others as a means, we must not reduce them to a means alone. To treat another as a means to an end, as well as an end in itself is at least defensible, while treating others solely as a means is not only morally questionable in both conceptions, but is also 'bad faith" in de Beauvoir's view. Regardless of whether the motivation behind this precept may differ between existential and Kantian ethics, the precept itself remains the same. Whether it is spurred by an ontological necessity or a desire to provide a strictly ethical justification, it is unacceptable to use others as a means to one's own ends without at least taking into consideration their own status as free beings.

It must be made clear that by drawing such comparisons between ambiguous ethics and Kantian ethics, I do not intend to imply that de Beauvoir is an undeclared

deontologist, nor do I intend to suggest that Kantian ethics should be viewed as a

precursor to existential ethics. One need only examine the role that moral intentions play

in each to find irreconcilable differences. For Kant, the "good will", or the appropriate

moral intention lies at the core of ethics. Any outcome which may result from the

application of such intentions pales in importance to the sense of duty preceding it. While

de Beauvoir does not condemn prior moral intentions as inherently frivolous or trivial, she

is dissatisfied with them as a moral focal point. The act of moral choice and the actions

undertaken with respect to it, rather than the sentiment behind it, are to be regarded as

paramount. What is intended by this comparison of de Beauvoir's ethical discussions with

the ethic postulated by Kant is that although de Beauvoir is quite critical of Kant's

deontological ethic, and cautions against falling into the phenomenological discrepancies

presented by its reliance on moral abstractions, she nonetheless shares in some of its major

postulates.


Consequently, de Beauvoir also shares in several of the difficulties presented by

Kantian ethics. Just as Kantian deontology does not give anything more than abstract

guidelines for choosing between competing a priori moral duties, de Beauvoir does little

to aid in balancing ontological duty to one self with ontological duties to others.

However, her insistence on the consideration of both is unmistakable. In its entirety, her

discussion rests upon one very obvious universal principle, namely, the conception of

freedom, and just as Kantian ethics fail to reflect the particularities of each human

situation, de Beauvoir gives little concrete detail about how this freedom is to be realized

or protected in any concrete sense. Admittedly, de Beauvoir's positing of freedom as an abstract universal principle is done on both ontological and moral grounds. In addition to establishing an ethically justifiable principle, it is an attempt to be phenomenologically accurate with respect to the individual human situation. However, like Kant's insistence on a priori moral duties, her own discussions of the nature of freedom are left largely abstract. As an ontological necessity, freedom may indeed be a given. Nonetheless, de Beauvoir's discussions of it are weakened by her failure to give adequate detail concerning how this freedom is to manifest itself in more concrete terms.

In light of de Beauvoir's inadvertent similarities to Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, one further argument presented by Karen Vintges warrants examination. As Vintges points out, because of de Beauvoir's stringent focus on the individual, it may be tempting to equate de Beauvoir's ethics with that posited by ethical egoists. De Beauvoir, as Vintges observes, is commonly accused of promoting a similar brand of strict self-interest. This is to say that in order to act in a morally justifiable fashion, one should always do what is in one's own best interest. Although this is a vastly simplified version of ethical egoism, it is sufficient to illustrate the ways in which it may be linked to de Beauvoir's own discussions of ethics. As Vintges comments, de Beauvoir herself might agree with egoists in the sense that an individual cannot be expected to place moral priority on things which are not of pertinence to their own interests, particularly in light of the notion that the individual is to be held responsible for the recognition and defense of his or her own freedom. It is difficult to see how one may be expected to put aside one's

own interests in favour of an abstract moral concern for those things which are of little or no personal significance.[3] To expect such detachment would most likely, in de Beauvoir's conception, be phenomenologically inaccurate. Like ethical egoism, de Beauvoir's view does not equate self-interest with moral ill-will, as several other ethical systems do. However, this aspect alone of de Beauvoir's discussions does not justify reducing it to straightforward egoism. Where egoism posits self-interest as the only defensible moral motivation, de Beauvoir not only allows for moral concern for other individuals, but necessitates such concern through ontology. Simply put, one's own freedom is meaningless without this concern. The ontological and its consequent moral obligation to others both prevent blatant and deliberate self-interest from being held as an absolute rule in de Beauvoir's ethics. Under certain circumstances, it may be both desirable and necessary to sacrifice some of one's personal benefits so that others may more easily transcend their own situations. As the criticisms previously presented illustrate, the ways in which one is to balance one's own freedom with the preservation of that of others are vague at best. The line between one's own freedom and that of others is in many ways blurred in de Beauvoir's theory by her lack of positive stipulations. However, this does not overshadow the role one's responsibility to others plays in her theory, regardless of the lack of concrete detail given pertaining to this responsibility. Perhaps the most significant and useful point which may be drawn from this line of criticism is that the similarities between her ethic and those posited by egoists are symptoms of de Beauvoir's inability to escape an abstract, theoretical account of ethics. Without sufficient detail in

---

[3] Vintges, 67

The Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir's discussions run the risk of being accused of

abstract ethics, as well as egoism.

De Beauvoir's lack of positive assertions in The Ethics of Ambiguity poses

difficulties beyond the similarities her discussions bear to abstract ethical constructions

such as those previously discussed.  De Beauvoir herself was quite disappointed by her

own use of abstract, ideal types to illustrate examples of bad faith which lead to the

unethical treatment of others.[4]  Notions such as "Sub-man", "Serious Man" and the

"Nihilist" are all abstract, theoretical stereotypes.  Although such conceptions are both

interesting and posses some explanatory power, it nonetheless seems odd, if not

unjustified to use such abstract conceptions to establish a system of ethics in which

abstractions of all sorts are to be banished because they are not phenomenologically

representative.  This is not to say that there are not individuals who illustrate the various

types of bad faith described by de Beauvoir.  Indeed, the numerous instances of

oppression to be found in modern culture would seem to stand as strong evidence that

these immoral and ontologically unsound outlooks do exist.  However, it is unclear in de

Beauvoir's discussions if such attitudes exist exclusively on an individual level, and are

thus preventable, or if they are representative of a broader cultural norm which would be

more difficult to dissipate.  In either case, it seems unjustified to dismissively reduce such

irresponsible attitudes to mere types, for in this, de Beauvoir commits the same

indiscretion that she condemns in those who have inspired these categories.  Thus there is

---

[4] Cottrell, 83

strong recognition by the author herself of the theoretical hypocrisy presented by these abstract conceptions.

Several specific lines of criticism illustrate further difficulties which arise from de Beauvoir's lack of concrete detail. Terry Keefe makes just such an argument in outlining several of the difficulties which arise from de Beauvoir's rather vague and abstract use of freedom as an absolute foundation for ethics. First, Keefe notes the unresolved tension with respect to ethical solidarity among humans. Solidarity is, in any ethical construction, a difficult conception to discuss with any sort of clarity. Finding an adequate account of global unity in ethics would seem to be a daunting philosophical task, especially with a view to promoting individual freedom, and on this basis, Keefe commends de Beauvoir. However, as Keefe argues, it is difficult to see how de Beauvoir can put forth the notion of the common human good of choosing freedom without addressing the notion of human solidarity in some sense. These may seem like weak criticisms at first, for both de Beauvoir and Sartre would seem to have ready replies to such accusations. Particular goods do not need to be agreed upon as long as all individual subjects are engaged in actively avoiding bad faith. In Sartre's conception, one is responsible for constructing what is to be conceived as the common good for humans through the freedom underlying one's own choices. However, it is nonetheless difficult to see how a common good could be agreed upon, even if it is something as seemingly vital as freedom. The notion of appealing to all, or even a large group of humans to actively pursue this good is even more

problematic.[5]  In de Beauvoir's conception, individuals are not entitled to pick and choose

according to their own fancies and declare them good for all.  All moral agents wishing to

avoid "bad faith" are charged with the task of estimating what it would be like for all

human subjects to make such a choice, and thus they must accept responsibility for the

good of all humans on this basis.  Moreover, all individuals must recognize that their

choices may profoundly affect the concrete details in the situation of others.  However,

neither reply seems to satisfy completely.  De Beauvoir's own constructions, few as they

may be, are problematic with respect to a "common human good", for in addition to her

placing the individual at the centre of the moral universe, she also insists that she is not

merely calling for individual efforts.  While individual efforts are crucial, in specific

projects such as raising awareness of freedom in the oppressed and in actively opposing

oppressors, a group effort is required.  Accommodating de Beauvoir's emphasis on

individual choice within the framework of the group project of actively combating

oppression is problematic.  How, precisely, are we to gather together with other

individuals in a collective effort to combat oppression, while still avoiding the imposition

of our collective or individual wills onto those of others?  Moreover, how are we, as free

beings, to protect of ourselves from the imposition of the will of others onto our own?

