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## ABSTRACT:

In this dissertation, I examine the relevance of Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* to contemporary feminist thought on the self, autonomy, and ethics. More specifically, I argue that this text has the potential to make unique contributions to these areas of contemporary feminist philosophy.

After introducing my project and offering a basic outline of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in my first chapter, I offer a more detailed analysis of Beauvoir's ethics in my second chapter. This analysis includes specific attention to Beauvoir's conceptions of the ambiguity of the human situation, the reciprocity of moral freedom, and the ways in which individuals can abnegate their freedom. In addition to this analysis, I examine the socio-historical context of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, situating the text both in terms of the historical moment in which Beauvoir wrote it and in terms of her other literary and philosophical works.

In my third chapter, I demonstrate *that* Beauvoir's ethics are relevant to contemporary feminist thought on the self, autonomy, and ethics. Accordingly, this chapter includes both a limited examination of contemporary perspectives on these topics and an explanation of how *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is thoroughly equipped to respond to some of the same concerns and issues that are important to today's philosophers.

In the fourth chapter, I sketch a conception of relational autonomy that shows one of the ways in which Beauvoir's ethics could make a unique contribution to contemporary feminist thought. More specifically, I develop a conception of autonomy that incorporates Beauvoir's analyses of ambiguity, emotion, and reciprocity: one that blends relational autonomy with what I call "moral attunement with the world." In this respect, I maintain that it not only adds a moral

dimension to autonomy itself but also helps to fortify the significance of autonomy as a philosophical concept.

Finally, in my fifth chapter, I review my arguments and key moments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and I stake the claim that Beauvoir is not only an important thinker from the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also an important thinker *for* the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

# Centralizing Ambiguity: Simone de Beauvoir and a Twenty-First Century Ethics

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B.A. University of Dayton, 2003

Dissertation  
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Philosophy

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## Chapter 1—Introducing the Project

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Analyses of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* generally remain limited to the text itself, rarely reaching beyond the Beauvoir corpus. In other words, their scope remains limited to the field of Beauvoir studies—a field that, while flourishing in recent years, typically only reaches an audience already interested in and/or engaged in Beauvoir studies. This is not to say that these analyses are philosophically or theoretically uninteresting: some notably point out how Beauvoir’s positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* differ from some of her more well-known positions in *The Second Sex*, while others demonstrate Beauvoir’s achievement in creating an existentialist ethics that is neither nihilistic nor absurd. I argue, however, that examinations of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can and should fit within a broader philosophical framework.

To be clear, my argument is not simply that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is *unacknowledged* within feminist philosophy. On the one hand, it *is* the case that many feminist philosophers and/or philosophers working on existentialism do not acknowledge or refer to Beauvoir’s ethics when it seems appropriate or even obvious that they are indebted to her philosophical work. In some respect, then, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is an “unacknowledged” text. On the other hand, most Beauvoir scholars *do* concede that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a substantial philosophical text.<sup>1</sup> But to leave analyses of this text solely within the realm of Beauvoir scholarship ignores the philosophical possibilities that Beauvoir’s ethics can open up for feminist theorizing. In particular, I argue that Beauvoir’s ethics opens up new possibilities for thinking about the self,

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<sup>1</sup> Especially in recent years, many Beauvoir scholars have offered fruitful analyses of Beauvoir’s ethics. See Barbara Andrew (1998), Kristana Arp (1999), Eva Gothlin (2006), Eleanore Holveck (1999), Stacy Keltner (2006), Sonia Kruks (1999), and Monika Langer (1994).

autonomy, and ethics: possibilities that contemporary feminist theorists in particular have not fully explored.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I contend that this text offers unique and noteworthy insights into many contemporary feminist discussions. As I see it, the uniqueness of these insights revolves primarily around Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity and its function in human experience and ethics. It also revolves around *how* Beauvoir conceives of the fundamental relationality of the self, of freedom, and of ethics: a relationality that is unequivocally tied to her articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation. I ultimately argue that these insights can serve as a springboard for a broadened conception of relational autonomy.

Before embarking on a more detailed delineation of my argument, I will give a brief overview of the general themes running throughout Beauvoir's argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Providing such an overview will create a concise characterization of Beauvoir's ethical framework to which I can turn in my outline of my own project. Furthermore, it will create a series of philosophical "signposts" in Beauvoir's ethics to which I can refer in subsequent chapters.

### The Ethics of Ambiguity: *An Overview*

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Notably, I do not purport to offer a definitive overview or encapsulation of Beauvoir's ethics in this section. My primary goal in offering this overview is instead to give the reader some sense of the "key moments" in Beauvoir's ethics: to highlight the concepts that, as I see it,

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<sup>2</sup> To say that these possibilities have been *entirely* unexplored would be inaccurate. Specifically, both Barbara Andrew (1998) and Karen Vintges (2006) have offered brief examinations of ways in which Beauvoir's ethics can contribute to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions. It is worth pointing out, however, that Andrew limits her analysis to the ways in which Beauvoir's ethics can contribute to discussions of care ethics. Moreover, Vintges offers a very brief argument explaining the ways in which Beauvoir's conception of the self is relevant to contemporary postmodernist and multiculturalist discussions. Because these arguments are so limited in their scope, they do not approach the breadth of the project that I plan to undertake.

are crucial to understanding the various positions that Beauvoir articulates in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

As I see it, there are three concepts that are not only central to Beauvoir's ethics but also essential to explicating the other concepts in the text. These are: 1) the ambiguity of the human situation, 2) the reciprocity of freedom, and 3) the intertwining of the assumption of freedom and the ethical movement. I maintain that these specific three concepts locate the ideas that help to illustrate not only the general spirit of Beauvoir's ethics but also the other (main) ideas in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>3</sup>

I find it helpful to turn first to a passage that appears near the end of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Evoking what I consider Beauvoir's "vision" for her moral philosophy, she asserts that "morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (EA 133<sup>4</sup>). As will become apparent in my subsequent analysis, this passage also evokes each of the three central concepts that I mentioned previously. As I see it, the indefinite questioning that accompanies Beauvoir's sense of morality is, in part, the result of one's recognition of the ambiguity of the human situation: one must perpetually negotiate between (often) conflicting modes of existence. In addition, one can trace the "painfulness" of this questioning back to the reciprocal nature of human freedom: according to Beauvoir, navigating between one's own and others' freedom creates a never-ending possibility of ethical failure. And finally, the intertwining of the ethical movement and the assumption of one's freedom encompasses both the "painfulness" and the "indefiniteness" of the questioning that Beauvoir sees as central to morality: to act ethically, one

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<sup>3</sup> To give an example, while Beauvoir's analysis of oppression is certainly a key moment in the text, one cannot fully comprehend her conception of oppression without also turning to and understanding her conception of the reciprocity of freedom. Conversely, one can understand her conception of the reciprocity of freedom without even being aware of her analysis of oppression.

<sup>4</sup> I shall use this abbreviated citation for *The Ethics of Ambiguity* throughout this project.

must will one's freedom toward an open future—a future with no pre-ordained values, and a future that always holds the possibility of an ethical “failure.”

Given the title of Beauvoir's work, it is not surprising that her conception of ambiguity figures as a “key moment,” if not *the* key moment, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In particular, Beauvoir claims that the human situation itself is fundamentally ambiguous. This ambiguity results from various irresolvable tensions that humans encounter in their subjective experience. According to Beauvoir, we experience ourselves both as subjective agents and as “objects” in the worlds of others. We are subjectively conscious of the world, yet we also make up parts of the worlds of which others are conscious. In this same vein, we can experience both a solitary isolation from *and* an inextricable bond to the rest of the world. We can feel a sense of unfettered freedom yet also feel weighed down by the limitations that the world imposes upon us. We can experience ourselves as individuals and as members of a collectivity. Among those with whom we have a relationship, we can experience our sovereign importance as individuals; but among those for whom we are anonymous, we can experience relative insignificance. And with each step we take to live and to “build” our lives, we move closer to our deaths (*EA* 7-9). These “tensions” in human experience create what Beauvoir describes as the ambiguity of the human situation.

As Beauvoir goes on to explain, many “consoling” ethical and/or metaphysical systems often attempt to obscure this ambiguity “by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity of enclosing oneself in the pure moment” (*EA* 8).<sup>5</sup> As she sees it, the proper way to respond to this ambiguity is to “assume” it: to acknowledge it, to accept it, and even to integrate it into the way

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, the primary targets of Beauvoir's criticism here are dualistic philosophical systems.

that one acts in the world (*EA* 9). In fact, she further argues that we should base our ethics on our knowledge of this ambiguity (*EA* 9). Not surprisingly, then, Beauvoir uses this conception of ambiguity to ground her own ethical framework. For, as will become evident in my further analyses, her ethics is one that emphasizes both the particularity of human beings and the “cause” of universal human freedom.

Beauvoir is careful to point out that the ambiguity she describes is not to be confused with *absurdity*. If the human situation were *absurd*, then an ethics would be impossible: *nothing* in human life could be given importance, and humans would have license to choose and act in *any* way they liked. But an *ambiguous* human situation does not entail the nihilism and lack of foundation for human responsibility that an absurd situation would. Instead, it suggests that the meaning of human existence “is never fixed, that it must constantly be won” (*EA* 129). Of course, the fact that the meaning of human existence must be *won*—that it is each individual’s *responsibility* to win this meaning—illustrates that “painful” and “indefinite” questioning that Beauvoir uses to characterize morality. Because values are never fixed, we must always “maneuver in a state of doubt” and act without “waiting for a perfect knowledge to prove to [ourselves] the necessity of...[our] choices” (*EA* 123).

To explain, Beauvoir asserts that it is up to each human being to *give* importance to the world.<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir also acknowledges, however, that we will this “importance”—or rather, we will our *values*—into a world populated and *valued by* other human beings. In this respect, Beauvoir emphasizes that the source of all values is not “universal man” but instead “the

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<sup>6</sup> This claim reflects the existentialist (and specifically Sartrean) position that humans are fundamentally a lack of being, without fixed essences or natures. To “properly” give importance to the world, then, one must act on the desire to “disclose being” rather than on the desire to “be.” Acting on the *desire to be* involves reaching toward a fixed essence and/or acting as if the world’s importance is defined in some fixed way. Acting on the *desire to disclose being*, however, involves taking up the responsibility to give importance or meaning to the world *and* allowing both oneself and the world to be open to multiple “meanings.”

plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself” (EA 17-18).

So while each human being is responsible for willing her own values into the world, this very act of willing occurs within a context of other, particular human beings also willing their own values into the world.

Accordingly, values are never fixed. At most, they are temporarily and precariously grounded in the particular needs and projects of each particular human community. So, with the exception of human freedom and its importance in ethics, all human values are fluid.

Furthermore, the existence and/or persistence of each value depends upon the wills and projects of *individual* human beings. The fundamental relationality of this human values helps to ensure that human beings cannot *ethically* will “just any” value. Beauvoir connects this point to her original claim about the ambiguity of the human situation: as she sees it, an *ambiguous* ethics helps to explain how *separate* individuals can still be *bound* to one another. Furthermore, an *ambiguous* ethics helps to explain how *each* individual has the responsibility to will values or “laws” that are “valid for all” (EA 18).

Distinguishing herself from other existentialist thinkers, Beauvoir also articulates a fundamentally reciprocal conception of freedom. Before examining the details of this reciprocity, it is important to note that Beauvoir discusses two types of freedom in her ethics: ontological freedom and moral freedom. Her characterization of ontological freedom is aligned with Sartre’s characterization of human freedom: a freedom that all human beings always already have, and a freedom that even an experience such as torture or oppression cannot take away. It is moral freedom, however, that Beauvoir focuses on most closely in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Unlike ontological freedom, a person can choose either to *will* her moral freedom or

to flee from it. (One cannot *will* ontological freedom since it is always already present.) The willing of moral freedom represents, for Beauvoir, an ethical act, while the flight from freedom constitutes a flight from the ethical life.

Furthermore, Beauvoir contends that moral freedom illustrates a fundamental bond with other human beings. As she sees it, one's projects become meaningful only in the context of others' projects (*EA* 71). In this respect, others' freedom helps to make one's own freedom possible. What's more, Beauvoir describes the "cause of freedom" as "universally human" (*EA* 86).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the very *fact* of one's freedom exists *because of* other human beings willing their (moral) freedom; and the very *act* of willing one's own freedom helps to make others' freedom possible.

Notably, Beauvoir maintains that one flees from or abnegates one's freedom when one obscures the ambiguity of the human situation and when one fails to acknowledge and/or respect others' freedom. This is not to say that acknowledging both the ambiguity of the human condition and respecting the freedom of others allows one to live a foolproof ethical life. In fact, Beauvoir maintains that ethical action always implies a never-ending possibility of failure. As she explains, each action that is done in the service of one or more human beings can also be simultaneously done *against* another human being (*EA* 99). For example, while working to end the oppression of one group of people, one must treat their oppressor(s) as a *thing*, often by engaging in violence. Thus, in order to expand the freedom of some, one must often limit the freedom of others. This situation demonstrates one of the ways in which Beauvoir's conception of morality implies a fundamental "painfulness," for sometimes (and perhaps in many cases),

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<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir's characterization of the "cause" of freedom as a universal human goal also plays a crucial role in her account of the struggle against oppression.

even an “ethical” action can simultaneously lead to an ethical transgression or limiting of an other’s or others’ freedom.

Beauvoir connects the reciprocity of human freedom to the ambiguity of the human situation in other ways as well. For instance, she asserts that the very act of willing one’s freedom and expanding the freedom of others *illustrates* this ambiguity. This is because just as one is “interested in the liberation of all,” one acts on this interest “as a separate existence engaged in his own projects” (*EA* 112). Accordingly, the reciprocal nature of freedom and its role in ethics demands that one recognize and respect 1) one’s simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity, 2) one’s freedom from and bond with others, and 3) one’s individuality and one’s role in the collective human community.

Worth noting is that Beauvoir’s focus on the reciprocity of human freedom also allows her to respond to those critics that accuse existentialism of offering a solipsistic conception of the human being. As she explains, her ethics *is* individualistic in that it demands that each human being will her own values into the world. On the other hand, her ethics is *not* solipsistic since it defines each human being “only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals” (*EA* 156).

Beauvoir expands upon this notion of reciprocal freedom by connecting acting freely with acting ethically. Specifically, she states that “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (*EA* 24). Within Beauvoir’s framework, this connection exists since willing oneself free (in the moral or ethical sense) involves not only willing one’s own values into the world but also acting in a way that expands the possibilities for others to act freely. Accordingly, Beauvoir’s conception of acting freely requires one to reach out *toward others* in a way that she finds to be fundamentally moral.



At first blush, it may seem as if Beauvoir's connection between free action and ethical action destabilizes the conditions that one must meet in order to act ethically. If ethical action "merely" requires one to act freely, then it may seem as if *any* act would be considered *ethical* within Beauvoir's framework. One must recall, however, that Beauvoir is discussing a particular sort of freedom—*moral* freedom—in her ethics. Furthermore, assuming one's *moral* freedom requires not only that one acknowledge the ambiguity of the human situation but also that one act in a way that respects and expands the possibilities for others to act freely. These conditions certainly restrict the sorts of actions that would Beauvoir would consider "ethical." In fact, it is within this context—that is, her distinction between moral freedom and ontological freedom—that Beauvoir first makes the connection between free and ethical action (*EA* 24).

Beauvoir's final sentence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* provides an apt illustration of the connection between free action and ethical action. As she maintains, "If it came to be that each man did what he must, existence would be saved in each one without there being any need of dreaming of a paradise where all would be reconciled in death" (*EA* 159). Within Beauvoir's ethical framework, moral freedom gives human beings not only expanding possibilities but also expanding responsibilities. If each person were to assume these responsibilities—and thus to assume her freedom—then each person would also (and simultaneously) act ethically. And although this very assumption can be "painful" as one navigates the world without any pre-established values, with the never-ending possibility of ethical failure, and within a condition that is fundamentally ambiguous, the assumption of moral freedom *also* carries with it the possibility of that world in which each existence "would be saved."

*Project outline*

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In the previous sections, I have established a rough framework supporting my position that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can make unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophy. In this section, I explain how I intend to build upon this framework: first, by demonstrating that Beauvoir's ethics is relevant to contemporary feminist philosophy; second, by considering objections to my interpretation of her ethics; and third, by taking up Beauvoir's notion of "moral action as free action" and constructing a new view of autonomous and ethical action.

In Chapter 2, I first situate *The Ethics of Ambiguity* within its particular social and historical context. I then offer a detailed outline of Beauvoir's arguments from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: an outline that goes far beyond the overview that I offered in the previous section. This outline follows the organizational structure of Beauvoir's text. I begin with Beauvoir's first chapter, "Ambiguity and Freedom." I then turn to her second chapter, "Personal Freedom and Others." Finally, I outline Beauvoir's third chapter, "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity."

Worth noting is that while I attempt to preserve the linguistic integrity of Beauvoir's argument—and even make adjustments to the English translation when appropriate—my ultimate goal in this outline is not to trace the linguistic influence of Sartre, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, et al. on Beauvoir's work. Although I do note this influence (and its significance), I also use more contemporary philosophical terminology (e.g. "relationality," "intersubjectivity," etc.) in describing Beauvoir's ethics. In using these terms, I do not mean to give an anachronistic interpretation of Beauvoir's ethics but instead intend to establish the foundations for my own argument.

Following my outline of the text, I note some important distinctions between *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Beauvoir's other works: namely, Beauvoir's first novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came to*

*Stay*), *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (a philosophical essay that predates the writing and publication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*), and *The Second Sex*.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Beauvoir *does* posit relational views of the self, autonomy, and ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While this argument is not the central thesis of my project, it nevertheless helps to make my central thesis possible. In other words, I do not plan offer up a new view of autonomy and ethics based on Beauvoir's work without first demonstrating that Beauvoir's positions are, in fact, relevant to contemporary interpretations of autonomy and ethics.

In the first major section of Chapter 3, I examine the contemporary feminist interpretations of the self that I find to be significant and important to my argument. This involves not only a review of the relevant literature on the topic but also an analysis of some of the general themes that run throughout feminist theories of the self.

In applying these analyses to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, I examine the ways in which Beauvoir's account of the child's situation, the ambiguity of the human situation, and the complexity and particularity of human encounters help to open up possibilities for thinking about the self. In particular, I examine the ways in which her account can contribute in unique ways to contemporary analyses of intersubjectivity, intersectional identity, and relationality.

I contend that Beauvoir's analysis of the confrontation with ambiguity and its role in self-development and intersubjectivity offers unique insight into feminist discussions of the self.<sup>8</sup> My

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<sup>8</sup> c.f. Linda Barclay. "Autonomy and the Social Self." *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Judith Butler. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005; Marilyn Friedman. "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique." *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997; and Diana Tietjens Meyers. "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!" *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

discussion pertains to the particular way in which others make one's (inter)subjectivity possible. For as Beauvoir explains, the development of one's intersubjectivity involves one's encounter with the ambiguity of the human situation. Moreover, this encounter with ambiguity is mediated by one's encounter with others: that is, by the ways in which one realizes one's simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity, one's independence and dependence, and one's relative significance and insignificance. The importance of this contribution becomes clearer in subsequent sections of Chapter 3, where I analyze how Beauvoir's conception of the self informs her discussions of freedom (or autonomy) and ethics.

In the second major section of Chapter 3, I review the general themes running throughout contemporary views of relational autonomy. As with the relational self, these views emphasize not only the relationality and intersubjectivity of the self but also the relational and intersubjective contexts in which autonomy must develop and in which autonomy can be exercised. I then turn to Beauvoir's ethics and examine the ways in which *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can contribute to contemporary discussions of relational autonomy.

While Beauvoir does not explicitly address conceptions of autonomy in her essay (and in fact dismisses any ethics based on the specifically Kantian conception of autonomy), her description of human freedom and its role in the ethical life is strikingly similar to current work on relational autonomy. As I have already mentioned, Beauvoir assumes a proto-relational view of the self by emphasizing the "situatedness" (or social-political context) of each person's particular circumstances. Moreover, she uses this characterization of the self to articulate the situation of human freedom and the task of the ethical life in such a way that recognizes and honors the profound significance of our intersubjective relationships. Notably, this "honoring"

involves an acknowledgment of and a response to the ambiguity of the human situation (*EA* 133).

In anticipation of my argument in Chapter 4, I also examine the relational components of Beauvoir's connecting of free action to moral action. This conception of freedom (and, for that matter, of autonomy) creates a singular and intriguing bond between autonomy and ethics. Beauvoir is not simply suggesting that "achieving" or "realizing" one's autonomy is an ethical act *for the individual alone* (although she does characterize willing one's freedom as an ethical achievement for the individual). More interestingly, her characterization of willing freedom is *always* tied to the willing of *others'* freedom (*EA* 73). In addition, acting autonomously always involves acting *for others* (*EA* 133-134).

In the third major section of Chapter 3, I explore the ways in which *The Ethics of Ambiguity* makes a unique contribution to contemporary ethical discussions. First, I explore some general themes found in contemporary feminist ethics, particularly feminist care ethics. I then examine the ways in which the recognition and response to the ambiguity of the human situation fits into Beauvoir's conception of the moral agent. In fact, it is because of this ambiguity that Beauvoir characterizes ethics as the "painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (*EA* 133). Acting ethically is thus a struggle, and a perpetual struggle at that. It requires first and foremost a recognition of the never-ending possibility of ethical failure and of the precariousness of human relationships and the human situation in general (*EA* 10, 74, 99).

This emphasis on the role of ambiguity in ethical agency alone represents a unique contribution to feminist philosophy and ethics in general. The importance of this contribution pertains to the ways in which the acknowledgement of ambiguity ties into one's relations with other human beings. Taking up this idea, I explore the fundamentally relational aspects of

Beauvoir's ethics. This exploration is most central to my argument. Namely, while willing freedom remains central to her ethics, she does not characterize this act as a singular or self-centered act. Rather, she explicitly characterizes willing *oneself* free in terms of willing the freedom of *others*. The moral agent, then, is never cast as a lone individual weighing the utility of the consequences of her actions or examining whether her maxim can become a universal law. In fact, to be *considered* an moral agent on Beauvoir's view, one must always recognize that one's freedom is tied to the freedom of others, that one is always an individual among others (*EA* 142).

In the final sections of Chapter 3, I consider objections to my interpretation and analysis of her position. First, I consider the criticism that my project unfairly turns *The Ethics of Ambiguity* into a feminist text. This criticism arises since Beauvoir certainly did not treat or envision *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a feminist text. My central argument, however, does not address Beauvoir's intentions for or treatment of the text. Rather, my argument explores the ways in which Beauvoir's ethics can make unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophy. Accordingly, whether or not her project was an explicitly feminist one is irrelevant to my own argument since non-feminist texts can and have made significant contributions to feminist philosophy. Moreover, the fact that Beauvoir went on to write *The Second Sex* makes her non-feminist texts more amenable to feminist interpretation. In fact, much of what she wrote in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* influenced parts of her argument in *The Second Sex*. So while it would be inappropriate to call *The Ethics of Ambiguity* a feminist text, it does *not* seem inappropriate to give a *feminist reading* of the text.

I also examine whether *The Ethics of Ambiguity* offers an overly individualistic and solipsistic ethical project. This objection fits within a larger framework of criticism of

existentialist philosophy. Specifically, many critics accuse existentialism of celebrating rugged individualism and solipsism. I argue, however, that Beauvoir avoids these dangers by articulating conceptions of the self, freedom, and ethics that are undeniably relational and intersubjective. In fact, her ethics offers a way for human beings to *escape* solipsism. Likewise, she explicitly condemns those who present a philosophical turn toward solipsism. Notably, this critique places Beauvoir in stark contrast with Sartre, who, as Sonia Kruks observes, offers “a radical individualism” in which “each of us construes the meaning of both past and present only from the perspective of our own project.”<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, however, envisions the human being as *situated* within a social matrix of values and projects.

Lastly, I consider the objection that while *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has important parallels to contemporary feminist philosophy, it makes no *unique contributions* to it. As stated previously, however, the centrality of ambiguity in Beauvoir’s conception of the human experience sets off her discussion of the self, freedom, and ethics from other discussions of the same topics. And while many Beauvoir scholars have focused on this conception of ambiguity, they have not moved their discussion much beyond the realm of Beauvoir scholarship. I intend to make this move: to demonstrate how Beauvoir’s conception of ambiguity and her analysis of the self, freedom, and ethics make unique contributions to the broader realm of feminist philosophy.

It is worth noting that I will not consider in detail the objection that Beauvoir’s ethics is merely a derivative version of Sartre’s philosophy. Many notable Beauvoir scholars and feminist philosophers, including Michèle Le Doeuff, Margaret Simons, and Sonia Kruks<sup>10</sup>, have

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<sup>9</sup> Sonia Kruks. “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> See Michèle Le Doeuff. *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* trans. Trista Selous. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991; Le Doeuff (1995). “Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into

considered this objection and responded to it with great acuity. Their general conclusion is that Beauvoir's ethics is far from derivative and actually inspires Sartre's construction of his social philosophy. Moreover, they dismiss as inaccurate Beauvoir's own assessment of herself as the uncreative partner in her relationship with Sartre. The evidence for the positions of Le Doeuff, Simons, Kruks, and others is so overwhelming that I find it unnecessary to argue for this very same position again.

In Chapter 4, I sketch a view of relational autonomy based on some of Beauvoir's arguments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Specifically, I contend that one can build a view of relational autonomy that draws a strong connection between assuming one's autonomy and acting morally—just as Beauvoir maintains that acting freely and acting ethically go hand in hand.

Briefly, I maintain that the unique insights that Beauvoir can offer to current interpretations of autonomy (and, specifically, relational autonomy) are threefold. 1) Assuming one's freedom involves assuming and responding to the fundamental ambiguity of the human situation. Ignoring or obscuring this ambiguity always entails a flight from freedom and is, in most cases, a mark of the serious man (*EA* 133). (I describe this process in more detail in my analysis of Beauvoir's account of the serious man.) 2) The human experience of—and particularly the response *to*—emotions plays a central role in a person's ability to act autonomously. This point becomes most apparent both in Beauvoir's description of the lack of emotions that the serious man experiences and in her account of the connection between love and

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(Ambiguous) Line.” trans. Margaret A. Simons. *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press; Sonia Kruks (1995). “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press; and Margaret Simons (2004). “Introduction.” *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.



free action. 3) Acting autonomously is always connected to others, for to will one's freedom is to open up possibilities for the freedom of others.

These insights mark important contributions to feminist philosophy since they help to broaden the relationality of relational autonomy in a way that adds a particularly *moral* component to autonomous action. This added dimension, which I characterize as a moral attunement to the world, is a central part of the view of autonomy that I advocate.

I plan to end my project with a broad examination of the unique contributions that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can make to contemporary feminist philosophy. Thus, Chapter 5 will serve as a synthesis of my arguments in the previous chapters. As such, this chapter should be seen more as a chapter of concluding remarks than as a substantive portion of my argument.

It is worth reiterating that Beauvoir does not present (and does not even purport to present) a systematic ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While some critics interpret this fact as a detriment to Beauvoir's ethics, the lack of an ethical system seems to work in favor of a project such as mine. For I am using Beauvoir's ethics as a sort of springboard for re-approaching various positions that are central to feminist philosophy. Accordingly, the fact that Beauvoir's ethics is not entirely systematic provides me with some analytical freedom.

In sum, my aim in this project is to 1) argue that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can make unique contributions to current feminist philosophy, 2) explain how the text can make these contributions, and 3) propose a view of relational autonomy that represents one such contribution. As such, I intend not only to highlight the historical significance of the text but also to underscore the relevance that Beauvoir's work has to philosophers and philosophy of the twenty-first century.

## Chapter 2 – *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: The Argument and the Context

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In this chapter, I provide a detailed outline of Beauvoir’s argument from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Prior to this outline, I situate *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in its particular social-historical context—that is, within the context of the particular events that either inspired Beauvoir’s analyses and/or occurred simultaneously with the writing of the text.

Following the outline of the text, I analyze the relationship between *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and several of Beauvoir’s other works. I should note that this analysis is not comprehensive and focuses only on those texts that relate most significantly to my own argument. Nonetheless, despite the many texts that I omit in this part of my analysis, this section still offers an indication of how Beauvoir’s ideas developed and, in some cases, evolved over the course of parts of her philosophical and literary career. Acknowledging this evolution is important because it helps to situate *The Ethics of Ambiguity* within the context of Beauvoir’s other works.

### *Situating Beauvoir’s thought in a socio-historical context*

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To understand better the genesis, development, and practical applicability of Beauvoir’s thought in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is helpful to situate the writing of the text within a particular historical context. More specifically, Beauvoir wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* soon after the Nazi occupation of Paris during World War II. Undoubtedly, the events of World War II helped to shape her ethics, both transforming some of her views on the relationship between individual freedoms and illuminating various instances in which one’s circumstances can demand a particular sort of moral or ethical response. For purposes of my own project, I will

focus primarily on how Beauvoir's experiences during World War II shaped her views on the relationality of the self, freedom, and ethics.

The significance of an analysis such as this one extends beyond a simple acknowledgement of the fact *that* Beauvoir's wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* shortly after World War II. It is essential to situate Beauvoir's ethics in a social-historical context so that one can envision the answers to two important questions: 1) From where did Beauvoir draw inspiration for her ethical categories and concepts, and 2) Whom did Beauvoir intend to be the audience of this text? Although examining the historical moment in which Beauvoir wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can by no means exhaust all of the possible answers to these questions, it does allow one to place her ethics "beneath the real sky" and "in the midst of living men"—that is, under the same practicality and ethical concreteness that Beauvoir calls for all throughout her text (*EA* 158). In addition—and as will become apparent in my subsequent analysis—situating *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in a particular historical moment *in Beauvoir's lifetime* helps to illustrate some of the ways in which *actual* people (and not theoretical moral agents) influenced Beauvoir's shift toward more relational conceptions of the self, freedom, and ethics. Noting this influence is particularly significant since Beauvoir herself emphasizes the importance of formulating an ethics that honors and acknowledges the concrete "thickness" of the world and of the particular human beings that populate the world.

On a broader level, however, I draw attention to the social-historical context of Beauvoir's ethics in order to demonstrate two seemingly oppositional, yet ultimately complementary points: 1) that particular, concrete situations *did* provoke the writing of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* but 2) that one cannot and should not attempt to reduce Beauvoir's analyses and ethical categories *to* these concrete situations and their particular significance. In other

words, I think that it is exceedingly important to acknowledge the “concrete thickness” of Beauvoir’s ethics—the ways in which it is tied to an *actual* world, to *real* people. With that in mind, I think that it is equally important to acknowledge that her analysis is applicable and relevant to a world (and to people) beyond the world and people that inspired that analysis. And I keep this tension (that is, the one between the social-historical context and the further-reaching relevance) in mind throughout my outline of Beauvoir’s argument.

To begin, it is clear from Beauvoir’s letters, diaries, and memoirs that, not unlike most people living in France during this time, World War II had a profound effect on Beauvoir and her perspective on politics, philosophy, and human interaction in general. One can observe this effect most notably in the somewhat dramatic transformations that occurred in Beauvoir’s political and philosophical ideas over the course of the war. For instance, before 1939, Beauvoir held an unwavering pacifist and isolationist position in response to the rise of fascism and Nazism. Many, including Beauvoir herself, have interpreted this response almost as a “non-response,” reflecting a naïve understanding of the exigencies of the political situation in Europe. As Kristana Arp notes, “[Beauvoir] and many others sat by and did nothing while Fascism swept over Europe and then remained witness to havoc and atrocities it brought in its wake.”<sup>11</sup> In this light, one can interpret some of the positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as acts of self-condemnation or approbation.

This is not to say that Beauvoir necessarily casts herself as an abnegator of freedom, nor is it to say that pacifism itself constitutes a renouncing of one’s freedom. Nonetheless, given that her accounts of freedom, oppression, and the devotion to political struggles all require the agent to recognize and work toward the expansion of others’ freedoms—even if those efforts require

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<sup>11</sup> Kristana Arp. *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir’s Existentialist Ethics*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2001. p. 18.

the sacrifice of others—it does seem likely that many of Beauvoir’s positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* illustrate her philosophical reasons for rejecting her initial response—and her particular way of manifesting her pacifist politics—to European fascism prior to 1939.

Notably, Beauvoir briefly discusses World War II and Nazism in various parts of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. As I point out in my outline of Beauvoir’s ethics, she uses some of the French people’s responses to the Nazis as a way to illustrate what she calls the “aesthetic attitude.” This attitude—and its corresponding impartiality to history, to the world, and to other human beings—allowed some French men and women to remain aloof in the face of fascism and the deportation and annihilation of millions of Jews and other Nazi “undesirables” (EA 75). She also uses the case of the Nazi youth to demonstrate one of the “antimonies of action” that can occur most especially in the struggle against oppressive regimes (EA 98). And she even tangentially refers to the war and to the Nazi occupation in her declaration that “one does not submit to a war or an occupation as he does to an earthquake: he must take sides for or against” (EA 82).

But these examples, while certainly evidencing Beauvoir’s recognition of the historical significance and philosophical richness of World War II, do not necessarily track the entire scope of the influence that this war had on the development of Beauvoir’s ethical thought. To see this influence more readily requires not only more detailed interpretations of Beauvoir’s references to the war but also a look at some of Beauvoir’s other writings, specifically those that predate both the war itself and the writing of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Iris Murdoch offers one such interpretation of the relationship between Beauvoir’s ethics and World War II. Despite her low regard for Beauvoir’s ethics, Murdoch nonetheless notes the substantial influence that the Resistance and the Nazi occupation must have had on the way that

Beauvoir approached the study and articulation of an ethics.<sup>12</sup> As Murdoch sees it, Beauvoir's experiences during World War II gave her a clear picture of "the 'purity' of the moment of action followed by the hardening of a living faith into 'earnestness.'"<sup>13</sup> While Murdoch is not entirely clear about the "earnestness" to which she is referring in this passage, it seems reasonable to interpret her statement in light of the French Resistance during World War II. To explain, the purpose and efforts of the Resistance—a movement in which Beauvoir notably did not have a *central* role—were constructed in response to unquestionably exigent circumstances. In other words, the actions undertaken by members of the Resistance required recognition of the urgency of the *present* moment. This could help to explain in part why Beauvoir makes such an effort to articulate the temporal aspects of her ethics and to emphasize a specifically "ethical" view of the present, past, and future. This is not to say that Beauvoir developed the temporal component of her ethics *only* in response to her (limited) involvement in the Resistance. Nonetheless, Murdoch's point does demonstrate a way in which the events of World War II could have helped to shape Beauvoir's thought as presented in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Documenting yet another way in which the Second World War affected Beauvoir's thought, Margaret Simons notes in her introduction to a recent collection of Beauvoir's philosophical writings that after the Nazi occupation of Paris, Beauvoir developed a "new awareness of her connection with others."<sup>14</sup> This "new awareness" is, as Simons sees it, in contrast to the move toward solipsism that Beauvoir displayed in some of her earlier writings

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<sup>12</sup> Iris Murdoch. "De Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*." *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret A. Simons (2004). "Introduction." *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. p. 8.

(such as *L'Invitée*, or *She Came to Stay*), Beauvoir's first novel, a text that I examine more closely later on in this chapter. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* clearly demonstrates Beauvoir *rejecting* a conception of the human being that favors solipsism and *defending* a view that places the relationality of human beings at the center of her notions of freedom and ethical action. And this view distinguishes Beauvoir's thought from Sartre's more solipsistic conceptions of the self and of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. Notably, the occurrence of this transition from a more solipsistic to a more relational philosophical position corresponds to the historical events of (and Beauvoir's experiences during) World War II. This transition also runs parallel to the aforementioned shift that occurred in Beauvoir's political thinking: from an unwavering isolationism and pacifism to a more nuanced take on the (rare) necessity of violence.

As I mentioned earlier, Beauvoir discusses World War II and the atrocities committed by the Nazis in texts other than *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, including works that pre-date the writing and publication of *Ethics*. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, an essay published toward the end of the war and the Nazi occupation of Paris, Beauvoir briefly examines the *lack* of attachment that some French people felt toward others immediately after the occupation started. Instead of confronting the hardship before them, some people fled from the moment by “going into [themselves]” and remaining “indifferent, peaceful.”<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir's rebuke of their refusal to acknowledge their attachment to the world—and to others—anticipates her conception of human relationality and intersubjectivity in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. (I discuss the link between these two texts in more detail in later sections of this chapter.) In addition, this rebuke mirrors Beauvoir's ethical

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<sup>15</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. “Pyrrhus and Cineas.” trans. Marybeth Timmermann. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1944), p. 92.

demand that one *recognize* one's attachment to other human beings and use this recognition as the grounding for one's ethical action.