As such unanswered questions indicate, without any guidelines other than a general "Thou

Shalt Not", de Beauvoir's demand for a common human good forces the individual agent

into a moral juggling act.

---

[5] Keefe, 84

A second line of criticism introduced by Keefe raises the question of how, in light of the lack of detail presented in The Ethics of Ambiguity, different types of freedom are to be reconciled with one another.[6] While the non-deterministic freedom of individuals is discussed at length by de Beauvoir, the freedom of a class, a race, a nation, or of any other sort of group is not aptly addressed in The Ethics of Ambiguity. In other words, the difference between ontological freedom and political freedom is not clearly defined. It is not de Beauvoir's focus on the individual which lies at the centre of Keefe's concern, but rather the fact that it is practically the *sole* focus. One is left to wonder if de Beauvoir's emphasis on the ultimate freedom of the individual necessitates that the freedom of a group is to be recognized as nothing more than that of a collection of individuals. De Beauvoir also fails to establish whether, in a conflict between individual freedom and the freedom of a group, one is automatically forced by ontological necessity to give preference to the individual. What Keefe seeks through this line of criticism is some sort of indication of when the end truly justifies the means, and precisely which individuals or groups one should attempt to help. It seems questionable that the sacrifice of the collective freedom of a group is morally justified merely by its allowing an individual to fully realize his or her own freedom. In both aspects of Keefe's criticism, she seeks some sort of concrete grounds on which to put an ambiguous ethic into practice. As Keefe's criticisms illustrate, in failing to give any substantial positive guidelines as to how one is to go about doing so, de Beauvoir's discussions lead to difficulties with respect to more global or political concerns in ethics.

---

[6] Keefe, 86

Yet another useful objection concerning the abstract nature of de Beauvoir's theory is presented by Mary Evans.[7] Like Keefe, Evans contends that de Beauvoir's works in general do little to tell one what is to be done in situations in which a cultural barrier poses as an obstacle to individual freedom. As Evans discusses, there are numerous cultures in which the notion of individual freedom is an enigma. In such cultures, the freedom of the individual is both culturally and conceptually inextricable from that of the community or nation, not in the universal ontological sense put forth by de Beauvoir, but instead in a very concrete light. Conditions within a culture can and do pose serious impediments to the realization of one's freedom. What Evans acknowledges, and what de Beauvoir seems to fail to acknowledge, is that making the oppressed members of such cultures aware of their own individual freedom is seldom as simple as pointing out their ignorance with respect to the true conditions of human existence. Such a realization may necessitate a complete abandonment of the ways in which an oppressed individual or group perceives the world around them. It may even make it more difficult for such individuals to transcend their cultural situation. On a theoretical level, it is well and good to say that such a culture is simply in bad faith, and that its members need only be made aware of their oversight in order to inspire them to actively embrace their freedom and oppose their own oppression. Along similar lines, it is also fine to say that because of one's freedom to choose, one is obligated to actively engage such individuals in the hope that by doing so, one may help them to repair their own ontological

---

[7] Evans, 104

discrepancies. However, in more concrete terms, it is difficult to see how such a complete metamorphosis is possible, let alone how it may be accomplished without imposing one's own will on such individuals to some degree. It is perhaps unlikely that such a large scale opportunity to enlighten oppressed individuals should arise, but nonetheless, one is again faced with the fact that de Beauvoir's lofty abstract goals concerning freedom and the ethical treatment of others which follows from it do not translate easily into actual practice.

It is tempting to dismiss the Ethics of Ambiguity as being without merit on the basis of its lack of concrete detail, for as the criticisms presented illustrate, de Beauvoir succeeds only in indicating what is to be *avoided* in an ethical framework. If an ethic is based solely on an abstract, a priori principle, it is likely to be troublesome when applied to the particularity of human situations. If an ethic is overly concerned with the good of all, it is likely to ignore the individual, and in doing so, not give adequate weight to the ultimate locus of choice and freedom. Above all, if an agent does not place enough importance on their own ontological connections to other human subjects, he or she is likely to act immorally and to use others as objects. It is this third stipulation which is at the heart of oppressive behavior. However vague de Beauvoir may be in her attempts to construct an existential ethic, the list of moral cautions provided in The Ethics of Ambiguity must nonetheless be recognized as part of a valuable contribution to ethics. Keefe suggests:

> Perhaps instead of deploring its failure to offer detailed moral

precepts, we should acknowledge its success in establishing the impossibility of doing so.[8]

As Keefe indicates, de Beauvoir's discussions encourage her readers to avoid moral complacency, that is, to avoid settling on static ethical mandates, and to continually re-evaluate moral decisions. Beyond this, I contend that de Beauvoir provides her readers with an invaluable checklist of moral precautions to be applied to the examination of previous ethical theories, and to be taken into account when constructing new frameworks. As de Beauvoir insists in this first work, to go about moral deliberation without a view to such precautions is to risk bad faith, but it is also to risk real and immediate harm to other agents. De Beauvoir may fail to establish the specifics of an ambiguous existential ethic, but she *does* succeed in illustrating ways in which the ontological status of humans presented in existentialist thought can, and must bring about moral sensitivity.

It is strongly indicated that de Beauvoir herself recognized the troubling consequence of the lack of concrete and practical detail in The Ethics of Ambiguity. In later lectures given to other nations concerning the status of women, she is careful to clarify that her observations pertain only to those of her own culture, and that she is unacquainted with the phenomenological details of the lives of women in other nations.[9] More importantly, in her later work, The Second Sex, de Beauvoir does much to correct her previous oversights by discussing in very concrete terms the ways in which one may

---

[8] Keefe, p.86
[9] "Situation De La Femme D'Aujourd'hui", p.423

not only raise awareness of freedom in others, but also in one self. In this work, de Beauvoir examines the widespread conceptual frameworks which have served as means for oppressing the entire female sex for centuries, as well as the difficulty the female sex has experienced in realizing the true extent of their freedom. In essence, de Beauvoir's later works take into account the fact that in practical, concrete terms, the abolishment of oppression often requires much more than mere abstract ontological strategies. The everyday conditions of one's existence, and not merely one's ontological status as a free being, has influence over one's choice and actions. This is not to say that the Sartrean insistence on ontological freedom is to be rejected, but rather that the notion of bad faith requires critical scrutiny if it is to be made phenomenologically accurate. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir takes on this very task and attempts to soften Sartre's rejection of external influences by putting her own ontological and ethical discussions to the test with reference to the oppression of women, a group whose situation *has* influenced their recognition of themselves as free beings. It is to the redeeming features of this work as a corrective to the abstract nature of de Beauvoir's previous ethical works that the remaining chapter of this discussion will be devoted. What begins as an abstract set of moral cautions in The Ethics of Ambiguity becomes a detailed and concrete account of moral concern for others in The Second Sex.

# Chapter 3

As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, de Beauvoir's discussion of ethics is

not only as vague and abstract as the frameworks she strives to critique, but is also

troublesome in that it presents no distinctive alternative framework of its own. However,

this work is still valuable in that de Beauvoir presents us with a system of cautions, both

ontological and moral, to be used in the evaluation of previous ethical theories, as well as

in the construction of new ones. Although The Ethics of Ambiguity may fail in presenting

its own definite ethical framework, it must nonetheless be recognized for its success in

providing its readers with an overview of potentially harmful moral attitudes. In

accomplishing this, de Beauvoir demonstrates that existential ontology is not only capable

of accommodating moral concern, but also necessitates it. We are not only connected to

others in an abstract, ontological sense in that our freedom is meaningful only in reference

to the freedom of others, but in a very concrete sense, for we are in contact with these

others on a regular basis. Immoral actions such as oppression are examples of bad faith,

but in a more immediate sense, they also affect the social climate in which we must

maneuver. However, as an account of what ought to be avoided in moral attitudes, The

Ethics of Ambiguity is still incomplete, for even in its indication of the disastrous

consequences of overlooking our connections to other humans, it gives little concrete

detail of this. Although this work offers an interesting and useful theoretical account, it

still gives little explanation as to how oppressive behaviour actually arises, to whom it actually happens, and how, in more precise terms, it may be countered. These discrepancies are remedied to a large extent in The Second Sex, a detailed phenomenological account of the situation of women. When combined, the two works present a useful and informative account of the ways in which ignoring the vital connection between one self and others can, and often does, have immediate and negative effects on those who are deemed "other".

At the heart of The Second Sex is an examination of the Sartrean notion of "other". De Beauvoir does not contest this notion in itself, but instead contrasts Sartre's theoretical, ontological sense of "otherness" with the manner in which "otherness" is more commonly perceived. The former occurs between individuals, and although it presents discomfort, it does not necessarily imply a value judgement. The latter, however, is systemic in nature, that is, it is applied to groups rather than individuals, and is typically accompanied by notions of inferiority and superiority. Sartre's account of ontological alienation between human subjects is theoretically adequate, but gives no consideration to the many ways in which "other" may be misconstrued, nor does it examine the motivations involved in the willful distortion of self-other relations. De Beauvoir does not dispute the notion that every individual human subject, as a being conscious only of his or her own consciousness, is in some sense alienated from all other individual human subjects. It is this conception of "other" which is supported in The Ethics of Ambiguity. As long as this form of alienation is recognized solely with respect to individual encountering other

individuals, and as long as there is an implicit recognition that these others are not merely the objects they appear to be, but are also subjects, this Sartrean contention is not problematic. However, as de Beauvoir demonstrates in <u>The Second Sex</u>, this is not always the case. Members of the female sex are not generally regarded as "other" on an individual basis, as Sartrean ontology would demand, but rather on the basis that they are female. Moreover, women are deemed inferior because of this distinction.

Woman is deemed "other" primarily because of her physiological and reproductive attributes. De Beauvoir's first task is therefore to attack the validity of such absolute differentiation. She begins <u>The Second Sex</u> with an attempt to dissolve the contention that there are consistent and indisputable physiological differences between the sexes. Even on a purely anatomical level, the supposed male-female dichotomy is not necessarily given in an objective sense, but rather is largely speculative in that these differences vary from species to species and more importantly, among the human species. More importantly, de Beauvoir asserts that any differences which may actually exist do not form a sufficient basis on which to assert an absolute separation between the sexes. What is presented in human sexual biology is a reciprocal relationship, and does not necessitate a relationship of dominance and submission. More importantly, reproductive capacities, like physical size and strength, comprise only a small segment of human potential. In short, humans are more than just the sum of their bodily components. They are, at least in part, a product of their social situation and the ways in which they freely interact with this situation. To this end, de Beauvoir insists:

> ...The body of a woman is one of the essential elements in her
> situation in the world, but that body is not enough to define her
> as a woman...Biology is not enough to give an answer to the
> question before us: Why is woman the *other*?[1]

Two key notions are expressed in this passage. First, although de Beauvoir is reluctant to

accept absolute physical differentiation, she is willing to acknowledge that the two sexes

do exhibit varying characteristics. This acknowledgment is significant in that it represents

de Beauvoir's attempt to be phenomenologically accurate in her discussions. To say that

there are no differences whatsoever presented in human biology would be as unfounded as

claiming that there are absolute, universal distinctions. Second, and more important is her

claim that the human body, including the female body, is only one of many factual

elements in an individual's situation. It is not the body itself, but rather the ways in which

one chooses to view one self with reference to the body, which are integral to self-

construction. As de Beauvoir contends, "Woman is a female to the extent that she feels

herself as such."[2] If she is inferior to her male counterparts, it is only because she chooses

to accept this view, and not because of logical or natural necessity. This notion is of

particular weight in that de Beauvoir devotes the majority of The Second Sex to the ways

in which women are unfoundedly limited to their bodily characteristics.


Humans, as de Beauvoir insists, are not merely a species. We *are* physical beings,

but we also have crucial social, cultural, and economic components in our situations which

play an equal role in the construction of self. None of these elements, alone or in

---

[1] The Second Sex, p.37
[2] The Second Sex, p.38

combination, determine who or what we are as individuals, but rather, it is the ways in

which we freely choose to react to these elements which makes us who and what we are.

In keeping with her thought as an existentialist, implicit in all of de Beauvoir's arguments

against the idea of innate female nature is an element of choice. The labeling of woman as

"other" on the basis of her physiology is thus a social construction which has been chosen

to serve a purpose, and is not a necessity. As de Beauvoir describes:

> One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological
> or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in
> society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...only the
> intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an *other*.[3]

As this passage indicates, the notion of "other" is a strictly relational term to be applied to

relationships between individuals and not beyond this.


The unnecessary slotting of woman into the category of "other" is in itself

phenomenologically unfounded, but intentional alienation of this sort is also morally

reprehensible in that it is accompanied by negative conceptual baggage. This is to say that

women are not only seen as other, but are also deemed inferior because of their so-called

"otherness". De Beauvoir outlines two major ways in which women are commonly

reduced to their physical existence, both of which have negative moral consequences. In

some instances, women are associated with the creative aspects of nature on the basis of

their reproductive capacities. This conception is referred to by de Beauvoir as the "eternal

feminine". With this first framework, women are not only romantically construed as

---

[3] The Second Sex, p.267

quintessential givers of life, inherently predisposed to altruism, but because of this, they

are assumed to have an inherent and automatic propensity for caring for others. This in

turn is translated into the notion that women are morally superior as a logical extension of

their reproductive capacities. This conception, as de Beauvoir contends, is most

commonly found in cultures which do not fully recognize the male contribution to

reproduction. Nonetheless, the notion that women are naturally predisposed to altruism

pervades even those cultures which claim to possess more advanced scientific knowledge.

The second conception of women involves an outlook in which nature is viewed as

animalistic, irrational and in need of human intervention to give it order and purpose. As

beings who are conceptually equated with the physical or natural aspects of themselves,

women are likewise conceived of as chaotic, disorderly and in need of external control.

As a result, women are deemed inherently less capable of all that is predominantly human,

including reason and intellect, and are consequently seen as inferior. Two problematic

assumptions underlie both conceptions. First, a great distance is placed between the

human realm and nature. The difficulties inherent in this assumption will be touched upon

later in this chapter. Second, of greater concern is the assumption that one half of the

human race is to be reduced to their "natural" state, while the other half is not. In either

conception, the "other" or "second" sex is saddled with all of the qualities which men are

not prepared to recognize in themselves.[4]

---

[4] Diprose, p.122

Whether the conceptual alienation involves praising or even worshipping nature in fear of its awesome power, or aiming to control nature because of its inherent inferiority to Human kind, the moral consequences to those placed into either category are equally dire. Being held in association with the "eternal feminine" may seem appealing at first, as it appears to grant tremendous power and even reverence to the female sex. However, this reverence is granted out of fear, and is not an acknowledgment of value. Moreover, this notion is highly questionable in that it espouses a conception of innate character. In keeping with previous discussions of existential ontology, it is unfounded to claim that women are altruistic by nature because such assertions eliminate any notion of freedom to be otherwise. In other words, what is put forth in this conception of "other" is a morality which denies choice, and thus this conception is logically self-contradictory. If the altruistic behavior of Woman is determined by nature, then she must either be unquestionably drawn to procreation and nurturing under all circumstances, or else her choices to pursue avenues other than "motherhood" must be viewed as also being in the spirit of serving the greater interests of others. As de Beauvoir shows, this is rarely the case. The fact that many women *do* choose projects other than procreation would seem to counter the supposition of innate nature. It is evidence that not all women are governed by such impulses. In response to the notion that all female acts are altruistic, women who choose alternate paths are not only condemned for their lack of altruism, but are deemed outright immoral. It is questionable that altruism is not equated with morality with respect to the male sex, for it sets a double standard of what is to be considered morally correct behavior. Above all, it must be recognized that holding the "Divine Feminine" as

an ontological paradigm for women results in the setting of an unreasonably high moral

standard. Few, if any women are capable of exhibiting such absolute selflessness, and

consequently, few, if any women are ever capable of escaping immorality.


The "animalistic" conception of nature to which woman is often tied is fraught

with its own immoral assumptions, for in this case, women are identified with all of the

distinctly negative aspects of nature. In outlining some of the pejorative traits associated

with the second conception of Woman, de Beauvoir comments:

> ...She is contrary, she is prudent and petty, she has no sense of fact
> or accuracy, she lacks morality, she is contemptibly utilitarian, she
> is false, theatrical, self-seeking and so on.[5]

The view of nature attached to this construction of Woman places emphasis on her

mutability and her instability, in essence, her animality and baseness. Unlike the "eternal

feminine", which paints woman as a "super-human" being, this conception places her

among the "sub-human". Like the former conception, it is also thick with inconsistencies.