Furthermore, in "An Eye for an Eye," a philosophical essay published in *Les temps modernes* in 1946, Beauvoir examines both the intense hatred and the desire for revenge that the French people felt toward the Nazis after World War II. She asserts in this essay that each attempt to punish criminals for their crimes serves as a revelation, an *instance* of the ambiguity of the human situation. For she argues that even when punishing those whose crimes were as horrendous as those of the Nazis, especially when acting out of vengeance, one reduces other human beings to mere things—one purposefully and consciously objectifies other *subjects*. And as Beauvoir contends in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, when one treats others as things in this manner—even when this treatment is politically or morally or otherwise "necessary"—one participates in and creates an ethical tension, or an "antinomy of action." Even if done in the name of good or necessity, participating in a violence that reduces other human beings to things perpetuates the very modes of thought and actions that may have "justified" that vengeful violence in the first place.

Worth noting is that in "An Eye for an Eye," Beauvoir is responding in part to those who see vengeance (in this case, against the Nazis) as "the serene recovery of a reasonable and just order."<sup>16</sup> According to Beauvoir, vengeance—especially private vengeance, where a victim seeks personal vengeance against his victimizer, or a vengeance in the name of some abstract notion of justice that does not explicitly recognize the crimes committed against particular persons—does not and cannot provide this sort of tranquility either to the victims of crimes or to

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<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. "An Eye for an Eye." trans. Kristana Arp. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1946 in *Les temps modernes*, 1(5)), p. 258.



the societies that call for the punishment of criminals. This is because, as Beauvoir points out, these sorts of vengeance simply perpetuate a pattern of evil, substituting one abomination for another. And as she goes on to note, this creates a situation in which “injustices pile up without wiping one another out.”<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say that Beauvoir offers any sort of pardon to the Nazis or to anyone who has been considered to have committed a “crime against humanity.” Kristana Arp notes that such a crime violates one of Beauvoir’s fundamental ethical principles, for the person (or persons) perpetuating this crime refuses to recognize the ambiguous nature of human existence.<sup>18</sup> Instead of acknowledging *all* people as having both consciousness and material reality, the person who commits a crime against humanity “recognizes only one aspect of his existence, his subjectivity, and only one aspect of his victim’s existence, his material reality,” thereby providing him with the *justification* to treat his victims as things.<sup>19</sup> For these reasons, Beauvoir advocates seeking a state-sponsored “vengeance” against those that commit crimes against humanity. In Arp’s view, this is a vengeance that does not face the ethical tensions posed by private or abstractly justified vengeance but that instead aims to “create a future where the wrongs punished will not occur again.”<sup>20</sup> In other words—and in a way that anticipates Beauvoir’s argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—this state-sponsored “vengeance” could ultimately open up possibilities for others to assume their moral freedom. Thus, these punishments are not carried out *in order to* seek vengeance as a goal itself, nor are they

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Kristana Arp, “Introduction to ‘An Eye for an Eye’.” *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 241.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 243.

committed in the name of an abstract moral or political concept: they are carried out so that others may act freely.

The war's influence on Beauvoir's ethical thought becomes apparent too in her essay, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism."<sup>21</sup> In this essay, Beauvoir explicitly confronts an array of ethical issues regarding World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris. In particular, she considers the various attitudes that the collaborators took toward others and toward their own freedom, and she examines the ways in which some collaborators exploited traditional ethical systems in order to justify their actions. For instance, in describing the potential responses to the Nazi occupation of Paris, Beauvoir maintains that there was "no preexisting [ethical] system" that could have adequately dictated a proper ethical or moral attitude for the French people.<sup>22</sup> One could formulate conflicting, even contradictory responses and interpretations to the occupation by maintain a strict adherence to utilitarian principles, or to the categorical imperative, or to a Platonic conception of the Good.

Beauvoir elaborates on this issue by pointing out that during their trials, many of the collaborators were able to argue that they did *not* violate "any of the great eternal maxims."<sup>23</sup> Manipulating the abstractions of traditional systems of philosophical ethics, the collaborators were able to argue that they *did* serve their country, that they *did* serve the cause of peace and justice. The target of Beauvoir's criticisms, then, are not simply the collaborators who refused to recognize the ambiguity of the human situation and who violated the freedom of others but also those ethical systems that obscure this ambiguity and that conceive of human beings and values

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<sup>21</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. "Moral Idealism and Political Realism." trans. Anne Deing Cordero. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1945 in *Les temps modernes*, 1(2): 248-268.)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 188.

in the abstract rather than in their particularity and complexity. In this respect (and foreshadowing her arguments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*), Beauvoir maintains that an ethical project such as hers “requires that [human beings] give up the security that [they] hoped to gain by enclosing [themselves] within the pure subjectivity of traditional ethics”: to recognize that they are both subjects *and* objects in others’ worlds.<sup>24</sup> It requires human beings to accept the potential failure that always accompanies ethical action and to acknowledge the ambiguity that characterizes the human situation. Most importantly (at least for Beauvoir’s project), it also requires human beings to establish and re-establish their values freely, in a way that honors not only one’s own but also *others’* freedom.

To return to the initial questions that I posed at the beginning of this section—1) From where did Beauvoir draw inspiration for her ethical ideas, and 2) To whom was Beauvoir writing her ethics?—one can see that answering these questions requires one to take seriously the effects that World War II had on Beauvoir’s thinking. This is not to say that the war provides the *only* lens through which one can imagine answers to these questions. One could also approach these questions in light of the influence of the other works and/or philosophers with whom Beauvoir interacted. Nonetheless, considering both the timing of Beauvoir’s writing and the occurrence of the shifts in her ethical thinking, examining these questions in light of World War II seems to be one of the most (if not *the* most) important ways in which to imagine the inspiration for and audience of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

One could also argue that part of Beauvoir’s inspiration for some of her positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* comes from her initial isolationist response—or her initial *lack* of a response—to fascism. To reiterate, one might trace her emphasis on the temporal aspects of the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 189.

ethical movement and her privileging of the present moment of action over the idolization of the future back to her regret over having not taken action against the fascist movement sooner: for engaging in an “inactive pacifism,” so to speak. Similarly, one might trace her careful examination of the necessity of violent struggle back to this same experience. Note, for instance, that Beauvoir concedes that while violence is often used to limit others’ freedom, one can justify its use only if one acts violently in order to open up “concrete possibilities” for others to assume their freedom (*EA* 137, emphasis added). Furthermore, she makes this concession while acknowledging the implicit ethical “failure” involved in such an endeavor: even if one is justified in acting violently, one still takes away freedom from those against whom one acts.

Envisioning who Beauvoir’s audience is requires some more creative interpretive legwork—and perhaps two different interpretive frameworks entirely. For one could separate Beauvoir’s “audience” between her intended audience and the audience for whom *The Ethics of Ambiguity* did or could have some practical influence. Of course, it is possible—and perhaps even probable—that members of each group overlap. For purposes of my own argument, I will consider primarily the audience to whom Beauvoir might have been writing—or even to whom she might have thought her ideas might have some practical influence.

Notably, Beauvoir does address the historical specificity of the “man” [sic] living in the time in which she wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity*:

Men of *today* seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means. The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Though they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth’s. Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their

grandeur more brilliantly, and in no other age has this grandeur been so horribly flouted. (*EA* 8-9, emphasis added)

Notably, this passage demonstrates Beauvoir's acknowledgement of the effects that World War II—the Nazis, the concentration camps, the atomic bomb—had not only on human experience but also on the human confrontation with the ambiguity of their situation.

On the other hand, one need not interpret this passage solely within the context of World War II. For instance, Beauvoir also alludes to industrialization and the ways in which it can sever and/or strain a person's ties to his community. In fact, one can also interpret this passage in light of the colonial/post-colonial world that Beauvoir inhabited. Stacy Keltner considers this sort of interpretation, claiming that "Beauvoir...diagnoses late modernity as a technological-industrial destruction of the forms of thought that have traditionally functioned to provide meaning and coherence to existence."<sup>25</sup> On Keltner's view, then, (late) modernity both brings to light the ambiguity of the human situation and makes it more difficult for people to evade this ambiguity. And for Beauvoir, who characterizes this ambiguity as a fundamental fact about the human situation, this is not necessarily an unwelcome effect of modernity.

Accordingly, it seems that at least for part of her ethics, Beauvoir directs her attention toward her contemporaries—particular people with particular social and historical circumstances that affect their experience of the ambiguity that is central to Beauvoir's ethics. It also seems likely, however, that Beauvoir had a more general audience in mind while writing this text. This is not to say that she necessarily attempted to elevate her ethics to the level of "timelessness" and abstraction that characterized (and, on Beauvoir's interpretation, plagued) other systems of philosophical ethics. Nonetheless, it seems *unlikely* that Beauvoir was writing *only* to French

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<sup>25</sup> Stacy Keltner. "Beauvoir's Idea of Ambiguity." *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 203.

people, or to Europeans, or even to Westerners of the post-war period.<sup>26</sup> For one, even though she diagnoses the modern period as making people more acutely aware of their fundamentally ambiguous situation, her characterization of the *human situation* is never directed at a particular group of people. Her claim is that *all* human beings encounter and/or are enmeshed in this ambiguity.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, while Beauvoir's *intended* audience may have been those people who have experienced the ambiguity of the human situation in the ways that she describes in the aforementioned passage (i.e. those who have witnessed the ravages of technological warfare and who have seen the expansion of industry and its effects on the human population—and even moreso then than now, this category did not apply to *all* living human beings), the general themes that she considers (i.e. ambiguity, human freedom, and the particularity and complexity of human individuals and relationships) address a *general* condition for *all* human beings, regardless of their temporal and geographical locations and technological experiences. And, as I will continue to point out, *this* point is what allows her ethics to remain relevant far beyond the reaches of the wartime and post-war events and people that inspired these ethics. At the very least, it makes her ethics relevant to contemporary feminist thought.

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<sup>26</sup> Though, admittedly, her ethnocentric characterizations of non-Western women do betray a lack of understanding, if not a lack of consideration, about cultures much different from her own.

<sup>27</sup> Consider, for instance, Beauvoir's following statement that appears at the beginning of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: "As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have *all* felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition" (*EA* 7, emphases added).

In the opening pages of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir articulates both what she means by the ambiguity of the human situation<sup>28</sup> and how she conceives of our relationship to this ambiguity. The human situation is ambiguous, explains Beauvoir, because we experience ourselves both as subjects and objects; both as individuals and as members of a collectivity; both as solitary and as bound to the world. We experience both our freedom and our servitude, both our relative insignificance and our sovereign importance. And no act of the will or intellectual maneuvering can resolve or eliminate these ambiguities from human experience (*EA* 8-9).

If nothing else, Beauvoir's account of this ambiguity reveals a depth of understanding of the human situation—an understanding that extends beyond the particular time and location in which Beauvoir wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Without treading too far into a universality that Beauvoir would have considered objectionable, it seems safe to say that she *did* conceive of this ambiguity as a universal (or near-universal) characteristic of the human situation in the modern period. In this respect, she is not a universalist in a sense that is timeless and de-contextualized; her “universalism” is instead indexed to the post-modern period and, I argue, up through today. For the ambiguity that she describes need not apply or relate solely to the people of wartime or post-war France. It applies just as neatly (and relevantly) to contemporary experiences: to the coinciding disconnection from and connection to others that technology and social media create; or even to the simple experience of *being* one's own agent while simultaneously being an

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard Frechtman chose to translate ‘la réalité humaine’ as ‘the human situation’ in his English rendering of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While the choice to translate ‘la réalité humaine’ as ‘human situation’ does not seem surprising or unusual, this translation does become more complicated if one considers that ‘la réalité humaine’ was the phrase that French translators once used to render Heidegger's *Dasein* into French. This is not to suggest that Beauvoir necessarily intended for ‘the human situation’ to be *synonymous* with *Dasein*. But it does suggest that Beauvoir's conception of human being and existence owes a great debt to Heidegger's thought. In fact, it might be prudent to conceive of Beauvoir's notion of ‘the human situation’ not only as human *situatedness* but also as human *being*.

object—one of the many cast of characters—in the worlds of thousands, if not millions, of other agents that one ever encounters.

But even if one were to accept the “universality” of this ambiguity, one could nonetheless posit that Beauvoir’s descriptions of our experiences themselves are ambiguous: not the human situation. In other words, the “ambiguities” that Beauvoir describes might simply be linguistic tensions that one can resolve by more clearly describing human experience. So instead of articulating our experience as one where we occupy *both* an individual, subjective solitude *and* a collective, objective tie to the world, we can say that we are “individual subjects in *our own eyes*” and “objects, whether individual or collective, *in others’ eyes*.” Thus, the tension or ambiguity Beauvoir articulates between our experience of simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity can be dispelled by a re-description of that experience.

Beauvoir, however, refers to more than simply a linguistic tension in human experience. To be clear, Beauvoir portrays the ambiguity of the human situation as an ontological fact about the way that human beings experience themselves in relation to others. This fact is something that humans *think* and *feel*: we are *confronted* with this ambiguity, and the tensions emerging from this confrontation are irreconcilable (*EA* 7). In other words, attempting to “re-describe” (and thereby eliminate) the ambiguity of the human situation only temporarily obscures that ambiguity: it does not and cannot eradicate it.

Beauvoir, in fact, finds fault with those who attempt such re-description or eradication of the ambiguity of the human situation. Depicting the ways in which one can mask or obscure this ambiguity, she launches her initial criticisms against those philosophers who offer what she describes as metaphysical positions that “eliminate the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by



yielding to eternity of enclosing oneself in the pure moment” (EA 7-8). In other words, she directs her criticism toward philosophical systems that 1) incorporate strict dualities and that 2) de-value or obscure one prong of the duality while giving the alternate prong an unrealistically elevated status. In contrast to this effort to obscure the ambiguity of the human situation, Beauvoir advocates *assuming* our fundamental ambiguity, not only in order to achieve a more accurate knowledge of the conditions of human life but also to develop an ethics *based* on these conditions (EA 9).

Developing an ethics based on the ambiguity of the human condition is, as Beauvoir admits, a precarious endeavor. Acknowledging this point, Beauvoir gives the notion of failure an integral role in her ethical system. On the one hand, she points out that failure plays a role in all ethical systems, even “optimistic” ones. *All* ethical systems must recognize that if human beings could not fail—that is, if they were godlike—then they would not need ethics in the first place (EA 10).

On the other hand, Beauvoir’s conception of failure and its role in her ethics is also tied to an existentialist (and specifically Sartrean) notion of being, a point that makes the incorporation of failure into her ethics unique. Because the for-itself (or, roughly, each human consciousness) can never fully disclose being—because it can never attain absolute being, or confer an absolute and eternal essence upon its existence—it will always fail in its efforts at the disclosure and/or attainment of being. Nonetheless (and as Beauvoir articulates in subsequent sections of the text), the for-itself must still *attempt* to disclose being in its activities and projects. This attempt is, as she points out, what constitutes our efforts to give meaning and value to our lives.

Further drawing upon the for-itself and its lack of a predetermined nature or essence, and upon the ambiguous conditions of human life, Beauvoir rejects any ethics that posits universal and absolute values. As she explains, human beings are not only free to but also responsible for defining their own values. Moreover, neither God nor any other metaphysical concept predetermines or prescribes human values (*EA* 15-16).

At first blush, then, Beauvoir's metaphysical and ontological assumptions about the human being remain situated squarely within the confines of the "existentialist tradition," a tradition often associated with—and criticized for—developing a conception of the human being that is radically free, individualistic, and even isolated from other human beings. And this is because the human being, on Beauvoir's view, is not only free to but also responsible for creating *her own* values. She must do so without presupposing the values of others and without dictating her own values to others.

Moreover, it seems that Beauvoir's ethics could imply a fundamental absurdity, amoral relativism, or even nihilism at its core.<sup>29</sup> For if human beings are the source of all values, and if they are free to create and define their own values, then it seems that they can act and choose however they like: there is no reason, concept, or situation to ground or constrain their actions. As long as a person confronts the ambiguity of her situation and freely founds her projects, then it seems as if *any* act could potentially pass as "ethical" in Beauvoir's ethics.

But Beauvoir clearly separates her ethics from an absurd or nihilistic ethics, and she implicitly (and in later sections, explicitly) repudiates a conception of the human being that is isolated or radically individualistic. This is because Beauvoir *does* offer a "grounding" for human action and values. As she explains, "it is not impersonal universal man who is the source

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<sup>29</sup> And initially, this would not be totally surprising, given the work of both Sartre and Camus.

of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself” (EA 17-18). So while it is up to each individual human being to choose and act upon her own values, these values are communally-based: they are situated within and informed by a particular community of concrete individuals. They are “relativistic,” but they are relative to the community of people in which one lives—in which one thinks, and decides, and acts. They represent an interplay between individual subjects and the cultures and societies in which they are situated. Moreover, as Beauvoir later explains, the very possibility of willing one’s values is grounded in a specific reciprocal relationship between human beings. Beauvoir’s ethics, then, departs in significant ways from the isolated, radically free individual associated with (Sartrean) existentialism.

That being said, it is important here to note the way in which Beauvoir initially characterizes human freedom and its role in ethical agency. According to Beauvoir, the very act (and every act) of willing one’s freedom constitutes an ethical act (EA 24). In fact, Beauvoir makes clear that “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (EA 24).

Taking up this point, Beauvoir considers a potential objection to her position. Namely, if all human beings are always already free, then it might seem redundant or even contradictory to conceive of the willing of one’s freedom as a specifically moral or ethical act. There would be nothing morally or ethically significant about willing one’s freedom if one *always*, automatically willed freely.

Beauvoir responds to this objection by distinguishing what she calls “natural freedom” from “moral freedom.” As she explains, human beings *are*, by nature, free in a metaphysical or

natural sense.<sup>30</sup> But to *will* one's freedom—or, to use another term in Beauvoir's lexicon, to *assume* one's freedom—is, in Beauvoir's words, to “effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence” (EA 24-25). In this respect, one *cannot* choose to will oneself “not free”: one cannot deny one's original, natural, or metaphysical freedom. Nonetheless, as Beauvoir explains, one *can* choose not to will oneself free by adhering uncritically to the values of others (EA 25). To reiterate, then, one cannot eliminate one's original freedom, but one can choose not to assume this freedom. Choosing the latter would constitute an abnegation of one's *moral* freedom.<sup>31</sup>

Also worth noting is that Beauvoir characterizes the willing of one's freedom as a creative endeavor, an endeavor that takes the form of a *project*. One could view this endeavor as a primarily “meaning-giving” project—one in which a person ensures that her actions continually establish or reflect her freely-chosen values. For Beauvoir claims that one must continually return to one's past accomplishments and “justify [them] in the unity of the project in which [one is] engaged” (EA 27).

This is not to say that one must force each of one's actions into a unified or systematic theme. Rather—and as will become clearer in subsequent sections of Beauvoir's ethics—one should attempt to act in a way that consistently *gives* meaning to one's life and *reflects* one's values. It is both a retrospective and prospective ethical movement. Furthermore, when reflecting on one's past actions, one should consider the ways in which those actions do or do not

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<sup>30</sup> In this respect, Beauvoir accepts certain aspects of Sartrean freedom, for her conception of *natural* freedom correlates more directly with the radicality of Sartrean freedom.

<sup>31</sup> Though Beauvoir does not frame her ethics in terms of blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, culpability, and responsibility, one could view her ethics through this lens thusly: one is always already free in when it comes to “natural freedom.” This is an original freedom that everyone possesses, and one cannot eliminate it. One can assume this freedom, and any action that emanates from this assumption is something for which one would be responsible. But one can *also* choose *not* to assume this freedom: this too is a moral act, and one for which one is responsible.

reflect the values that one purports to uphold. One must question whether or not one's actions represent assumptions of abnegations of freedom. One might ask, "Does my choice to support a war ultimately impinge upon others' abilities to assume their freedom? Is this impingement justified by the fact that this war might some day open up possibilities for *more* people to assume their freedom? Or in refusing to speak up about my opposition to this war, do I flee from an instance in which I *can* assume my freedom and actively will my values into the world?" And for Beauvoir, this examination, this questioning, and this attempt to give meaning to one's life and actions: these are all part of the *project*—a project that is not a universal template but one that is unique to each person—that constitutes the willing of one's freedom and, ultimately, the moral life.

Admittedly, this perpetual act of reflection and meaning-giving can seem like a toilsome, even obsessive project for any one human being to undertake. What's more, creating an ethics that requires constant and highly intellectual meaning-giving exercises presents an array of problems to Beauvoir's ethics.

This is not to say that the primary mode of evaluation for a set of ethical principles or categories should be based on the facility with which those principles can be adopted. But if Beauvoir herself relies upon an ableist conception of reason and capacity in articulating her ethical and moral principles, then those principles might seem to border on a troubling sort of perfectionism. Furthermore, if few people can engage in the ethical-evaluating that she describes, then one might wonder exactly *whom* these ethics are valuable for or to in the first place.

For the most part, Beauvoir does not consider problems of perfectionism in her ethics. In many ways, this might be because she would not view an "ethics of ambiguity" as a perfectionist

ethics. For while the processes of giving meaning to one's actions and establishing one's values are certainly crucial to her ethical thought, the processes themselves—the *exercise* of meaning-giving and value-establishing—do not seem to be what Beauvoir herself values most in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In other words, these are admittedly perfectionist and highly intellectual ethical exercises and processes on the one hand. But on the other, there are the actual *values* for which Beauvoir advocates: the recognition of the ambiguity of the human situation; the particularity and concreteness of the world and the people around us; the reciprocity of moral freedom; and even the impossibility of eliminating sacrifice and failure.

And respecting these values does not seem to require the same sort of intellectual perfectionism that the reflective exercises in Beauvoir's ethics do.

## *Chapter 2: Personal Freedom and Others*

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Beauvoir begins her analysis in this chapter with an examination of the child's situation. According to Beauvoir, the child is "cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit" (*EA* 35). As such, the child is always already situated in a particular cultural, historical, and socio-political context that gives the child "ready-made values" (*EA* 44). Because of the "givenness" of the child's situation, then, it is easy (and even appropriate, as Beauvoir claims) for the child to accept this situation without questioning it (*EA* 35). The child's ignorance cannot be helped, not because the child is not *allowed* to obtain knowledge but because the child has not had the time or maturity to obtain such knowledge (*EA* 141).

While the child's situation thus might imply a justification of paternalistic treatment, Beauvoir is careful to point out that children must still be "respected as human persons" (*EA*

141). The implication here is that even as the child lives under various structures of authority, her *freedom* must be respected by others so that she too can learn to respect that freedom and, some day, to assume it (*EA* 141). Thus, while Beauvoir does not articulate a specific vision of how children *should* be socialized or treated so that their freedom is respected, she still suggests that this sort of respect should factor into children's socialization.

Beauvoir goes on to describe that as the child reaches adolescence, he (and *we*) must cease to assume the values and ideals of the world in a "childlike" manner. In other words, one must cease to accept uncritically the values of the world in which one is situated. With human freedom comes the responsibility for choosing one's values. Refusing to choose one's values—or, correlatively, uncritically assuming the values of others—constitutes a flight from freedom and, as Beauvoir points out in her discussion of the serious man, can lead to not only an isolation from other human beings but also the degradation of other human beings.

Nevertheless, Beauvoir also argues that all humans can submit to an "infantile world" (*EA* 37). In other words, the child's situation is not limited to children. An adult can, just as readily and perhaps more vigorously than a child, allow the world in which she exists—in which she is thrown—to determine the values which thereby determine her decisions and her responses to that very world. Beauvoir first casts this submission in terms of the "western woman" that takes refuge in her husband's or lover's opinions and values, thereby abdicating her responsibility to fashion her own projects and values (*EA* 37). The difference between the child and the aforementioned woman, however, is that the child's ready-made values are imposed

upon her, while, according to Beauvoir, the woman *consents to or chooses* these values<sup>32</sup> (*EA* 38).

Returning to her characterization of the child's situation, Beauvoir goes on to describe the ways in which a person begins to exercise her freedom. As she sees it, the initial assumption(s) of freedom coincide with the discovery of one's subjectivity—a discovery that might be more accurately described as the discovery of one's *intersubjectivity*. For Beauvoir claims that the child simultaneously discovers his own *and* others' subjectivity (*EA* 39). To draw from her conception of the dual (yet intertwined) aspects of the human being in her essay, "An Eye for an Eye," one could say that the child at this point recognizes that others are more than simply their material reality: they also have a consciousness, a subjectivity of their own.<sup>33</sup> What incites this recognition is the child's realization that "language, custom, ethics, and values have their source in these uncertain creatures"—that is, in other human beings (*EA* 39). Recognizing himself as one of these "uncertain creatures," the child thus also recognizes that his acts will (and do) "weigh upon the earth" as others' acts do (*EA* 39). Assuming one's freedom, then, involves acknowledging that one's freedom will affect others *and* that others will affect one's freedom.

Beauvoir's articulation of human freedom becomes clearer in her account of the various archetypal figures who abnegate their freedom and fail to cast themselves into the world. The first such figure whom she considers is the "sub-man." As Beauvoir explains, sub-men "occupy themselves in restraining [the] original movement" in which one casts oneself into the world:

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<sup>32</sup> Beauvoir chooses (perhaps a bit too hastily and even ethnocentrically) to use a specifically *western* woman in this example, for she maintains in Chapter 3 that (non-western) women who are severely oppressed might not have the means to assume their freedom in the way that Beauvoir describes.

<sup>33</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. "An Eye for an Eye." trans. Kristana Arp. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1946 in *Les temps modernes*, 1(5)) p. 241



that is, in which one assumes one's (moral) freedom and acts in a way that establishes meaning and value in the world (EA 42). She ascribes attitudes such as fear and apathy to the sub-man and appeals to these attitudes to account for the reasons why the sub-man avoids the inherent risks and tensions of the "original movement" (EA 42). And even though the sub-man *must* act—he, like anyone else, cannot *avoid* acting in the world—these actions are not positive meaning-giving actions but are rather "flights" from his responsibility to *positively* give meaning to his choices and projects (EA 43). In this respect, Beauvoir casts the sub-man as one who flees from freedom into the facticity of existence, who flees *toward* the ready-made values of others. And this, she explains, is what makes the sub-man susceptible to the world as "a blind [sic] uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of" (EA 44).

Perhaps the most central "abnegator" of freedom that Beauvoir examines is the "serious man." According to Beauvoir, the serious man is marked by the act of flight. Faced with the enormous responsibility that human freedom demands, the serious man "flees" from this very freedom. In this flight, the serious man surrenders himself to a particular object or end. He questions nothing about this end. He values only what is useful in reaching this end. Beauvoir further maintains that the serious man only values this end or object *because* he is able to "lose himself in it" (EA 47). In this respect, the object to which he surrenders becomes like an idol, one to which he is not hesitant to sacrifice himself (EA 47). In Beauvoir's words, the serious man becomes "a slave of that end" (EA 48). As she sees it, this slavish mentality runs the risk of leading to a sort of tyrannical behavior:

...The serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution—army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. (EA 49)

Accordingly, if others are not useful to the serious man's end, then he has no reason to consider their subjectivity and freedom as important. In fact, Beauvoir maintains that the serious man has no problem sacrificing others for the sake of his end; more chillingly, the serious man can "persuade himself that what he sacrifices is nothing"<sup>34</sup> (EA 49). Thus, the serious man is dangerous to others.

But the serious man is also a danger to himself. As Beauvoir explains, "the serious man's life loses all meaning if he finds himself cut off from his ends" (EA 51). Any threat to this end and its values, then, is a threat to the serious man himself.<sup>35</sup> He is so lost in the object of his efforts that he not only finds it acceptable to sacrifice others unquestioningly in service of that end but also will (at least in terms of his life's meaning) *be sacrificed* if there is any threat to that end.

Worth noting is that the precariousness of the serious man's situation is markedly different from the general precariousness of the human situation. To explain, *all* human beings are precariously situated not only because of the ambiguity that they experience in the world but also because they must will their values *into* this ambiguous world, a world that has no preordained values, a world in which ethical failure is always possible. But the precariousness of the serious man's situation is complicated by the fact that he views his values and his ends as *fixed*: that he views them as objective, and uncritically so. Moreover, it is complicated by the fact that he "loses himself" in these fixed ends (EA 47). Thus, if these ends are threatened, it is as if the serious man *himself* is threatened.

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<sup>34</sup> As will become important for my argument, this rebuke of the serious man demonstrates an instance in which Beauvoir implicitly asserts the value of others and the significance of human relationality.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Beauvoir here notes, "Proust observed with astonishment that a great doctor or a great professor often shows himself, outside of his specialty, to be lacking in sensitivity, intelligence, and humanity. The reason for this is that having abdicated his freedom, he has nothing else left but his techniques" (EA 50).

Following her account of the serious man, Beauvoir turns to her characterization of the nihilist. The nihilist is one who, realizing the negativity or “nothingness” of the human being, decides to *be* nothing (*EA* 52). In other words, recognizing both that she has no predetermined essence and that the world is fundamentally ambiguous, the nihilist chooses to will nothing, to be nothing. Fitting her description of the nihilist within her own theoretical framework, Beauvoir further characterizes the nihilistic attitude as “disappointed seriousness turned back upon itself” (*EA* 52).<sup>36</sup> Described in this way, it makes sense that the nihilist and the serious man share a similar response to the world around them. Like the serious man, the nihilist devalues others around her, for to will herself to be nothing, the nihilist must also annihilate the significance of those around her. (This reciprocal annihilation mirrors the reciprocal nature of freedom that Beauvoir describes.) As Beauvoir sees it, this annihilation often takes the “form of a desire for power” (*EA* 55).

Beauvoir acknowledges that the nihilist’s attitude does reveal a confrontation with and acknowledgement of the ambiguity of the human situation. Nonetheless, the nihilist errs in her *response* to this confrontation. For while human beings are “without essence” on the existentialist view—while they are, at the heart of their being, a “lack”—this does not mean that their existence must remain equally negative. That is, this does not entail that their existence is also a lack, or that they should *will* their existence to *be* a lack. On Beauvoir’s *ethical* view, one must assume a positive existence by willing one’s freedom: by establishing one’s values, by engaging in projects, by engaging *with* others. The nihilist rejects this movement toward freedom and toward a positive existence: she sees that the world does not contain any “ready-

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<sup>36</sup> As many analyses of Beauvoir have pointed out, this suggests that Beauvoir envisions a sort of progression from seriousness to nihilism.

made” justifications or values, but she does nothing to “justify the world and to make [herself] exist validly” (*EA* 57). This refusal is what separates the nihilist from the moral agent.

Next, Beauvoir describes what she calls the “adventurer.” Notably, her characterization of the adventurer helps to dispel the notion that existentialism (or at least that Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics) is inherently solipsistic. For the adventurer is one who “throws himself into his undertakings with zest... but he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only the conquest” (*EA* 58). Beauvoir notes that this effort places the adventurer in a position similar to the moral agent, who casts herself into the world without “proposing to be” (*EA* 59). But unlike the moral agent, the adventurer is entirely indifferent to his project. Because of this indifference, the adventurer takes up his projects in a solitary fashion, not considering or even acknowledging that his projects affect others in the world and that others help to make his projects possible (*EA* 60). Furthermore, this indifferent attitude allows the adventurer to treat others as mere instruments in the service of his ends. If others stand in the way of his ends, then he is inclined to sacrifice those “insignificant beings” in the service of his ends and his power (*EA* 61).

As Beauvoir notes, a solipsistic existentialist ethics would permit the adventurer’s behavior and perhaps even celebrate this behavior as heroic. But, at least within Beauvoir’s ethical framework, acknowledging the “human meaning” of one’s actions is central to the ethical life (*EA* 60). This is because the genuinely free person—the person who acts and chooses and lives in the way that Beauvoir advocates—not only acknowledges the ways in which others help to make her freedom possible but also works toward the liberation of herself and others. Solipsism, then, has no place in (Beauvoir’s) existentialist ethics. Beauvoir secures this position by proclaiming that the adventurer’s “fault is believing that one can do something for oneself without others and even against them” (*EA* 63).

Finally, Beauvoir describes the “passionate man.” Like the serious man, the passionate man sets up his project as an absolute, fixed thing; but unlike the serious man, the passionate man sets up his project as a “thing disclosed by his subjectivity” (EA 64). In fact, one could describe his subjectivity—and his entire world, for that matter—as becoming consumed by his project. This consumption isolates the passionate man from other human beings:

Having withdrawn into an unusual region of the world, seeking not to communicate with other men, this freedom is realized only as a separation. Any conversation, any relationship with the passionate man is impossible. In the eyes of those who desire a communication of freedom, he therefore appears as a stranger, an obstacle. (EA 65)

Orienting himself entirely and solely toward his project, the passionate man views the world around him only in terms of its ability to help him or hinder him from his ends. In this respect, like other abnegators of freedom that Beauvoir describes, the passionate man will treat other human beings as mere things (EA 66). Beauvoir notes that the resulting isolation—and, more importantly, the passionate man’s quest for being *apart from* other human beings—leads the passionate man to lose himself in his project.

Beauvoir’s taxonomy of “freedom abnegators” has useful contemporary analytical significance, perhaps even for those who do not accept her entire moral framework. For these categories (i.e. the sub-man, the serious man, and so on) add rich dimensions to political and moral analyses of individual, and even collective, behavior.

To explain, Beauvoir certainly criticizes those who purposefully objectify other human beings and who intentionally restrict other’s freedom for personal gain. This concept is not foreign to other widely accepted ethical frameworks. But Beauvoir’s categories of freedom-abnegation also address those who flee from their moral freedom and take solace in adhering uncritically to the values of others. Thus, *critical thinking* is central to her ethical framework. It

is central to her moral evaluation of others and of others' actions. And it seems worthwhile, if not potentially illuminating, to cast contemporary ethical problems—corporate executives' willful ignorance about the toxic chemicals added to their companies' products; individuals who look to media personalities to develop their politics and their views about the world; or even more benign cases in which people become enslaved to their work or their activism—in terms of the analytical tools that Beauvoir offers in her list of “freedom abnegators.”

After cataloging the various abnegations of freedom, Beauvoir characterizes the ways in which love and freedom are interconnected. It is no coincidence that Beauvoir follows her characterization of the passionate man with an account of love, for she initially examines love in terms of its differences from passion. According to Beauvoir, love does not resemble the passionate man's consumption with his project. Instead, to love another “genuinely” involves loving a person “in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes” (*EA* 67). She further describes love as “the renunciation of all possession” (*EA* 67). Accordingly, the act of loving is intimately tied to the act of willing one's freedom: to love is to respect the freedom of the other, and to will one's freedom is to (concurrently) seek to open up possibilities for the freedom of others. Central to love, then, is the fundamental relationality of freedom.

Beauvoir does note that the relationality of freedom is not immediately apparent to those who will their freedom. In fact, she acknowledges that many people initially perceive their relationships with others (or others in general) as threats to freedom (*EA* 70). Nonetheless, the very structure of one's freedom, and the conditions that make assuming one's freedom possible, necessitate the presence of others. To explain, Beauvoir maintains that willing freedom and willing that there be being are “one and the same thing” (*EA* 70). This means that in order to will one's freedom, one must project one's own values into a world that does not possess any

predetermined values of its own. Furthermore, although one must ensure that one's freedom does not become "engulfed" in the project that she is willing, one must also ensure that one's freedom is actually aiming *at* a particular project or goal (EA 70). To undertake this movement—that is, to will or assume one's freedom—requires others because "to will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations" (EA 71). Part of what gives meaning to one's projects, then, are the "human significations" of others' projects, of others' values. Accordingly, Beauvoir maintains that "man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men" (EA 72). But this justification only comes from a context—a situation—in which other free human beings are also willing their projects and ends. Further articulating the nature of this reciprocal relationship with others, Beauvoir claims that "to will oneself free is also to will others free" (EA 73). So if I assume my freedom *in the way that Beauvoir describes*, then my assumptions of freedom open up greater possibilities for others to assume their freedom; and others' assumptions of freedom open up greater possibilities for me to assume my freedom.

Matthew Braddock has recently argued that this conception of freedom is vacuous in that it cannot offer a criterion for easily distinguishing between right and wrong.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, he contends that Beauvoir's entire ethical framework amounts to a "subjectivist" system that cannot be applied to a broad range of moral problems and that encourages individuals to value others' freedom only to the extent that it promotes the individual's self-interest.<sup>38</sup> Without delving headlong into a critique of Braddock's analysis and, I as see it, misinterpretation of Beauvoir's

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Braddock (2007). "A Critique of Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics." *Philosophy Today*. 51(3): 303-311.