Because of their supposed predominant physicality, women are assumed to be naturally

incapable of reason or morality, at least not to the same degree as their male counterparts.

Again, this presents an unacceptable conception of morality because it eliminates any sort

of choice. If women are base and animalistic by nature, then it should logically follow that

they not be held accountable for their own faults. However, not only are women assumed

to be incapable of the "higher" human pursuits, but they are often limited to roles in the

domestic sphere, which is the realm of complete immanence, as opposed to transcendence.

---

[5] The Second Sex., p.597

This is to say that the lives of women are meant to centre around repetitive tasks, as opposed to the creative acts which are vital to transcendence. In short, women are denied opportunities which might allow them to act in such a way that they could dispel myths of their irrationality. Moreover, women are also chastised for not striving to escape the confines which are so diligently applied to them, which implies that they have some degree of choice in the matter. Just as the "eternal feminine" sets the standard too high and scorns those who cannot reach it, the "animalistic" version sets the standard unreasonably low and is frustrated when its constituents do not strive to surpass it. It is crucial to note that de Beauvoir does not deny that women sometimes exhibit many of the negative traits suggested in the "animalistic" view of nature. However, in keeping with her non-naturalistic theories, she insists that such character faults are the result of women's responses to negative social constructions, and are not a logical consequence of a female's physical nature:

> Many of the faults for which women are reproached- mediocrity,
> laziness, frivolity, servility-simply express the fact that their
> horizon is closed.[6]

It is, as this passage illustrates, essential to note that it is a lack of opportunity, and not a lack of natural aptitude, which encourages such negative traits. In making dubious corporeal differences into absolute differences, society has limited the extent to which human females may go beyond the limitations of their own situations. As de Beauvoir explains, women are relegated to a life of immanence as opposed to transcendence, of repetition as opposed to originality, and reproduction as opposed to production. Despite

---

[6] The Second Sex, p. 603

the questionable foundations of such roles, women resign themselves to a life of inhuman

servitude if they accept such conceptions, but they also risk charges of immorality if they

choose to stray from them.

The predominating conceptions of women as "other", their lack of reliable

foundation, as well as some of the specific moral deficiencies of each, lead us to consider

the general consequences of this view. These consequences fall into three categories. The

*practical* consequences of deeming woman as other are abundant and fairly

straightforward. As de Beauvoir argues, women, like all humans, do not revel in being

limited, nor do they thrive while being ridiculed and punished for not being able to

overcome such limitations. The entire second section of The Second Sex is devoted to a

phenomenological account of the ways in which such unjustified conceptions pervade

women's self-construction on a day to day basis, from early childhood to old age.

Growing up with the recognition that one is not only different by virtue of one's sex, but

also inferior because of it, has immediate and concrete consequences. The deceitfulness

and disobedience for which many women are chastised are, in de Beauvoir's estimation,

nothing more than examples of women exerting their freedom, if only in a very limited and

negative capacity. Abuse of children, neglect of household duties, and disobedience of

one's husband are not merely indications of women lashing out at other individuals, but

are ways in which women react against their oppressive situation in general, and exercise

their freedom in a lesser capacity. De Beauvoir also suggests immediate and practical

consequences to the men who perpetuate such attitudes. In supporting either the "eternal

feminine" or the "animalistic" view of women, men doom themselves to disappointment and frustration in their relations with the opposite sex. They are likely to be resentful if she fails to fit into either mold, but at the same time, they will be displeased if she does. Eliminating all such unfounded conceptions would, in short, eliminate this source of tension, leaving men to deal with women on an individual basis. In her own analysis of this work, Karen Vintges questions the stubborn maintenance of such conceptions and asks, "What could be more wonderful than relating to a real human being, a person, rather than to an abstract cliché?"[7] In a very immediate sense, deeming women as *other* is likely to bring frustration, both to women and to men.

In light of de Beauvoir's existentialist thought, the *ontological* consequences of the willful misconceptions of Woman should follow. Something as inert or factual as bodily functions is not sufficient grounds on which to construct one's relations to others, nor is it sufficient grounds on which to view these others as inferior. This is worthy of particular note in that the same unfounded conceptions are not applied to men. As de Beauvoir's ontology mandates, what is affirmed for one human's freedom must be affirmed for that of all humans and in promoting freedom for their own sex, while negating it for the other, men fall into bad faith. To conceive of women as "other" in the manner illustrated in The Second Sex is to deem them as inessential, that is, not possessing the qualities which are essential to being human. If being human hinges upon reason, morality and intellect, then women stand to be excluded as human beings, and to be deemed superfluous. To take

---

[7] Vintges, p.28

this view is, however, to overlook the fact that it is only in virtue of Woman's "otherness" as other that men are at all able to see themselves *as selves*. The "primary" being may only be recognized as such in relation to the "secondary" being, and not as logically or naturally prior on its own. Thus, it is only because of this artificial construction of women that men are able to be recognized as dominant or essential beings. Such conceptions are phenomenologically misrepresentative, when everywhere women are engaged in being human, rational and moral to the same degree as men. Male self-interest, and not ontological necessity lies behind this conception, and further, this particular aspect of bad faith encourages bad faith in women as well. As previously discussed, both Sartre and de Beauvoir acknowledge the role that other's views of us play in our own self-conception. Who we choose to be is largely in response to the way we perceive others perceiving us. Women, because they see such disapproval and disgust in the way they are viewed by men, are not obligated, but are more likely to choose to view themselves in similar ways. From this realization, a crucial question arises: If women are able to choose, and have always been able to choose to reject these harmful views of femaleness, even in the face of distinctly difficult situations, why have they persisted in choosing to ignore their freedom? Despite the tremendous sympathy she shows for the distinctive and oppressive conditions in which women live, de Beauvoir does not deny the widespread bad faith they have exhibited. Women choose to deny their freedom and accept lives of immanence for the same reasons that all individuals in bad faith choose to do so, namely, because they are offered certain comforts and securities in exchange for this denial.

Among the greatest of these comforts is a lack of moral responsibility, both for one

self and for others. What is most striking about de Beauvoir's account of the

consequences of this gender-based notion of "other" is her concern for its moral effects.

As de Beauvoir points out, in relegating women to the realm of absolute "otherness"

strictly on the basis of physical differences, man first excuses himself from the task of

trying to understand them, let alone acknowledging their status as moral beings. When

Woman is conceived as a being so utterly different, it seems futile to attempt to break

through the ontological alienation, as men would attempt to do with other men.[8] In

essence, by labeling women as inherently irrational and immoral, uninformed and incapable

of anything other than petty concerns, men give themselves permission to leave women

behind as moral "lost causes", and in doing so, excuse themselves from moral

responsibility to them. De Beauvoir criticizes such attitudes on the basis that *all* human

subjects are enigmatic to one another in that they cannot know others in the same way that

they know themselves. Beyond this, it must be recognized that even our own selves are

somewhat mysterious, as each of us is a work in progress, and not merely a manifestation

of some absolute essence or nature. Men are doubly responsible for the situation of

women in that it is their own attitudes which have contributed to the conceptual and

practical obstacles with which women must contend, and consequently, they are at least

indirectly responsible for the negative female characteristics which are encouraged by

these obstacles.

---

[8] The Second Sex, p.256

More important are the moral issues which arise for women themselves, for, as previously discussed, when one is viewed by society as inconsequential, or worse, as inherently flawed, one is more likely to choose to adopt this attitude toward one self. The relegation of women to "otherness" tends to encourage women to minimize, or even negate their own status as moral agents. De Beauvoir explains:

> A free individual blames only himself for his failures, he assumes
> responsibility for them; but everything happens to women through
> the agency of others, and therefore these others are responsible for
> her woes.[9]

This is not to say that women do not have the same ontological freedom as men, but rather that their situation is such that it encourages willful ignorance of their freedom in that they are enticed to accept shallow comforts in place of the recognition of their freedom. If an individual is continuously made to feel inconsequential or secondary, especially in a moral capacity, then it is more likely that she will view herself as incapable of affecting any sort of change, and thus it will be less likely that she will choose to accept responsibility for both herself and those around her. Although it is not unreasonable to expect women to learn and accept moral responsibility, it must nonetheless be taken into consideration that their situations have strongly encouraged bad faith.

De Beauvoir's discussions in The Second Sex not only give concrete details of oppression itself, but also strive to provide concrete solutions to these forms of ontological and moral "bad faith". In keeping with her background as an existentialist, de

---

[9] The Second Sex, p.606

Beauvoir's antidotes to female "otherness" necessitate individual rebellion. If women are

to free themselves from their status as "other", it is first necessary that each individual

woman become aware of her own subordination to whatever extent is possible, and to act

as a free being in actively opposing inaccurate conceptions of femaleness. Crucial to this

transformation is the rejection of the authority of the male sex. De Beauvoir insists that

this realization logically follows from the discovery of one's own freedom:

> When a woman begins to doubt men's superiority, their pretensions
> serve only to decrease her esteem for him.[10]

At the core of removing women from the status of "other" is women refusing to submit to

it on any level, to avoid bad faith and to demonstrate *by their actions* that they are every

bit as capable of reason and morality as men. Women must strive to react to their

situations in a different manner, but must also take on the task of improving their own

situations to better accommodate the freedom which all humans may choose to accept.

However, de Beauvoir's emancipation of women from their unnecessary state of

alienation requires more than mere individual rebellion. In keeping with de Beauvoir's

claims that one's own freedom is dependent upon that of others, this sort of liberation

must also involve widespread social transformation. Women must not only embrace and

utilize their own individual freedom, but must also take responsibility for bringing about

this awareness in other women to whatever extent is possible without the imposition of

their own will. The oppression of women, as previously discussed, does not operate on an

---

[10] The Second Sex, p.692

individual basis, but rather is systemic. An individual who escapes these conceptions *does* succeed in showing herself to be less typically female, but does not necessarily aid in the lifting of negative qualities from the general notion of "woman" to the extent which is necessary for complete emancipation. Herein lies the chief difficulty with the Sartrean view of freedom in that individual rebellion is not sufficient. The irresponsible and unnecessary conception of Woman as other is not only interwoven into the general worldview held by both men and women, but is also ingrained in societal institutions. Marriage, education, law, and economics all contain elements of this notion of woman as other, and because of this, the reconfiguration of "femaleness" must also include the reconfiguration of the societal institutions which support it. To begin, women must be granted equal access to the public realm, without fear of reproach for not choosing the reproductive and domestic tasks with which they have traditionally been tied on the basis of their sex. If granted equal opportunity, access and encouragement to education, employment, political power and economic status, de Beauvoir contends that women would not need to exhibit themselves as disobedient, sneaky and petty creatures in order to exercise their freedom, but rather as human beings with the same ability and fallibility as any other. In essence, women could be given equal opportunity to transcend their situations. This broader mandate affirms, in both theoretical and practical terms, that it is the socio-economic status of women, and not merely their physical existence, which both comprises their situation, and moreover, influences how they react to this situation. Even more important than being allowed into the realm of broader, public concern, however, is the extreme caution with which women should adopt traditional "female" roles involving

child-rearing and marriage, both of which have been used instrumentally in the oppression

of women for centuries. De Beauvoir must not be misinterpreted as condemning such

choices altogether. She merely intends to caution women that motherhood and marriage

are to be viewed strictly as choices among other choices, to be undertaken freely and not

out of any sense of duty, natural disposition, or societal obligation. In keeping with her

intention to present the situation of women in a more concrete, phenomenological manner,

de Beauvoir suggests that there are few women in a situation separate enough from such

influences to be able to choose marriage and motherhood freely. Because of this, access

to birth control and abortion must also be made an integral part of societal reform, so that

women may be assured of an opportunity to choose freely. In addition, de Beauvoir

insists that society must accommodate those who do choose marriage and motherhood by

establishing ways that women in such situations may continue to work, be educated, and

participate in public affairs. As all of de Beauvoir's solutions suggest, the conception of

femaleness can and should be re-created in such a way that a woman's body need not

impede transcendence of her situation any more than that of a man impedes his own.


Regardless of its insight into the situation of women, and its redemption of

existentialism as being capable of moral concern, the account presented in The Second Sex

is not without its own set of difficulties. In light of this, it would not be prudent to

continue this examination of de Beauvoir's general contribution to ethics without first

acknowledging at least a few of its problematic aspects. First, in attempting to find equal

opportunities for men and women, de Beauvoir tends to advocate that women adopt

traditionally masculine traits, such as reason and intellect. De Beauvoir is perhaps justified in stating that the characteristics which make up the common conception of woman, such as laziness, immorality and ignorance, are distinctly negative, and in this light, her desire to evade them is somewhat understandable. Nonetheless, becoming equal, in de Beauvoir's conception, seems to involve becoming more "male", as it advocates the adoption of traditionally masculine qualities such as reason and morality. She fails in The Second Sex to encourage men to cultivate more "feminine" traits, such as emotion or the capacity to nurture. Some critics, including Mary Evans, insist that there are "female" qualities which are not negative.[11], and being the product of oppression, as opposed to natural tendencies, should not automatically render such qualities any less valuable. Evans is particularly concerned with The Second Sex in that it devotes little attention to the role men can and must play in the liberation of women. Evans comments:

> What does not seem to be included in her outline of the future is
> any change in men except insofar as changes are forced upon
> them by the new woman's greater inclination to argue and reject
> the more extreme instances of male control.[12]

Evan's line of criticism is useful for several reasons. First, as Evans indicates, the role of men in this process is merely passive. De Beauvoir does not, at least not in the two main works discussed, encourage men to assume responsibilities in child care or domestic tasks. De Beauvoir fails to question the self-other/male-female dilemma as an unnecessary dichotomy without sufficient middle ground. In other words, she does little to establish equal value between the traits associated with the two sexes. Instead, she attempts to

---

[11] Evans, ix
[12] Evans, 68

compensate for it by eliminating one of its poles. Female traits may not be natural or innate, but to abandon them to this extent does not stand as an affirmation of the value of female experience, but rather as an implicit value judgment against it. Second, Evans' account is effective in that it indicates that de Beauvoir is inadvertently suggesting that women strive to be more like the very individuals responsible for their oppression. Assimilation as a means of emancipation seems morally questionable. De Beauvoir successfully establishes that women are *capable* of joining the ranks of men in the public world, but does not fully explore the implications or the value of doing so. Moreover, de Beauvoir fails to acknowledge the process of internalization of negative traits which often accompanies oppressive situations. It may not be psychologically possible to abandon one's previous identity with the readiness suggested in de Beauvoir's account. What Evans does not address in her criticism is that in encouraging the adoption of "male" traits without also establishing the value of "feminine" traits, de Beauvoir opposes some of her own theoretical mandates. This includes her insistence that one must not only make the oppressed aware of their oppression, but one must also actively oppose the oppressor. Her account in <u>The Second Sex</u>, to the contrary, seems to promote allegiance to the oppressor. Along these lines, Terry Keefe suggests that de Beauvoir seems to encourage women to do more of the things that men do, as opposed to venturing out and creating new and distinctive projects as women.[13]

---

[13] Keefe, 115

It is perhaps unfortunate that what is lacking in The Second Sex is remedied only

in later works. It is in these commentaries on her own work that de Beauvoir addresses

this matter and insists that the elimination of women as "other" also depends on men

adopting roles traditionally deemed suitable for women, as well as the valuing of the more

positive qualities associated with femaleness. In an interview with Alice Schwartzer, de

Beauvoir explains:

> Those "feminine" qualities are a product of our oppression, but
> they ought to be retained after our liberation, and men would have
> to learn to acquire them.[14]

Although it must be noted that de Beauvoir does, in some capacity, touch upon these

issues in later works, and may have intended to express such views in The Second Sex,

their omission from this particular work nonetheless weakens the potency of its

arguments.

In a strictly existential light, The Second Sex, when combined with the theoretical

accounts provided in The Ethics of Ambiguity, stands as a valuable reconfiguration of

Sartre's version of "bad faith". As discussed in previous chapters, Sartre's exclusively

abstract conception of bad faith poses significant difficulties when applied to any concrete

situation, for it is difficult to conceive of ways in which one may remain undaunted and in

complete awareness of one's freedom in difficult circumstances. What Sartre seems to

demand is an absolute detachment, and an almost super-human refusal to accept the

limitation of one's situation. As de Beauvoir's account of the situation of women

---

[14] Schwartzer, p.78

illustrates, transcendence of this sort is significantly more difficult in some situations than in others. Although ontological freedom may remain the same between individuals, in light of systemic oppression like that which is exhibited in the situation of women, it fails to hold up in any concrete capacity. Women may be theoretically capable of transcending their situations to the same degree as men, but their situations themselves are significantly less conducive to transcendence. What is most significant about de Beauvoir's reshaping of bad faith is that she strives to incorporate power relations as a very real and immediate influence in self-other relationships. To dismiss the range of choices available to various individuals and to various groups may be ontologically excusable, but it is morally irresponsible. Thus, de Beauvoir is to be credited for her attempt to introduce a vital ethical concern into an otherwise disinterested conception of being.