<sup>38</sup> Worth noting is that Braddock also criticizes Beauvoir for assuming rather than arguing for the conception of human condition upon which she bases her ethics. *Ibid*, p. 304.

ethics, I find it useful to respond to his criticisms because they represent common misconceptions about *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

For one, Beauvoir does not intend her ethics to serve as a set of criteria for clarifying the distinctions between right and wrong. Braddock acknowledges this point to some extent, yet he maintains that Beauvoir's ethics are nonetheless just as abstract as the ethical systems that she rejects.<sup>39</sup> But one could also argue that, instead of ignoring the criteria that are central to most ethical systems, Beauvoir reframes the way that philosophers approach ethics and its usefulness or benefit to human beings. Instead of viewing ethics as a means for evaluating human beings and/or their actions, Beauvoir (in the spirit of the Ancient Greeks) views ethics as a means for examining "how one should live" and "what one should live for."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, her approach to ethics takes into account what she considers the *reality* of the "human situation" and its fundamental ambiguity. As I see it, Beauvoir offers a new center for ethics: one that is not about judging between right/wrong, permissible/impermissible, blameworthy/praiseworthy, and so on, but one that *is* about opening up possibilities for assuming freedom.

Moreover, Beauvoir reframes the very questions that individuals should ask themselves when confronted with ethical decisions. Instead of asking oneself, "is this act right or wrong," or "does this act accord with some universal ethical law," or even "is this act most useful to the greatest number of human beings," Beauvoir encourages individuals to ask themselves the following set of questions: Does this act open up possibilities for others to assume their freedom? Am I evaluating the particularities of my circumstances, or am I applying overly broad concepts to my interpretations of my situation? Do my projects propel me toward or away from

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 307.

<sup>40</sup> Kristana Arp notes this point of similarity between Beauvoir's ethics and Ancient ethics in *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2001. p. 23.



“seriousness”? And, as she points out in the final chapter of her ethics, one should ask oneself these questions indefinitely (*EA* 157).

This reframing in itself is no reason to charge Beauvoir with providing a “vacuous” or overly abstract ethics. For the abstractions that she criticizes are those that offer “ready-made” answers to supposedly universal moral questions. These abstractions gloss over the particularities of each situation that requires ethical decision-making. To provide a seemingly generalized ethical principle that *encourages* the valuing and consideration of these particularities (as Beauvoir does) does not contradict Beauvoir’s own critique of abstract ethical systems.

In fact, as she goes on to explain in the third chapter, Beauvoir resists creating an ethics that can furnish ready-made answers to generalized or universal moral questions. To reiterate, she emphasizes that one must examine the particularity of each situation that requires ethical or moral response. Furthermore, she maintains that one must respond to each situation without appealing to any universal values as guides for one’s actions.

Finally, according to Braddock’s interpretation of Beauvoir, “it is in our self-interest to promote the freedom of others, because the justification we need comes from the interaction of free, meaning-producing subjects in the world.”<sup>41</sup> But Braddock’s insistence that Beauvoir’s conception of ethical freedom is based primarily on the individual’s self-interest (and on the individual’s desire for consistency) obscures Beauvoir’s simultaneous emphasis on the relationality of freedom and human interdependence. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that Beauvoir precedes one of her discussions of interdependence with a comparison between *love* and the assumption of freedom.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 306.

This is not to say that Beauvoir would *reject* the notion that to act freely (as she describes it) would also be to act in one's self-interest. But to cast this ethical movement primarily within the realm of an ethics of self-interest makes Beauvoir's ethical framework resemble her depictions of the various abnegations of freedom: not the assumption of (relational) freedom that she advocates. The sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, and the passionate man all find other human beings—their subjectivity, their freedom—to be insignificant *unless* they are useful to a particular project. To suggest that one should promote others' freedom *only* because their freedom helps to make one's projects (and freedom) possible seems to situate the value of others' freedom solely within the realm of that freedom's utility. And this is not Beauvoir's position.

### *Chapter 3: The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity*

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At the beginning of Chapter 3, Beauvoir offers a further (albeit brief) articulation of the connection between relationality and the assumption of freedom in her account of the “aesthetic attitude.” As she explains, one adopts the aesthetic attitude when one chooses to remain utterly detached from the world. Viewing oneself outside of history and even outside of the present moment, the world (and the human beings that are a part of the world) becomes a mere object of contemplation: not an integral aspect of the context or a place of which one is a part<sup>42</sup> (EA 74-75). Offering a searing condemnation of this sort of orientation to the world (or lack thereof), Beauvoir maintains that many French people adopted the aesthetic attitude during the Nazi occupation, thereby allowing themselves to remain “aloof” in the face of fascism and the

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<sup>42</sup> Whether Beauvoir intended to or not, her criticism of the aesthetic attitude is also a rejection of the “life of study or contemplation” that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

deportation and annihilation of millions of Europeans. In this respect, Beauvoir characterizes the aesthetic attitude and the pure contemplation that accompanies it as a way of “fleeing the truth of the present” (EA 76). (This attitude need not be limited to French-people of the Nazi occupation, of course—it also applies quite nicely, albeit dishearteningly, to those who remain aloof to contemporary environmental destruction, or to global poverty, or to any number of situations in which people find it easier to remain detached from the world than to confront what is terrible and difficult and desperate about the world.)

Beauvoir repudiates the aesthetic attitude not only for its misconception of the human relationship to the world but also for its view of the present. On the one hand, she contends that the world in which human beings act is “a human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings” (EA 74). The person adopting the aesthetic attitude does not realize that, even in her attempt to detach herself from the world, this detachment still occurs *in* the world: in a world where other human beings act, and in a world where one’s actions both affect and are affected by others. On the other hand, Beauvoir criticizes the way in which the aesthetic attitude perpetually views the present as a “potential past” (EA 76). In other words, instead of viewing the present as a moment of action, as a possibility for assuming one’s freedom, the person adopting the aesthetic attitude views the present solely as a *thing* that she can contemplate from a detached perspective. If one views the present simply as a “potential past,” then one risks losing sight of the connection that exists between the present and the future. When this connection is obscured, then one also risks losing the capability to transcend the present moment and to assume one’s freedom in a way that opens up possibilities for others to assume their freedom.

Following her critique of the aesthetic attitude, Beauvoir begins to offer a concrete analysis and application of her ethics, examining both the sources and possible subversion of

oppression and the significance of the past. First, in response to critics who maintain that existentialism cannot yield a practical or applicable ethics, she argues that an existential ethics *can* offer guidelines for concrete action. This is because willing one's freedom (at least in the way that Beauvoir envisions it) requires that one project oneself into the world. As Beauvoir puts it, the human "project toward freedom is embodied...in definite acts of behavior" (*EA* 78). Furthermore, these projects or engagements in the world—whether they take the form of scientific discoveries, artistic achievements, or political action—not only give meaning to the assumption of one's freedom but also "people the world concretely" so as to open possibilities for others to assume their freedom (*EA* 81). So while Beauvoir's ethics might not offer guidelines that *pre-determine* whether an action is "right or wrong," or "permissible or impermissible"—and Beauvoir explicitly refuses to create such an ethics—her ethics nonetheless offer more general guidelines that can direct people's decisions when they consider the particularity of their circumstances and the ways in which their actions will affect the freedom of others.

At this point, Beauvoir turns to a situation that illustrates both the limitations of freedom and the liberatory possibilities of an existential ethics such as hers. In particular, she examines the sources, conditions, and potential subversions of oppression. She notes that it is only because human beings are *interdependent*—only because our possibilities for freedom depend upon the future that others open up for us—that oppression is possible (*EA* 82). Oppressors are "successful" because they prevent those they oppress from assuming their freedom and engaging in any sort of "constructive movement" in the world (*EA* 82-83). Moreover, oppressors are often successful when they can convince the oppressed that their situation is a natural fact and not

something imposed by other human beings. To the oppressed, then, this “fact,” would seemingly be nothing that they could surpass—only something that they must accept unquestioningly.

Beauvoir’s conception of the proper political response to oppression seems a bit perplexing at first. For instead of calling for the world to respond to oppression in the traditional (i.e. more “practical”) ways, she encourages people to “furnish the ignorant slave with the means of transcending his situation by means of revolt, to put an end to his ignorance” (*EA* 86).

According to Beauvoir, the best way for one to work to end another’s oppression, then, is to help the other become cognizant of her oppression. This work toward ending oppression not only helps to prevent one from becoming a tyrant (ignoring oppression is, according to Beauvoir, a form of tyranny) but also helps one to open up new possibilities for the oppressed and for all other human beings to assume their freedom (*EA* 86). Reiterating her conception of the relationality of freedom, Beauvoir here notes that “to want existence, to want to disclose the world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will” (*EA* 86).

Notably, Beauvoir is careful to refrain from making the overcoming of oppression a struggle that “belongs to” all human beings equally. As she puts it, the oppressed person is “more totally engaged in the struggle” than those who are not oppressed yet remain in solidarity with her (*EA* 87).<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, because the freedom (or lack thereof) of others affects one’s own possibilities for willing one’s freedom, Beauvoir asserts that one cannot “fulfill [herself] morally without taking part in” the fight against oppression (*EA* 88-89).

Matthew Braddock contends that, contrary to Beauvoir’s “subjectivist” approach to ethics, “it would be easier for her to appeal to basic human rights as objective values in order to help weigh freedom and oppression.”<sup>44</sup> As he sees it, Beauvoir makes the following (flawed)

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<sup>43</sup> This point bears some resemblance to standpoint theory.

<sup>44</sup> Braddock (2007), p. 308.

argument in her ethics: human beings desire to justify their existence; we can justify our existence only through the concrete assumption of freedom; and each person's freedom is tied to the freedom of others. The correlation between the justification of existence and the relationality of freedom is supposedly what should propel people to assume their freedom in a way that also opens up possibilities for others to assume their freedom.<sup>45</sup> Finding this approach to ethics too vague to furnish an adequate response to oppression, Braddock argues that one should instead appeal to values such as human dignity or human rights in order to fight effectively against oppression.

But appealing to *human interdependence*, as Beauvoir does, seems just as an effective a way to “weigh freedom and oppression.” Furthermore, Beauvoir's overall conception of oppression and her portrayal of the ethical responses to it do not preclude the possibility of introducing the language of human rights and dignity into the struggle against oppression. On her view, it is simply (or not so simply) the fact of the relationality of freedom that *justifies* or *grounds* the struggle itself.

This is not to say that Beauvoir's critical response to oppression is without its flaws. For while it certainly seems that her view can accommodate the language of human rights and dignity, it does not necessarily seem that her view can accommodate the oft-felt *urgency* in the struggle against oppression. In other words, if her response to oppression is simply to inspire a wave of “consciousness-raising” among the oppressed, then it might not seem as if her response is entirely practical, or even all that effective at undermining oppression.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 307.

While one might justifiably criticize Beauvoir for developing an overly intellectual response to oppression, I think that it is wrong to assume that she does not appreciate the exigency of ending oppression. In fact, she appeals to this very exigency in her account of “the antinomies of action” (which I soon describe) in order to explain why those working toward human freedom must sometimes sacrifice others’ freedom; for sometimes, the efforts to expand human freedom involves limiting oppressors’ (or those who work in the service of the oppressors’) freedom. She acknowledges the wrenching necessity of revolt and the sacrifice and ethical ambiguity that such revolt entails, but she does this all with the realization that the revolt itself belongs to the oppressed—it is not for others to take on with well-meaning paternalism. And this is why, for better or for worse, she emphasizes as she does the importance of making the oppressed cognizant of their oppression.

Complicating her view of oppression further—or rather, viewing oppression in all of its complexities—Beauvoir clarifies that one cannot realistically devote oneself to the termination of all oppressive situations. Each instance of oppression is unique and requires a correlative unique struggle. Because of the impossibility of dedicating oneself to each of and every such struggle, one must often sacrifice a cause in the service of another cause that one finds more urgent.

It is important to note here that Beauvoir’s insistence on the reality of this sacrifice is more than a mere truism. In other words, Beauvoir is not pointing out the obvious fact that out that no one can dedicate herself to every single struggle against oppression. She also reveals that 1) ethical and moral action require sacrifice, and perhaps even failure, on the part of the individual and 2) one should not approach the struggle against oppression in terms of generalities but instead in terms of the unique and specific circumstances of each oppressive situation.

This is not to say that Beauvoir's ethics cannot accommodate an idea such as the universal freedom or liberation of all human beings. In fact, she argues that in each individual struggle against oppression, one must "seek to serve the universal cause of freedom" (EA 90). In part, seeking freedom *universally* involves ensuring that one does not fall into fanaticism or seriousness concerning one's moral projects. To become fanatical or serious about a particular moral cause would also lead one to become separated or isolated from other human beings. And in regard to this point, Beauvoir clarifies that such separation would *not* allow a person to expand his freedom. In other words, one might think that ignoring the freedom of others would give one the justification and unbridled freedom to do whatever one likes. To the contrary, Beauvoir maintains the recognizing the freedom of others is crucial to one's own freedom. As Beauvoir puts it, "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (EA 91). This is because acting freely involves "surpassing the given toward an open future," and the future is made open only by the decisions and actions made by other people (EA 91).

At this point, the temporal aspects of Beauvoir's ethics become increasingly apparent. For although she emphasizes the "givenness" of the present and the openness of the future, this does not mean that she devalues the significance of the past. For while she does criticize conservatism as a "serious" dedication to the past, she also acknowledges that "to abandon the past to the night of facticity is a way of depopulating the world" (EA 92). Although this statement may seem a bit melodramatic, its importance lies in the fact that Beauvoir connects each individual not only to the people of the present but also to the people of the past. In other words, the relationality of human beings extends across both time and place. The freedom and projects of those who lived in the past have opened up possibilities (and, in some cases, have



limited the possibilities) for people of the present to assume their own freedom. The actions taken by those in the past affect the freedom of those in the present and even those in the future. And so, to illustrate, the legacy of slavery in the United States has affected the “possibilities for freedom” for African-Americans by creating a persistent state of racism-fueled oppression, even 150 years after slavery ended. And the decisions that nations and individuals make today—whether in regard to immigrants, indigenous populations, women, gay men, lesbians, transgender people, children, Muslims, Christians, or Jews—will continue to affect the “possibilities of freedom” not only for people living presently but also for future generations.

Beauvoir does concede that it is sometimes necessary to “sacrifice” the past for the future, offering the example that directing public funding toward the improvement of schools and education can be preferable to rehabilitating old buildings (*EA* 94). In other words, there are no hard and fast rules that privilege one temporal location over another. Accordingly, and in line with the rest of her argument, the decision of whether or not to make such a sacrifice depends upon the particularities of the circumstances (i.e. the exigency of the situation, the needs and freedom of those involved, etc.) that one is evaluating.

In this chapter’s third section, “The Antinomies of Action,” Beauvoir explores the ways in which the struggle for freedom and its expansion can lead the moral agent to failure, sacrifice, and surprising consequences. She begins this section with an examination of the tensions that can arise when the oppressed revolt against their oppressors. Just as oppressors reduce those they oppressed to their facticity—that is, just as they treat the oppressed as *things*—so too must the oppressed objectify their oppressors during a revolt. It is worth noting here that Beauvoir is referring primarily to a *violent* revolution, one in which those doing violence to their oppressors cannot help but become “masters, tyrants, and executioners... a blind force, a brutal fatality” (*EA*

97). This treatment of oppressors signifies a tension in Beauvoir's ethics because, echoing one form of Kant's categorical imperative, her ethics demand that people *not* treat others as things: it demands that people value and promote the freedom of others. Nevertheless, this is also a point at which Beauvoir's ethics radically diverges from Kantian ethics, for Beauvoir recognizes that the promotion of human freedom sometimes requires one to treat an oppressor as a thing, to reduce her to her facticity. In other words, ethical agency sometimes requires a momentary sacrifice of one's ethical principles. And this might very well be a unique theoretical strength of an ethics of ambiguity: for Beauvoir's ethics are flexible, in flux, and responsive to the singular circumstances in which one is evaluating or deciding or acting.

But one could argue that this "sacrifice" signifies an inconsistency in Beauvoir's ethics. In other words, because the concept of promoting others' freedom is central to Beauvoir's ethics, it may seem problematic that the promotion of others' freedom sometimes requires explicitly *limiting* others' freedom. This ethical "tension," however, could also illustrate yet another way in which the ambiguity of the human situation can surface. And in this respect, this tension *preserves* and does not undermine the principal tenets of Beauvoir's ethics. For at the same time that one is working to undermine oppression and thereby expand the possibilities for others' freedom, one may also *limit* the freedom of and even *dehumanize* the oppressor against whom one revolts—and this very tension illustrates some of the ambiguities (subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and servitude, etc.) that Beauvoir characterizes as central to her ethical project.

Considering yet another tension—and potential sacrifice—that can occur in the revolt against oppression, Beauvoir notes that young people often participate in oppressive regimes, carrying out the orders of tyrannical leaders. But as she points out, "when a young sixteen-year-

old Nazi died crying, ‘Heil Hitler!’ he was not guilty, and it was not he whom we hated but his masters” (*EA* 98). As she explains, in less exigent circumstances one might prefer to re-educate this young person rather than to sacrifice him in the name of the struggle against oppression. Notably, this hesitancy to place the ultimate “blame” on the youthful followers of oppressive leaders is consistent with Beauvoir’s claim that the ability to recognize and assume one’s freedom is a learned process that only *emerges* in adolescence. Nonetheless, Beauvoir admits that the process of re-education and demystification is a “slow labor” that impedes the urgency of the revolt (*EA* 98).<sup>46</sup> In this respect, those who struggle against oppression may need to sacrifice those who follow oppressive leaders, regardless of whether those followers are ignorant or under constraint (*EA* 98).

According to Beauvoir, these sorts of tensions—namely, the objectification of oppressors and the sacrifice of ignorant or constrained followers of oppressors—point to a more general failure inherent in the struggle against oppression. As she puts it, “no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men” (*EA* 99). In the struggle against oppression, one always assumes the risk of limiting others’ possibilities for freedom, especially in the cases of the oppressors and their followers. This ever-present possibility of ethical “failure,” Beauvoir notes, is often masked by ethical doctrines that prescribe precise guidelines for action or that promote universal solutions to ethical problems (*EA* 99). On the contrary, Beauvoir insists on incorporating this failure into her very ethical framework. Her response is not to (attempt to) eliminate this failure but rather to call moral agents to be cognizant of it: to recognize it as a manifestation of the ambiguity of the human situation. And, to reiterate, this

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<sup>46</sup> Admittedly, her rejection of this “slow labor” in this instance might make one question why she nevertheless prefers the slow labor of helping the oppressed to be cognizant of their situation and to assume their moral freedom *before* helping them to engage in a revolt against their oppressor.

seems to be a particular strength of her ethics: its principles are articulated, but not immovable. Its goals are universal, without sacrificing particularity and uniqueness.

One of the reasons that the aforementioned tensions entail an ethical “failure” is that whether by objectification or sacrifice, they hinder others’ abilities to achieve transcendence.

More disturbingly, this sort of hindrance is one of the hallmarks of the oppressor’s tactics.

Beauvoir describes just how oppression can limit one’s possibility for transcendence as follows:

Reduced to pure facticity, congealed in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things which can be subtracted from the collectivity of other things without its leaving upon the earth any trace of its absence. (*EA* 100)

She goes on to explain that even when multiplied by the thousands, these “things among things,”

these human beings reduced to their pure facticity, remain utterly insignificant to the oppressor:

“mathematics also teaches us that zero multiplied by any finite number remains zero” (*EA* 100).

Worth noting, however, is that the moral agent and the oppressor cannot be collapsed into one

comparable ethical failure just because they both hinder the transcendence of other human

beings. While the moral agent’s movement toward transcendence is always “other-directed”—

that is, while the moral agent works to open up possibilities for others to assume their freedom—

the oppressor “retains for himself the only aspect of a transcendence which is capable of

justifying itself” and views others only in terms of their “contingent and unjustified immanence”

(*EA* 102). The moral agent assumes her failure yet works for the ultimate promotion of human

freedom, thereby offering some justification for her treatment of oppressors. The oppressor, on

the other hand, has no ethical justification for the ways in which she limits the freedom of others.

Taking up these ideas, Beauvoir reaffirms the importance of the individual’s subjectivity and particularity and their role in her ethical framework. For one, she maintains that the world

itself is devoid of significance unless it is populated by individuals who are themselves significant—who are significant to others, and who also afford meaning to the world in which they live. She establishes this point further by declaring that “in order for this world to have any importance, in order for our undertaking to have a meaning and to be worthy of sacrifices, we must affirm the concrete and particular thickness of this world and the individual reality of our projects and ourselves” (*EA* 106). In this respect, Beauvoir preserves both the uniqueness and the relationality of the individual, each of which helps to give meaning to the world and to the projects that each individual undertakes.

Beauvoir is careful at this point to clarify that the relationality of the individual does not entail a “collectivist conception” of the human being (*EA* 108). As she sees it, such a conception would preclude the possibility of “such sentiments as love, tenderness, and friendship” (*EA* 108). To explain, without the particularity and uniqueness of each individual, human relationships would be interchangeable and somewhat meaningless rather than irreplaceable and meaningful. In fact, Beauvoir maintains that the death of those we love would not be seen as an “individual and irreducible misfortune” if it was not for the particular and unique ties that bind individual persons to one another (*EA* 108). It is because of people’s recognition of their differences—because of their recognition of their own and others’ particularity—that they can enter into relationships in which “each one becomes irreplaceable for a few others” (*EA* 108).

Beauvoir’s conception of the bonds between human beings is meant to illustrate the ambiguity of the human situation. For just as each person tied to all others—and just as each person surpasses herself *toward* others in her attempts to assume her freedom—each one also acts and “exists absolutely as for himself” (*EA* 112). As Beauvoir further explains, “each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects” (*EA*

112). Echoing her initial articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation, each person experiences herself as both subject and object, both as solitary actors and as members of a collective world. This ambiguity reveals one of the ways in which the relationality of the human being in no way precludes each person from acting as an individual. Correlatively, it reveals one of the ways in which each person's individuality in no way suggests that any person can be totally isolated or "free from" other human beings.

Thus affirming the significance of the bonds between human beings, Beauvoir goes on to explain that her conception of these bonds should not lead one to assume a utilitarian ethics. As she sees it, utilitarianism esteems a universal and absolute utility based on each person taking all of humankind as its "cause" or central focus, and Beauvoir rejects this level of universality and absolutism (*EA* 112). For on the utilitarian view, "what is useful is what serves Man"; but on Beauvoir's view, there is no "universal Man" (*EA* 112-113).

This is not to say that the utility of certain actions or behaviors plays *no* role in Beauvoir's ethics. In fact, she acknowledges that her justification for sacrifice in the struggle against oppression is that sacrifice's utility. Beauvoir notes, however, that her conception of the justification of sacrifice creates an "antinomy of action" (*EA* 113). For one might sacrifice one's commitment to non-violence, or even another *person*, all in the name of upholding yet another value or even the very possibility for others to assume their freedom. In other words, though sacrifice may sometimes be useful, and even necessary, it may also demonstrate the inability for a person to maintain all of her values at all times.

At first blush, her justification of sacrifice seems to appeal to a universal conception of humankind that she ultimately rejects. Instead of trying to integrate such a conception into her ethics, however, she explains that the justification of sacrifice appeals to a fractured conception

of humankind: in other words, its utility is not grounded in the goal to benefit the greatest number of people but instead depends on opening up the greatest possibilities for others to assume their freedom. Considering human beings as faceless aggregates for whom to mete out utility is *not* one of Beauvoir's ethical priorities. Offering concrete possibilities for individual human beings to assume their freedom *is*.

Re-emphasizing the precariousness and inherent failure involved in ethical action, Beauvoir thus acknowledges that serving one group of people can also lead one to do *disservice* to yet another group of people. Rather than assuming a principle of utility or happiness to be a tool for "choosing" between the two groups of people, Beauvoir instead contends that freedom is the supreme end to which all other ends and principles are subordinated (*EA* 113). Utility, then, is a proximate or secondary value in Beauvoir's ethics—it is not as central a value as moral freedom or particularity or even acceptance of the ambiguity of the human situation.

Beauvoir next considers how various conceptions of the present and the future either 1) lead to seriousness and/or help to justify the oppression or 2) facilitate the assumption of freedom. She first points out that the term 'future' tends to have two connotations that correspond to the ambiguity of the human situation. One connotation corresponds to the trajectory of a person's projects. As Beauvoir describes it, when a person considers her future, she "considers that movement which, prolonging my existence of today, will fulfill [her] present projects and will surpass them toward new ends" (*EA* 115). In this respect, the present and the future compose a "single temporal form" in which one engages in, realizes, and then surpasses one's projects. The other connotation of the future, however, corresponds to a sort of reified vision of time in which the future is not a prolonging of the present but is instead an ultimate and final end or goal that descends upon the world in some sort of cataclysmic fashion (*EA* 115-116).

Beauvoir notes that both religions (particularly Christianity) and political movements (including socialism) offer such conceptions of the future. As she sees it, the danger involved in viewing the future as such is that the present becomes something that must be eliminated in service of the “permanence of future being” (EA 117). What makes this possibility morally dangerous is that one can use such a view of the future to justify some presently occurring oppression. To explain, if the present is simply some ephemeral moment that must be eliminated in service of some permanent end in the future, and if oppression and/or violence are the most efficient means by which to reach that end, then those specific instances of oppression and violence are justified by the end(s) that they serve. The present, then—and those people who live in the present—can thus be sacrificed *for* the future.

One could argue that this position is inconsistent with Beauvoir’s earlier justification of the violence and sacrifice that sometimes must occur in order to promote human freedom. In other words, if Beauvoir challenges a reified or constricted view of the future on the grounds that one can use that view to justify oppression and violence, why does she nonetheless maintain that violence and the subjugation of oppressors can sometimes be justified? In other words, why does she permit the use of violence in order to promote human freedom yet rebuke the use of violence in order to attain some permanent, utopian, or otherwise propitious future?

The difference between these justifications of violence and/or oppression is based on both the ends for which they strive and the circumstances in which that violence is justified. For one, the person assuming her freedom in the way that Beauvoir describes uses violence in order to combat oppression and to promote human freedom. According to Beauvoir, these ends—particularly the promotion of human freedom—justify the use of said violence. The person with the reified view of the future, however, uses violence and oppression in order to reach some



permanent future and contends that this very future justifies their violent actions. So while one serves the cause of human freedom, the other the cause of a permanent future. For Beauvoir, one end is moral, the other morally misguided (and even on the verge of the “serious”). Furthermore, Beauvoir’s moral agent remains cognizant of the ambiguity of the human situation and acknowledges the ethical tensions that occur when one engages in violence. Those who view the future in its permanence, however, sacrifice others in the service of an absolute value or goal, thereby obscuring or denying the ambiguity of the human situation.

Beauvoir further articulates her criticism of a reified view of the future by suggesting that those who “project themselves toward a Future-Thing submerge their freedom in it and find the tranquility of the serious” (*EA* 117). This tranquility is won, however, at the cost of one’s (and others’) freedom. To assume one’s freedom—and to promote the freedom of others—one must instead incorporate the ambiguity of the human situation into her ethical decision-making by realizing that 1) the desire to flee from one’s freedom and to lose oneself in a thing (such as the future) is never-ending, so 2) the struggle to will one’s freedom is simultaneously never-ending. As Beauvoir puts it, “the plane of hell, of struggle, will never be eliminated; freedom will never be given; it will always have to be won” (*EA* 119). There will never be a “final” future in which this struggle is eliminated. Instead, one must decide and act in a way that affirms both the “concrete thickness of the here and now” and the trajectory of one’s acts toward a future in which one will surpass those very acts with new projects and new ways of assuming one’s freedom (*EA* 122). With this in mind, Beauvoir reiterates both the precariousness and the fundamental responsibility of the ethical and/or moral agency that she describes:

...the man of action, in order to make a decision, will not wait for a perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice; he must first choose and thus help fashion history. A choice of this kind is no more arbitrary than a

hypothesis; it excludes neither reflection nor even method; but it is also free, and it implies risk that must be assumed as such. (*EA* 123)

The ambiguity of the human situation is, in part, what makes this ethical precariousness possible. Notably, Beauvoir is careful to point out that this ambiguity—one of the central concepts of her text and of her general ethical framework—should not be confused with *absurdity*. If the human condition were absurd, she asserts, then one would *never* be able to give meaning to existence. On Beauvoir's view, this would make ethics impossible. On the other hand, to say that the human situation is ambiguous does not entail that existence *cannot* be meaningful. Instead, it requires that human beings *give meaning to* existence. As Beauvoir puts it, "to say that [existence] is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must constantly be won" through human projects (*EA* 129).

Continuing to caution against the serious man's flight from freedom, Beauvoir emphasizes again that those acting within the ethical framework she articulates must refrain from concealing both the ambiguity of the human condition and the tensions that result from that ambiguity (i.e. the "antimonies of action"). In fact, she contends that the person who assumes her freedom must recognize those tensions as permanent tensions. At this point in the text, Beauvoir finally articulates just how one integrates this recognition into one's moral behavior, claiming that "morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (*EA* 133). It is this very questioning which, according to Beauvoir, distinguishes the tyrant or the oppressor from the moral agent. Moreover, it is this questioning which helps to explain further why the violence of the moral agent can be justified yet the violence of the tyrant not. For while the tyrant "rests in the certainty of his aims" and refuses to question or re-examine his ends and the means he uses to attain them, the moral agent (or the "man of good will," as Beauvoir describes

him here) perpetually asks whether his means and ends are truly opening up possibilities for the liberation of all human beings (*EA* 133-134).

Anticipating the objection that this way of integrating the ambiguity of the human situation *into* an ethics leaves that ethics without any clear directives for action, Beauvoir responds that such an objection “falls into a naïve abstraction” (*EA* 134). The “naïve abstraction” is the view that an ethical system can and should provide answers or solutions to ethical problems without taking into account the unique circumstances that contextualize those problems. It is the view that ethics should be fundamentally universal, and that all ethical problems are fundamentally generalizable. In this respect, such an abstraction ignores the ambiguities and tensions that always already accompany each human circumstance. Beauvoir sums up her response to this objection by asserting that “ethics does not furnish any recipes” for moral action (*EA* 134). It is up to each individual to decide for herself what her moral actions will be. What’s more, it is up to each individual to actively *avoid* approaching ethics as if it were entirely universal and as if her ethical problems were entirely generalizable.

Illustrating this point, Beauvoir later examines some examples that demonstrate not only how the particularity of various circumstances can lead to different ethical decisions but also how the relationality of one’s freedom can vary based on one’s changing circumstances. In one example, she states that it is “right” for a friend to save a person who tried to overdose and who later went on to become a happy mother of a family, yet is wrong (and “torturous”) for doctors to keep alive patients who have “tried to commit suicide twenty times” (*EA* 142-143). On the one hand, one could argue that Beauvoir offers a faulty and even inconsistent evaluation of these circumstances. She seems to judge the former case based on its apparently unforeseen happy consequences, yet she seems to judge the latter case based on one’s knowledge of the events leading

up to the moment of ethical decision. One evaluation is future and consequence-directed, and the other is based on one's knowledge of the past (and on what one takes to be "torturous," for that matter). On the other hand, Beauvoir introduces these examples by declaring that "we must evaluate each circumstance individually" (*EA* 142). Echoing her claim that ethics cannot (and should not) furnish recipes for action, this declaration might help to respond to the aforementioned criticism (although the criticism is certainly warranted). In some cases, one must decide based on a potential future. In others, one must decide based on one's knowledge of the past. This in no way implies that Beauvoir offers a consequentialist ethics. Although the standards and circumstances for ethical judgment might seem to vary from situation to situation in the examples that Beauvoir gives, the crucial point of her ethics remains constant in each one of these examples: one must act in a way that promotes human freedom. Furthermore, one must do so in a way that honors the fundamental ambiguity of the human situation.

Beauvoir ends this chapter—and the book—with a final assessment of the ways in which her ethics incorporates individualism and relationality, ethical "success" and "failure," and universality and particularity. Responding to the question of whether or not her ethics is individualistic, Beauvoir claims that it *is* individualistic in how it accords ultimate responsibility to each person for assuming her freedom and opposing "totalitarian doctrines which raise up beyond man the mirage of Mankind" (*EA* 156). On the other hand, she clarifies that one must not confuse this sense of individualism with solipsism. For Beauvoir's conception of the individual is fundamentally relational: "the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others" (*EA* 156). This relationality is not a matter of choice but a matter of one's condition. In other words, while a person can be narcissistic and

even exhibit solipsistic *behavior*, these behaviors in no way negate the ways in which that person is always already tied to other human beings—the very possibility of our moral *freedom* is always already tied to other human beings.

Offering a final word on the roles that contingency and failure play in her ethics, Beauvoir then asserts that “a conquest of this kind is never finished” (*EA* 157). The “conquest” to which she refers here is the ethical movement that she has described throughout the entire text. The assumption of one’s freedom, the willing of one’s projects, the promotion of human freedom: these quests are never-ending. But the fact that one cannot reach an ultimate ethical “triumph” does not mean that one should either give up on the ethical movement or obscure the failure that is involved in that movement. Instead, Beauvoir contends that one must “struggle against [that failure] without respite” (*EA* 157). To engage in the struggle in the way that Beauvoir envisions, one must also refrain from allowing one’s values to reach the plane of universal abstraction. As she puts it, “as soon as one considers a system abstractly and theoretically, one puts himself, in effect, on the plane of the universal, thus, of the infinite” (*EA* 158). And this is dangerous because it falls prey to the “ethics” of the serious—of those who fail to appreciate the uniqueness and subjectivity of human beings and the singularity of people’s circumstances.

Beauvoir does concede that this move to the universal and the infinite can ultimately lead to a sense of personal tranquility. But this tranquility only useful for academic contemplation and is “won” at the expense of concrete, lived experience. To this effect, Beauvoir illustrates this contrast between her ethical “system” and the traditional universalized ethical systems by recounting her first encounter with the Hegelian system:

I remember having experienced a great feeling of calm on reading Hegel in the impersonal framework of the Bibliotheque Nationale in August 1940. But once I

got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it had offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men. (EA 158)

It is not some abstract conception of the human being but rather real, lived experience and other real, living human beings that demand an ethics such as Beauvoir's.

### Situating The Ethics of Ambiguity among Beauvoir's other texts

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In this section, I examine in more detail three of Beauvoir's other works: *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*), *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and *The Second Sex*. On the one hand, exploring these texts helps to provide a more dimensional understanding of Beauvoir's argument(s) in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The first two texts help to provide literary and philosophical contexts for her arguments, and the last text offers a glimpse of what one could interpret as an application of her theoretical positions. On the other hand, examining these texts also helps to provide a *counterpoint* to some of Beauvoir's positions in her ethics. For instance, some of Beauvoir's positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* seem to depart markedly from portions of *L'Invitée* and *The Second Sex*. Understanding these differences—and working to dispel confusion over these differences—both highlights important transitions in Beauvoir's thinking and clarifies often misunderstood moments in Beauvoir's work. For purposes of this project, I focus on the transitions and clarifications that pertain to Beauvoir's understanding of the relationality of the self and human freedom and how this relationality plays a role in ethical action.

Worth noting is that my choice of these three texts is more of a strategic move than an historical one.<sup>47</sup> In other words, by choosing these texts, I do not intend to suggest that they are

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<sup>47</sup> In her analysis of Beauvoir's ethics, Kristana Arp examines the texts that precede the writing of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in order to situate Beauvoir's ethics *historically* and philosophically. While the spirit of our arguments

the only texts that are historically relevant to Beauvoir's arguments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, nor do I intend to suggest that they are even the *most* historically relevant to her arguments. Instead, I contend that an examination of these three texts provides the best foundation for my own argument about the relevance of Beauvoir's *Ethics* to contemporary feminist theorizing about the self, autonomy, and ethics. For as I see it, *L'Invitée* presents the most stark example of Beauvoir's initial lack of appreciation for human relationality; *Pyrrhus and Cineas* serves as a prototype for some of the ideas she articulates in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; and *The Second Sex* is simply the work for which she is currently most well known.