Nonetheless, in light of de Beauvoir's suggestions that men have a vested interest in keeping women in this state of bad faith, and keeping with the notion that the situation of women makes it difficult to realize this, let alone escape it, it is unclear precisely who is to begin the process of ontological enlightenment which will lead women to recognize and embrace their freedom. This is a particularly troubling question in that it is not merely men, but also other women, who perpetuate the notion that women are inessential beings. De Beauvoir succeeds in giving concrete suggestions in some of her discussion, but fails to do so with respect to this crucial question. In essence, de Beauvoir seems to overlook the necessity of trust, an issue to which modern feminist ethicists such as Annette Baier devote considerable attention. In "Trust and Antitrust", Baier states "...Any form of

cooperative activity, including the division of labour, requires the cooperators to trust one another to do their bit."[15] As Baier claims, most voluntary forms of trust involve an accepted personal vulnerability in pursuit of a specific goal, and the more explicit this vulnerability is made, without relinquishing trust, the more moral the trust becomes. What is implicit throughout her essay is that trust, wherever possible, should be undertaken with an open recognition of precisely what one stands to lose in trusting another, as well as the level of discretion one is willing to grant another with respect to the care of one's goods. Baier carries these moral cautions into a more explicitly feminist context in "Whom Can Women Trust?", in which she seeks to make explicit the issues of trust which present themselves in the promotion of gender roles. Baier states:

> Whom can women trust? Not ourselves, until we manage to get
> a partitioning of employments that really does increase the abilities
> that, on reflection, we really do want increased.[16]

What Baier strives to illustrate with this line of questioning is that women face significant vulnerability in trusting men, but also in trusting any other woman who does not critically question traditional stereotypes pertaining to gender. The concern for the moral dimensions of trust which form the basis of both of Baier's essays is somewhat lacking in The Second Sex. De Beauvoir gives ample reason for women to distrust men, for in her account, men have a vested interest in keeping women limited to an existence of immanence. Like Baier, de Beauvoir discusses the danger of passing irresponsible notions of femaleness down through generations of women. Complications arise with de

---

[15] Annette C. Baier, "Trust and Antitrust", p.280
[16] Annette C. Baier, "Whom Can Women Trust?", p.243

Beauvoir's insistence that the emancipation of women must be a collective effort. As

Baier indicates, collective efforts are reliant on trusting others to "do their bit". However,

de Beauvoir does little to illustrate why or how one should rely on individuals of either sex

for assistance, as bad faith pervades both male and female attitudes. As Baier astutely

comments, "The confederacy of sexists is not easy to leave."[17]. Without adequate detail

concerning who one should ally oneself with, and exactly what one risks losing in such

alliances, de Beauvoir's vision of equality remains difficult at best.


In general, de Beauvoir falls into the same difficulties encountered by many liberal

ethicists in assuming that equal opportunity to be rational and moral will necessarily

translate into equality of the sexes. Guilty of the same assumption is John Stuart Mill,

who in his work, The Subjection of Women, asserts that women should be granted access

to the public sphere for reasons of utility. Like de Beauvoir, Mill relies on the oppressed

to take advantage of new opportunities and intiate their own liberation, without asking

oppressors to evaluate and change their own roles. What both accounts fail to

acknowledge is that emancipation involves issues beyond mere opportunity, issues which

are subtle, but nonetheless crucial. Questions of trust and internalization of oppressive

notions are but two examples of these issues.


It is tempting to be disappointed that even with her own criticism of her use of

ideal types in The Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir makes similar use of such types in the

---

[17] Ibid, p.234

latter half of The Second Sex, in which she categorizes the female situation with reference

to various stages in life, as well as various lifestyles. Archetypes such as "The Mother"

and "The Lesbian" appear and give detail of what it is like to be a woman in this or that

situation. In this sense, de Beauvoir falls into the same theoretical difficulties as in her

previous work in that she outlines the situation of women as a group, rather than as

individuals. However, it may also be argued that this method of presentation is necessary,

for as her account illustrates, women are not deemed "other" on an individual basis, but

rather as a collective. In giving a more generalized account, de Beauvoir is simply being

phenomenologically accurate with respect to the ways in which women are oppressed.

Despite the drawbacks discussed, there is one very prominent positive aspect to de

Beauvoir's ethical discussions and the system of moral correctives provided within them,

which, unfortunately, is not realized in any of her own discussions. The cautions

concerning one's view of self-other relations provided by de Beauvoir have relevance not

just in social constructions of gender, but may also be applied to any group which has been

deemed "other". There are no fewer reasons to examine the reasons why racial minorities,

the mentally and physically challenged, the aged, and those of alternate sexual orientation

are not only systemically viewed as deviations from "the normal", but as inferior because

of their differences. The systemic designation of women as "other" may be the most

widespread instance of this, as women compose at least half of the human population, but

it is only one of many forms this willful distortion of self-other relations may take. In all

such cases, minor, and sometimes inconsequential differences are conceived of as absolute

differences, and in all such cases, moral discrepancies are likely to abound from the denial

of one's connection to and moral responsibility for individuals of all sorts.


De Beauvoir's system of moral cautions may also be applied to the non-human

realm, although both de Beauvoir's and Sartre's versions of existentialism are focused

almost exclusively on the human sphere. In fact, much of what is put forth in Sartrean

ontology would seem to encourage separation from the natural world, as our bodies, as

well as our environmental surroundings, are to be viewed as factual elements of our

situation, and hence are to be transcended. De Beauvoir and Sartre emphasize only those

ontological connections which involve other human subjects. Nonetheless, although de

Beauvoir may not have anticipated this application of her theory, it lends itself readily to

environmental ethics. Just as we must recognize and protect the moral worth of other

humans who form part of our situation, it would seem equally necessary to explore our

connection to the non-human constituents of one's situation. This is to say that it is

necessary to question our own reasons for conceiving of nature as "other". It is just such

an application which is presented in Val Plumwood's <u>Feminism and the Mastery of</u>

<u>Nature</u>. While de Beauvoir's focus is on the moral consequences of ontological outlooks,

Plumwood takes a distinctly logical approach in examining the structure of dualities. Both

strive to question unnecessary dualisms which result in negative moral outcomes. Like de

Beauvoir, Plumwood insists that women are unnecessarily linked to the natural world, and

more importantly, are deemed inferior on the basis of this association. Like de Beauvoir,

Plumwood asserts that one must, by necessity, become aware of the vital dependence one

has on other beings:

> ...We must understand the self as *essentially* related and interdependent,
> and the development of the self as taking place through the involvement
> and interaction with the other.[18]

In both accounts, others must be acknowledged as concrete and immediate factors in a

human individual's situation, and it is only in our relating to them that we may construct

ourselves. Plumwood, however, extends her conception of others to include both human

and non-human creatures, and insists, "...This is just as possible to achieve in the case of

non-human as it is in the case of human others."[19] According to Plumwood:

> My welfare or satisfaction may be essentially connected to the
> thriving of a particular set of ecosystems, to the welfare of
> particular animals or plants (and ultimately if more distantly
> to the thriving of global nature), just as much to the thriving of
> human kin.[20]

The details of Plumwood's argument merit an entire discussion of their own, but it should

suffice to say that what de Beauvoir accomplishes with the gendered conception of

"other" in The Second Sex, Plumwood does for the non-human world in her own

discussions. The harm brought about by the unnecessary separation between humans and

non-humans is evident from the degradation of our ecosystem through pollution, but is

also twofold in that it presents harm to those who are associated with nature on a

conceptual level, including women. What all of these applications indicate is perhaps the

---

[18] Plumwood, p.153
[19] Plumwood, p.151
[20] Plumwood, p.151

greatest strength of de Beauvoir's system of moral checks and balances, namely, its

potential scope. Whenever one chooses to systemically differentiate oneself from another

on the basis of any one isolated characteristic, as opposed to on the basis of separation as

individual subjects, one risks not only ontological dishonesty in denying one's connection

to these others, but one stands also to do substantial moral harm to them.

## Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I attempted to show that despite the drawbacks of de Beauvoir's ethical discussions, there is still much that is valuable in her advocation of a system of moral cautions. First, in identifying such cautions, de Beauvoir gives a moral dimension to an ontology which is otherwise far too dismissive of its own moral consequences. Sartrean existentialism is to be praised for its attempt to capture the frustrations, the dilemmas and the possible triumphs of human existence. However, even with its phenomenological accuracy it is not complete. It is rather questionable that an account of the reality of human being should be constructed without devoting considerable attention to the ways in which one may lead a "good" life, while still paying heed to this reality. In making her own discussions of existentialism explicitly concerned with ethics, de Beauvoir makes the Sartrean version of being culpable in a moral sense. With or without a distinctive ethical framework of her own, de Beauvoir's discussions of morality repeatedly pull her existentialist readers back to their ties and responsibilities to other human beings. Therefore, as an existentialist, she is to be praised for her recognition of these moral ties, not only in an abstract, theoretical sense, as is presented in The Ethics of Ambiguity, but also in more concrete, immediate terms, as is illustrated in The Second Sex. In essence, de Beauvoir makes existential links to other beings distinctly situational, as opposed to being merely theoretical.

Second, de Beauvoir's system of moral cautions proves itself to be valuable

because of its applicability, not only to the situation of women, as is the focus of The

Second Sex, but also to the situations of any number of groups unnecessarily deemed

"other" and oppressed because of this identification.  As Konrad Bieber asserts in his own

analysis of de Beauvoir's contribution to ethics:

> ...She has eventually equipped the combative champions of
> women's rights in our day with the weapons to be used in the
> continued fight for equality and justice, as it turned out not only
> for women but for all human beings treated unfairly.[1]

As is implied by this statement, and as I discussed in my own analysis of de Beauvoir's

philosophy, the subjugation of women as "other" is not to be diminished in its importance

and immediacy.  It is, however, to be viewed as a symptom of a greater moral and

ontological discrepancy, for the willful distortion of self-other relationships is common

with respect to gender, but also forms the foundation of numerous harmful moral

outlooks.  Such distortions may be found in any instance in which a minor difference is

translated into a major difference, not out of natural or logical necessity, but rather in

order to serve a more arbitrary purpose.  In other words, it is not the alienation between

ourselves and others which is morally offensive, but rather the systemic designation of

"other" and more importantly, the dichotomy of inferiority and superiority which tends to

follow from it.  With the same willful ignorance many human cultures have chosen to

overlook their vital connection to the non-human world, and moreover, have seen fit to

deem half of their own species as inferior.  The immediate harm to non-human creatures,

---

[1] Bieber, 114

as well as to the human creatures with which they co-exist should be evident. Although de Beauvoir does not deal specifically with the oppression of other human groups, nor does she address the degradation of the non-human world, it must be said that her attempts to emancipate women are not merely a reactionary response to the treatment of her own gender, but are a practical application of her insistence that oppression as a general practice is both ontologically misguided and morally unjustified.

Despite my attempts to defend de Beauvoir's contribution to moral philosophy, I acknowledge that there will perhaps be those who remain disappointed with her lack of a definite ethical theory. If this is all that is to be sought in moral philosophy, then there is perhaps no comfort to be offered in response to this frustration. As I have argued throughout this discussion, there is little, if any such guidance given in any of de Beauvoir's moral discussions to enable a reader to construct a clear and concise view of existential ethics as an ethic unto itself in the same sense as utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, or even egoism. De Beauvoir stubbornly refuses to provide any prescribed set of rules or guidelines, but rather warns against those who do. At the same time, she rejects relativism and puts forth the vague, but imposing principle of necessary ontological freedom and demands recognition of it, both in thought and in action. De Beauvoir proclaims her ethics to be necessarily ambiguous, but her admission of this provides little satisfaction to those seeking a definite set of moral rules to follow.

However, in a broader context, I would suggest that to define the study of ethics strictly in terms of particular frameworks is to unnecessarily limit what may be included in the category of moral philosophy. I would assert that the re-evaluation and reformulation of existing ethical theories is of equal value as the construction of new ones. I make this assertion with reference to the fact that ethics and morality centre around the recognition that there are other agents to be considered, and because of this, one risks doing harm to these other agents through the uncritical acceptance of any ethical framework. For example, both utilitarianism and Kantian deontology presuppose that the moral agent deciding between options must be capable of objective, rational deliberation, whether these options take the form of consequences or duties. In other words, the agent is expected to be able to separate him or herself from their situation. Both Kant and Mill devote considerable discussion to defining which individuals may be identified as capable of reason, and hence, of moral deliberation. However, as de Beauvoir contends, this sort of disinterested rationality is a highly problematic, if not an impossible criterion to satisfy. Human beings are subjects heavily engaged in a world of other subjects, and because of this, it is doubtful that such separation is possible. What is to be commended in de Beauvoir's critique of these frameworks is that it encourages an ongoing, critical sort of moral dialogue. Just as existentialist ontology condemns complacency with respect to our freedom, and forces us to recognize ourselves as "works in progress", de Beauvoir's discussion outlaws moral complacency, and presents ethics itself as an ongoing project. This project is concerned with ensuring that no framework be adopted without first ensuring that it meets the all-important criterion of ontological freedom, as well as the

responsibilities which accompany it. More importantly, it is concerned with giving details

of how and why ontological freedom may be ignored.

Out of this line of defense, one further valuable aspect of de Beauvoir's moral

philosophy becomes apparent, one which has not been discussed at length in my thesis, but

is nonetheless worthy of mention. There is, I would argue, an admirable degree of

continuity between de Beauvoir's ethical works, one which not only compensates for the

inadequacies of individual works, but also further emphasizes their positive aspects. To

those who lament the lack of a definite ethical framework in de Beauvoir's works, it may

be said that because of her existential convictions, de Beauvoir could not be justified in

adopting any sort of prescriptive ethic. To do so would be to misrepresent the fluidity and

mutability inherent in most aspects of human existence. Universal goods are unfounded in

that they presuppose universal human nature. Thus, there is consistency in the way the

ontological assertions made in Sartre's Being and Nothingness, as well as "Pyrrhus and

Cineas", de Beauvoir's earliest philosophical work, are translated into an ethical context in

The Ethics of Ambiguity.

Moreover, one must applaud the consistency with which de Beauvoir takes the

vague and often abstract system of moral cautions presented in The Ethics of Ambiguity

and places them into a more practical context in The Second Sex. De Beauvoir's

discussions of emancipation of women, at least in the latter work, seem to demand little of

the male purveyors of negative views of women as "other". Instead, it seems to demand

everything of those who have been living in ignorance of their own status as free beings.

As discussed before, de Beauvoir appears to oversimplify the choice to recognize one's

freedom with her one-sided solutions. Feeling oneself as "other" in the ways she describes

is not a merely superfluous attitude which may be shed with ease. Although negative and

unnecessary, such conceptions of "other" tend to be internalized, often becoming part of

one's own self-conception. Although it may be *possible* to reformulate one's self-

conception, it seems impossible to abandon it outright. Reconstruction of oneself requires

both time and conducive circumstances. However, even with a view to this difficulty, de

Beauvoir's discussion may be redeemed somewhat if they are examined with reference to

the audience for which it is intended. It is possible that The Second Sex was written with

female readers in mind. In other words, this work may have been intended more for the

enlightenment and awareness of the oppressed, rather than opposing of the oppressor. If

interpreted in this manner, the suggestions for achieving equality provided in The Second

Sex are consistent with the methods for opposing oppression which are presented in The

Ethics of Ambiguity, and the lack of male initiative in it is not as troubling. The Second

Sex is not so much an imposition of specific feminist initiatives as it is a detailed expose of

the situation of women, presented to them in the hope that female readers will recognize

the restrictions of their own situations, their own bad faith toward them, and hopefully the

many ways in which they may choose their freedom and thereby rectify this oversight. In

turn, women who realize their own freedom and learn to make use of it might pass this

realization on to other women, and possibly men. Support for this interpretation may first

be found in De Beauvoir's own commentaries on <u>The Second Sex</u>. In a later interview

concerning the situation of women, de Beauvoir comments:

> I do not think that <u>The Second Sex</u> transformed the condition of
> any women; it was only capable of helping them to better understand,
> to feel less alone.[2]

As her later commentary suggests, she sees fit to actively oppose oppression by making

those who fall victim to it aware of this injustice, as well as providing some practical

suggestions for opposing it. More importantly, in presenting <u>The Second Sex</u> with the

onus on women, de Beauvoir is in essence following the moral guidelines which she

herself presents in <u>The Ethics of Ambiguity</u>.