I turn first to Beauvoir's first novel, *L'Invitée (She Came to Stay)*, originally published in 1943. Many critics and interpreters of Beauvoir's literary work consider this novel to represent Beauvoir's most solipsistic conception of the human being. This leaning toward solipsism is immediately apparent in the Hegelian epigraph that Beauvoir chooses for the novel: "Each conscience seeks the death of the other." And as is apparent by the novel's end, this epigraph points not only to the movement of the Hegelian dialectic but also to the *literal* way in which one seeks out the death of another.

The story itself is set in World War II Paris and revolves around a love triangle between the three main characters: Xavière, François, and Pierre. Pierre and Xavière are lovers who have a decidedly "open" relationship—one in which each partner is free to take on other lovers without reproach from the other. Nonetheless, when François arrives in Paris from the French countryside and not only befriends the couple but also becomes one of Pierre's lovers, Xavière becomes intensely jealous. As this jealousy builds—and as Pierre often provokes this jealousy—

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may be in alignment with one another, the goals of our arguments are somewhat different: hence my choice to narrow the scope of the additional works of Beauvoir that I examine. See Kristana Arp. *The Bonds of Freedom*. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2001.

Xavière does, quite literally, “seek out the death of the other.” In fact, at the novel’s end, Xavière murders François, demonstrating the triumph of her freedom:

Her act was her very own. *I have done it of my own free will.* It was her own will which was being fulfilled, now nothing separated her from herself. She had chosen at last. She had chosen herself.<sup>48</sup>

The novel’s message about freedom, then, seems to be that the freedom of the other is a fundamental *threat* to one’s own freedom.

But while Beauvoir emphasizes the tension between the subject and the other in *L’Invitée*, she instead emphasizes the interdependence of the subject and the other in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Many critics of existentialism, however, attribute only the former position to existentialist thinkers, claiming that existentialism offers solipsistic and/or atomistic conceptions of the self, freedom, and ethics. Attributing these views to Beauvoir, however, ignores the shift in her thinking that occurred between the writing of *L’Invitée* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. As such, noting this shift helps to clarify the ways in which Beauvoir’s original views of the self, freedom, and ethics (and the views often attributed to existentialist philosophers) differ from her analysis of these same concepts in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Furthermore, noting this shift helps to distinguish Beauvoir from *other* existentialist philosophers (including Sartre), a distinction based primarily on the emerging relationality of her philosophical views.

In fact, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir herself ensures that her reader does not conflate the *individualism* of her ethics with a sort of ethical *solipsism*:

[An ethics of ambiguity] is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him. (*EA* 156)

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<sup>48</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. *She Came to Stay*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1990. (originally published as *L’Invitée* in 1943.)



And as I pointed out in my historical analysis of the text, Margaret Simons attributes this transition in part to the influence that the Nazi occupation of Paris had on her thinking. (To reiterate, Beauvoir wrote *L'Invitée* toward the beginning of the war, and she wrote and published *The Ethics of Ambiguity* after the war's end.)

It is also important to distinguish *The Ethics of Ambiguity* from one of Beauvoir's early philosophical works, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. Published in 1944, three years before the publication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, this essay in some ways foreshadows parts of Beauvoir's *Ethics*. On the other hand, it also retains some of the solipsism apparent in Beauvoir's earlier works. Thus, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* serves as a bridge between Beauvoir's solipsistic and relational "periods," helping one to track some of the changes that occurred in her philosophical positions during the 1940s.

For example, while Beauvoir does emphasize certain relational aspects of the human being in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she still imagines the moral agent as an isolated, singular person establishing her values in the world.<sup>49</sup> In fact, she does not even accept human intersubjectivity as a "given" in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, emphasizing instead that "the inert existence of things is separation and solitude. There exists no ready-made attachment between the world and me."<sup>50</sup> In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, Beauvoir places greater emphasis on the ways in which the individual always wills her values in a social and relational context. This is not to say that Beauvoir denies that the moral agent acts *as* an individual in her later ethics. Rather, Beauvoir's conception of ethical agency in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* underscores what she considers the ambiguity of the human situation: the moral agent is both subject of her action and object for

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<sup>49</sup> Beauvoir (1944), p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

other people's actions. She is both an individual and is tied to a world of others. She is both an independent actor in the world and dependent upon others to receive and respond to her projects and actions (*EA* 8-9). So, unlike the individual of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, the individual of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is always relationally situated and always attached to the world around her.

Notably, however, Beauvoir does emphasize in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* the *particularity* of the attachments that individuals have to one another. Resisting the moral platitude that "all men are my brothers," Beauvoir instead asserts that "multiplying the ties that bind me to the world by infinity is a way of denying those that unite me to this singular minute, to this singular corner of the earth."<sup>51</sup> In this respect, one can still trace Beauvoir's emphasis on human relationality back to parts of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. For instance, after describing the solitary moments that occur in person's day, Beauvoir muses that one often feels the need to recount those moments to one's friends—to make one's life exist "for others" in addition to oneself. So even though Beauvoir spends parts of this essay contemplating the *inaccessibility* of the other, it seems in this brief moment that she also recognizes the human need to reach out toward others in the face of this inaccessibility.

But Beauvoir's contemplation of this need to reach out toward others goes beyond the simple idea that human beings often find solitude "unsatisfying."<sup>52</sup> Anticipating her arguments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that the relationality of human beings helps to establish each person's freedom. In fact, offering a metaphorical representation of the interconnection of human freedoms, Beauvoir maintains that "our freedoms

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.

support each other like the stones in an arch, but in an arch that no pillars support.”<sup>53</sup> And taking into account this image—an arch with no supporting pillars—this metaphor depicts both the strength and the precariousness of Beauvoir’s vision of human freedom.

I turn now to what many theorists consider Beauvoir’s most monumental work: *The Second Sex*. At first blush, *The Second Sex* offers a striking counterpoint to Beauvoir’s conceptions of immanence and transcendence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>54</sup> In her ethics, Beauvoir repeatedly calls upon human beings to acknowledge the ambiguity of their situation—an ambiguity that includes their dual experience of their physical, material objectivity and their conscious, non-material subjectivity. What’s more, given her general characterization of ambiguity and its role in ethics, Beauvoir suggests that the tensions between these dual aspects of the human experience should be neither reconciled nor obscured by privileging one form of experience over the other. Instead, she maintains that we must allow the tension and ambiguity between objective and subjective experience to remain “active,” and we must integrate *both* aspects of our experience into our ethical decision-making.

In *The Second Sex*, however, Beauvoir associates women’s bodies with a seemingly inescapable passivity—one that must be overcome by emphasizing and making social and political space for women to engage in *transcendent* activities (or activities that involve the assumption of freedom that she discusses in her ethics). This characterization of women’s bodies does not necessarily demonstrate Beauvoir refusing to *acknowledge* one aspect of the ambiguity of the human situation, but one could interpret her as coming dangerously close to

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Worth noting is that Beauvoir does not make explicit use of the contrast between the *terms* ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as she does in *The Second Sex*. Nonetheless, some of the contrasting terms or experiences to which she refers in her characterization of ambiguity at times map onto her analysis of immanence and transcendence as it first appears in *The Second Sex*.

“obscuring” or devaluing one prong of the ambiguity (i.e., the experience of one’s immanence) in order to elevate the other (i.e., one’s experience of or capacity for transcendence).

Upon closer inspection, however, I think that that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* provides a philosophical *context* for understanding *The Second Sex* in a “new way.” For instance, while Beauvoir seems to demonstrate a clear preference for the human (and especially women’s) experience of transcendence in *The Second Sex*, she emphasizes the *interdependence* of immanence and transcendence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. One can see this interdependence first in the ways that the movement of transcendence—the assumption of one’s freedom—always involves a recognition of the ways in which one’s actions affect the possibilities for transcendence for other *concrete* individuals. This is not to say that the “concreteness” of individuals refers only to their bodies or only to activities associated with “immanence.”<sup>55</sup> But this move in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* *does* acknowledge the interconnection between one’s *concrete* situation and one’s *opportunities* for activities that promote freedom and transcendence.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that this distinction exists (that is, the distinction between her view of immanence and transcendence in *The Second Sex* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) is in itself worth noting since it seems to signal a shift in Beauvoir’s thinking. More importantly, this distinction is noteworthy since it helps to address the criticism that Beauvoir does not adequately value women’s bodily experiences in *The Second Sex*. One could argue, for instance, that

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<sup>55</sup> According to Andrea Veltman, such activities are primarily “life-maintaining” activities or mechanical chores that do not give rise to constructive or creative self-expression. Andrea Veltman (2006). “Transcendence and Immanence in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir.” *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> As Gail Weiss notes, one can also see the interdependence of immanence in transcendence in the way that Beauvoir acknowledges the human ability to detach oneself from and reflect upon a situation even as one is *in* that situation. Gail Weiss (2004). “Introduction” to “Introduction to an *Ethics of Ambiguity*.” *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, p. 282.

Beauvoir's regard for and emphasis on women's transcendence in *The Second Sex* does not insinuate a parallel disdain for the immanent/bodily experience of women. Instead, her emphasis on transcendence and her "critique" of women's immanence highlights not a problem with women's bodies *per se* but rather a problem with the social constructions and treatments of women's bodies. In other words, if one takes seriously Beauvoir's apparent portrayal of the *interdependence* of immanence and transcendence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, one can interpret certain arguments from *The Second Sex* not as dismissals of women's bodies but as critiques of the ways in which women's *experiences* of their immanence are mediated by social-cultural gender constructions.<sup>57</sup> For if women's bodies are cast as sexualized objects, or as vessels for reproduction, or as any one thing that precludes the possibility of varied experiences of gender vis-à-vis one's biology, then it becomes difficult to live and choose and act in a way that *defies* the social construction of one's body. Thus, it is this very socio-cultural mediation—not women's bodies themselves—that can prevent women from achieving the sort of transcendence that Beauvoir advocates both in *The Second Sex* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>58</sup>

Beauvoir addresses these concerns in her ethics. She claims that even though the assumption of one's freedom and the casting of oneself into the world are shaped in part by one's physiological possibilities, "the body itself is not a brute fact" (*EA* 41). She goes on to explain that although the body "expresses our relationship to the world...it *determines* no behavior" (*EA*

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<sup>57</sup> Kristana Arp notes that interpreting *The Second Sex* in terms of women's *experience* of their bodies (as opposed to women's bodies themselves) reflects the phenomenological roots of Beauvoir's thinking. Specifically, it reflects Merleau-Ponty's influence on Beauvoir's thought. Kristana Arp (1995). "Beauvoir's Conception of Bodily Alienation." *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 165.

<sup>58</sup> See also Judith Butler (1989). "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution." *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*. eds. A. Garry and M. Pearsall. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.

41, emphasis in the original).<sup>59</sup> A woman's body, or a brown body, or a disabled body, or a large body is not a predictor of any one type of being-in-the-world. On the other hand, social constructions of these (and other) bodies do much to impinge upon the ways in which the world responds *to* people's bodies. In this way, the social perception of one's body can do much to impinge upon a person's ability to assume their freedom.

Andrea Veltman pursues this line further, arguing first that Beauvoir's conception of immanence as it appears in *The Second Sex* does not even map onto the notion of facticity or Sartre's notion of the *en-soi* (or the "in-itself").<sup>60</sup> As she sees it, immanence refers to "the negative labor necessary to maintain human life or perpetuate the status quo."<sup>61</sup> This interpretation of immanence is supported not only by Beauvoir's (sometimes problematic) characterizations of "women's work" (i.e. child-rearing and housework) as activities that "imprison [a woman] in repetition and immanence"<sup>62</sup> but also by her characterizations of "men's work" as activities that allow one to "escape" the realm of immanent work and "assert transcendence over immanence" and "open up a future different from the past in which his roots are sunk."<sup>63</sup> In other words, it is the work associated with male and female roles—not male and

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<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Beauvoir also claims in "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" that "...just as our body is a mechanical force capable of producing definite effects in the material world yet is, at the same time, the expression of our existence, so too our actions belong to the category of material phenomena, but they are also realities that signify." p. 184. "Moral Idealism and Political Realism." trans. Anne Deing Cordero. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1945 in *Les temps modernes*, 1(2): 248-268.)

<sup>60</sup>Andrea Veltman (2006), p. 115.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115. As Veltman herself notes, this interpretation adds/reflects a specifically Marxist dimension to Beauvoir's thought.

<sup>62</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. trans. H. M. Parshley. Vintage Books: New York, 1989. p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 62.

female bodies themselves—that maps onto Beauvoir’s conceptions of immanence and transcendence.

Correlatively, Veltman maintains that Beauvoir’s conception of transcendence goes beyond Sartre’s notion of transcendence as any intentional conscious movement. On Veltman’s view, Beauvoirian transcendence refers more accurately to creative activities of self-expression, more akin to the “projects” of human freedom that Beauvoir describes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, because women are socially and culturally associated with activities of *immanence*, they are systematically cut off from activities that are not only creative and constructive but also from activities that help them to recognize their freedom and, on Beauvoir’s view, to live ethically. Moreover, because of the bodily alienation that the social construction of the female body affords to women, this very construction effectively obscures part of the ambiguity of the human situation by forcing a woman to view her *self* as alien to her body, thereby imposing an (ambiguity-obscuring) dualistic view of her mind and body upon her.<sup>65</sup> She becomes not mind and body, or mind with body, but mind vs. body. In other words, instead of experiencing her existence both *as* consciousness and body, a woman experiences her existence as consciousness *in opposition to* or *alien to* her body.

Thus, reading *The Second Sex* through the lens of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can help one to see in a new light Beauvoir’s “privileging” of transcendence over immanence in *The Second Sex*. *The Second Sex*, then, need not be read as a *counterpoint* to Beauvoir’s ethics but as a

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<sup>64</sup> Andrea Veltman (2006), p. 116.

<sup>65</sup> This is also pointed out by Kristana Arp in “Beauvoir’s Conception of Bodily Alienation.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. p. 166.

crucial point in the trajectory of Beauvoir's ethical, moral, and political thinking—and one that is better understood by taking seriously Beauvoir's arguments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.



## Chapter 3 – Relationality and the Relevance of Beauvoir’s Ethics to Contemporary Feminist Philosophy

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Many of the positions that Beauvoir articulates in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* both anticipate and/or add new dimensions to recent feminist-philosophical emphases on the relationality of human experience. Acknowledging this connection between Beauvoir’s ethics and contemporary feminist philosophy helps to extend the philosophical horizons upon which *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is read. Moreover, drawing this connection helps to set the stage for my own argument that Beauvoir’s ethics can lead to a broadened conception of the relationship between relational autonomy and ethics.

In brief, I maintain that Beauvoir portrays both a fundamentally relational view of the self and a relational view of freedom—or, in a more contemporary philosophical context, autonomy—in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In addition, I maintain that her very conception of ethical action presupposes a person’s recognition of her intersubjectivity: more specifically, a recognition of and respect for the ways in which her freedom is tied to others and to others’ freedom. To reiterate, I find that these views not only bear a strong resemblance to contemporary feminist discussions of the self, autonomy, and ethics but also have the potential to make unique contributions to those discussions. Specifically, I claim that these contributions are rooted in Beauvoir’s conceptions of the child’s situation, the particularity and complexity of human individuals, and, most importantly, the ambiguity of the human situation. As I argue, these conceptions add depth, nuance, and, especially in the case of Beauvoirian ambiguity, brand new concepts to contemporary views of the self, autonomy, and ethics. In this chapter, I focus

on the concept of relationality as it functions in Beauvoir's ethics, connecting it and situating it within contemporary feminist philosophy.

It is worth noting that the order in which I have arranged the discussions in this chapter reflects a more general view about the relationship between the self, autonomy, and ethics. On a somewhat uncontroversial level, my discussion of the self precedes my discussion of relational autonomy in order to reflect the notion that any account of relational autonomy—that is, any account of relational *self*-governance—presupposes an account of the relational self. But on a more debatable level, my discussion of autonomy precedes my discussion of ethics in order to reflect my claim that one's conception of acting freely can and perhaps should inform one's conception of what it means to act morally—or, as I characterize it, what it means to attune oneself morally to the world. I turn to this argument in Chapter 4, after considering some potential objections to the arguments that I have offered in this chapter.

### *The relational self in feminist philosophy*

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In this section, I examine the various ways in which feminists have conceived of the relationality of the self. It is important to emphasize that these conceptions are *varied*: some focus on the relationship between a *general* “society” and the self, while others focus on the effects that a person's *particular* relationships have on self-development. Some concentrate on the multiple layers of identity each person must negotiate, while others concentrate on situating the self within multiple layers of social interaction. Some emphasize the impinging aspects of our relationality, while others emphasize the ways in which the relationality of the self broadens the possibilities for human flourishing.

Despite these multifaceted articulations of the relational self, it is also important to point out that these articulations remain committed to some general ideas about the self. On the one hand, these views tend to emphasize the *interdependency* and *intersubjectivity* of human beings. Correlatively, these views reject atomistic and solipsistic views of the self. Accordingly, no matter how differently each relational theorist cashes out her or his particular views of the self, all of these views fit within a general framework that underscores the importance of human interrelatedness and criticizes conceptions of the self that dismiss or ignore this interrelatedness.

Notably, many conceptions of the relational self characterize the self more as a social, philosophical, psychological, and/or linguistic entity that helps us to articulate human agency rather than an absolutely, inflexibly, and un-changeably reified *thing*. This, of course, is not to say that these conceptions and their various manifestations are without problematic ambiguities. Diana Meyers, who advocates a specifically relational view of the self, makes note of concerns raised by J. David Velleman in regard to the ways in which theories of the self often conflate three discrete articulations of the self. According to Velleman, the conflations that often occur are between: 1) the self as a metaphysical entity that persists through time, 2) the self as a philosophical-psychological entity that describes who one is and how one regards oneself, and 3) the agential entity that *acts* in the world.<sup>66</sup> Meyers (who, to reiterate, does advocate a relational view of the self) and Velleman (who does not advocate a specifically relational view of the self) offer different responses to this problem: Velleman appeals to a mentalistic and reflexive view of the self to account for all three *discrete* “versions” of the “self”; whereas Meyers flags the importance of recognizing the corporeality and relationality of individual selves in order to

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<sup>66</sup>Diana T. Meyers (2005). “Who’s There? Selfhood, Self Regard, and Social Relations.” *Hypatia*. 20(4): 200-215. In reference to J. David Velleman (2002). “Identification and Identity.” *Contours of agency*. ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

preserve feminist commitments to embodiment, personal relationships, and political action and in order to preserve a view of relational autonomy in which the philosophical-psychological self of “self-regard” *does*, in some way, map on to the “agential self.”

While I do not intend to mitigate these differences here, it is important that I *do* respond to Velleman’s and Meyers’ shared concerns about the conflation of the various ‘self’-conceptions, particularly in regard to the way that the self functions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Their concerns represent a live argument within contemporary philosophy, and to argue that Beauvoir’s ethics can contribute to contemporary philosophy requires that I ensure that her ethics can meet the questions and concerns raised by contemporary philosophers.

As I see it (and as I explain in further detail in the subsequent section), Beauvoir conceives of the self or the person as an agent who not only acts but also wills her *values* into the world through her actions. So the self is not purely mentalistic but also *embodied*. The self is not purely individualistic but also *interdependent*. In this respect, Beauvoir bridges the gap between the agential and “self-regard” conceptions of selfhood by recognizing agency as inextricably linked *to* the ways in which one regards oneself and one’s values.

In a more general sense, relational views of the self are also committed to the notion that the self develops in and/or is in some way constituted by one’s relationships with others. Worth noting is that this distinction between self-development and constitution points to a broader distinction between social-psychological and metaphysical views of relationality.<sup>67</sup> In other words, while some theorists maintain that the self is relational in virtue of the fact that it can only

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<sup>67</sup> Linda Barclay (2000), among others, discusses this distinction in her “Autonomy and the Social Self.” *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. John Christman (2004) also points to this distinction in his critique of relational autonomy in “Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves.” *Philosophical Studies*. 117(1-2): 143-164.

develop in a relational context, others maintain (and sometimes *also* maintain) that the self is relational in virtue of its metaphysical constitution.<sup>68</sup>

While I do not intend to obscure this distinction in my outline of relational views of the self, my goal in this section—and in this chapter—is not to adjudicate the differences between these views but rather to spell out the general positions held by relational theorists. My reasons for jettisoning a closer analysis of this distinction are as follows. For one, I do not think that Beauvoir’s own work serves as a helpful tool for responding to these particular differences and thus cannot serve as a “determining factor” for choosing one view over the other. As such, emphasizing these differences too strongly would lead to a discussion that is somewhat irrelevant to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This being said, as will become apparent in my subsequent discussion of Beauvoir’s own view of the self, I *do* find that her reasons for articulating the self *as* relational are more amenable to the social-psychological (rather than metaphysical) view. In other words, Beauvoir portrays the relationality of the *self* in terms of its development rather than its constitution.<sup>69</sup> The self is a singular entity, but it is an entity made possible by social and relational forces and influences. Nonetheless, since my goal in this section is to capture a broader picture of the general themes running throughout relational conceptions of the self, I will employ an “and/or” technique (describing relational views of the self as focusing on development *and/or* constitution) in articulating these views.

With that in mind, I now turn to an examination of the similarities between the various relational conceptions of the self. In one respect, it is easier to discuss the similarities of these

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<sup>68</sup> This view is held most widely by communitarians.

<sup>69</sup> As will become apparent in subsequent sections of this chapter, however, I think one can also interpret that her views of human *freedom* as *metaphysically* or *constitutively* relational.

views of the self in terms of their negative aspects: that is, in terms of what they *reject*. For one, relational theorists reject conceptions of the self that (over)-emphasize a person's isolation from others. This is not to say that relational views deny the *singularity* of the self. In other words, they generally do not deny that there can be discrete individuals. Instead, they deny that the self can either develop and/or exist in total isolation from other human beings. Likewise, they often also reject *conceptions* of the self that obscure the important connections that exist between human beings.

In this respect, one common target of relational theorists' criticisms is the view of the self that is articulated within many parts of the liberal philosophical tradition—and this criticism here extends all the way from Hobbes to Rawls and beyond. As Marilyn Friedman points out, this view is often associated with an “abstract individualism” that conceives of the self as “atomistic, asocial, ahistorical, emotionally detached, thoroughly and transparently self-conscious, coherent, unified, rational, and universalistic in its reasonings.”<sup>70</sup> Understandably, this view is a catalyst for feminist-relational critique since it tends to obscure the interdependency and intersubjectivity of human persons, concepts that, as I have mentioned, are central to feminist models of the relational self.

One could argue, of course, that this criticism mostly depends upon a caricature of the liberal tradition, a tradition that is vast, complex, and, in recent years, more amenable to various relational conceptions of the self.<sup>71</sup> But even if more relational conceptions of the self have

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<sup>70</sup> Marilyn Friedman. “Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique.” *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. p. 42. Similarly, Friedman criticizes the ways in which this sort of conception of the self leads to conceptions of autonomy that promote traits that are antithetical to many feminist commitments.

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, the aforementioned essay by John Christman (2004) on relational autonomy and liberal individualism.

appeared in the literature within the liberal tradition within recent years, there are still significant ways in which *specifically* relational and/or feminist views of the self extend beyond the conceptions of the self as articulated within the liberal tradition.

As mentioned previously, one of the themes that unite many relational theories of the self is the notion of intersubjectivity. Alluding to Lorraine Code's conception of personhood, for instance, Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar explain that the intersubjectivity that is a feature of most relational accounts of the self (and of autonomy, for that matter) "centers on the recognition that persons are 'second persons' who only become persons in relation with others."<sup>72</sup> In this light, the development of personhood and identity is a process that can occur only within a matrix of other relationships. While this is not necessarily at odds with the self as conceived within the liberal tradition—certainly, the individual bearer of political rights can "possess" a self that has developed within a relational context—this view of the self places relationality and intersubjectivity and even embodiment at its center, *unlike* most liberal views of the self.

Similarly, as Genevieve Lloyd points out, one of the hallmarks of the relational-self view is that it recognizes the "need to highlight the connections between persons rather than what separates them, community rather than individuality, sociability rather than the solitary self."<sup>73</sup> The "need" to highlight these connections is present for various reasons. For one, those who view the self as overly individualistic, atomistic, and isolated ignore the social and interpersonal

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<sup>72</sup> Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy Reconfigured," p. 6. In reference to Lorraine Code, "Second Persons," *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>73</sup> Genevieve Lloyd, "Individuals, Responsibility, and the Philosophical Imagination," *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 112.

contexts that are *necessary* for the development of self. As such, to view the self only in isolation is to ignore the fact that the self would not even develop without its being “situated” in a constellation of social and personal relationships. Moreover, individualistic and atomistic conceptions of the self seem to de-value the social and relational components of the self’s development and flourishing to the point where these components are often obscured in accounts of the self.

One might argue that anyone who *denies* the social contexts necessary for self-development is simply offering a philosophically arcane view of the self. In other words, since accepting the social dimensions of self-development is not necessarily unique to *relational* theorists of the self, then it is unlikely that this characteristic of relational theory would help to distinguish a relational view of the self from other views. In this respect, it is important to point out the ways in which relational theories can and do elaborate upon the claim that social experience is crucial to self-development.

For instance, articulating another way to conceive of the relational self, Diana Meyers casts the self in terms of “intersectionality.”<sup>74</sup> This model emphasizes the influence that a person’s social experience has on her identity and self-development, focusing in particular on “how individuals internalize gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and ethnicity in sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, and xenophobic societies.”<sup>75</sup> Without obliterating the possibility of *individual* selves and identities, the intersectional view acknowledges that other people have a profound, inescapable, and lasting effect not only on the development of one’s self but also on

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<sup>74</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!” *Relational Autonomy: Feminists Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.



one's capacity for self-definition. And, as will become relevant in subsequent sections of this chapter, Meyers also argues that acting autonomously involves carefully negotiating between the facets of one's personal identity and the demands that one's society places on that identity in an effort to define and act from one's "authentic" desires.<sup>76</sup> In other words, like other others who construct or analyze both a relational view of the self and a relational view of autonomy, her notion of autonomy supervenes on the recognition of and response to the relationality of the self.

Without question, Meyers's conception of intersectionality is not the only way to conceive of the relational self (or of relational autonomy for that matter). Nonetheless, her account does offer a glimpse at other ways in which relational theorists articulate the relationality of identity and self-definition and development in a manner that goes beyond the general claim that social experience is somehow important to *any* conception of the self. What's more, it offers a glimpse at one of the other criticisms that relational theorists of the self often launch toward the self as conceived by the liberal tradition: namely, that the self is not a raceless, classless, sexless, genderless entity but instead is affected by, informed by, and even partially constituted by the *social* constructions and forces related to one's race, class, sex, and gender.<sup>77</sup>

Exploring yet another horizon upon which to theorize the relationality of the self (and drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt), Seyla Benhabib also underscores the importance of narrative relationality and the self in *Situating the Self*.<sup>78</sup> As she explains, the very individuation of the self and the identification of actions occur narratively. Characterizing narrativity as "the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 169.

<sup>77</sup> c.f. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" in *Feminist Legal Theory*, ed. Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

<sup>78</sup> Seyla Benhabib. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

immersion of action in a web of human relationships,” she goes on to claim that sometimes we are the authors of the narratives of our own selves and our own actions, sometimes others take on this “authorship,” and other times we take on this authorship for others.<sup>79</sup> Self-development—and perhaps the self “itself”—occurs and/or is located in a matrix sort of communicative matrix of individuals.

Susan Brison also develops a narrative conception of the self, one that requires not only a self-reflexive narrator but also an audience “able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them.”<sup>80</sup> Brison’s argument is set against the backdrop of her past trauma—a brutal rape and beating that left her nearly dead. It is also set against the backdrop of her efforts to “reconstruct” her self after these events, efforts in which Brison’s empathetic “audience” of peers, friends, family, and support group members were crucial. And what Brison theorizes from this experience is that the relationality of the self extends beyond self-development and/or self-constitution: it applies also to the ways in which others (the empathetic audience of listeners that Brison describes) are essential to the “reconstruction” of the self after that self experiences a trauma.

So, to reiterate, although relational conceptions of the self are not monolithic—some emphasize self-development while others emphasize self-constitution, some view relationality in terms of intersectionality and others in terms of narrativity, and so on—these conceptions do ascribe to some general ideas about the self and its relationship to other selves. Namely, those who advocate a “relational self view” value intersubjectivity (as opposed to atomistic

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Brison, “Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity,” *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) p. 21. Worth noting is that while J. David Velleman also casts his conception of the self in terms of reflexivity and narration, he does not emphasize the importance of the *audience* of this narration as Brison does here.

subjectivity) and interdependency (as opposed to rugged individualism). And as I explain in the subsequent section, Beauvoir emphasizes these values throughout *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

### *Beauvoir and the relational self*

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Just as many contemporary relational views of the self transcend the simple claim that social experience is necessary for self-development, Beauvoir's (relational) view of the self is more than a simple articulation of the social aspects of self-development. In fact, Beauvoir's particular way of conceiving of the relationality of the self goes beyond any conception that one can find in the contemporary (and, particularly, philosophical) literature. For one can find evidence of the relationality of her view of the self in her discussion of the child's situation, her emphasis on the particularity and complexity of each human being, and her articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation. Analyzed together, these aspects of Beauvoir's ethics demonstrate not only *that* she offers a relational view of the self but also that she offers a *unique* relational view of the self: one that has the potential to offer a novel perspective on more contemporary views of the self.

The fact that Beauvoir presents a relational view of the self becomes apparent first in her articulation of the child's situation. To explain, Beauvoir characterizes the child's situation as one in which the child finds himself "cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears as an absolute to which he can only submit" (*EA* 35). According to Beauvoir, this situation—not one's *particular* circumstances, but

the *general* circumstances of one's initial beings—is one that *all* people find themselves at the moment of their birth. It cannot be chosen, and it cannot be changed.<sup>81</sup>

Notably, simply *describing* the child as being “cast” or thrown into a world not of his own making does not illuminate the particularly relational dimensions of Beauvoir's account of the self: an atomistic, isolated conception of the self can accommodate this idea of “thrownness” too. Moreover, it does not distinguish Beauvoir's conception of the self from other (specifically feminist) interpretations of the self. On the other hand, her portrayal of the child's ensuing struggle with *ambiguity* both underscores the relationality of her view and helps to distinguish that view from other feminist views of the self.

To explain (and to echo the arguments that I covered in Chapter 2), Beauvoir conceives of the struggle with ambiguity in terms of the child's own discovery of her *intersubjectivity*. Initially, the child is given the “ready-made” values of those around her. As the child gains knowledge and freedom, however, she discovers that these values are ambiguous: their meaning is not fixed but is instead in flux, thereby reflecting the very ambiguity of the human situation. Moreover, she discovers that her relations with others reflect the very ambiguity of the human situation. For the child then begins to realize that just as others comprise a part of her own world, she comprises a part of others' worlds. Just as she intimately experiences her own subjectivity, others experience their own subjectivity; but just as she can only directly experience the materiality (and not the consciousness) of others, others can only directly experience her own materiality (and not her consciousness). Thus, she experiences herself as both subject and object; both as an individual and part of a collectivity; both as consciousness and as a material

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<sup>81</sup> In this respect, Beauvoir's characterization of the child's situation is reminiscent of Heidegger's concept of “thrownness.” Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinsin. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004.

being. According to Beauvoir, then, the recognition of one's subjectivity is a fundamentally relational exercise: it both interaction with reflection upon and acknowledgement of others.

As I see it, the very fact that the encounter with this ambiguity is so intimately connected to the realization of one's intersubjectivity helps to distinguish Beauvoir's conception of the self from contemporary feminist conceptions of the self. For according to Beauvoir, it is not simply the sociality of one's experience that contributes to the development and/or the constitution of the self. Furthermore, while there are important similarities between Beauvoir's view of the self and other current feminist views of the self, to focus only on these similarities would be to erase the distinct differences found in Beauvoir's ethics: especially when it comes to her emphasis on the ambiguity of the human situation.

In addition, the experience of the ambiguity of this sociality plays a central role in Beauvoir's (relational) conception of the self. And neither Code in her conception of "second-personhood" nor in Meyers in her conception of intersectionality nor Brison in her conception of the self-in-narration account for this ambiguity. Accounting for this ambiguity is crucial to Beauvoir: it is a central component of human experience, and to ignore or erase it would be to offer up a flawed and inaccurate portrait of the human situation.

To continue, Beauvoir expands on her articulation of the child's situation, explaining what occurs once the child has first encountered the ambiguity that she describes. After confronting the ambiguities that, she claims, are an integral part of the human situation, the child must decide whether to continue living as a child (in world that Beauvoir calls the "serious" world) or to *cast herself* into the world so as choose her values freely (EA 36). It is worth noting, however, that even as the child goes on to develop and choose "her own" values, these values are always tied to and constituted by a community. More particularly, these values are connected to

the *specific* and *concrete* community to which the child (and later, the adult) belongs (EA 39, 144). Thus, although Beauvoir emphasizes the *individual's* responsibility to will her values, she never abstracts this willing of values from its social contexts.

As Beauvoir thus conceives of it, the child discovers her subjectivity within a world of *others*: within a world of “language, customs, ethics, and values,” within a world where one’s “acts weigh upon the earth as much as those of other men” (EA 39). Accordingly, the discovery of one’s subjectivity always occurs within an intersubjective and relational context. It is never a singular accomplishment or realization. Furthermore, the continuing confrontations with ambiguity and the subsequent assumptions of (or, in some cases, flights from) one’s freedom all occur and are affected by the fundamentally relational context in which one wills one’s projects. These insights in particular are important to feminist philosophical inquiry because they broaden the significance of our relationality. For according to Beauvoir, we do not simply live among others, making decisions that affect others: the very metaphysical background of our lives is ambiguous, and this ambiguity itself colors our entire world with relationality.

Worth noting is that if one were to apply the self-development/self-constitution distinction to Beauvoir’s view, one would find that she conceives of the self’s relationality in terms of *self-development*. This is not to say that she characterizes the relationality of the self *only* as some psychological feature or achievement of selves. Rather, the relationality of the self—and, as I point out in the subsequent chapter, of one’s *freedom*—takes on an almost Kantian-transcendental feature on Beauvoir’s view. More specifically, the assumption of one’s freedom, the willing of one’s values, and the other ways in which Beauvoir characterizes ethical agency all supervene on the relationality of the self. Just how this works becomes clearer as one investigates the human confrontation with ambiguity.

To explain, Beauvoir articulates the self's (inter)subjectivity in terms of the ambiguity and precariousness of the human situation itself. As she explains, we find ourselves both as subjects and as objects in the world: we act, and we are acted upon, we are both independent and dependent. We experience both our solitude in the world and our bond with the world. We discover both "our freedom and...our servitude, [our] insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men" (*EA* 8-9). And according to Beauvoir, our responses to these tensions and ambiguities represent either the assumption of our freedom or, in the case of the serious man, the flight from freedom.

It is important at this point to note that Beauvoir's analysis of ambiguity is not simply an examination of one's discovery of nuance and "grey areas" in the systems of values that one encounters and/or upholds. Rather, the ambiguity that Beauvoir explores relates to the ways in which one encounters the fundamental ambiguity of the human *situation*. To reiterate, Beauvoir conceives of the human being as both subject and object, both independent and dependent, both significant and insignificant. These ambiguities are inescapable—one is always already enmeshed in them. Furthermore, Beauvoir's response to these ambiguities is not to "resolve" or obscure them but to embrace and accept them: to integrate a realization of these ambiguities into the precarious and fallible ways that we respond to the world (*EA* 9).

As she explains, "[man] experiences himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things" (*EA* 7). In other words, at the same time that a person can feel complete sovereignty over himself, he can also feel the overwhelming influences of others around him. Spelling out this tension further, Beauvoir describes humans as both "subjects amidst a universe

of objects” and “in turn an object for others”; we are “nothing more than individuals in the collectivity on which we depend” (*EA* 7).

This condition of the human being—this ultimately ambiguous and even precarious situation in which we all find ourselves—offers an important insight in regard to contemporary relational theorists’ view of the relationship between the self and others. Namely, Beauvoir maintains that refusing to recognize the ambiguity of our condition (that is, our simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity) creates an incomplete and, for some, mendacious depiction of the human condition. Accordingly, any analysis of the relationality of human beings that obscures this ambiguity and/or does not keep the tensions it encompasses “in play” would be, on Beauvoir’s view, fundamentally flawed—and flawed not only in a philosophical or abstract sense but in an ethical and moral sense as well. In other words, analysis and philosophy and inquiry might slip into “seriousness” just as easily as individuals do.

Worth noting is that each of the ambiguities that Beauvoir discusses hearkens to the relationality of human beings: Our actions affect others, and their actions affect us. We have shifting (and, at times, simultaneous) experiences of independence from others and dependence upon others. We can feel both alone and uniquely bound to others in the world. In this respect, Beauvoir’s relational view of the self is appropriately robust and complex, for it acknowledges how others (the “collectivity on which we depend”) play a crucial role in the development and flourishing of the self and, as will become more apparent in the subsequent sections of this chapter, in the development and exercise of autonomous agency.

It is thus *through* and *because of* Beauvoir’s characterization of the ambiguity of the human situation that she is able to offer a view of the self that is *both* relational *and* individual. Moreover, the fact that Beauvoir’s view of the self is rooted in her conception of ambiguity not



only distinguishes her view of the self from contemporary feminist views but can also help to expand the contemporary discussions of the self. Taking up Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity, one can emphasize the individuality of each human being without simultaneously advocating solipsism; and one can emphasize the relationality of each human being without simultaneously suggesting that there are no discrete individuals. Accordingly, Beauvoir's conception of the self can help to respond to criticisms of contemporary relational views of the self: criticisms that accuse such views of quashing the importance of individual subjectivity and agency at the expense of relationality and dependence. Furthermore, if one uses the concept of ambiguity to mediate these two aspects of the human self, one does not contradict oneself in maintaining that human beings are both relational and individual. Especially if one accepts Beauvoir's account of the ambiguity of the human situation (or at least accepts that the human situation is ambiguous in *some* of the ways that Beauvoir describes), then this seeming contradiction becomes instead an accurate reflection of a tension that is a fundamental part of human experience.

In this respect, what Beauvoir provides is a view of the relational self that responds to feminist (and even more general philosophical) concerns about individualism and communitarianism. Stacy Keltner nicely summarizes Beauvoir's dual response to individualists and communitarians, maintaining that "against the relations of externality of individualism, Beauvoir insists that the existent is, existentially, bound up with others. Against the internal fusion of communitarianism, Beauvoir insists that the existent is, existentially, separate."<sup>82</sup> In fact, on Keltner's interpretation of Beauvoir, the very schools of thought that advocate either atomistic individualism or communitarianism *evade* the ambiguity that Beauvoir insists human

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<sup>82</sup> Stacy Keltner, "Beauvoir's Idea of Ambiguity," *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 205

beings should confront.<sup>83</sup> On the one hand, the individualist position obscures the notion that human beings experience not only their subjectivity *but also* their “objectivity” as it relates to others’ subjective experiences. On the other, the communitarian position obscures the notion that human beings experience themselves not only as individuals *but also* as part of a collectivity.

Worth noting is that within Beauvoir’s ethical framework, these very evasions and obfuscations would constitute ethical transgressions. Recall, for instance, Beauvoir’s castigation of those “reasonable metaphysics” and “consoling ethics” that obscure or deny the ambiguity of the human situation (*EA* 8). Taking this point further, it seems that any metaphysical conception of the self that similarly obscured or denied this ambiguity would flee the ethical task that Beauvoir thinks best reflects the way that humans are situated in the world. This is because a fundamental part of this task involves *acknowledging* the ambiguity of the human situation and *integrating* it into the way that one approaches the world. Thus, any conception of the self that is “one-sidedly” individualistic (as some liberal conceptions seem to be) or relational (as some communitarian conceptions seem to be) create philosophical problems that one can interpret as specifically *ethical* problems.

In this respect, Beauvoir’s conception of the self has the potential to add an ethical and moral dimension to feminist conceptions of the relational self. To explain, Beauvoir does not simply provide good *metaphysical* reasons for accepting a relational view of the self. She also provides an *ethical* underpinning for this sort of view. In so doing, she broadens the sorts of reasons to which one can appeal when formulating a view of the self. In other words, a view of the self that reflects the ambiguity of the human situation incorporates not only our ontological

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205.

and metaphysical situation but our “situatedness” as fundamentally relational beings. Our selves are selves-among-selves.

For historical and philosophical purposes, it is worth noting that Beauvoir’s relational conception of the self departs in significant ways from Sartre’s conception of the self. In fact, Michèle le Doeuff claims that Beauvoir is able to avoid most of the masculinist elements of Sartre’s system, most obviously in *The Second Sex*.<sup>84</sup> As le Doeuff explains, Beauvoir accomplishes this task this not by offering an explicit critique of Sartre’s positions but by “approaching her investigation from the perspective of existentialist morality.”<sup>85</sup> From this perspective, Beauvoir focuses not only on human finitude but also on the construction of human values and their relationship to authenticity and freedom. Moreover, Beauvoir refrains from using the language of conquest, domination, and accusation that pervades Sartre’s writing, including his writing on the self and the Other.<sup>86</sup> Instead, Beauvoir acknowledges the ways in which others—and, more particularly, the distinction between the “I” and the other—are “constitutive of the particular mode of any given type of subject.”<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Beauvoir acknowledges a fundamentally *reciprocal* element in the relationship between the self and the Other, thereby eliminating the notion that the other is “only ever one dimension of ‘I’s consciousness.”<sup>88</sup> As le Doeuff sees it, this notion of reciprocity helps to establish a space in

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<sup>84</sup> Michèle le Doeuff. *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* trans. Trista Selous. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89

<sup>86</sup> Worth noting is that Le Doeuff does criticize Beauvoir for being “too forgiving” by blaming oppression not on particular individuals but on “the situation” itself. *Ibid.* p. 93

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p. 109

which women (and men) can work to understand sexual difference in terms other than the subordination of women to men. Thus, on le Doueff's view (and on my own view), Beauvoir poses a specifically relational view of the self *and* of the situation in which one finds oneself "thrown."

Finally, in her concluding analysis of *The Second Sex*, le Doueff tracks the development of the relationality of Beauvoir's views by noting the following changes that occurred in Beauvoir's presentation of her ideas between 1949 and the 1960s and 1970s: 1) Her use of the word 'world' changed, and 2) Her vision of subjectivity changed. To elaborate, 1) 'World' became not simply a place of meeting between consciousnesses or a place where "subjects...are subjects of a will that they impose upon others."<sup>89</sup> Instead, Beauvoir's notion of 'world' was a place that was constructed and could also be changed. 2) In that respect, Beauvoir's vision of the subject was not one of a pure will but of an "*artisan*."<sup>90</sup> And as an artisan, one can craft the world by creating laws and institutions and by willing individual projects. Thus, as I pointed out in my social-historical analysis of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in Chapter 2, Beauvoir's thoughts on the self and on individuality transitioned from a perspective in which others impinge upon and limit one's freedom to one where others not only help to make one's own freedom possible but also help to populate a world in which one can engage in projects (as an "artisan") that, as Beauvoir hopes, also help to open up possibilities for others to assume their freedom.

Accordingly, Beauvoir's contributions to the contemporary feminist discussions of the relational self need not be limited to the intriguing connections she draws between intersubjectivity and the ambiguity of the human situation. In addition to this important

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132

contribution, she also offers a view of the self in which *both* existentialism *and* (at least on my interpretation) feminism overlap. And this is a significant achievement, especially considering the ways in which interpretations of existentialist thought and thinkers often operate under the shadow of Sartrean masculinist thinking. Beauvoir liberates her ethics from this type of thinking, and in doing so she creates a moral philosophy that is both existentialist and yet that can transcend the “bounds” of existentialism in its relevance to current feminist philosophical inquiry. To reiterate, this is all made possible by her novel imagining of the ambiguity of the human situation.

#### *Relational autonomy in contemporary feminist literature*

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Although there is no unified conception of autonomy to which the term ‘relational autonomy’ refers, there is at least a general perspective that all proponents of the relational view uphold: namely, they recognize the importance of our intersubjectivity, not only as it relates to the development of our selves and our identities but also as it relates to our capacity for personal autonomy and moral and political agency.<sup>91</sup> Implicit in this recognition is the understanding that the relationships that each person shares with others—an essential component of one’s *intersubjectivity*—have a profound effect on her ability to act autonomously.

Notably, part of the motivation for advocating a relational view of the self and of autonomy is that these views acknowledge the complexities of the self and self-development, a complexity that arises from each person’s particular interaction with the world around her, and a

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<sup>91</sup> c.f. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, “Autonomy Reconfigured,” *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

complexity that is not always accounted for in non-relational views of the self and/or autonomy. For instance, as Ofelia Schutte notes, the “Enlightenment concept of individualism... fails to notice the complex, multi-layered, fragmented, contradictory aspects of the self.”<sup>92</sup> Or, as Lorraine Code points out, “the self of the liberal tradition (the autonomous bearer of rights, the rational self-conscious agent, and thence orthodox empiricist knower) has only ever existed in narrowly conceived theoretical places, abstracted from the exigencies of human life.”<sup>93</sup> These sorts of abstractions from concrete lived experience belie the profound effects that human experience and relationships have on the development of and flourishing of the self. Whether in enriching or abhorrent ways, social and interpersonal forces work to shape the self, to mold “who we are” in the eyes of others and to construct our own images of ourselves. And many feminist theorists hope to capture the significance of these forces in their accounts of relational autonomy.

In that same vein, many accounts of relational autonomy also attempt to preserve the *value* of autonomy, a concept that has been the subject of many feminist critiques, especially as it has been articulated throughout the history of philosophy. As Marilyn Friedman explains, “Many feminist philosophers have recently suggested that women find autonomy to be a notion inhospitable to women, one that represents a masculine-style preoccupation with self-sufficiency and self-realization at the expense of human connection.”<sup>94</sup> And to be fair, philosophical

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<sup>92</sup> Ofelia Schutte, “Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts.” *Women of Color and Philosophy*. ed. Naomi Zack, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> Lorraine Code, “Rational Imaginings, Responsible Knowings: How Far Can You See from Here?” *Engendering Rationalities*, eds. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgan, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 263.

<sup>94</sup> Marilyn Friedman. “Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women.” *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 35.

conceptions of autonomy have not always been clear about whether autonomy was compatible with a deep concern for relationality and intersubjectivity. In some cases, it even seemed as if autonomy was antithetical to these more relational values or concerns. But those who advocate a relational view of autonomy demonstrate that one can value the importance of self-governance and even individuality while simultaneously maintaining a respect and concern for relationality and the interconnectedness of persons. What's more, they often include what Friedman herself argues should be included in *feminist-friendly* conceptions of autonomy: namely, “paradigms of autonomy that involve female protagonists” and “narratives of autonomy that avoid stereotypically masculine traits.”<sup>95</sup>

Not surprisingly, proponents of relational autonomy generally maintain a relational view of the self, most often in one of the various forms that I described in the previous section. For if certain sorts of relationships are necessary to the development of the self, then they must also be relevant, if not also a necessary condition, for the development of autonomy. To explain, the very notion of autonomy—a term that literally means ‘self-governance’—supervenes on one’s conception of the self. If one’s conception of the self is a relational conception—and, as I hope I have made clear, relational theorists offer many compelling reasons to accept this sort of conception—then one’s conception of autonomy must also be a relational conception. Put more simply, if the self is relational, then *self-governance* will at least be grounded in relationality.

But maintaining that human beings are both fundamentally relational *and* capable of autonomous action leaves the relational view of autonomy open to criticism from more traditional perspectives. Namely, one could argue that the complexity and other-centeredness of the relational self precludes the very possibility of personal autonomy. On the relational view,

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<sup>95</sup> Marilyn Friedman. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, (2003). p. 99.

self-governance could seemingly “over-involve” the influence of others. Granting too great a significance to the role that others play in the development of the self, then, might lead one to believe that the relational self view provides a better grounding for heteronomy than for autonomy.

An examination of the historical development of the notion of autonomy in moral philosophy could lead one to make such a conclusion. As Jerome Schneewind documents in *The Invention of Autonomy*, the philosophical concept of autonomy (at least within philosophical discussions) developed out of an ongoing debate about the human relationship with God, the Church, and social institutions at large.<sup>96</sup> As his exploration reveals, initial questions regarding what we now call autonomy dealt with concerns about how the nature of God, the Church, and society might impede or otherwise affect a person’s ability to act autonomously (or, to put it less anachronistically, to have and act from a free will).<sup>97</sup> Accordingly, these discussions, while not explicitly denying the importance of relationships and their bearing on the self, nonetheless increasingly emphasized the negative space between the self and others. In other words, early accounts of autonomy focused on the self and/or the will as it occurred in isolation from others or as it attempted to separate itself from others—not as it was made possible by and flourished because of relationships with others.

Kant famously crystallizes this sort of view. In fact, his entire moral philosophy at times can appear like a defense against all empirical influences on the will, including everything from

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<sup>96</sup> Jerome Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>97</sup> As Schneewind’s book also reveals, the notion of personal autonomy developed out of another debate between the intellectualist and voluntarist traditions. Although these debates were initially concerned with the nature of God and God’s will, they nonetheless had a profound effect on the discussions about the nature of the human will.



personal inclinations to personal preservation to personal relationships.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, his conception of autonomy (as it is not only the “ground of the dignity of human nature” but also the “supreme principle of morality”) seems to view each individual human being primarily in isolation from others.<sup>99</sup> And at the very least, it does not afford much significance (if any) to the role that others may play in the development and exercise of one’s autonomy.

For example, Kant describes the autonomy of the will as “the property that the will has of being a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition).”<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, heteronomy—an almost inimical antithesis to autonomy for Kant—occurs when the will “goes outside of itself” to seek the moral law.<sup>101</sup> And although this characterization of Kant’s ethics is far too brief and glosses over the many intricate details of his work, it seems safe to say that characterizing autonomy *in terms of* one’s relationships with others would effectively transgress the Kantian conception of autonomy. As for Kant’s ethical schema, then, although a person must undoubtedly consider other people when she assesses the universality of her maxims within, her will must nonetheless possess a certain self-sufficiency and singularity (or “non-relationality”) in order for her to be considered autonomous (and not heteronymous).

Similarly, contemporary philosopher John Christman criticizes those who advocate a view of the self that is metaphysically relational (as opposed to those who advocate what he calls

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<sup>98</sup> Notably, Kant asserts in the preface to the *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals* that the “pure moral philosophy” that he seeks to develop must be “wholly cleared of everything which can only be empirical.” Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), p. 389.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 436 and p. 440.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 440.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 441. It is worth noting here that Kant is primarily criticizing those wills who seek moral laws based on the object or end of a particular action. And while he does not specifically address this sort of object or end as it relates to a person’s relationships with others, it is still significant to note the singular and isolated picture that Kant depicts of the will (and, by proxy, of the self).

a “contingent psychological claim” about the relationality of the self).<sup>102</sup> As he argues, these metaphysically social or relational conceptions of the self (upon which some views of relational autonomy are presupposed) “[run] the risk of ignoring the very variability, contingency, and temporally fluid nature of human existence that motivates the rejection of old-style individualism.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, these views can unwittingly undermine some of the very claims against atomistic individualism that motivate many of the arguments in favor of relational autonomy.

In addition, Christman criticizes those who maintain that relationality is constitutive of one’s autonomy rather than something that contributes to the development of one’s autonomy.<sup>104</sup> Specifically, he voices concerns about what he considers to be a tendency toward perfectionism in various conceptions of relational autonomy, particularly in substantive accounts of autonomy. To explain, substantive accounts of autonomy rule out the possibility that an agent can make certain types of choices autonomously, even if the processes that the agent used to make those choices meet all of the necessary and sufficient conditions for autonomy set out by an account of autonomy that does *not* put limits on the sorts of choices that a person can make autonomously.<sup>105</sup> One of the hallmark examples used to illustrate substantive accounts of autonomy is a woman who has used critical examination and other specified agential tools (*while*

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<sup>102</sup> John Christman (2004). “Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves.” *Philosophical Studies*. 117(1-2): 143-164, p. 145.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>105</sup> These accounts (advocated to varying degrees by Natalie Stoljar and Paul Benson, for instance) set limits on the *sorts of* decisions and values that a person can actually make or hold autonomously. c.f. Natalie Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition.” *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Paul Benson (1991), “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” *Social Theory and Practice* (17:385-408).

*under no coercion or manipulation*) in order to accept the norms of feminine socialization that encourage obedience and complete subservience to one's husband. Under some accounts of autonomy, this woman *would* be considered autonomous in virtue of the fact that she exercised agential tools that satisfied the conditions for autonomy—*regardless* of the content of her decision to be a subservient wife. On a substantive account of autonomy, however, because her decision results in an outcome that *precludes* autonomy in other circumstances, one cannot consider her to be autonomous—*regardless* of what sorts of “autonomy-making” agential tools she relied upon to make her decision.

Procedural accounts of autonomy, however, generally maintain that agents are considered autonomous when their decision-making or value-obtaining processes meet specific conditions. And on Christman's view, various substantive accounts of autonomy run the risk not only of allowing autonomy to exist only in an idealized state but also (perhaps paradoxically) of conceiving of autonomy in a way that requires an *obedience* to a specific normative structure. In fact, Christman thinks that a properly robust and anti-perfectionist conception of autonomy *should* allow for a person to choose *autonomously* a life of strict obedience. As he explains, so far as one can continue to reflect on the conditions in which one decides and chooses her values and “insofar as the self is socially constituted, it is counterintuitive to claim that such a *self* is only autonomous if she can break away from those very social conditions, authoritarian though they are, that constitute her being.”<sup>106</sup>

Not surprisingly, those who advocate a relational view of autonomy have a response to these concerns. What's more, they also have a response to those who accept the relational-*self* view yet remain critical of the concept of autonomy on the basis that it is somehow antithetical to

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<sup>106</sup> John Christman (2004). p. 155.

other feminist values. In “Autonomy and the Social Self,” for instance, Linda Barclay offers an account of why some (if not most) relational conceptions of the self are *not* incompatible with the idea of autonomy.<sup>107</sup> This account is in part a response to many feminist criticisms of autonomy, criticisms asserting that autonomy presupposes an overly individualistic, rationalist, and unrealistically self-reliant and self-transparent agent. As Barclay (and others) point out, however, the idea of autonomy does not preclude the idea of a social or relational self. In other words, the autonomous person need not be the mythical “rugged individual,” nor need she act from a “deep” part of herself that is separated from all other people in order to act autonomously. Instead, one can conceive of the autonomous agent as one whose self is *made possible by* and can flourish *because of* its interdependencies with other selves.

Barclay also clarifies that she is appealing to a procedural conception of autonomy, as opposed to a substantive account of autonomy. To this effect, Barclay characterizes her position as one that views autonomy as “a capacity, or the exercise of certain competencies” that enable a person to reflect critically upon his values and desires and to choose his ends and purposes accordingly.<sup>108</sup> As Barclay explains, because (procedural) autonomy hinges on a person’s reflective capacities and competencies, one need not assume that autonomy involves a person being free from external or social influence.<sup>109</sup> On the contrary, a person is autonomous when she has the ability or capacity to develop a critical (though not necessarily repudiating) response

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<sup>107</sup> Linda Barclay, “Autonomy and the Social Self,” *Relational Autonomy: Feminists Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>109</sup> Diana Meyers has also offered a compelling account of autonomy competency. See Diana T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

to these influences.<sup>110</sup> So while she conceptualizes the *exercise* of one's agency in terms of the individual, she also recognizes that agency itself would not be possible without one having a social and relational context in which that agency develop. This conception of autonomy, then, always views the self in relation to others (without thereby advocating an objectionable heteronymous view of the will).

Further exploring the connections between autonomy and the social or relational self, Barclay argues that “the fact that any of us has the capacity for autonomous agency is a debt that we owe to others.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, because each person develops and matures in the matrix of particular family relationships, the nature of these relationships also influences the development of each person's autonomy. Jennifer Nedelsky makes a similar point, arguing that what allows people to be autonomous is not the fact that they are isolated with others but that they are in relationships “that provide the support and guidance necessary for the development and experience of autonomy.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, our dependency—and later, our interdependency—on others never cease to affect our capacity for autonomy. In fact, as Barclay and Nedelsky maintain, this interdependency helps people not only to be autonomous but also to lead flourishing lives.

One can compare this process of autonomy-development to theories of individuation, including psychoanalytic theories of individuation. Although these accounts do not always

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<sup>110</sup> It is important to note, however, that not all accounts of relational autonomy accept a purely procedural conception of autonomy. Natalie Stoljar, for instance, rejects the procedural view in favor of a view that accommodates the “feminist intuition.” According to the feminist intuition, preferences influenced by oppressive norms of feminine socialization cannot be autonomous preferences. “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition.” *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Agency and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>112</sup> Jennifer Nedelsky, “Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts, and Possibilities,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1 (1989): 7-36, p. 12.

overlap with feminist goals and projects, and although some psychoanalytic accounts can be downright antithetical to various feminist commitments and concerns, it is worth noting that many aspects of relational theories of the self and of autonomy owe a great debt to psychoanalytic theory. In fact, one exceedingly important contribution that psychoanalysis makes to the relational view of the autonomy is its emphasis on (and even its simple acknowledgement of) the role of the relationship of the infant and her caregiver in the process of individuation.

D.W. Winnicott, for instance, argues that individuation is a matter of ego development in which the infant (via the “benign environment” that his mother or caretaker creates) cultivates the emotional maturity to be alone.<sup>113</sup> In particular, this means that the child can emotionally “deal with” the wish or desire for the caretaker’s continual presence even when the caretaker is *not* present.<sup>114</sup> Worth noting, however, is that the process of individuation depends upon the initial existence of the mother-infant (or caretaker-infant) relationship: without this initial relationship (or without the right sort of infant-caretaker relationship), one risks undermining the very process of individuation. In this respect, then, Winnicott’s view integrates the seeming connection between individuation and self-separateness on the one hand, and individuation and relationality on the other. In other words, his position articulates a way in which individuation (or, in light of my discussion, autonomy) actually requires certain sorts of *social* or *relational* experiences.

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<sup>113</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1965), p. 31.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Similarly, in her account of mother-child interaction and its effects on self-development, Virginia Held describes a form of individuation that offers not only a compelling characterization of the relational self but also a conception of relational autonomy that “is seen not in terms of individual autonomy but in terms of competence in creating and sustaining relations of empathy and mutual intersubjectivity.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, individuation becomes less about distinguishing or even distancing oneself from others autonomously and more about promoting one’s subjectivity *relationally*. In this respect, although Held herself remains critical of the value of individual autonomy, one can integrate parts of her argument into a view that characterizes *relational* autonomy as a competency or a skill or an achievement that occurs *within* a set of other competencies, skills, or achievements.

In fact, Diana Meyers characterizes autonomy in terms of competencies or sets of skills. Considering various and at times diffuse manifestations of personal autonomy, Meyers notes that exercising autonomy requires one to exercise a certain skill *set*.<sup>116</sup> Part of her reason for characterizing autonomy as a competency is that she also recognizes autonomy as an accomplishment: not as something that simply “happens” to someone.<sup>117</sup> And according to Meyers, in order to “accomplish” autonomy, one must be able to 1) consider and seriously entertain a variety of life plans, 2) examine and critically evaluate the feelings evoked by these plans, 3) “assess the practicality of these options...in light of relevant factual information,” 4) be attuned to and cognizant of discontent with previous plans and/or decisions, 5) be mindful of any

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<sup>115</sup> Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 60.

<sup>116</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers. “Personal Autonomy and Feminine Socialization.” *The Journal of Philosophy*. 84(11): 619-628.

<sup>117</sup> Coincidentally, in this article Meyers also considers autonomy in light of Beauvoir’s critiques of feminine socialization in *The Second Sex*.

inner conflict about one's plans, 6) be prepared to resist individual and/or social pressure to choose one plan over another, and 7) "resolve to carry out their own plans."<sup>118</sup>

Articulating yet another dimension of the various conceptions of relational autonomy, Meyers' view also requires a constant mirroring of one's self through the lens of all of the social groups to which one belongs, ranging from personal relationships to nation-states.<sup>119</sup> According to Meyers, without this perpetual recognition of the ties between oneself and others—that is, without a recognition of the relationality of the self—(her version of) autonomy is not possible. Not surprisingly, Meyers' conception of relational autonomy reflects her conception of intersectional identity—that is, the ways in which selves are affiliated with and even partially defined by their ties to social and political groups and to other persons.

Eva Feder Kittay provides yet another important perspective on relational autonomy in her articulation of the relationship between dependents and dependency workers.<sup>120</sup> To explain, Kittay characterizes dependents as those whose "needs require special attention" and dependency workers as those "upon whom the dependent persons depend."<sup>121</sup> In considering these two types of persons, Kittay offers a critique of traditional notions of autonomy (and the political evaluations of human needs, goods, and justice) that exclude experiences of vulnerability, care, and sacrifice from what is included in the range of "normal" human functioning or flourishing.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 627.

<sup>119</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers. "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!" *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>120</sup> Eva Feder Kittay. "Human Dependency and Rawlsian Equality." *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.



As she maintains, a properly robust and sensitive conception of the *social* order should “[acknowledge] dependency as an obligatory limitation of self-governance.”<sup>122</sup>

In acknowledging autonomy’s *limits*, however, Kittay does not necessarily provide reasons to *de-value* autonomy. Instead, she illustrates just why autonomy should be theorized and valued and thought about as it exists among and within a set of other concepts, skills, and competencies. In other words, theories and conceptions of autonomy are all but disingenuous if they do not acknowledge the *contexts* in which people actually *act* autonomously and the circumstances in which purely autonomous action might be (rightly) impeded.

Taking up these many multifaceted and at times conflicting views of relational autonomy, one could hardly say that there is a strict uniformity to relational autonomy accounts. But while these conceptions vary amongst one another as much as conceptions of the relational self do, these conceptions nonetheless retain significant similarities. For one, they recognize that autonomy itself develops and/or is sustained in a specifically relational context—that it is not a triumph of rugged individualism but instead is an achievement or competency or set of skills or agential exercise made possible in part by one’s relationships with others. In addition, they simultaneously value both the importance of interpersonal relationships associated with relationality and the self-realization associated with autonomy. In doing so, they help to preserve the value of autonomy without thereby de-valuing the importance of other persons.

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*Beauvoir’s relational view of freedom*

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

While Beauvoir explicitly addresses the concept of human ‘*freedom*’ and not ‘*autonomy*’, it nonetheless seems reasonable to interpret her account of freedom in light of current views of personal autonomy—particularly relational autonomy. Admittedly, this interpretation may seem questionable given the fact that Beauvoir associates the concept of ‘autonomy’ with Kantian ethics, and even *rejects* any ethics grounded in autonomy.<sup>123</sup> Since the publication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, discussions of autonomy have evolved beyond this Kantian conception and represent a broader perspective on self-governance—one that seems compatible with Beauvoir’s discussions of (moral) freedom. In fact, the very conceptions of relational autonomy that I have here discussed seem to complement, rather than oppose, Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom and its role in her ethics.

Another reason to cast Beauvoir’s discussion of moral freedom in terms of contemporary discussions of relational autonomy is that contemporary discussions of human *freedom* (as opposed to those on personal autonomy) pertain most directly to various manifestations of determinism and their effect on (and, in the case of hard determinists, elimination of) human freedom. With the exception of the ontological freedom that Beauvoir accepts as a given and omnipresent part of human existence, this is not the conception of freedom with which Beauvoir engages in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. To reiterate, Beauvoir distinguishes ontological freedom from moral freedom, and it is *moral* freedom that she devotes her attention to in her ethics. And again, moral freedom is something that one “assumes” by casting her or his values and projects

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<sup>123</sup> Her rejection of Kantian ethics is based primarily on Kant’s abstract (i.e. non-concrete) conception of persons and on the *abstract* formulae that are central to his ethics (*EA* 127). She further elaborates upon this critique in “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” arguing that “the error of Kantian ethics is to have claimed to make an abstraction of our own presence in the world. Therefore, it leads only to abstract formulas. The respect of the human person in general cannot suffice to guide us because we are dealing with separate and opposed individuals. The human person is complete both in the victim and the executioner; should we let the victim perish or kill the executioner?” p. 127.

into the world. As with contemporary discussions of personal autonomy, one is only *considered* morally free if one actively assumes one's freedom in this way.

Before I describe the comparisons between relational autonomy and moral freedom, however, it is important to point out that Beauvoir's notion of moral freedom and more contemporary notions of *moral autonomy* do not always and/or entirely map onto one another. To clarify, moral autonomy refers specifically to autonomy with regard to one's *moral* values—that is, with regard “principles, values, and rules that are, in some significant sense, [one's] own.”<sup>124</sup> And while Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom does refer to the assumption of one's freedom with regard to the establishment of one's *values* and projects in the world, this effort does not always take the form of a specifically moral action or behavior in a *traditional* sense. In fact, her casting this freedom as a “moral” freedom has more to do with the process of *assuming* this freedom than with the content of one's actions or even of one's values. In other words, assuming one's moral freedom has less to do with determining what is right and wrong or good and bad and more to do with recognizing the ambiguity of the human situation, acknowledging the freedom of others, and projecting one's values into the world.

Notably, the contemporary notion of “personal autonomy” does not neatly map onto Beauvoir's notion of moral freedom either. In a contemporary philosophical context, “personal autonomy” refers to autonomy with regard to one's general decisions, actions, and other agential matters (which can, of course, include matters related to moral values, such as the choice among an array of moral alternatives<sup>125</sup>). This does not seem to capture Beauvoir's sense of “moral

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<sup>124</sup> Friedman, Marilyn. “Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique.” *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. p. 41.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

freedom” either. For whereas personal autonomy can apply to fairly innocuous decisions (such as the choice between chocolate or vanilla ice cream) moral freedom is not meant to describe these sorts of mundane decisions.<sup>126</sup>

Nonetheless, the differences between these various forms of freedom and autonomy neither complicate nor negate the correlations between Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom and contemporary conceptions of relational autonomy. For one, Beauvoir’s depictions of the child’s situation in particular and of the human situation in general bear striking resemblance to relational accounts of autonomy. To reiterate, Beauvoir characterizes the child’s situation as one in which one finds oneself “cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears as an absolute to which he can only submit” (*EA* 35). In addition to explaining why children are exempt from the expectation to assume their moral freedom without the cognitive and emotional skills necessary for this exercise, this characterization also helps to illustrate the ways in which the human condition is *inescapably* social and interpersonal.

Diana Meyers (among others) describes a similar sense of “inescapability” in her account of intersectional identity.<sup>127</sup> As she characterizes it, the social groups and categories of which each person a part—the ones we choose, and the ones we are born into—intersect and effect each person’s identity. What’s more, one cannot escape these effects, or the ways in which one’s identity is affected by others. And for both Beauvoir and Meyers, this inescapability is not always or necessarily a detriment to human freedom. In fact, both seem to characterize it as an initial relational “springboard” from which one derives various tools and/or skills for exercising

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<sup>126</sup> Unless, of course, one were feeding ice cream to a person with a chocolate allergy.

<sup>127</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!”

one's autonomy (or, in Beauvoir's case, one's moral freedom).<sup>128</sup> Without this springboard, there is nothing from which *to* individuate, and there is even nothing *to* help fashion one's identity or self or autonomy or freedom. As it is, autonomy thus *begins* relationally.

What's more, as Beauvoir points out, the *particular* circumstances that these forces create for *each* individual are exceedingly important to questions of freedom and, analogously, for autonomy. What both Beauvoir and relational theorists offer a response to, then, are those who view a person's relationship to his freedom in isolation rather than interconnection, subjective rather than intersubjective, and independent rather than interdependent terms.

In that light, Beauvoir's account of moral freedom continues to run parallel to other relational accounts of autonomy. For just as Beauvoir claims that willing one's freedom involves recognizing the *complex* and *particular* circumstances in which one lives and acts, relational theorists recognize the "need to think of autonomy as a characteristic of agents who are emotional, embedded, desiring, creative, and feeling, as well as rational, creatures."<sup>129</sup> As Meyers, Nedelsky, and others point out, only by responding to these features of oneself can one begin to realize her capacity for (relational) autonomy. Furthermore, like relational theorists, Beauvoir recognizes the importance of human interdependency as it relates to assuming and projecting one's freedom. In every instance where one has the opportunity to project her freedom or to act autonomously, the relationships that one shares with others have a profound effect on this opportunity.<sup>130</sup> For both Beauvoir and relational theorists, then, the question of

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<sup>128</sup> And this even hearkens back to psychoanalytic theories of individuation.

<sup>129</sup> Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy Reconfigured," p. 21.

<sup>130</sup> In this light, it is worth noting that relational theorists often focus on how oppressive socialization affects a person's ability to act autonomously. See Paul Benson (1991), "Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization," *Social Theory and Practice* (17:385-408).

whether a person can or does or has acted autonomously must always be reflected back to an examination of her relationships with other people.

In fact, Barbara Andrews notes that Beauvoir's notion of freedom incorporates not only transcending one's immanence or facticity but also "reaching out to others."<sup>131</sup> Reflecting the very ambiguity upon which Beauvoir bases her ethics, the assumption of one's freedom is thus both an individual accomplishment and an interpersonal endeavor. It is both singular *and* relational. And even if a person tries to obscure or ignore or even deny the relationality of her freedom, this relationality is nonetheless always already present—simply by acting, by deciding, by *living* in the world, one affects others' freedom, and others affect one's own freedom. One "reaches out" to others even if one does not *intend* to do so.

But in addition to the parallel aspects of Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom and contemporary conceptions of relational autonomy, her conception of moral freedom also has the potential to contribute in unique ways to the current discussions of relational autonomy. For one, Beauvoir's approach to ambiguity and its role in human freedom is significantly different from contemporary accounts of relational autonomy, particularly since her theorizing of the ambiguity of the human situation is not conceptualized (and rarely even mentioned) in contemporary philosophical works. And by integrating the ambiguity of the human situation into a conception of autonomy, one can broaden the very relationality of autonomy by demonstrating that this relationality is not tied *solely* to the structure and development of the self and of autonomy. More than that, the relationality of autonomy is rooted in the ambiguity of our situation. We are both subjects and objects who act and are acted upon, who experience moments of unfettered freedom and intractable bonds with others. And a conception of autonomy inspired by *The*

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<sup>131</sup> Barbara Andrews (1998), "Care, Freedom, and Reciprocity in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir," *Philosophy Today*, 42(3): 290-300. p. 291.

*Ethics of Ambiguity* could imply that acting autonomously involves not only acknowledging but also navigating these very ambiguities.

In addition, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, Beauvoir's position regarding the parallel (and even overlapping) elements of moral action and free action opens up new possibilities for theorizing relational autonomy. More specifically, taking up certain aspects of Beauvoir's ethical thought allows one to theorize a way in which what I call "moral attunement to the world" and autonomous action run parallel and even overlap. And this conception of relational autonomy would not only open up the moral dimensions of the very notion of autonomy but also create an ethically-based motivation for advocating a particular view of (relational) autonomy.

Thus, in this section I have demonstrated *that* Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom is relevant to contemporary philosophical discussions of relational autonomy. But I have also pointed out ways in which her ethics has the potential to contribute unique insights to these discussions: namely, by incorporating her conception of ambiguity and her connection between moral action and free action *into* a contemporary account of relational autonomy. This section, then, lays some of the essential groundwork for the view of autonomy that I propose in Chapter 4.

#### *Contemporary feminist ethics and relationality*

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Just as there is no single, unified conception of relational autonomy to which all relational theorists uphold, there is no single, unified feminist ethics that all feminists and/or feminist ethicists uphold. From care ethics to standpoint theory to radical feminism to certain

aspects of feminist philosophy of science, there are multitudes of ways in which “feminist ethics” are articulated. Nevertheless, one can identify some concepts or values that are often central to feminist ethics in most of their various manifestations—and ones that are relevant to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

For one, feminist ethicists are often critical not only of socially-constructed and mandated gender roles but also of the ways in which women’s experiences and/or historically “feminine” traits (such as community, sharing, embodiment, and emotion) have been marginalized, obscured, or even disparaged throughout history—and even throughout the history of ethics itself.<sup>132</sup> In addition to offering up a distinctive “women’s ethics,” one other response to this marginalization is to integrate traditionally women-associated or feminine values and traits into the broader ethical discussion within philosophy—that is, to create a human ethics that takes into account the full depth and breadth of human experience and that honors the differences between people.<sup>133</sup> Though this approach has its limits—it cannot always accommodate the radically nuanced approach to ethics that other ethics based on social or other identities can—it is vastly more holistic than the more traditional ethical systems that do *not* incorporate “women-centered” or “feminine” values. What’s more, this more holistic approach seems to reflect Beauvoir’s own approach to ethics and moral philosophy in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

In addition, there are some general themes or concepts that tend to run throughout most feminist ethics. In fact (and germane to this very project), in “Care, Freedom, and Reciprocity in

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<sup>132</sup> C.f. Alison Jaggar. “Feminist Ethics.” *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. eds. L. Becker and C. Becker. New York: Garland Press, 1992.