The same sort of continuity is found in de Beauvoir's later essays, in which she

discusses the more political extensions of the suggestions provided in <u>The Second Sex</u>. In

these later works, de Beauvoir goes beyond an attempt to instill individual awareness of

freedom and expounds upon the necessity for institutional and sociological changes.

Although such ideals are presented in <u>The Second Sex</u>, they are provided only as brief

suggestions. In giving further attention to them in her supplementary works, de Beauvoir

provides an even more concrete context for her moral concerns. For example, "Brigitte

Bardot et le Syndrome de Lolita" discusses the notion of women as "other" in the context

of the media. De Beauvoir views Bardot as a paradigmatic example of the "eternal

feminine", as Bardot is presented by the media as physically unmarred, ageless, and almost

---

[2] from "Une Interview de Simone de Beauvoir par Madeleine Chapsal", p.381, my own translation

supernatural in her flawless femininity.[3] Both the presentation and promotion of such a

figure, as well as the eager reception of it by male members of society are indicative of a

need to re-evaluate the images of women presented by the media. In "La Femme et la

Création", de Beauvoir once again emphasizes the need for women to be given equal

opportunity beyond the private or domestic sphere, but also calls for a greater recognition

of women's contribution to the public sphere. De Beauvoir insists that being able to vote,

to be educated and to be financially independent are not sufficient to establish equality

unless the movement of women into these spheres is welcomed as valuable. Despite being

allowed access to the political sphere, there are fewer female political leaders than male.

Despite being allowed into the economic sphere, there are far fewer women than men in

upper executive positions in industry. Despite being allowed an education, there are

significantly fewer women at the top of the academic ladder. Among the reasons for these

imbalances, de Beauvoir suggests that even though opportunities for women have been

greatly improved, complete equality has not been achieved because the contributions

women make are received with far less praise than those of men. There is a difference

between allowing women to enter the more public sphere, and expecting them to enter it

as one would men. Originality and ambition, qualities praised in men in the public sphere,

are not encouraged in women, and without such encouragement, women are less likely to

take full advantage of their new opportunities.[4] In each of these, as well as in other

political essays, de Beauvoir strives to address the more subtle details of societal change,

---

[3]"Brigitte Bardot et le Syndrome de Lolita", p.364
[4] "La Femme et la Création", p.463

using the same moral concerns present in <u>The Ethics of Ambiguity</u> and <u>The Second Sex</u>. These later essays give more breadth to the notion of the necessity of collective, in addition to individual effort in dissolving unwarranted views of "otherness". What is presented throughout de Beauvoir's moral philosophy is not merely a set of isolated works, but rather a continuous project, concerned not only with identifying the anatomy of immoral attitudes and providing both abstract and concrete examples of them, but also with establishing a means of correcting these attitudes and improving the situation of those who have been disatvantaged. One work follows another in a logical progression, and often what appears to be lacking in one is remedied to some degree in those which follow.

To conclude, I would like to make one further comment, one which was briefly discussed in the introduction to this thesis, but for good reason, was not included in the bulk of my discussions. Hopefully, I have illustrated in my account of de Beauvoir's moral philosophy, that piecing together an understanding of de Beauvoir as a philosopher does not, as many critics seem to assert, require the exploration of her personal life, her affairs with Sartre, or her fictional characters. This is not to say that de Beauvoir's autobiographical works and her novels are not interesting as studies in themselves, nor is it to say that there are not elements of her philosophical stances woven throughout the other genres in which she partakes. However, an analysis of each of these would warrant a discussion of its own. What I have attempted to demonstrate through the omission of these alternate sources is that de Beauvoir's moral and philosophical contributions can and should be acknowledged as interesting and useful in and of themselves. De Beauvoir is

not merely a loudspeaker for Sartrean ontology, nor is she simply a novelist who becomes sidetracked in philosophical concerns, nor is she a social deviant who narcissistically seeks philosophical justification for her own rebellious choices. De Beauvoir is a conscientious and concerned thinker who seeks an open and critical dialogue on ethics, one which demands the avoidance of ontological bad faith, but more importantly, seeks reparation for those who have been disadvantaged by unfounded moral attitudes which have, unfortunately, gone unchallenged.

# Bibliography

## Works Cited:

Baier, Annette C. "Trust and Antitrust" in <u>Feminism and Political Theory</u>. ed. Cass R.
    Sunstein. Chigago: University of Chicago Press, 1989

Baier, Annette C. "Whom Can Women Trust" in <u>Feminist Ethics.</u> ed. Claudia Card,
    Laurence: University Press of Kansas, 1991

Bieber, Konrad. <u>Simone de Beauvoir</u>. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979

Brosman, Catharine Savage. <u>Simone de Beauvoir Revisited</u>. Boston: Twayne Publishers,
    1991

Cottrell, Robert D. <u>Simone de Beauvoir</u>. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Brigitte Bardot et le Syndrome de Lolita" in <u>Les Écrits de Simone
    de Beauvoir</u>. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS: Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. "La Femme et la Création" in <u>Les Écrits de Simone
    de Beauvoir</u>. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS: Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. <u>The Ethics of Ambiguity</u>. Trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York:
    Carol Publishing Group, 1996

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Pyrrhus et Cinéas" in <u>Pour une Morale de L'Ambiguité</u>. URSS:
    Gallimard, 1947

De Beauvoir, Simone. <u>The Second Sex</u>. Trans. H. M. Parshley, New York: Vingtage
Books, 1996

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Situation de la Femme D'Aujourd'hui" in <u>Les Écrits de Simone
    de Beauvoir</u>. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS: Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Une Interview de Simone de Beauvoir par Madelaine Chapsal"
    in <u>Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir</u>. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier,
    URSS: Gallimard, 1979

Diprose, Rosalyn. The Bodies of Women. New York: Routledge, 1994

Evans, Mary. Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin. New York: Tavistock, 1985

Keefe, Terry. Simone de Beauvoir: A Study of her Writings. London: Harrap Limited, 1983

Kruks, Sonia, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom" in Sartre and Existentialism: Sartre's French Contemporaries and Enduring Influences. ed. William L. McBride, New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997

MacQuarrie, John. Existentialism. New York: Penguin Books, 1972

Moi, Toril. Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990

Plumwood, Val. Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. New York: Routledge, 1993

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1956

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism and Ethics" in Moral Education. eds. Barry I. Chazan et al, New York: Teachers College Press, 1975

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Humanism of Existentialism" in Essays in Existentialism. Secaucus: Carol Publishing Group, 1997

Schrader, George Alfred. Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967

Schwartzer, Alice. Simone de Beauvoir Today. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984

Vintges, Karen. Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996

Wilson, Colin. Introduction to the New Existentialism. London: Hutchinson & Company Limited, 1966

**Other Sources:**

De Beauvoir, Simone. "La Condition Feminine" in Les Ecrits de Simone de Beauvoir. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS: Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. "La Deuxième Sexe" Vingt-Cinq ans Apres" in Les Écrits de
    Simone de Beauvoir. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS:
    Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Merleau-Ponty et le Pseudo-Sartrisme" in Les Écrits de
    Simone de Beauvoir. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS:
    Gallimard, 1979

De Beauvoir, Simone. Must We Burn de Sade? London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1953

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Le Pense de Droite, Aujourd'hui" in Faut-il Brûler Sade?, France:
    Gallimard, 1955

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Reponse a Quelques Femmes et a un Homme" in Les Écrits de
    Simone de Beauvoir. eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, URSS:
    Gallimard, 1979

Leighton, Jean. Simone de Beauvoir on Woman. Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickson University
    Press, 1975

Nauman, St. Elmo. The New Dictionary of Existentialism. New York: Philosophical
    Library, Inc., 1971

Okely, Judith. Simone de Beauvoir. London: Virago Press Limited, 1986

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Human Emotions. Secaucus: Carol Publishing
    Group, 1997

Simons, Margaret A. "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship" in Sartre
    and Existentialism: Sartre's French Contemporaries and Enduring Influences.
    eds. William L. McBride, New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997

Whitmarsh, Anne. Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits of Commitment. New York:
    Cambridge University Press, 1981