<sup>133</sup> To be fair, some radical feminists (including most lesbian feminist ethicists) *do* offer a more woman-centered and –exclusive approach to ethics. While my intention is not to exclude their voices from this conversation, I find that more inclusive ethical models are more relevant to this discussion since Beauvoir herself offered a non-exclusionary ethical approach in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.



the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir,” Barbara Andrew identifies six key concepts that she thinks feminists seek to articulate in a specifically feminist ethics: “reciprocity, respect, care, intersubjectivity, attention to difference, and a strong subjectivity and agency.”<sup>134</sup> While these concepts may not be exhaustive, and while some feminist theorists may object to the centrality of one or more of these concepts, they nonetheless serve as helpful placeholders for purposes of this project, not least of which because they are some of the central themes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. What’s more, one can find each of these concepts in the various articulations of the relational self and relational autonomy that I have already examined in previous sections of this chapter. And to this effect, most (if not all) of them are associated with the general notion of relationality. Accordingly, they are particularly relevant to a discussion of the relationality of Beauvoir’s ethics.

To begin, reciprocity often functions as a central concept in most feminist ethics. While certainly not unique to feminist ethics, reciprocity does serve a specific feminist-centered purpose in that it encompasses not one-sided and selfless giving but mutual and self/other-respecting give and take. In other words, in addition to honoring such historically woman-centered values as sharing and interpersonal relationships, it serves to combat the decidedly unfeminist trope of the woman as the selfless, purely altruistic martyr for others.

As a feminist ethical concept, reciprocity can refer to a set of shared responsibilities in the private *and/or* public spheres—to reciprocal practices of respect and responsibility in a family or amongst individuals on the one hand, and to laws or policies that promote reciprocity in a political domain on the other. It can refer to a mutual recognition of political rights and/or

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<sup>134</sup> Barbara Andrew (1998). “Care, Freedom, and Reciprocity in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir.” *Philosophy Today*. 42(3): 290-300.

freedoms, and it can refer to a mutual respect for the roles of each member of a family. It can refer to a call for a social and political recognition of the roles of caregivers, and it can refer to a call for individuals to recognize caregivers' need for freedom and even for dependency. Thus, even as a unifying idea throughout various feminist ethical discussions and/or theories, "reciprocity" is not a one-dimensional concept. Its meaning is robust, and its conceptual functions are varied.

Relevant to the discussion at hand, reciprocity also has the conceptual potential to strike a balance between caring and self-interest, and between dependence and autonomy. Notably, Barbara Andrew argues that care ethics (an ethics often—and mistakenly—assumed to be emblematic of *all* feminist ethics) does not seem to accommodate an adequately robust notion of reciprocity because of the ways in which care ethics *can* lead to patriarchal notions of femininity and moral agency: in other words, because of the ways in which it does *not* encompass the aforementioned balances.<sup>135</sup> As I address in further detail in the subsequent section, Andrew claims that Beauvoir's ethics can help to rectify this problem by portraying care and freedom not as competing concepts or goals or experiences but as integrated modes of being.<sup>136</sup> What this all means for feminist ethics at large is that including reciprocity near the center of one's ethical and/or moral arguments allows for a broad range of moral values and concepts (i.e. caring, self-interest, dependence, and autonomy) that would seem to be conflicting in any other context. Acknowledging the reality and importance of these values, concepts, and experiences hearkens back to Beauvoir's own emphasis on the ambiguity of the human situation: we are *both* independent and dependent, both subject and object, and to deny this ambiguity in our ethical

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

and moral thought would be to create, among other things, an inaccurate portrayal of human life and experience.

To continue, as with the concept of reciprocity, the concept of respect in feminist ethics tends to incorporate a specific attention to the public *and* private domains, to others and to oneself, and to a variety of human differences. For instance, one hallmark argument in contemporary feminist political theory involves the claim that the work one performs outside and inside the home are both deserving of respect (and public recognition).<sup>137</sup> This call for respect often translates into a respect for work that is freely chosen, meaning-giving, and performed without seeing such work as the duty of one's sex or gender.

Beyond these characteristics, it is worth noting that most feminist ethics incorporate a respect for other persons (and/or for oneself) in addition to or even rather than a respect for a particular rule or law. This is not to say that non-feminist ethics do not advocate a respect for other persons, nor is it to say that feminist ethics never incorporate rules or precepts that deserve respect. But in general—and illustrating the interpersonal values often central to feminist ethics—respect as a concept is more often than not directed toward other persons (and toward *oneself*) in feminist ethics.

To continue, the idea that “all human beings are worthy of respect” or even the idea that “respect for oneself is an important component of moral agency” is not altogether unique to feminist ethics. But certain feminist ethical and political discussions do cash out these notions of respect—or self-respect—in ways that are decidedly feminist. More specifically, there are

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<sup>137</sup> This, of course, is different from suggesting that all feminist theorists celebrate the role of the housewife, especially when domestic work is characterized as an inescapable destiny for women instead of a type of work that has value and that can be meaningful if freely chosen by the person who does it. Notably, Beauvoir is mostly critical of domestic work in *The Second Sex*, but this critique also situates such work within the sphere of socially and culturally compulsory “women’s work.”

particular questions regarding respect that are central to various feminist ethical and political discussions: Do social or political commitments undermine one's ability to respect oneself? For example, does oppressive feminine socialization undermine women's ability to respect themselves—or even to assume moral agency and/or autonomy? How do the nuances of people's social and political identities complicate universal claims regarding respect? When is respect for different values or beliefs appropriate—and, especially within discussions of multiculturalism, when do these differences demand tolerance? On the other hand, when (if ever) do a person's values, beliefs, or affiliations violate conditions for respect? While the answers to all of these questions vary even among self-identified feminist analyses, the centrality of these questions in relation to women (and to others whose power is often mitigated by their social and/or political identities) is often (though not always) unique to feminist theory.

In addition to respect and reciprocity, the concept of care is often central to feminist moral and ethical discussions. In fact, care often functions in conjunction with respect and reciprocity in these discussions, illustrating one of the many ways in which one can *practice* respect and reciprocity. What's more, placing care—and related concepts such as interpersonal relationships, *care-taking*, and interdependence—at the center of an ethical, moral, or political argument honors values that were once seen solely as “women's work” or “women's ways of thinking.”<sup>138</sup>

While “care ethics” do not represent the *only* articulation of a specifically feminist ethics, it does represent one of the most widely-known feminist ethical discussions of care. One can

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<sup>138</sup> Worth noting is that many discussions of care *work* conflate all “women,” ignoring the racialized and classed aspects of care work performed by both men and women. This is one of the limits of care ethics, especially as it was initially articulated; for the differences in the work associated with care do not simply fall along gendered lines. They also fall along race and class lines.

trace explicitly-identified care ethics back to Carol Gilligan's analyses of gender and moral evaluation.<sup>139</sup> According to Gilligan, some of the most prominent theories of moral development (such as Freud's and Kohlberg's) have privileged "masculine" ways of thinking, creating, relating, and acting in the world. This privileging is at the expense of what Gilligan considers to be "feminine" ways of thinking, creating, relating, and acting in the world. In conjunction with these gendered ways of being, Gilligan associates two distinct moral voices or languages with men and women, finding that men tend to operate under a language of justice, and women tend to operate under a language of care. As she sees it, men's moral evaluations tend to use ethical parameters that prize universality, (individualistic) autonomy, rights, and rules, while women tend to use ones that emphasize relationality, intersubjectivity, responsibilities, and nurturing. Notably, Gilligan's work is not without criticism. For one, she seems to reify the masculine and feminine moral voices and languages, creating a troubling sense of gendered absoluteness in regard to moral thought. What's more, she privileges and even *isolates* the differences she perceives among genders over other ethically salient identities, such as race, class, and sexual identities. Nonetheless, Gilligan's work does serve to illuminate a set of moral values and concepts that are largely absent, obscured, or even dismissed throughout the history of ethics.

Some feminist theorists who do not identify their work *as* "care ethics" still incorporate and/or value the act of *care-taking* in their ethics. As I pointed out in the previous section on relational autonomy in contemporary feminist ethics, Eva Feder Kittay theorizes care-taking in a way that emphasizes the importance of integrating dependence and what she calls "dependency

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<sup>139</sup> Carol Gilligan. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

worker” into broader theories about social justice, ethics, and policy.<sup>140</sup> In doing so, she also expands upon the notion of “human flourishing.” For if care-taking, dependency, vulnerability, and sacrifice are all part of “normal” human functioning—if these are all an important part of real, concrete lives—then any ethics (and politics) that strives to represent the breadth and depth of human experience should find ways to incorporate (and not obscure) these experiences into broader claims about justice and social expectations and human flourishing. To reiterate, this understanding of the complexity of human experience reflects Beauvoir’s articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation.

In a more general sense—and one that is not solely or uniquely related to care ethics—care can also manifest itself simply as concern for others, or even *loving* concern for *particular* others. Instead of promulgating only a universalized concern for human beings in general, feminist emphases on community and interpersonal relationships allow ethics to incorporate values like particularity and relationality. Accordingly, recognizing the importance of care helps to concretize ethics, to move it from a place of overly abstract universality to a place in which unique circumstances and specific relationships are not only acknowledged but also honored.

Feminist ethical and moral discussions also tend to incorporate a respect for and attention to difference. These differences are not limited to those between sexes and/or genders: feminist analyses of difference also examine sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, ability, location, privilege, and circumstances (among other axes of difference and/or oppression). What’s more, instead of viewing moral agents as raceless, ageless, genderless, and classless individuals whose personal characteristics have no bearing on their moral evaluations and standpoints, feminist theory

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<sup>140</sup> Eva Feder Kittay. “Human Dependency and Rawlsian Equality.” *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

typically includes the recognition that these differences are not only morally relevant but also essential to understanding the world and the people who inhabit it.

This attention to difference need not apply solely to differences between *agents*. In fact, in addition to examining differences between the geographical locations of *agents* and the ways in which these differences affect moral decision-making and evaluation, feminist theorists also note the differences in the location of *moral issues*. More specifically, they are mindful and critical of the ways in which the history of ethics (and those writing and thinking through these ethical problems) tended to ignore or obscure moral issues that arise in traditionally “female” locations.<sup>141</sup> And by ignoring situations and circumstances that occur, for instance, in the home or other parts of the domestic (and traditionally not public-political) sphere, ethical theorists not only exclude the lives and realities of many women from their theoretical horizons but also fail to consider thoroughly the depth of their ethical precepts and/or frameworks. One of the feminist meta-ethical concerns, then, is to ensure that experiences traditionally associated with women are not ignored in the broader philosophical canon.

Notably, a regard for attention to difference is one of the central components of standpoint theory. In standpoint theory, paying attention to certain differences (including but not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and location) allows one to ascertain the ways in which the oppressed are epistemically privileged with regard to their oppression and/or to other salient aspects of their and others’ situations. Put more succinctly, standpoint theorists maintain that the oppressed simply *are* epistemically privileged with regard to their oppression. This theory is not only pertinent to epistemology. It is also ethically and morally relevant because of

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<sup>141</sup> C.f. Allison Jaggar “Feminist “Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, and Prospects.” *Feminist Ethics*. ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1991.

the ways in which it demands an attention to oppression—to the *oppressed*—and to the ways in which a variety of epistemic standpoints are crucial for understanding, theorizing, and responding to oppression. What’s more, standpoint theory illuminates the need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of those whose knowledge and experiences are often severely devalued and even ignored.

In addition to reciprocity, respect, care, and attention to difference, feminist ethical and moral discussions often emphasize the importance of human intersubjectivity. This emphasis is often juxtaposed with the emphasis on the atomistic and isolated subjectivity that one often finds throughout the history of philosophy. What’s more, it is often predicated upon the recognition that self-development, autonomy, and/or a number of other skills and achievements are either made possible by and/or are sustained by certain sorts of interactions with others.<sup>142</sup> Quite simply, as a central ethical or moral concept, intersubjectivity expresses a regard for the importance and *value* of human relationality.

Integrating the concept of intersubjectivity into most feminist ethics does not undermine the concern for strong subjectivity and agency. In other words, by emphasizing human intersubjectivity, feminist ethics are not intended to perpetuate decidedly anti-feminist myths that portray women as *lacking* strong subjectivity and agency. To the contrary, one of the hallmarks of many feminist ethics involves an explicit attempt to reconcile not only the public with the private but also intersubjectivity with individual agency—to demonstrate that intersubjectivity and connectedness do not preclude the importance of a strong sense of agency.

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<sup>142</sup> This idea hearkens back to the previous sections on relational conceptions of the self and autonomy. For while intersubjectivity is conceptually distinct from relational autonomy, relational accounts of autonomy often incorporate a regard for the importance of *intersubjectivity* (as opposed to isolated subjectivity).



In some cases, this means working to differentiate personal (and even relational) autonomy from heteronomy. In other cases, it might involve describing how a strong sense of agency is *made possible* by certain sorts of interactions with others: for the fact that individual accomplishments and autonomous decisions need not preclude the idea that the skills one used to exercise that agency and autonomy were somehow shaped or influenced by other people. And still others attempt to reconcile intersubjectivity and relationality with a strong sense of agency by envisioning an ideal political, personal, and philosophical situation in which interpersonal relationships, individual accomplishments, and the delicate balance between intersubjectivity and strong agency are all valued and even celebrated.

To reiterate, then, while these six concepts-- reciprocity, respect, care, intersubjectivity, attention to difference, and a strong subjectivity and agency--are not necessarily an exhaustive representation of feminist ethics, they do help to identify some of thematic similarities among various (and varied) feminist ethics. What's more, they offer an organizational strategy for pointing out the relevance of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to contemporary feminist ethics. For as I argue, Beauvoir's ethics incorporate each of the aforementioned six key concepts in feminist ethics. What's more, some of the arguments from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—even over sixty years after its publication—can expand and even contribute to more contemporary discussions of these six concepts.

### *The relationality of Beauvoir's ethics*

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In my view, Beauvoir presents a fundamentally relational ethics. This should not be surprising given her relational characterizations of the self and of moral freedom. In fact, it seems right to suggest that that the relationality of Beauvoir's ethics supervenes on her relational

views of the self and of freedom. To demonstrate this point, I will analyze Beauvoir's ethics using the very same six concepts that appeared in the previous section: reciprocity, respect, care, attention to difference, intersubjectivity and a strong subjectivity and agency. As I see it, the presence of these concepts in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* helps to illustrate not only the relationality of Beauvoir's ethics but also their relevance to contemporary feminist ethics.<sup>143</sup>

As I have maintained throughout this project, reciprocity plays a central role in Beauvoir's ethics. To understand just how this concept functions with *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, one can turn to Beauvoir's conception of ethical action (that is, the assumption of moral freedom) and her claim that people should to work to promote human freedom through their own freely-chosen projects. Namely, Beauvoir's very conception of moral freedom is grounded in a notion of reciprocity. As she sees it, when other people assume their freedom, they help to make my and others' freedom possible. Moreover, when I assume my freedom, I expand the possibilities of freedom both for myself and for others.

Beauvoir's ethical framework, then, is not grounded simply in relationality—it is also rooted in reciprocity, and even an expectation of reciprocity among agents. In fact, a certain sort of “unintentional reciprocity” is all but inescapable according to Beauvoir's analysis of the human situation. This “unintentional reciprocity” is even tied to the ambiguity of the human situation. For whether one intends to or not, one's choices and actions affect others, and one thereby affects others' freedom. And whether one acknowledges this fact or not, others' choices and actions affect one's own freedom. What's more, in order to engage in the sort of moral agency that Beauvoir advocates, one must acknowledge not only the ambiguity of the human

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<sup>143</sup> And to reiterate, Chapter 4 will involve a more extensive look at some of the unique contributions that *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—particularly Beauvoir's conception of the relationship between assuming one's moral freedom and acting ethically—can make to contemporary feminist theory.

situation but also the relational and reciprocal qualities of one's freedom. What others do, what one does to others, and even whether or not others are or can be morally free are all tied to one's own moral freedom.

Viewing reciprocity thusly—that is, as an unintentional and ever-present part of the human condition—could help to expand upon most feminist philosophical analyses of reciprocity and its function in ethics by posing the concept of reciprocity as a metaphysical fact about the human condition. For the reciprocal nature of freedom is, for Beauvoir, a given. It is a foundational aspect of human freedom, and it is even illuminative of the ambiguity of the human situation. One is both subject and object, one acts and is acted upon, one is fundamentally alone and inextricably tied to others. This “givenness” thus offers the very concept of reciprocity an ontological and metaphysical foundation: it is a condition of human freedom, and perhaps even of human being. And as I see it, what makes this particular form of reciprocity distinctive among feminist ethics is not only that it is a foundational reciprocity but also that it is tied to the ambiguity of the human situation. In other words, it seems that Beauvoir's motivations for presenting a reciprocal conception of freedom are not solely tied to a desire to promote and/or value reciprocity itself. To be clear, when posed alongside masculinist ethics and value systems that do *not* acknowledge the importance of reciprocity, it does seem appropriate to promote reciprocity as an ethical, moral, and feminist concept: this is primarily how the concept functions within most feminist ethics. But Beauvoir does more than promote reciprocity. Rather, it seems that the reciprocity involved in assuming one's moral freedom simply reflects the tensions between self and other, solitude and connectedness, and subjectivity and objectivity that are characteristic of Beauvoirian ambiguity. On this view, then, reciprocity is not simply a historically “feminine” value for whose importance one must argue: it is an ever-present mode of

*being* for *all* human beings. And it is this foundationality, this deep connection to the ambiguity of the human situation, that makes Beauvoir's conception of reciprocity unique even among contemporary philosophical discussions. According to Beauvoir, reciprocity is not merely something to strive for: it *is* part of the human condition itself.

Respect for other persons is also built into Beauvoir's conception of freedom and moral agency. For assuming one's moral freedom requires one to recognize others' freedom concretely, and non-hypothetically. It requires one to *purposefully* consider others' freedom and the social, political, economic, and/or interpersonal effects that one's actions will have on others. It requires one to act in a way that "exercises" the reciprocity that is foundational to one's existence. Accordingly, it requires that one *respect* others and their freedom.

This does not mean that Beauvoir ignores or obscures those moments in which respect for *all* persons is impossible. In fact, she acknowledges that efforts to undermine oppression often *require* one treat oppressors as *things*. Beauvoir is thus keenly aware of those instances in which certain moral edicts—never treat others as means, never objectify others, etc.—break down in their application to specific and concrete circumstances. As Beauvoir acknowledges, sometimes the exigency of certain situations requires one to compromise values or other moral standards that one would otherwise hold universally—including the notion that one should always respect and/or not objectify others. But instead of allowing these cases to disintegrate the very concept of respect for others, and instead of "resolving" this issue by oversimplifying it or even by avoiding these circumstances in her analyses, Beauvoir keeps the tension between the desire to refrain from objectifying other human beings and the near-need to objectify others (in times of war, during efforts to subvert oppression, etc.) when the situation demands it. In doing so, she maintains a respect for the ambiguity of the human situation—the *reality* of this ambiguity and

the ways in which the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity, connection and isolation, freedom and determination, and so forth all complicate our ethical evaluations such that we are required not simply to acknowledge these tensions/ambiguities but also to *integrate* them into our moral and ethical evaluations. And like Beauvoir's conception of reciprocity, it is this connection to Beauvoirian ambiguity that gives her conception of respect the potential to contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions.<sup>144</sup>

While the concepts of 'respect' and 'reciprocity' have seemingly straightforward connections to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the connection is less clear when it comes to the concept of 'care.' In fact, it is important to note that by characterizing Beauvoir's ethics as "relational," I do not intend to suggest that she presents a systematic model of care ethics. For one, Beauvoir does not even present a systematic ethics whatsoever. What's more, one should not conflate an ethics of care with an ethics that incorporates a regard for the relationality of human beings (as Beauvoir's does). Instead, I only intend to highlight the ways in which Beauvoir acknowledges that human interdependence is not only a fundamental aspect of the development of the self and of autonomy but also a central factor in the ethical assessment of a person's behavior and actions *and* in the assessment that one must undertake in order to be considered "morally free" within Beauvoir's framework. This is not to say that Beauvoir's ethics does not contain significant parallels to care ethics, nor is it to undermine the significance of care ethics and its place in the feminist philosophical canon. In fact, I concede that her emphases on reciprocity and the particularity of our relationships with others might lead one to loosely characterize her ethics as a *precursor* to care ethics.

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<sup>144</sup> I discuss more particularly how Beauvoirian ambiguity broadens contemporary ethical and moral thought—including in regard to the complexity of specific moral problems—in the following chapter.

But her ethics also encompasses various components that distinguish it from care ethics in significant ways. Put more succinctly, while Beauvoir's ethics is amenable to care ethics, it is not at all a work *of* care ethics.<sup>145</sup> There are, in fact, significant distinctions between Beauvoir's ethical framework and care ethics. For even though one could describe the "reaching out toward others" that is central to moral freedom as an act *of* care, Beauvoir herself never characterizes the act of assuming one's freedom as an act of *caring for* others. She advocates a *regard* for others and their freedoms. She emphasizes the particularity of other human beings and of their unique circumstances. She respects and even esteems friendship, love, and shared joys. Her ethics *is* relational. But this does not mean that the assumption of moral freedom—the act that is central to her ethical framework—is synonymous with an act of care.

In addition (and perhaps most devastatingly for those who draw a parallel between an ethics of ambiguity and care ethics), Beauvoir would most likely be loathe to associate her ethics with any ontology that characterizes women as the arbiters of care and men as the arbiters of justice. In fact, the gendered modes of thinking and evaluating that are central to most care ethics become the object of her critique in *The Second Sex*. For even though Carol Gilligan herself does not view the "language of care" and the "language of justice and rights" as permanently and inherently affixed to women and men (respectively)—that is, even though she views their gendered manifestations as *social constructions*—her very efforts to connect women with caring might perpetuate the thought that women are inherently "better" at caring and therefore should be "in charge" of caring for others.<sup>146</sup> Beauvoir clearly does not advocate or even *suggest* that work (including care-taking) should fall along such gendered lines.

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<sup>145</sup> To claim otherwise would be anachronistic, to say the least.

<sup>146</sup> This is a critique that many feminists launch against care ethics.

In this respect, it seems appropriate to point out that Beauvoir's implicit conception of relationality is universal and applicable to both men and women, regardless of their socialization. As I have already pointed out, it would be inaccurate (and anachronistic) to characterize *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as an ethics of care. Nonetheless, it would also be inaccurate to deny that there are any similarities between Beauvoir's ethics and care ethics or to deny that care itself does not play an important role in her ethics. In fact, one could maintain that by encouraging a concern for the particularity of human beings and their unique circumstances and by advocating a reciprocal view of freedom, Beauvoir places acts of care at the center of her ethics. What's more, by describing genuine love for another person as an act in which one completely respects and encourages the other person's *moral freedom*, Beauvoir links love, care, and ethics both uniquely and inextricably.

Admittedly, Beauvoir's characterization of care (and, more accurately, of love) has not gone without criticism. Nancy Bauer, for instance, doubts the sincerity of Beauvoir's "rosy idealization of love as the highest moral moment."<sup>147</sup> As Bauer sees it, Beauvoir's account of "love for the Other" departs not only from the general tone of the *Ethics* and its Sartrean influence but also from Beauvoir's own general suspicions about the optimism in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

It seems to me, however, that the "optimism" that Beauvoir rejects pertains more specifically to themes of "progress" in the Hegelian dialectic and to what she sees as Hegel's reification of the future and/or of a future moment. What's more, it does not seem that Beauvoir categorically rejects all optimism whatsoever.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, she more accurately rejects a *naïve*

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<sup>147</sup> Nancy Bauer. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. pp. 165-166.

<sup>148</sup> And, to be fair, this is not the claim that Bauer makes.

optimism in a morality that obscures ambiguity and justifies violence and oppression in service to reified and absolute ethical and moral concepts. And finally, she certainly reiterates the value and importance of human relationships throughout her *Ethics*. So unlike Bauer, I do not see Beauvoir's conception of love as an awkward attempt to reconcile a Sartrean view of the radical separateness of human beings with a regard for particular aspects of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Instead, I think that love functions more specifically as *one of many* expressions of respect for others' freedom.<sup>149</sup> In other words, working to promote others' freedom does not entail that one *loves* all others; but loving another person *does* require one, on Beauvoir's view, to respect her or his freedom and to refrain from erasing her or his distinctness as a subject.

Returning to the discussion at hand, because of the ways that it is distinct from most contemporary care ethics, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* might be able to meet certain criticisms launched against ethics of care and thus offer insights into how proponents of care ethics can respond to these critiques. In fact, Barbara Andrew asserts that Beauvoir's ethics can meet the following objections raised against care ethics: 1) that care ethics can slip into advocating a patriarchal conception of femininity and 2) that care ethics connects moral agency with a weakened conception of autonomy, or even with heteronomy. And this is because Beauvoir's ethics explicitly includes the positions that 1) the moral agent must recognize both *her own* and others' potential freedom (thereby not sacrificing all of her freedom to the needs of others) and 2) the individual cannot submit her freedom to the collectivity.<sup>150</sup> In other words, Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom neither requires nor condones a life of self-sacrifice in the service

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<sup>149</sup> In other words, respect for others' freedom need not take on the form of love in its most literal sense.

<sup>150</sup> Barbara Andrew (1998), p. 293.



of others. Anticipating her arguments in *The Second Sex*, her view of the assumption of moral freedom also refrains from casting itself as a specifically masculine or feminine endeavor. Instead, it encompasses a reciprocal notion of other-directedness: one that strikes a balance between assuming *one's own* freedom and being mindful of others' freedom. Furthermore, this conception of moral freedom neither requires nor condones submitting one's freedom to the ideas and values of others. As Beauvoir makes painstakingly clear, this behavior is indicative of one who *abnegates* his freedom—one such as the sub-man, the serious man, etc. Thus, she balances a concern for care and reciprocity with her concern for strong subjectivity and agency.

Offering both a critique of and a possible new direction for care ethics, Andrew also asserts that “if care ethics were to focus more on the connection between political and ontological freedom [like Beauvoir does], then discussions of care would have to focus on care as a liberatory practice.”<sup>151</sup> Comparing this view to Sarah Ruddick's argument in *Maternal Thinking*, Andrew points out that “Beauvoir's principle of recognizing others and acting with them has freedom as its goal,” wherein care is not necessarily a survival instinct but an ethical attitude. And I concur—if one reads Beauvoir's conceptions of reciprocal freedom, concern for particularity, and even acknowledgment of the ambiguity of the human situation as correlative with love or *care*, then love and care themselves become central to political acts intended to undermine oppression and expand the moral freedom of all human beings. This, of course, is different from conceiving of love in a more literal or romantic sense. But reading love as a political act is not an altogether foreign concept within feminist ethics.<sup>152</sup> What's more, using typically interpersonal acts or behaviors (i.e. care and/or love) as a model for political action

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>152</sup> See, for instance, Luce Irigaray's *i love to you: sketch of a possible felicity in history*. trans. Allison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1996.

does not seem to stray too far from Beauvoir's explicit ethical, political, and philosophical commitments. For one, it is the very *individual* act of assuming one's moral freedom (by expanding possibilities for *others* to assume their freedom) that informs larger-scale political acts, such as working to undermine a specific oppressive situation. What's more, Beauvoir's continued emphasis on the uniqueness and concreteness of all human beings prevents her ethics (and any concept of "political love" inspired by her ethics) from advocating an idealized and generic care for others. Instead, her concern lies primarily with particular relationships between particular people: not with universal claims about "love" for a faceless, nameless crowd of people.<sup>153</sup> Accordingly, using Beauvoir's conceptions of ambiguity and the assumption of moral freedom in order to articulate a care-based ethics could offer unique insights into contemporary feminist explorations of interpersonal love *and* political love.

As with reciprocity, respect, and care, Beauvoir's ethics encompasses a unique perspective on intersubjectivity. To reiterate, her very conception of freedom hinges not only on reciprocity but also intersubjectivity. For whereas Sartrean freedom focuses primarily on transcending one's immanence or facticity, the moral freedom that Beauvoir articulates in her ethics involves not only this sort of transcendence but also a concerted effort to reach out to others. In fact, she characterizes the "genuinely free" person as being:

conscious of the real requirements of his freedom, which can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others. Therefore, in any case, the freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves. Such a law imposes limits upon action and at the same time immediately gives it a content. *EA* 61

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<sup>153</sup> This is not to say that one must have a unique and meaningful relationship with everyone to whom one extends reciprocity/promotes moral freedom/undermines oppression. It is to say, however, that respecting such relationships is crucial to Beauvoir when it comes to assuming one's moral freedom. For without this respect—without an attention to specific individuals and relationships—one risks engaging in the behavior of the sub-man, the serious man, and so on.

At the very least, then, her conception of freedom requires that one be *mindful* of others' freedom—that one *acknowledge* the ways in which one's own freedom affects and is affected by others'.

Furthermore, Beauvoir strikes a fine balance—and even maintains the tension—between individuality and relationality throughout her ethics. She is careful never to lose the individual, or to lose the *meaningfulness* of each individual, by subsuming the individual to a collectivity. But she is also careful never to quash the importance of human connectedness. And maintaining this balance between individuality and interconnectedness is at the very heart of Beauvoir's conception of the ambiguity of the human situation: the simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity, absolute freedom and inescapable connectedness, acting and being acted upon all hinge on the *fact* of human intersubjectivity. And as with the aforementioned feminist ethical concepts (i.e. reciprocity, respect, and care), it is this connection to the ambiguity of the human situation that could allow Beauvoir's conception of intersubjectivity to offer unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophy.

To continue, one can note Beauvoir's attention to difference in her concern for the particularity for human beings and their circumstances. Her ethics is a contextual and situational ethics, not one that applies abstract, universal rules to all people and all situations regardless of their circumstances.

Notably, this does not mean that Beauvoir's attention to socio-cultural differences is as politically attuned as is most contemporary feminist ethics. In many ways, she *does* assume a universal, raceless, classless, and genderless type of ethical agency. Even more problematic are some of her characterizations of women in various cultures. For instance, she distinguishes between children and oppressed women (or at least "Western women") based on her claim that

the “child’s situation is imposed upon him, whereas the [Western] woman...chooses it or at least consents to it” (*EA* 38). Notably, this characterization is deeply problematic since it seems to infantilize the “non-Western woman.” Moreover, it glosses over the variations of women’s experiences, suggesting that all non-Western women can be assumed to live under a veritably imposed child’s situation and that all Western women can be assumed to have at least some access to the means to assume their freedom. Admittedly, these hasty generalizations demonstrate one of the ways in which Beauvoir fails to maintain an attention to difference in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. And while fully charging Beauvoir with a “philosophical failure” in regard to this matter might be somewhat anachronistic, this characteristic of her ethics nonetheless illustrates an instance in which it fails to meet some of the values and expectations of contemporary feminist ethics. And, in this way, it illustrates an area in which her ethics could likely *not* contribute to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions of difference.

On the other hand, it is not without merit or value to view these philosophical failings through the lens of Beauvoir’s own ethical and moral precepts. Recall, for instance, that Beauvoir criticizes the generalizations and absolutisms characteristic of most traditional ethical systems. One could argue that the very orientalist and colonialist modes-of-thought she employs here are indicative of the ethical and moral thought that she herself criticizes. Strangely enough, it is *her own* critique that offers insight into why her generalizations are problematic: for these generalizations fail to account for the complexity and particularity of human beings, and they obscure the ambiguity of the human situation by reifying the subjectivity and objectivity of various individuals based on their cultural identities. There is, I think, a particular value in recognizing that contemporary criticisms of specific parts of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can be

rooted in some of the very principles found *in* Beauvoir's ethics. Indeed, it demonstrates in part the relevance of Beauvoir's ethics to contemporary feminist thought.

Perhaps not surprisingly—and in a way that *does* lend itself to current feminist theory—Beauvoir's respect for difference also plays out in her articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation. As Stacy Keltner notes, though Beauvoir owes a considerable philosophical debt to Hegel, she nonetheless purposefully avoids the “both/and” logic of the Hegelian dialectic precisely because the dialectical movement reconciles and even obliterates the differences between those concepts and terms and experiences that Beauvoir sees as central to the ambiguity of the human situation.<sup>154</sup> Beauvoir is not only willing but also insistent upon keeping these philosophical tensions and ambiguities “in play.” And as she sees it, doing so has not only contemplative value but also moral and political value. So while Beauvoir might falter in her attention to differences between social and political identities, she succeeds in offering a unique perspective on differences between the general experiences that give rise to the ambiguity of the human situation. In other words, her moral philosophical goals are not to obliterate the tension, and the *value* of the tension, between subjectivity and objectivity, independence and connectedness, acting and being acted upon, and so on. Instead, the purpose of her ethics is to keep these tensions in play, and to integrate them into the way that we think and act and decide. What's more, by *centralizing* these ambiguities, Beauvoir distinguishes her ethics from all other ethics and moral philosophies.

Ann Murphy places Beauvoir's move toward what one might call a relational sense of individualism within the context of Beauvoir's critique of Hegel (and the Hegelian dialectic),

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<sup>154</sup> Stacy Keltner. “Beauvoir's Idea of Ambiguity.” *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 204.

noting that “we might read in Beauvoir’s critique of [the Hegelian subsumption of the particular for the universal] as her own concern for pluralism and for the preservation of the particularity of the individual and the project.”<sup>155</sup> To reiterate, while Beauvoir does not advocate an atomistic individualism, she does emphasize the importance of the individual and her or his particular projects. She does so not only in order to reinforce the value of each individual but also in order to illustrate that the meaningfulness of human relationships—of each *particular* human relationship—depends upon the uniqueness of the individuals in those relationships. As she sees it, relationships have meaning *because of* our individuality and *because* we are not replaceable to others (*EA* 108).

To continue, because of the way in which she articulates this attention to difference, some might criticize Beauvoir (and many do criticize other feminist ethics) of developing a relativistic ethics—one that carries no judgmental or evaluative weight whatsoever. The underlying criticism seems to be that an ethical relativism would lead to a more (morally) frightening nihilism and/or absurdity in which the world would be inherently and unchangeably meaningless. And in such a meaningless world, it would seem inappropriate (if not equally meaningless) to speak in moral terms—to speak of values, or even simply to attribute values to human relationships, actions, and endeavors. Beauvoir, however, goes to great lengths to distinguish her ethics from an absurd or nihilistic ethics. As she sees it, just because the world has no fixed or pre-determined meaning does not mean that people cannot give it meaning through their actions. What’s more, just because there are no universal and abstract rules in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* does not mean that actions are unable to be evaluated from a moral or ethical

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<sup>155</sup> Ann V. Murphy. “Between Generosity and Violence: Toward a Revolutionary Politics in the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir.” *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 271.

standpoint. To reiterate, an ethics of ambiguity is contextual and situational, but it is also grounded in the concreteness of human experience and community. And according to Beauvoir, this “grounding” occurs as such: “it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the **plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself**” (EA 17-18, emphasis added).

By this point, it should be obvious that Beauvoir’s ethics incorporate a strong subjectivity and agency. In fact, as I addressed in Chapter 2, some may argue that she incorporates *too strong* of an intellectual requirement for moral agency, or even too strong of an emphasis on individual subjectivity in general.<sup>156</sup> But as I mentioned in my original response to these criticisms, Beauvoir’s conception of individual agency is always tempered by an ever-present recognition of and concern for human relationality. In fact, her very characterization of subjectivity and agency itself is rooted in a reciprocal conception of freedom. And while the fact *that* she advocates a strong subjectivity and agency is not radically different from contemporary feminist ethical discussions, the fact that her senses of subjectivity and agency are rooted in not only a reciprocal freedom but also the ambiguity of the human situation does make her ethics distinctive among others.

Finally, adding a dimension to her ethics that is not uniquely feminist but that gives one access to Beauvoir’s justification for any ethical framework, she writes:

...in order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness. If the satisfaction of an old man drinking a glass of wine counts for nothing, then production and wealth are only hollow myths; they have meaning only if they are capable of being retrieved in individual and living joy. The saving of time and the conquest of leisure

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<sup>156</sup> My response to this criticism is also located in Chapter 2.

have no meaning if we are not moved by the laugh of a child at play. If we do not love life on our own account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way. (*EA* 135-136)

Although one need not interpret this passage through a feminist lens, there are still traces of the aforementioned feminist-ethical concerns therein. As Eleanore Holveck points out, Beauvoir's musings on the *joys* of existence illuminate her insistence that the assumption of and promotion of human freedom are not intended to idealize an "abstract, ideal or future freedom" but are instead meant to propagate "the lived, concrete experience of freedom as the joy of existence."<sup>157</sup> In this respect, Beauvoir seems to concretize freedom itself.

And as I see it, the concerns at the heart of Beauvoir's ethics are themselves concrete. She does not advocate moral abstractions, nor does she treat people like theoretical human-like subjects. Beauvoir is concerned with people assuming an ethics of ambiguity in order to *actually* live the "concrete experience of freedom as the joy of existence." And this makes her ethics not just amenable to a feminist ethics and not simply comparable to a care ethics—it makes it a *joyful* ethics in and of itself. In fact, given the above passage, one might conclude that for Beauvoir, the possibility of joy *is* what justifies the creation of any ethics or moral philosophy.

### *Objections*

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In this section, I consider potential objections to the positions I articulated in previous sections of this chapter. To re-clarify just what these positions are, I argue that Beauvoir offers relational views of the self, autonomy, and ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: views that are both

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<sup>157</sup> Eleanore Holveck (1999). "The Blood of Others: A Novel Approach to The Ethics of Ambiguity." *Hypatia*. 14(4): 3-17. p. 8.



relevant and even fruitful to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions of the self, relational autonomy, and ethics. Accordingly, any objections that I consider in the following sections will be ones that are pertinent to my interpretation and application of Beauvoir's ethics. That is to say, I will not consider objections to Beauvoir's arguments themselves. (And to be clear, I consider some of these very objections in Chapter 2.) Nor will I be considering objections to my central argument that Beauvoir's ethics can lead to a new view of relational autonomy that binds together acting autonomously and acting ethically. (These objections will appear in the subsequent chapter.) Thus, at this time I will only consider objections to my claim that Beauvoir *does* offer relational views of the self, autonomy, and ethics and that her positions have the potential to make unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophy.

#### *Transforming The Ethics of Ambiguity into a feminist text*

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It is quite clear that Beauvoir did not conceive of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a specifically feminist text. As evidenced by her letters, interviews, and memoirs, her motivations for writing *The Ethics of Ambiguity* did not include a desire to analyze and/or criticize the situation of women. In fact, until the last decade or so of her life, Beauvoir was even hesitant to engage in social-political feminist activities in France and beyond.

This is not to say that Beauvoir does not include what one might call "feminist considerations" in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. For instance, she briefly contemplates women's oppression in the second chapter of her ethics, mentioning the ways in which women can be either complicit in the abnegation of their freedom or overdetermined *by* their oppressive situations such that they cannot assume their moral freedom (EA 37). Furthermore, one can even note a thematic and conceptual thread between *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Beauvoir's own

feminist text, *The Second Sex*.<sup>158</sup> But these considerations by themselves do not entail that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a specifically feminist text. As such, one could argue that my comparison between Beauvoir's and contemporary feminist views of the self, autonomy, and ethics misrepresents *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Beauvoir's motivations for writing it.

In response, I must clarify that my concern is not whether Beauvoir's ethical project is a feminist project *per se* but whether this project can contribute in unique ways to contemporary feminist philosophy. Many non-feminist texts (and even texts that encompass some explicitly anti-feminist messages) have nonetheless served as inspirations for feminist texts. For instance, when Drucilla Cornell draws upon the Kant in her work on sexual self-determination,<sup>159</sup> or when Lynn Hankinson Nelson draws upon Quine in her account of feminist empiricism,<sup>160</sup> they are both incorporating specifically non-feminist philosophy in their own work; but this does not necessarily undermine the feminist implications of their work. And even if one were to insist that non-feminist texts should be only minimally incorporated into feminist work, the fact that Beauvoir followed up the writing of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with the writing of *The Second Sex* makes the "feminist-friendly" elements of her ethics even more plausible. For she *is* a feminist philosopher. Her novels even incorporate decidedly feminist themes and characters. And the very existence of *The Second Sex* casts a feminist light upon any other work of Beauvoir's: both those that came before *and* after *The Second Sex*. Accordingly, I think that Beauvoir's *oeuvre*

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<sup>158</sup> c.f. Jo-Ann Pilardi. *Simone de Beauvoir Writing the Self: Philosophy Becomes Autobiography*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

<sup>159</sup> c.f. Drucilla Cornell. *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>160</sup> c.f. Lynn Hankinson Nelson. *Who Knows: From Quine to a Feminist Empiricism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1990.

(including *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) is friendly to, if not also a touchstone for, feminist philosophy.

Furthermore, the fact that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not a feminist text does not preclude one from giving it a feminist reading. My arguments in the above sections of this chapter serve just that purpose: that is, to offer a feminist reading of Beauvoir's ethics, one that demonstrates the parallels between her positions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and those found in contemporary feminist discussions of the self, autonomy, and ethics.

Worth noting is that I do not characterize Beauvoir as providing a primary or even a proximate influence on these contemporary views. In other words, my goal in this chapter is not to trace historically the views that one finds in current feminist philosophy. Rather, my goal is to establish a comparative link between Beauvoir's positions and contemporary feminist positions: a link that serves as a foundation for my argument that Beauvoir's ethics can help to construct a view that characterizes acting autonomously as acting morally. Thus, to suggest that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has important parallels to contemporary feminist philosophy is markedly different from suggesting that it has directly influenced contemporary feminist philosophy. And I do not even purport to suggest the latter.<sup>161</sup>

Notably, the fact that Beauvoir does consider—albeit briefly—women's oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* makes her ethics more amenable to a feminist reading. To reiterate, she compares (though questionably and controversially) the situation of oppressed women to the situation of children, maintaining that oppressed women are people whose "life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance" and who "like the child...can exercise their freedom, but only within the universe which has been set up before

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<sup>161</sup> It is, however, certainly possible, and even probable, that Beauvoir's work has had a significant influence on various feminist works on the self, autonomy, and ethics

them, without them” (EA 37). Identifying the specifically patriarchal elements of women’s oppression, Beauvoir goes on to criticize women in *Western* countries who have not yet assumed their freedom (in the way that Beauvoir describes) and who often “take shelter in the shadow of men” and “adopt without discussion the opinions and values recognized by their husband or their lover” (EA 37). This attitude, she suggests, allows a woman to maintain a childlike lack of responsibility, especially with regard to her freedom. And while Beauvoir certainly does not excuse the patriarchal attitudes and behavior of individuals who perpetuate the oppression of women, she nonetheless places a responsibility on (Western) women to assume their moral freedom in order to combat this oppression.

To reiterate, then, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not a specifically feminist text. But, given Beauvoir’s own later feminist commitments, her analysis of the situation of women in her ethics, and the fact that non-feminist texts can and have influenced later feminist works, it seems more than reasonable to argue that Beauvoir’s ethics can make unique contributions to contemporary feminist theory.

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*A response to Beauvoir’s dismissal of her ethics*

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Worth noting is that Beauvoir often expressed a rather disdainful attitude toward *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In fact, when asked about it in an interview with Deidre Bair (Beauvoir’s biographer), Beauvoir described the text as a “frivolous, insignificant thing, not worth of attention”—a work that was “supposed to be a defense of Existentialism and a definition of morality” but one that she was “too conscious of [herself] to think objectively.”<sup>162</sup> This position

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* p. 321.

mirrors many of the other dismissive comments Beauvoir made throughout her life toward not only *The Ethics of Ambiguity* but also her overall work as a philosopher.<sup>163</sup>

In fact, in addition to dismissing her philosophical work, Beauvoir often even refused to characterize herself as a philosopher *at all*, claiming explicitly that she was “not a philosopher” and that she was “neither intelligent enough nor creative enough, nor possessing the sheer creative brilliance it takes to propound a thesis or construct a system.”<sup>164</sup> With these statements and beliefs in mind, one could argue Beauvoir’s own depreciation of her ethics should have some sort of influence on how much (or how little) her ethics should be valued within the broader philosophical canon.

Commenting on this self-devaluing, Michèle le Doeuff suspects Beauvoir of “rarely being fair to herself, and of putting her own efforts into categories that are scarcely suitable for them, and that, even worse, depreciate them.”<sup>165</sup> And this claim corresponds with my own evaluation of Beauvoir’s self-evaluation: to characterize *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as frivolous, insignificant, and unworthy of attention seems unfair, to say the least. But to delve further into *why* Beauvoir de-valued her work so much—to delve into her psycho-social reasons for doing so—would be to stray too far from my own project.

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<sup>163</sup> Intriguingly, when asked in a separate interview with Bair which of her works she considered to be a good starting point for understanding and interpreting her *oeuvre*, she immediately replied by mentioning “the two [philosophical] essays, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*.” Perhaps her self-evaluation of her work had changed a bit during her final years, when she was able to distance herself from the specter of Sartre. Deidre Bair. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*. New York: Touchstone, 1990. p. 269.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269.

<sup>165</sup> Michèle le Doeuff. “Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into (Ambiguous) Line.” trans. Margaret A. Simons. *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. p. 62.

In sum, I can simply state this: Beauvoir's personal estimation of her work—or *any* philosopher's personal estimation of one or more of their works—does not preclude the overall philosophical significance of that work. To think otherwise, one risks devaluing a great many important philosophical texts of whose authors held less than favorable views.

*Beauvoir's existentialist individualism as antithetical to feminist interests*

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One could also argue that since Beauvoir offers an overly individualistic ethical project, her project actually runs counters to many feminist interests and goals. In other words, instead of a “strong subjectivity and agency,” perhaps she advocates a solipsistic atomism within her ethical framework. In this respect, any potential comparisons between Beauvoir's views and contemporary feminist views belie Beauvoir's underlying *anti*-feminist views. This criticism could further lead one to question how a relational conception of autonomy and ethics—the sort of view that I put forth in the following chapter—could be constructed using Beauvoir's ethics as its foundation.

As I see it, this objection ignores individualism as Beauvoir characterizes it and as it functions in her ethics. Moreover, this objection seems to uncritically conflate Beauvoir's work with Sartre's and, in some cases, with mere caricatures of existentialist philosophy.

To explain, Beauvoir explicitly distances her conception of individualism from any such conception incorporating a solipsistic or atomistic view of the individual. To reiterate, she states that “[an ethics of ambiguity] is *not* solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals” (*EA* 156, emphasis added). Accordingly, anyone who criticizes Beauvoir's ethics on the basis that it is “overly individualistic” or solipsistic has probably failed to recognize Beauvoir's own thoughts on the matter. In addition,

anyone who makes such a criticism probably fails to understand the differences between Sartrean (and other existentialist) conceptions of the individual and *Beauvoir's* conception of the individual and individual freedom.

To explain, Sartre *does* situate the individual in isolation from and even opposition to others. He even characterizes this isolation and opposition as an ontological fact about human beings. And while Beauvoir does not deny the *separateness* of individuals, she also does not posit a fundamental and unalterable antagonism between them. For as she fleshes out her initial characterization of the ambiguity of the human situation, she asks this question: “How could men, originally separated, get together?” (*EA* 17-18) One could argue that this very question propels the entire argument of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. It is central to what it means for the human situation to *be* ambiguous: how do we live in a way that honors both our radical separateness from one another *and* our inescapable connectedness to one another? And for Beauvoir, to create an ethics that *only* acknowledges this separateness (and not this connectedness) is to create an incomplete ethics: one that obscures the very ambiguity of the human situation.

This is not to say that there are no traces of an “individualist” leaning in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In fact, Beauvoir does claim that she values not only the individual but also a certain conception of individualism in her ethics. But she also notes that she emphasizes the importance of the individual precisely because of her claim that the particularity of individuals--“individual reality of our projects and ourselves”—is what gives the world its “concrete and particular thickness” (*EA* 106). What’s more, as Jeffner Allen points out, Beauvoir grants an “absolute power” to the individual so that the “individual alone [has the] power to lay the foundations for

its existence.”<sup>166</sup> Beauvoir’s respect for individualism, then, is not about worshipping a cult of self-sovereignty but is instead about honoring the uniqueness and agency of the individuals who, collectively, populate the world.

Moreover, Beauvoir makes a concerted effort to articulate a relational and intersubjective conception of the self. In fact, in her analysis of human freedom, Beauvoir repeatedly highlights the reciprocity involved in a “successful” assumption of freedom. Thus, any individualism that Beauvoir advocates is always mediated by her emphasis on relationality and reciprocity.

In addition, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, any traces of solipsistic or otherwise isolated conceptions of the human being gradually fade from Beauvoir’s work after the writing of *L’Invitée* (or, from a historical vantage point, during and after the Second World War). In this respect, an objection such as the one that I am here responding to would apply more appropriately to a conception of autonomy and ethics based on Beauvoir’s view of the human being in *L’Invitée*, but not to the views that she espouses in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

### *Parallels without unique contributions*

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Finally (and most devastatingly for my project), one could argue that while *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has important parallels to contemporary feminist philosophy, it does not have the potential to make any *unique* contributions to it. In other words, perhaps all one can do is to demonstrate that Beauvoir does offer relational views of the self, autonomy, and ethics: not that her views offer any notable insights into current conversations about those same topics.

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<sup>166</sup> Jeffner Allen. “a response to a letter from Peg Simons, December 1993.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.



But to make this argument obscures some of the central themes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: themes that do not often appear in the current debates. In particular, I know of no other text or argument that makes use of the *concept* and *experience* of ambiguity in the way that Beauvoir does. She centralizes this ambiguity, making it the foundation not only of her moral philosophy but also of the way that she outlines how *others* should think, act, and decide. And while many contemporary theorists contemplate the ways in which a person's response to *ambivalence* affects her self-conception, her capacity for autonomy, or even her capacity for ethical action, these conceptions of *ambivalence* are significantly different from Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity.<sup>167</sup> Feeling a mix of emotions or responses—feeling *ambivalent*—toward one's identity or circumstances is one thing, but living in a world in which (as Beauvoir claims) there are no pre-determined values or meanings is quite another. So just by integrating this conception of ambiguity into one's view on the self, autonomy, and/or ethics, one contributes something unique to the literature on these issues. By centralizing it, as Beauvoir does, one provokes a radical shift in the way that we conceptualize these philosophical topics.

Moreover, I build upon this very conception of ambiguity in my own contemporary view of the relationship between autonomy and ethics. In this respect, and as will become apparent in the following chapter, Beauvoir's ethics can inspire a conception of relational autonomy that brings together autonomous action and moral action in a way that does not yet seem to have appeared in other philosophical and/or feminist work. More specifically, I argue that this particular conception of relational autonomy is connected with what I describe as a "moral attunement to the world": it is a conception of autonomy infused with a moral significance, just as Beauvoir's own conception of freedom has a striking moral significance.

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<sup>167</sup> I address these arguments in more detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4 – Rethinking relational autonomy through the lens of Beauvoir’s ethics

Throughout this project, I have maintained that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has the potential to make unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions about the self, autonomy, and moral philosophy. In this chapter, I sketch out some of the ways in which Beauvoir’s ethics can broaden the horizon upon which we theorize relational autonomy. In particular, I maintain that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can open up pathways for exploring the moral dimensions of relational autonomy.

I have already examined Beauvoir’s assertion that “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (*EA* 24). Taking up the implications of this assertion, I will consider a conception of relational autonomy that rethinks the relationship between autonomous action and moral action—or, as I characterize it, a moral “attunement” to the world.<sup>168</sup> In particular (and similar to Beauvoir’s original position), I maintain that there is an intractable, though non-transitive, connection between acting autonomously and situating oneself in the world morally. More specifically, I maintain that to act autonomously is, among other things, to morally attune oneself to the world.

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<sup>168</sup> Worth noting is that although I am positing a new conception of the relationship between personal (relational) autonomy and ethics, I do not intend to posit a particularly new conception of the relational self. This is despite the fact that I extensively examined both contemporary views of the relational self and the relationality of Beauvoir’s own view of the self in Chapter 2. My reasons for jettisoning this discussion do *not* include the notion that Beauvoir’s work has nothing to contribute to contemporary discussions of the self. On the contrary, I think that her conception of how ambiguity figures into self-development can offer important insights into both psychoanalytic and feminist theories. But as I see it, the challenges that these insights pose to contemporary theories of the self are not radical enough to lead to an entirely new and unique conception of the relational self. For as I contended in Chapter 2, I think that even non-feminist theorists would be hard-pressed to articulate a conception of the self that does not acknowledge the importance of social experience and relationality as it affects self-development. On the other hand, I think that Beauvoir’s conception of the relationship between autonomy and ethics *does* lead to a more radical challenge to contemporary philosophical discussions—including feminist discussions. And this challenge resides primarily in the connection that Beauvoir—and I—draw between free action and moral action.

As should be apparent, this conception of autonomy and its connection to the moral life is based upon but also different in many ways from Beauvoir's position. For while it does build upon the ways in which Beauvoir ties the willing of one's freedom to the confrontation with the ambiguity of the human situation and to acts of love, my characterizations of "autonomy" and "moral attunement" differ in many ways from Beauvoir's characterizations of "willing oneself free" and "willing oneself moral."

In that same vein, although I use Beauvoir's insights as a springboard for the view that I posit, my goal in this chapter is not to restate Beauvoir's views and cloak them in contemporary philosophical jargon. In ways that I describe in the following sections of this chapter, the conception of relational autonomy and moral attunement and I am articulating goes beyond the views that one can find in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. So while I do not intend to obscure the fact that my own position owes a tremendous debt to Beauvoir's ethics, I also do not intend to obscure the fact that my view differs significantly from parts of her ethics.<sup>169</sup>

These differences between my and Beauvoir's positions notwithstanding, the unique contributions that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can make to contemporary conversations (and contemporary *feminist* conversations) about relational autonomy are both noteworthy and multiple. For in addition to influencing an expanded vision of relational autonomy, I also think that Beauvoir's ethics helps to answer some important questions about the *value* of autonomy: namely, why should we care about whether or not a person is autonomous? Should we prioritize personal autonomy over other behaviors, characteristics, or virtues? And what special value does the concept of relational autonomy have for feminist theorists in particular?

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<sup>169</sup> This does, I think, preserve the integrity of what it means to demonstrate that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can, in fact, inspire contemporary philosophical thought on the self, autonomy, and ethics.

As I see it, by granting freedom—or, on my expanded interpretation, autonomy—a moral significance, Beauvoir provides an answer to these questions. In other words—and in ways that I will explain further in the subsequent sections—part of the value of autonomy, and part of the reason that we should care about a person’s autonomy, relate to the ways that an autonomous life contributes to and/or coincides with a a life of human flourishing, a life that considers and cares for the lives of others, a life that thinks and acts and creates. Furthermore, part of the value of autonomy for feminist theory pertains to the ways that autonomous and/or moral action requires both an exercise of freedom and a recognition and respect for our relationships with others and for their freedom. A robust, relational conception of autonomy can blend care and free agency in a way that neither subsumes the individual under a collective nor exalts the individual to the level of isolated atomism. And I think that Beauvoir’s ethics offers a unique insight into just how exercising one’s autonomy can achieve these conceptual and philosophical goals.

#### *Beauvoir’s conception of (moral) freedom*

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Recall that Beauvoir’s notion of moral freedom differs significantly from the ontological freedom most generally associated with existentialism. Existential *ontological* freedom is a “given”: one is always already free in this sense, and this freedom cannot be taken away from any person by force or by circumstance. According to Beauvoir, however, *moral* freedom is characterized more accurately as an achievement. It is not the sort of freedom that is always already present, regardless of one’s particular situation. To this effect, being free in the moral sense involves: 1) confronting (and thus not obscuring) the ambiguity of the human situation, 2) refraining from the “flight” from freedom characteristic of the serious man and other abnegators of freedom, and 3) recognizing and promoting the freedom of *other* human beings. It is a

freedom that is not a given, but one that requires that one actively assume it. Moreover, as Jeffner Allen points out, being morally free also incorporates a “negative movement” in which one *actively* “rejects oppression for oneself and others.”<sup>170</sup> In this respect, it is more accurate to claim that Beauvoir characterizes agents not as *being* morally free but as *projecting* or *willing* their moral freedom. What’s more, the assumption of this moral freedom is always connected to others and their freedom, and is even constituted by one’s reaching out *toward* others.

As I have already argued, Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom has important similarities to contemporary conceptions of relational autonomy. For one, Beauvoir understands human interconnectedness as a given and inescapable fact. Moreover, she acknowledges the complexity and uniqueness of individual human beings and their circumstances. Finally, she situates each person’s freedom within a matrix of other freedoms, underscoring a fundamental relationality of human freedom.<sup>171</sup> This in particular is what makes her characterization of moral freedom not only similar to but also relevant to contemporary accounts of relational autonomy. Beauvoir recognizes that moral freedom does not develop in a vacuum: for each individual, moral freedom (like autonomy, on a relational view) is both made possible by and sustained by others and others’ actions. At the same time, our actions and choices can help one another’s freedoms to flourish as well. As I have repeatedly pointed out, reciprocity is a centerpiece of her conception of moral freedom.

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<sup>170</sup> Allen, Jeffner. “a response to a letter from Peg Simons, December 1993.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. p. 115.

<sup>171</sup> Recall that this characteristic of Beauvoir’s moral freedom distinguishes her quite explicitly from Sartre and his view of a more radical, absolute human freedom. As Sonia Kruks points out, one can trace this distinction to a disagreement between Beauvoir and Sartre over “the relation of situation to freedom.” For unlike Sartre, Beauvoir did not think that people who were severely oppressed and/or enslaved had much “access” (if any) to possibilities for transcendence. And this was not because the way that *others* limited the freedom of the oppressed and the enslaved. In other words, oppression itself is *possible* because of the interdependence of human freedom. “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom.” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. p. 82.

Similarly, the conception of autonomy that I will soon explore incorporates each of these hallmark characteristics associated with relational autonomy. For one, I characterize this conception itself *as* an iteration of relational autonomy. Moreover, inspired by Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom (and thus unique to any of the current accounts of relational autonomy), the conception of relational autonomy that I articulate here also requires the individual to accept the various ambiguities and tensions of the human situation; to incorporate these ambiguities into the way that one projects oneself into the world; to question already-constructed values and to contribute one’s own values into the world; and to value and promote the freedom of others. Like Beauvoir’s conception of freedom, then, my conception of autonomy is not simply something that one “possesses.” It is not static, nor is it a given. It is something that one *projects* or *wills* at discrete (and sometimes continuous) moments. It is an autonomy that one might will in one situation and abnegate in another. And it is an autonomy that is, arguably, worth striving for—that one *should* strive for—in all of one’s decisions and actions.

#### *A relational autonomy inspired by Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity*

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Here, I will briefly outline the characteristics of what I consider to be a conception of relational autonomy that is just one example of how *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can inspire new and unique conversations within feminist philosophy. Within this conception, a person must satisfy the following necessary conditions in order to act autonomously:

1. They must accept (or not obscure or deny) the ambiguity of the human situation.
2. They must assume (and not flee from) their potential for free agency.
3. They must act in a way that respects the autonomy of others.

By meeting these conditions, I maintain that a person not only acts autonomously but also morally attunes themselves to the world.

Notably, none of these conditions are entirely independent from the others. Instead, they are interrelated, just as their “correlates” are interrelated in Beauvoir’s ethics. What’s more, satisfying these conditions does not require that one undergo an awkward and clunky “three-step process.” In other words, one can satisfy these conditions simultaneously and without much strenuous effort. To explain how this is so, I will elaborate briefly upon what I maintain is involved in satisfying each of these conditions.

For one, within a contemporary context, accepting the ambiguity of the human situation requires one to *attempt* to understand and examine the world as a complex matrix of forces, values, situations, and human experiences. It requires one to *attempt* to understand that they are both subjects in their “own” world and objects in “others” worlds: that they possess both a singular freedom and an inextricable bond with others.

I characterize this condition in terms of an *attempt* because I think that a perfect or global understanding and acceptance of the ambiguity of the human situation is impossible for any one person to attain.<sup>172</sup> As I explain in later parts of this chapter, I also do not think that recognizing and accepting this ambiguity demands any specialized intellectual rigor from people. It simply *is* the way that we experience life and the tensions within it.

Moreover, to assume one’s potential for free agency<sup>173</sup> is to refrain from actively fleeing one’s ability to think and create and engage in the world. It is to think critically about the world

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<sup>172</sup> Along with many others working on theories of autonomy, I also take issues with perfectionist strains of autonomy in general. I discuss these criticisms in more detail in subsequent sections.

<sup>173</sup> To be clear, I shall be casting terms like “free agency” and “freedom” in light of Beauvoir’s account of moral freedom. In this respect, my concept of free agency is significantly different from a conception of free will.

and the values in it and to create and project one's own values into the world. This is not to say that one must constantly create and project radically singular values that are absolutely unique to oneself. Instead, it is to demonstrate that one has examined the values that are available to them, that one has held these values up to critical reflection, and that one has claimed certain values as one's own. And then, it is to *act* upon those values. In brief, one could articulate this condition as follows: one should act upon values or reasons that they have submitted to critical thought.

Respecting the autonomy of others (and doing so purposefully) is also crucial to this view of relational autonomy. On the one hand, this condition could be the most controversial of the three. One might argue, for instance, that a person could still be considered "autonomous"—could still successfully govern themselves—without even *caring* about the autonomy of others. In other words, the act of respecting another's autonomy might seem superfluous to the conditions for autonomy: it is a nicety, but not a necessity.

Nonetheless, my insistence on preserving this condition as a *necessary* condition for personal autonomy reflects what I consider to be the inescapable reality of our interrelated freedoms. Just as Beauvoir maintains, I think that other people's abilities to act autonomously—and simply what other people *do*—affects my own capacity to act autonomously. To recall, the concern here is not about whether other's capacity for autonomy affects my *free will*: it is whether their ability to assume their own autonomy affects my autonomy, or in Beauvoir's sense, my moral freedom. Accordingly, if my actions continually suppress others' abilities to act autonomously, then this stultified autonomy soon reflects back on my own (moral) freedom.

Finally, morally attuning oneself to the world involves orienting oneself in a way that respects not only others but also relations between others (and between *oneself* and others). Because this term is unique not only to the literature on relational autonomy but also to



Beauvoir's own work, I will devote the next section to describing what I mean by 'moral attunement' in more detail.

### *Defining "moral attunement"*

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Notably, although Beauvoir does not use a term like "moral attunement" in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (or anywhere, for that matter), it does seem as if this might be one way to characterize a concept toward which her ethical-theoretical trajectory is moving. For she explicitly denies that she is establishing a set of universal ethical rules for people to follow. And with the exception of acknowledging the value of human freedom, she does not delineate a detailed set of moral values in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She refrains from using traditional moral and ethical categories, such as "good and bad," "good and evil," "morally permissible and impermissible" and so on, and she instead relies upon a more fluid understanding of ethics: one that is less about moral judgment and permissibility and more about figuring out how to live in a way that respects the fundamental and unique freedom of human beings.

Nonetheless, the simple fact that she wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* demonstrates her concern for thinking through moral issues: for caring about why people do what they do, and even about how they *should* do what they do. And it seems, given both the content of her ethics and of her biography, that this concern is borne out of her concern for how people treat one another.<sup>174</sup> Her ethics constructs a veritable bridge between human beings, reconciling the

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<sup>174</sup> Recall my attention to the fact that Beauvoir wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* at the end of World War II. It is no coincidence, I think, that this experience ran parallel to a moment in her *oeuvre* where she developed a heightened concern for how people treated one another and for how to reconcile the radical separateness of people with their simultaneous interconnectedness—a reconciliation that is at the heart of her articulation of the ambiguity of the human situation.

radicality of our separateness with our desire, and perhaps our responsibility, to reach out toward others. With this being said, her ethics is not a collection of rules intended to mold people into morally upright beings. Instead, it is an understanding of the human situation and human behavior that is intended to promote not only the freedom of all people but also, as I argue, the flourishing of all people.

Nevertheless, particularly because Beauvoir does not define or even refer to anything like my conception of “moral attunement,” it is essential that I characterize this term here. For what does it mean to be “morally attuned to the world”? In the context of this discussion, in what ways is autonomy relevant to whether and/or to what extent one is morally attuned to the world? And is a conception of moral attunement even relevant to Beauvoir’s work?

First, a simple definition: As I see it, moral attunement involves orienting oneself toward the world and toward others in a way that respects both the ambiguity of the human situation<sup>175</sup> and the autonomy of others. I believe that this orientation (which, admittedly, sounds strikingly similar to Beauvoir’s characterization of “moral freedom”) has a specifically *moral* valence in that it helps to optimize one’s own flourishing and the flourishing of others. In other words, it is a *moral* attunement because of the way it positions one to promote human flourishing. So just as Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom is fundamentally reciprocal, so is my conception of moral attunement. Just as *my* conception of autonomy is fundamentally relational, so is my conception of moral attunement.

Because my conception of moral attunement is fundamentally tied to an appreciation for human flourishing, this connection itself demands yet another definition: namely, what I mean by ‘human flourishing.’ I think that it is helpful to think about this concept in terms of what is

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<sup>175</sup> This is the “ambiguity” as characterized by Beauvoir.

*possible* for and *available* to people—what they are able to do, and experience, and achieve over the course of their lives. So to lead a flourishing life, a person must be *able* to:

1. Examine her values critically, and will or manifest or even alter those values through her decisions and actions;
2. Engage in creative pursuits and projects that reflect her values; and
3. Lead a life that is (relatively) free from oppression: one in which a person can enjoy both the assumption of her own freedom and the ways in which *others'* freedom helps to make her own freedom possible.

Characterizing flourishing in terms of possibility and availability helps, I think, to ensure that one can lead a flourishing life without *always* meeting the above conditions for flourishing at every discrete moment. It allows for the realities of human thinking and decision-making: the fact that even those who value critical thinking do not always pore over each and every one of their decisions, the fact that our circumstances sometimes put two or more of our values at odds and force us to make decisions that incorporate sacrifice and (as Beauvoir characterizes it) “failure.” What’s more, this allows for the unique and individual intersections of privilege and oppression that each person’s life encompasses: the fact that one person might benefit from gendered privilege and simultaneously encounter oppression in regard to his racial identity, or the fact that these privileges and oppressions can vary based on one’s social and geographical locations. Put more succinctly, one can live a flourishing life without living a perfectly or perpetually flourishing life. And acting autonomously and morally attuning oneself to the world can help to maximize one’s potential for a flourishing life.

With this in mind, it is important to articulate how and why acting autonomously contributes to one’s moral attunement. More specifically, it is important to articulate how and

why the particular type of autonomy I envision relates to a person's moral attunement, and thereby to one's flourishing. In other words, it bears explaining how and why autonomy is even *relevant* to moral attunement.

Recall that the autonomy I am sketching here is fundamentally relational and reciprocal. Because this conception of autonomy is grounded in a type of reciprocity similar that in Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom, a respect for others' autonomy is built into what it means for an individual to act autonomously. In my mind, this very reciprocity is what makes autonomy relevant to moral attunement. For caring about others and their ability to act autonomously *is* part of what it means to be morally attuned to the world.

This is all part of why I claim that to act autonomously *is* to morally attune oneself to the world. And by my own definitions, this claim implies that acting autonomously is, among other things, to act in a way that respects the autonomy of others and the ambiguity of the human situation.

At first blush, it may seem that this definition involves a series of troubling tautologies: to act autonomously is to respect autonomy; and to act autonomously is to morally attune oneself to the world, which is also to respect the autonomy of others. Note, however, that the "respect for autonomy" that I incorporate in my definition of moral attunement is not simply a respect for autonomy in *general* but instead a respect for the autonomy *of others*. It is a respect for concretized autonomy, not autonomy as a theoretical concept. As I will elaborate in subsequent sections, this respect can take many forms, not least of which includes a concern for undermining oppression; acting in a way that does not impede others' autonomy; or even simply *caring* about others' ability to act autonomously. And while these forms of respect do not explain in *detail*

how autonomy and moral attunement are intertwined<sup>176</sup>, they at least establish how autonomy is *relevant* to my conception of moral attunement.

To return to how moral attunement fits within a discussion of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is important to reiterate that the trajectory of Beauvoir's ethics is not toward a moral calculus<sup>177</sup> in which actions and/or people are determined to be "good" or "bad," morally "permissible" or "impermissible."<sup>178</sup> Rather, it seems that her ethics moves toward the promotion of human flourishing. For according to Beauvoir, we do not promote ours and others' freedom in order to *be* good or in order to act according to a rigid set of principles: instead, the assumption of moral freedom is tied to the willing of one's values, to creativity, and to overcoming oppression—to activities that all seem to be tied to human flourishing, both in general and as I define it here. And if this is the case, then acknowledging the ambiguity of the human situation, and integrating one's awareness of this ambiguity into the way one acts and decides and lives, is integral to what it means to lead a flourishing life.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> As noted, I will save these more detailed descriptions for subsequent sections.

<sup>177</sup> In a later essay, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," Beauvoir characterizes ethics as follows: "Ethics is not an ensemble of constituted values and principles; it is the constituting movement that an authentically moral man must reproduce for himself." "Moral Idealism and Political Realism." trans. Anne Deing Cordero. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1945 in *Les temps modernes*, 1(2): 248-268.) p. 188.

<sup>178</sup> And Beauvoir herself makes this point quite clearly, maintaining that: "What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naïve abstraction. We don't ask the physicist, 'Which hypotheses are true?' Nor the artist, 'By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?' Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art" (*EA* 134).

<sup>179</sup> Notably, one might compare this notion of moral attunement to parts of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, specifically her discussion of *The Good*. Though Murdoch was famously critical of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, I still see this as an apt comparison. For while I do not think that Beauvoir's ethics or what I am suggesting here is amenable to a reading that places a "patient loving regard" for other people at the center of one's moral philosophy (as Murdoch does), I *do* think that Murdoch's description of the way that one should focus one's "attention" on others is most certainly comparable to my conception of moral attunement. Iris Murdoch. *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge Classics, New York: 1971. p. 39

Recall that in addition to framing “moral attunement” in terms of respecting the freedom of others, I also connect this concept to a respect for the ambiguity of the human situation. Incorporating a respect for the freedom or autonomy of others into this definition of moral attunement might seem intuitive. But less intuitive, and perhaps less obvious, is why I incorporate a respect for the ambiguity of the human situation into this definition.

As I maintain in more elaborate detail in the subsequent section, I think that the human situation *is* ambiguous in the way that Beauvoir describes it. In this way, the “world,” as humans experience it, really is ambiguous. And (to expand upon the definition of moral attunement) I maintain that being morally attuned to the world requires one to see and appreciate the world for what it is. It requires carefully and respectfully navigating our own and others’ circumstances. It requires striving to understand those circumstances as clearly as possible, even when those circumstances seem impossibly complex—and ambiguous. Otherwise, we risk attuning ourselves to a world that is not really “ours”—one that is an inaccurate understanding of ours and others’ situations.

This is not to say that I advocate an account of moral attunement that incorporates a *perfect* understanding of the world. This sort of understanding is impossible for the flawed and fallible intelligence that people (even those with the most and discerning intelligence) possess. Nonetheless, I *do* conceive of a moral attunement (and in addition to that, a view of autonomy) that incorporates a sincere effort to appreciate the world for what it is: an effort that avoids obscuring what is difficult and complex and *ambiguous* about the world. And this is, I think, precisely what Beauvoir means when she maintains that “it is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (*EA* 9).

Our values and normative claims must reflect our and others' situations as clearly as possible so that we may navigate the world as successfully as possible.

Worth noting is that I do not think that acting autonomously is the *only* way to morally attune oneself to the world. Thus, I do not think that there is a transitive relationship between autonomous action and moral attunement. What I do think, however, is that there is a significant overlap between the necessary conditions one must meet in order to be considered both "autonomous" and "morally attuned to the world." In addition, meeting all of the conditions for this view of autonomy necessarily results in one's moral attunement to the world.<sup>180</sup>

Recall that my simple definition of moral attunement is as follows: "Moral attunement involves orienting oneself toward the world and toward others in a way that respects both the ambiguity of the human situation<sup>181</sup> and the autonomy of others." Taking into account my further expansion of this core definition, I also maintain that moral attunement incorporates the following characteristics:

1. It requires one to understand and appreciate the world for what it is (and "what it is" includes the ambiguity of the human situation).
2. It can be articulated in terms of care for another person or group of people.
3. It helps to make possible human flourishing.

And I think that this is all made possible by meeting the conditions I set out for relational autonomy: an autonomy that is both influenced and inspired by Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*.

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<sup>180</sup> Recall that these overlapping conditions are "acknowledging the ambiguity of the human situation" and "respecting the autonomy of others."

<sup>181</sup> This is the "ambiguity" as characterized by Beauvoir.

Beauvoir's link between the assumption of freedom and the recognition of the ambiguity of the human situation not only presents a unique view of free action in itself but also can lead to a unique, contemporary view of autonomy. As I explain in subsequent sections of this chapter, the link between freedom and ambiguity figures prominently into Beauvoir's claim that to will oneself moral is to will oneself free. Accordingly, this link will also figure into my conception of the relationship between relational autonomy and a moral attunement to the world.

But before continuing to characterize this conception of autonomy, it is important to further distinguish the concept of ambivalence from that of ambiguity, particularly in terms of how these concepts have functioned in the literature on personal autonomy. For instance, Harry Frankfurt<sup>182</sup> and, to a lesser extent, Natalie Stoljar<sup>183</sup> have examined the ways in which a person's response to *ambivalence* affects her capacity for autonomy. On the one hand, Frankfurt tends to see ambivalence as something that undermines rather than promotes personal autonomy. To explain, he characterizes ambivalence as a defect of the will in which a person experiences "conflicting volitional movements" that are "inherently and unavoidably opposed" and that are "wholly internal to a person's will."<sup>184</sup> If a person is ambivalent in this way, then she cannot even pursue any goal that she sets for herself because she will be both "for" and "against" this

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<sup>182</sup> Harry Frankfurt. "The Faintest Passion." *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>183</sup> Worth noting is that Stoljar is referring to Cheshire Calhoun's argument that ambivalence does not undermine an agent's *integrity*. Stoljar briefly takes up this position and considers it in terms of an agent's autonomy. "Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition." *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 105.

<sup>184</sup> Frankfurt (1999), p. 99.



very goal. As Frankfurt puts it, the ambivalent person is “volitionally inchoate and indeterminate.”<sup>185</sup> And on Frankfurt’s view, this sort of ambivalence undermines a person’s autonomy because it prevents that person from achieving or maintaining “wholeheartedness” and in having the will that she wants to have.

On the other hand, Natalie Stoljar offers a much more favorable view of the relationship between ambivalence and autonomy than Frankfurt does. Drawing upon Cheshire Calhoun’s discussion of integrity, Stoljar considers the possibility that accepting an internal ambivalence regarding the various layers of one’s identity might promote rather than undermine one’s autonomy. While Stoljar does not develop this idea in much detail, she does highlights an approach to ambivalence that does *not* see it as a hindrance to autonomy. Specifically, her view suggests that autonomy with respect to one’s identity might require one to recognize and respond to potentially conflicting qualities of one’s social identity without trying to resolve or obscure those conflicts.

Beauvoir’s conception of *ambiguity*, however, points to something broader than an internal ambivalence that an agent experiences in regard to a decision that she must make between two or more options or in regard to the multiple layers of her identity. The ambiguity central to *The Ethics of Ambiguity* relates to the way in which human beings are situated in the world. It is something that reflects the dual and conflicting experiences that we have in regard to our subjectivity, our freedom, and our situation in the world. Beauvoir also argues that confronting and accepting the ambiguity of the human situation is a necessary condition for acting freely. In fact, she maintains that we should build our ethics upon our understanding of this ambiguity, claiming that “it is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (EA 9). On a meta-ethical level, then, she argues that our ethics should—and *must*—reflect the world and the human situation as it really is. And, she further maintains, it *is* ambiguous.

### *Relational autonomy in an ambiguous world*

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My claims about autonomy and the ambiguity of the human situation assume, of course, that the human situation *is* ambiguous in the ways that Beauvoir describes it. Moreover, they assume that human beings *do* confront or experience this ambiguity and that they even have the ability to recognize it. Admittedly, to make these sorts of assumptions is to risk universalizing the human experience in a way that may be unpalatable to those sympathetic to feminist and/or existentialist conceptions of the human being. Nonetheless, I think that one can lay claim to a *general* conception of ambiguity (such as Beauvoir’s) without simultaneously claiming that all human beings experience this ambiguity in a uniform fashion—that is, without universalizing the individual *experience* of ambiguity.

For instance, a breastfeeding mother and attorney might acquire a profound sense of the ambiguity of her freedom in the way that she can feel completely unfettered in her ability review a legal brief, all while nursing her infant; yet she can feel simultaneously and inextricably bound to this infant who is now completely dependent upon her for nutrition. Or a reproductive justice activist marching for women’s health rights might simultaneously experience herself as a singular individual—*she* alone holds the placard she is carrying, *she* alone has her own reasons for making a political statement about women’s reproductive rights; and as part of a collectivity—without the group of which she is a part, her placard and her protests might become powerless or even insignificant. A cashier at a fast food restaurant might feel the ambiguous pull

of seeing himself as an acting, thinking, and feeling subject in the world and yet acknowledging that to anyone who comes through his line, he is an object in their worlds. The ambiguity of the human situation is not simply something that one recognizes alone, pondering the mysteries of the world at a quiet desk. We feel it. We experience it. We notice it in our daily lives even if we cannot give name to what “it” is. Thus, if one keeps in mind that the ambiguity that Beauvoir describes manifests itself in human experience in multifarious and unique ways, then one can refrain from the universalizing to which I earlier alluded.

It is also important to consider the ways in which *not* confronting the ambiguity of the human situation would, for Beauvoir, lead to an abdication of one’s freedom—and why it would, on my view, lead to an abdication of one’s autonomy. This very obscuring of ambiguity is, to start, one of the central characteristics of the serious man. For instead of confronting the tension and uncertainty of the human situation, the serious man clings uncritically to absolute, universal values as a way to obscure and even hide from the discomfort that comes from knowing that the human situation is truly ambiguous, that values themselves are truly precarious. Furthermore, this uncritical and oversimplified view of the world leads the serious man to belittle and even dehumanize those people who are not useful to the values that he maintains. According to Beauvoir, then, a lack of appreciation for the ambiguity of the human situation actually coincides with a lack of appreciation and respect for the freedom and subjectivity of others. And because Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom is a fundamentally reciprocal conception of freedom, if one does not appreciate and respect the freedom and subjectivity of others, then one is *not* morally free in Beauvoir’s sense of the term.

To tie this point to my own discussion, refusing to appreciate the ambiguity of the human situation would correlate with one refusing to engage in critical and nuanced thinking about the

world and the people who inhabit it. It would be to cling uncritically to one's values and beliefs. And it would be to gloss over and devalue the uniqueness of each individual situation, and of each individual person. Finally, it would be to refuse to acknowledge the ways in which the ambiguity of the human situation manifests itself in each of our circumstances: the ways in which others are both objects in our world and subjects of their own worlds, the ways in which every individual is both free and bound to others, the ways in which we can *feel* both separate from and connected to others. This, it seems, challenges the possibility not only of being autonomous but also of being morally attuned to the world.

In fact, even in Beauvoir's descriptions of the sub-man, the serious man, and so on, one could argue that Beauvoir offers complementary descriptions of how these people are *not* morally attuned to the world. The serious man hinges on tyrannical behavior, ignoring the subjectivity and freedom of others in service of end or ends to which he clings. The adventurer remains indifferent to the human meaning of his actions, demonstrating a near contempt for other people. The passionate man becomes so engulfed in his project that he views others solely as means to his ends. And as Beauvoir notes, these philosophical categories translate into real, concrete human devastation: slavery, imperialism, oppression, tyranny, mindless treatment of other human beings. Each of these disconnections from the world and from other people hinges on a refusal both to acknowledge the ambiguity of the human situation and assume one's moral freedom. They demonstrate an unwillingness to recognize that one's subjectivity exists in a world of other subjects: that one's own freedom depends upon the freedom of others. Thus, it seems that these refusals interfere in significant ways with one's specifically moral attunement with the world. For if one refuses to acknowledge even *that* one's life and interests and goals are connected to others, it seems unlikely that one will display much care *for* others.

This is precisely where moral attunement and autonomy appear to be intertwined, and where their necessary conditions overlap: both require one to see and appreciate the world for what it is (and what it *is* is ambiguous). And both require one to acknowledge the ways in which one's own freedom, and even one's own dignity, depend on the freedom and dignity of others.

Even more than this, both involve the following recognition: the world is messy. Applying moral principles to the world is even messier. For rarely are “real” moral problems so clearly defined and analyze-able as they are in examples in philosophy texts. Real world moral problems involve a constellation of characters and considerations and circumstances. And they often demand more creativity than is offered by rule-oriented ethical systems. *This* is precisely what Beauvoir captures when she bases her ethics on the ambiguity of the human situation. A moral response to the world—and, as I see it, a moral attunement to the world—requires the recognition of the human situation's ambiguity (or messiness), the reflective understanding of one's interconnectedness with others, and the “never-ending questioning” that all figure centrally in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Thus, without any pre-established, universal ethical precepts to follow, Beauvoir maintains we must act in a way in which we both establish our own values and make it possible for others to do the same. This is the simple yet profound heart of her ethics. And sometimes—because our actions always affect others, and their actions affect ours—we will “fail,” and we will impinge on others' freedom. Sometimes we may even need to sacrifice one of our moral commitments for another, simply because of the human limitations of time, and finite knowledge, and mortality. Beauvoir herself illustrates this situation in her example of the young Nazi whose very youth (and *developing* sense of freedom) might have, in other circumstances, inspired an attempt to re-educate him, to give him the opportunity to change; but during the war,

because of the exigency of the situation, there was no time to educate or show greater compassion to him. His freedom *should* have been respected, but it had to be sacrificed because of the ways in which the group with which he was associated all but annihilated the freedom of many more others.

Building the possibility—nay, the near certainty—of “failure” into her ethics thus respects the very “messiness” upon which an ethics of ambiguity is based. This very “failure” is, I think, encompassed in the conceptions of relational autonomy and moral attunement that I articulate here. For moral attunement does not entail that one perfectly respects the freedom of all others at every moment. If one is respecting the freedom of others by working to undermine oppression, then this may mean that one must fail to respect the freedom of the oppressors. It would be challenging and even nearly impossible, for instance, to work to liberate slaves from a human trafficking ring without actively undermining the freedom of the enslavers. Systems and organizations of oppression are not amenable to a “respect for all others’ freedom” in the first place. Accordingly, a “perfect respect” is at times impossible, such as in the example that Beauvoir uses when she refers to a couple who freely chooses to persist in deplorable living conditions and without making an effort to change these conditions. According to Beauvoir, their freedom to choose this living situation becomes complicated when they have children: when their own freedom is the ruin of others’ freedom, and others’ futures. Beauvoir maintains that this principle illustrates the principle that the multiplicity of the Other—the fact that there are *many* Others whom we must consider when evaluating our own decisions, and our own values and projects—leads to many new moral questions that we must ask ourselves in the process of this decision-making (*EA* 143-144). What’s more, sometimes the possible responses to these moral questions reflect a complicated and messy world: one in which even those who

value the (moral) freedom of others must undermine the freedom of some in order to promote the freedom of others.

Recall too Beauvoir's introduction to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: "'The continuous work of our life,' says Montaigne, 'is to build death'...Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and plant merely undergo'" (*EA* 7). As we build our lives, we move ever closer to our death. Our lives themselves—not their biographies or the trail of records that they leave behind—will end in their annihilation. Even the lives and situations to which our moral philosophies respond are impermanent and imperfect.

So in addition to a general predisposition to rejecting formal ethical systems (characteristic of more existentialist philosophers), I believe that Beauvoir also rejects such systems *because* of their ability to capture and respond to the "messiness" of the world that I have here described. In fact, this is what she seems to claim when she refers to "those consoling ethics" that obscure the ambiguity of the human situation (*EA* 8). For it does indeed seem consoling to think of, or to hope for, an ethics that can perfectly respond to moral problems: that consistently applies universal and unchanging moral principles across a wide set of circumstances, and that does so without ever needing to challenge or question the content of those principles. But the messiness—the *ambiguity*—of the human situation undermines this very ethical perfection. And what this situation demands in its place *is* an ethics of ambiguity.

Finally, it is what this conception of relational autonomy can *accomplish*—and what, for Beauvoir, the plurality of individuals assuming their moral freedom can accomplish—that opens up perhaps the most striking possibility for rethinking relational autonomy through the lens of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. To explain, the relationality of Beauvoir's moral freedom does not just reside in how moral freedom develops or how one exercises it. It also resides in what it *does*,

what it makes possible. For Beauvoir maintains that “it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself” (EA 17-18). In other words, when the *plurality* of unique individuals assume their moral freedom, they establish values in the world. What’s more, they are not just values that are inchoate and relevant only to the individuals who will them but, as Beauvoir suggests, values willed by “separate existents” who are nonetheless “bound to each other” and *potentially* “[forging] laws valid for all” (EA 18). Thus, by assuming our moral freedom, we can establish *relational values*. By willing our values, we implicate others in those values, just as we are implicated in the willing of their values.

To ground a conception of autonomy in a claim such as this one is to broaden the very relationality of autonomy itself. And it partly is why, I think, that the conception of autonomy that I sketch here leads one to be morally attuned to the world. Simply by exercising one’s autonomy, one implicates others in one’s values, and one is implicated in the willing of others’ values too. Furthermore, one orients oneself toward others. What’s more, by meeting the conditions for autonomy that I have set out here, one orients oneself toward *caring* for others; at the very least, one orients oneself toward caring and respecting others’ autonomy in a concrete way.

### *Autonomy, love, and emotions in an ethics of ambiguity*

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I have already shown how Beauvoir’s ethics can help to open up new dimensions for considering connections between relational autonomy and Beauvoir’s conception of ambiguity. In addition, I maintain that her ethics helps to open up new dimensions for considering



connections between relational autonomy, love, and emotions. Note that just as Beauvoir ties her conception of free action to a loving gesture, so too do I connect relational autonomy to an act of love: toward an “attunement to the world” where one promotes one’s own and others’ flourishing. Making this connection helps to illuminate the moral dimensions of autonomous action and, I hope, to explain in part the strong relationship between autonomy and moral attunement to the world.

It is worth noting that existentialism is often associated with the pitting of individuals and individual freedoms against one another. And this is not without reason. Sartre in particular promulgates this sort of view, generalizing the human experience as a situation in which people are essentially alone in the world, with freedoms that are radically inaccessible to and unaffected by others. For Sartre casts the Other as an immediate threat to one’s freedom: not as someone who holds the potential to open up further possibilities for assuming one’s freedom. Furthermore, he characterizes freedom as an untouchable, immutable fact in the world: we cannot but be free. Even Sartre’s infamous prisoner example casts someone locked behind bars as still fundamentally and absolutely free.<sup>186</sup> As Sartre maintains, the prisoner can freely choose his reaction to his imprisonment. A barrier only arises when a prisoner develops the desire and will to escape the prison walls, and even then his freedom remains unsullied and intact: only a physical barrier exists between him and the objective of his will.

Because of their close personal and professional relationship, Beauvoir is often (carelessly) associated with this view too. Beauvoir, however, avoids essentializing and universalizing any inherent enmity between people. Instead, she sees an essential bond. For

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<sup>186</sup> See Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. p. 622.

while she acknowledges the ways in which it might *seem* as if others “steal the world away from me,” she also realizes that “if I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty” (EA 70-71). As she sees it, other people not only help to validate our “projects” but also make possible our ability to assume our freedom. So while Beauvoir does not *deny* the struggle that *can* exist between individuals (as her analysis of oppression demonstrates), she also does not deny the fundamental reciprocity and intersubjectivity of human beings and their freedom. What’s more, I believe that it is this very recognition on her part that allows her ethics to accommodate and even *value* concepts such as the emotions and love.

In fact, Beauvoir even explicitly addresses love and reciprocity in her ethics. In the second chapter of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir draws a unique and powerful connection between free action and love. To recall, she claims that:

It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the other is revealed as an other. And to love him genuinely is to love him in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes. Love is then renunciation of all possession, of all confusion. One renounces being in order that there may be that being which one is not. Such generosity, moreover, can not be exercised on behalf of any object whatsoever. One can not love a pure thing in its independence and separation, for the thing does not have positive independence. If a man prefers the land he has discovered to the possession of this land, a painting or a statue to their material presence, it is insofar as they appear to him as possibilities open to other men. (67)

Worth noting is that Beauvoir’s *explicit* consideration of the relationship between acting freely and loving another person is quite brief, appearing only at the end of her discussion of the passionate man. But the fact that her *explicit* examination of this issue is brief does not preclude the possibility that one could interpret large parts of Beauvoir’s ethics as suggesting an important connection between love and freedom. For here she characterizes love as a relinquishment of possession. To love is not to possess the other as an object but to respect the absoluteness of the other’s freedom.

It is important to reiterate here that the freedom which Beauvoir discusses at length in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not simply the ontological freedom that most existentialist philosophers take as a “given.” Instead, Beauvoir examines the relationship between ethical action and the assumption of one’s moral freedom. Noting this distinction—that is, the distinction between ontological and moral freedom—makes it easier to understand how she connects the assumption of one’s freedom to an act of love. For if assuming one’s moral freedom involves the recognition that one’s freedom is tied to others *and* that one must act in a way that promotes the freedom of others, then acting freely is always a gesture *out toward* others. And this gesture toward others does not represent an act of freedom if one does not intend it to open up possibilities for others to assume their freedom. In other words, although Beauvoir does not advocate moral altruism in her conception of freedom, this conception does incorporate notions of generosity and concern for others. So instead of absolute self-interest or absolute altruism, reciprocity resides at the center of her ethics and her conception of moral freedom: one pursues one’s own projects freely, assumes one’s freedom through one’s actions, and does so in a way that opens up possibilities for others to do the same. What’s more, it is because others do the same that one is able to take up this movement in the first place. And one cannot even be considered morally free according to Beauvoir if one is not actively engaged in this movement of reciprocal freedom.

To explain further the connection between Beauvoirian freedom and love, it is possible to glean from Beauvoir’s work the prospect that without certain sorts of emotional experiences, assuming the type of freedom that Beauvoir propounds would, in fact, be impossible. It is important to note by viewing emotions thusly, Beauvoir distinguishes herself from Sartre. In

fact, according to Karen Vintges, Beauvoir “sees emotion as the positive experience through which we have contact with the world and with our fellow human beings.”<sup>187</sup>

This point becomes clearer partly in light of her characterization of the serious man. One of the hallmarks of the serious man (one of the archetypal characters who, according to Beauvoir, abdicates his freedom) is that he refuses to assume the same affective experience in his actions that the moral agent does (*EA* 47). This point (namely, my claim that Beauvoir’s argument implies a connection between the emotions and autonomy) also becomes clear in light of the connections that she draws between love and freedom. Specifically, Beauvoir characterizes willing one’s freedom (and thus willing the freedom of others) as an act of love (*EA* 67). In this respect, she draws an important (and unique) connection between the love, freedom, and autonomy.

To explain, by characterizing willing one’s freedom (or, loosely, acting autonomously) as an act of love, Beauvoir adds an element of *care* to autonomous action. Without departing too much from the text itself, I maintain that this view of autonomy has important parallels to feminist ethics of care. I also contend that Beauvoir’s view of freedom can help to construct a more robust conception of relational autonomy: one in which the relationality of autonomy stems not only from the ways in which one’s autonomy develops and can be exercised but also from the ways in which one respects and acts for others by acting autonomously. In other words, on this view the relationality of personal autonomy would hinge not only on the ways in which others make possible and/or help to sustain one’s autonomy but also on the ways in which one’s own actions help to promote others’ autonomy.

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<sup>187</sup> Karen Vintges. “Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker for the Twenty-First Century.” *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 217.

In fact, Barbara Andrew offers a compelling analysis of the connection between freedom and the *ability* to love and care for others in her essay, “Care, Freedom, and Reciprocity in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir.”<sup>188</sup> Her primary thesis is that “one’s ability to love and give care is bound to one’s ability to act on one’s freedom.”<sup>189</sup> Challenging the image of the selfless caregiver, Andrew posits an image of care-giving based on mutual respect for one’s own and others’ freedoms. In addition to this emphasis on reciprocity, she also incorporates Beauvoir’s conception of ambiguity into the “ethic of freedom and care” that she develops.<sup>190</sup>

Andrew also characterizes the willing of care as a specifically reflective and ethical process. According to her, it is a process that, if continued throughout time, helps to constitute a person as the sort of moral agent who can successfully negotiate their and other’s freedoms. Part of what motivates her argument is her concern for framing care-giving *not* as a selfless act but as an act which “successful” caregivers both care for others *and* allow themselves to be cared *for* by others. To reiterate, the ambiguity to which Andrew draws attention here—and one Beauvoir does not necessarily focus on in much explicit detail—is that between our vulnerability and our independence, our neediness and our power. In the act of care-giving—in this particular willing of love—one finds the tension between one’s power and vulnerability. And this love is not selfless but based in the mutual recognition of freedom and dependency. When I act on my will, I depend on others to recognize my actions as having meaning. And according to Andrew, when I care for someone else, I only allow them real “access” to my world if I reveal my own vulnerability, if I allow them to “see me in my dependency as well as in [my] strength.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Barbara Andrew (1998).

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

Notably, any attention to Beauvoir's conception of love, and even the function of care in individuals, illustrates her commitment to valuing the particularity of human relationships. In fact, she claims that love and friendship would not even be possible without human uniqueness and concreteness: without the fact that "we are attached by particular ties" and that through our differences, "we become irreplaceable to a few others" (*EA* 108).<sup>192</sup>

Taking the role of love in Beauvoir's ethics into consideration, in what ways can her connection between love, freedom, and the emotions inform my own exploration of relational autonomy and moral attunement to the world?

For one, I think that it is important to reiterate the ways in which Beauvoir's account of moral freedom involves a continual "reaching out" toward others. A conception of relational autonomy that incorporates this "reaching out" (as I believe mine does) already seems to incorporate a move toward "moral attunement to the world." To act autonomously, one must already recognize others' autonomy. One must respect the ways in which other autonomous agents help to reflect the meaning of one's actions. Accordingly, in the very moment where one assumes one's autonomy, one is already "attuning" oneself toward others.

This concept of the mutual recognition of autonomy also gives way to an understanding of the uniqueness and concreteness of human relationships. For this mutual recognition is neither a hypothetical recognition nor a recognition of autonomy in some abstract sense. It is an actual recognition of the autonomy of specific people—of people who are likely in one's

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<sup>192</sup> One can trace Beauvoir's emphasis on the specificity of individuals and individual friendships to "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in which she maintains that any generalized conception of human "brotherhood" obscures the singularity of our ties to specific others (such as through friendships, familial relationships, etc.). Any ethics that encompasses a regard for love, then, must also encompass a regard for the radical particularity of each person. ("Pyrrhus and Cineas." trans. Marybeth Timmermann. *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. (Originally published in 1944))

network of social relationships. These unique and concrete people for whom we care, whom we might love, help to make our autonomy possible, just as we help to make theirs possible.

### *Autonomy and moral attunement*

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At this point, I shall clarify the connection I draw between relational autonomy and moral attunement, as I define these terms. How exactly *does* one morally attune oneself to the world by satisfying the conditions that I set out for relational autonomy? How *do* these sorts of acts contribute to human flourishing? And what it is about autonomy in particular that makes this possible?

To reiterate, I think that acting autonomously involves (among other things) respecting the autonomy of others. What's more, I maintain that acting autonomously requires one to respect the ambiguity of the human situation. These conditions are also features of moral attunement to the world, as I have here characterized it. Thus, by meeting just these conditions for autonomy, one already meets one of the conditions for moral attunement.

But beyond the mere overlap of necessary conditions for autonomy and moral attunement to the world, I think that the content of these conditions illustrates why *this* conception of autonomy leads one to be morally attuned to the world.

Consider, for instance, what it means to accept the ambiguity of the human condition. In recognizing that you are both a subject in your own world *and* an object in others' worlds, that you can feel both infinitely free and inextricably bound to others, that you have both sovereign importance and negligible significance in the world, you encounter the limits of your subjectivity. As soon as you act, your actions run up against the "worlds" of others. Your actions never occur in a vacuum, and their effects and their meanings seep into "subjective

worlds” that are not your own. You are always, already connected to others. In accepting the ambiguity of the human situation, you *attune* yourself to others.

Furthermore, to respect others’ autonomy is also to attune yourself to others. It is to recognize that their actions have meaning. It is to understand that their recognition of your actions help to confirm that your actions to have meaning: that they constitute a manifestation of your will and dreams and desires and values. It is to participate in a world where your own and others’ actions establish values.

I maintain that this attunement is a specifically *moral* attunement because of the ways in which it situates human beings toward others. Namely, it places us in a posture of mutual respect. It orients us in such a way that we care about others in concrete ways. And because this respect and care has a trajectory that moves toward expanding the possibilities for others to act autonomously, I think that it helps to promote human flourishing. It enhances the world so that others may critically reflect upon their values and enjoy creative pursuits and live free from oppression. And what is unique about my conception of relational autonomy is that it does not only promote one’s own flourishing: it also promotes *others’* flourishing.

### *Re(Valuing) autonomy*

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As stated previously, I maintain that Beauvoir’s notion of acting freely as acting morally helps to address some questions that contemporary theorists pose regarding the value of autonomy. Specifically, her view of moral freedom helps to address why we should value autonomy, to what extent we should value it, and what special value autonomy offers to feminist thought in particular.



According to Karen Vintges, Beauvoir's work (including but not limited to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) offers insight into contemporary feminist discussions and philosophical problems primarily because of Beauvoir's conceptions of ambiguity and what Vintges refers to as a "practical philosophical self-creation."<sup>193</sup> For one, by maintaining the tension between the radical separateness of human being and their undeniable connection, Beauvoir creates a philosophically rich "grey area" in which we can find justification both for generosity, reciprocity, and care for others on the one hand, and an aversion to universal moral laws on the other. In other words, an ethics of ambiguity can accommodate the claim that one *should* respect the freedom of others, and even that one *should* respect the interconnectedness and intersubjectivity of *all* people, without thereby claiming that one *should* ever speak for another person, or will a specific moral value *for* any other person but oneself.

Notably, the notion that the value of autonomy resides in its ability to promote human flourishing is not in itself a novel idea. But to say that autonomous action promotes moral attunement to the world—and that *this* promotes human flourishing—is another matter entirely. And *this* connection between autonomous action and moral attunement helps to explain why there is such a special value to autonomy in the first place. For at the center of feminist philosophy—at the center of any philosophical view laden with moral concerns—is a general concern about human flourishing, and a type of flourishing that is open to people regardless of their social and cultural identities.

What is particularly unique about this conception of autonomy is that autonomous action does not simply contribute to one's own flourishing: it also contributes to *others'* flourishing.

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<sup>193</sup> Karen Vintges. "Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker for the Twenty-First Century." *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 221.

For instance, recall Beauvoir's insistence that assuming one's moral freedom involves acting in a way that opens up possibilities for others to assume their moral freedom. Similarly, I maintain that acting autonomously involves *purposefully* and *concretely* respecting the autonomy of others. In other words, one compromises one's own autonomy if one acts with utter disregard for others' autonomy.

An additional concern about the value of autonomy is "just how much" we should value it: whether it should be privileged over other characteristics or achievements, and if so, over which exact characteristics and achievements it should be privileged.

Notably, I do not intend to quantify the exact "worth" of autonomy in relation to other values, characteristics, achievements, and attitudes. Thus, my goal in addressing the question of "just how much" we should value autonomy is not to place autonomy in a ranked system. Nonetheless, I think that the concept of autonomy that I have sketched here *centralizes* it as an ethical concern. From autonomy springs mutual respect and moral attunement to the world and the promotion of human flourishing. Acting autonomously reflects both the ambiguity of the human situation and the interconnectedness of human beings. And the centrality of autonomy as a value illustrates its significance among other ethical values.

Similarly, there is a concern about the specific value that autonomy has for feminist theory—and whether autonomy has any value at all in a feminist theory. While many feminist thinkers have promoted autonomy as an important value, others have questioned its role in feminist theory, raising concerns about some of the masculinist tendencies in certain theories of autonomy. For if the concept of autonomy necessarily promotes isolated individualism at the

expense of interpersonal relationships, then it might be a concept that many feminists want to eschew from their core set of values and concerns.<sup>194</sup>

However, those who articulated some of the first conceptions of relational autonomy (or what came to be known as relational autonomy) attempted to ameliorate some of the concerns about the apparent atomistic isolationism of other account of autonomy. Thus, efforts to characterize a *relational* autonomy tried to preserve and balance the value of self-governance and the value of human interconnectedness. And this attempt—these articulations of autonomy—are valuable to *any* feminism that might envision as a tool to combat oppression, the unequal distribution of resources, and the various and intersecting forces that subjugate countless individuals because of their social and cultural identities.

To respond to these issues further, it might be helpful to re-identify some key concepts that are generally important to feminist theory and to determine how this particular characterization of autonomy helps to honor and/or promote these concepts. To reiterate (and to use the same concepts that I did in Chapter 3), these concepts are: “reciprocity, respect, care, intersubjectivity, attention to difference, and a strong subjectivity and agency.”<sup>195</sup> If a particular conception of autonomy has the possibility to promote one or more of these concepts, then it seems that valuing autonomy itself is anything but antithetical to feminist values.

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<sup>194</sup> Marilyn Friedman makes note of this concern, which became prominent in 1980s and 1990s feminist philosophical literature: “The mainstream conception, so [feminist critics of autonomy] argued, is overly individualistic. It presupposes that selves are asocial atoms, ignores the importance of social relationships, and promotes the sort of independence that involves disconnection from close interpersonal involvement with others...The traditional conception of autonomy, feminists asserted, is biased toward male social roles and reflects male conceits and delusions.” “Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique.” *Feminists Rethink the Self*. ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. p. 40.

<sup>195</sup> Barbara Andrew (1998).

As I have maintained, a specifically *relational* conception of autonomy can not only promote but also incorporate these six concepts. To take up the view of autonomy I have outlined herein, this view is fundamentally tied to a **reciprocal** notion of freedom in which acting autonomously involves both acting upon one's own values and opening up ways for others to do the same. This very notion of freedom thus reveals one way in which autonomy can incorporate and even *require* a **respect** for others. What's more, this view of autonomy reconciles both a strong **subjectivity and agency** with **care**. In these ways, one can view autonomy as an exercise in **intersubjectivity**. Thus, if one constructs or appeals to a conception of *relational* autonomy, and if one accepts that any or all of the six identified characteristics are central to feminist philosophy, then one would be hard pressed to deny that autonomy is *always* antithetical to feminist concerns and values.

Nonetheless, Marilyn Friedman raises the concern that the exercise of personal autonomy can ultimately lead to disruptions in interpersonal relationships.<sup>196</sup> As she points out, "in a culture that idealizes autonomy, each individual faces the insecurity of investing herself in relationships and communities that the other participants might, on critical reflection, come to reject."<sup>197</sup> And any concept or set of skills that has the potential to radically *disrupt* interpersonal relationships might be troubling to feminist philosophy, which often emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships. The conception of autonomy that I have articulated here, however, envisions the tension between freedom and interconnectedness as a fact of human existence. What's more, this tension is not necessarily antithetical to human relationships. It is

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<sup>196</sup> Marilyn Friedman. "Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women." *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

an ambiguity that one must negotiate. Denying this ambiguity of the human condition, however, not only undermines one's autonomy but also obscures a fact about one's relationship to the world and to others.

Moreover, Beauvoir understands that one of the reasons that we should care about the freedom of others is that their recognition of our actions and values and projects helps to give meaning to what we do. This potential for meaning-giving explains the reciprocity that is at the center of both her conception of moral freedom and my conception of relational autonomy.

What's more, Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom not only reconciles a strong subjective agency with care but also recognizes the importance of our relationships with others. As Claude Roy notes, Beauvoir "never sees herself as the center of *the* world, but never forgets that she is the center of *her* world."<sup>198</sup> This is precisely a reflection of the ambiguity that is central to Beauvoir's ethics and to the conception of ambiguity that I articulate here.

In addition, the centrality of the ambiguity of the human situation to Beauvoir's ethics—and specifically to her conception of moral freedom—helps to reveal just how "feminist-friendly" this work is. Eva Gothlin, for instance, claims that Beauvoirian ambiguity "denotes intersubjectivity."<sup>199</sup> And this is not entirely surprising given the ambiguities that Beauvoir points out: subjectivity and objectivity, connectedness and separateness, dependence and independence. Keeping these ambiguities "in play"—and integrating them into the way we choose and act in the world—forces us to recognize that we are *both* subjects and objects, that we are *both* connected to and separate from others, that we are *both* dependent and independent.

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<sup>198</sup> Claude Roy. "Simone de Beauvoir." trans. Germaine Brée. *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*. ed. Elaine Marks. Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987. (Originally published in *L'homme en question: Descriptions critique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960.) p. 79.

<sup>199</sup> Eva Gothlin. "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity." *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006. p. 132.

It forces us to recognize our own intersubjectivity, and, if we incorporate this ambiguity into our reasons for deciding and acting, to respect the subjectivity (and freedom) of others.<sup>200</sup>

As I see it, the centrality of ambiguity, reciprocal freedom, and moral attunement in my conception Beauvoir-inspired conception of autonomy all help to justify why autonomy is a central moral, ethical, and political value.

### *Objections and clarifications*

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At this point, I will consider objections to the view of relational autonomy that I have based upon Beauvoir's ethics.

#### **On the transitivity between autonomy and moral attunement to the world:**

One could argue that there is a dangerous transitivity implied in my conception of autonomous and moral action: a transitivity that sets an unacceptable limit (or lack of limits) on what constitutes an ethical action and/or what counts as being morally attuned to the world. In fact, if one looks at *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, one might assume that Beauvoir herself intends such a transitivity when she claims that "to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision" (EA 24). Nonetheless, when looking at my own views of autonomy and moral attunement, one might claim that there are many instances in which an agent does not "will oneself morally" yet still manages to act autonomously.

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<sup>200</sup> Recall too that Beauvoir does *not* articulate a Sartrean dualistic conception of the human being, nor does she repeat Sartre's emphasis on the fundamental antagonism between individuals. Instead, by focusing on ambiguity, she finds a way to reconcile body and consciousness, self and other, without pitting them against one another.

Without too drastic of an imaginative stretch, one could imagine an example in which a person critically examines their values and acts on those values in a way that is free from manipulation and oppression; but perhaps the “fruits” of these actions and these values would be considered anything but “moral willing.”

Suppose, for instance, that a person works for a candy company that exploits child slavery in the cacao fields from which that company’s chocolate is derived. Suppose further this person is well aware of the use of this slavery—that they even visit the cacao fields and see for themselves the horrible conditions in which these children work. Yet despite what might inspire moral outrage in some, this person values their company’s profits so highly that they are willing, even upon critical reflection, to place these values above the value of the lives of these children. They are not under the influence of manipulation or oppression. They simply have chosen these values freely and govern themselves accordingly. And if my view incorporates the aforementioned transitivity between autonomy and moral attunement, then the person’s supposed autonomy would therefore imply his moral attunement to the world, *regardless* of how others morally evaluated that person’s actions.

However, given my definitions of autonomy *and* of “moral attunement,” one could hardly claim that this person is either autonomous or “morally attuned to the world” if they are willing to condone child slavery in the service of corporate profits. For while it is unclear whether or not the person in this example respects the ambiguity of the human situation (though they likely do not), it does seem quite clear that they do not respect the autonomy of those working in the cacao fields: condoning and supporting the subjugation of others in the service of corporate profits is anything but a respect for their autonomy. And since one of the necessary conditions for

autonomy and for moral attunement involves a respect for others' autonomy, this person *fails* to be considered autonomous and morally attuned to the world.

Moreover, a problem with an example such as this one is that the autonomy ascribed to this person resembles neither the autonomy that I advocate nor the moral freedom that Beauvoir describes. For one, the person does not seem to have an appreciation of the ambiguity of the human situation. Instead, there seems to be only an appreciation for *their own* subjectivity and subjectively chosen values, which they promote at the expense of slaves whom they treat as objects. What's more, they demonstrate no effort to promote or even respect the autonomy of these children. And this is not a matter of the exigent circumstances or ethical sacrifice that Beauvoir describes in, for instance, the example of the young Nazi. This person wholly commits to disrespecting others' autonomy without even a sense of tension, sacrifice, or ethical "failure."

On the other hand, one could imagine a similar yet "mirrored" scenario in which this same person would not be considered autonomous by neither Beauvoir nor me yet might *still* "will themselves morally" in certain situations. Suppose that the person still works for the company and is still well aware of the child slaves used in the cacao fields. Suppose further that they are so committed to advancing corporate profits that they fail to question, let alone criticize, this morally deplorable practice. They are so consumed with the profit-making that they fail to recognize the subjectivity of those whose freedom and personhood and even *life* is sacrificed in the name of these profits. And in their own eyes, they are perfectly comfortable with viewing themselves as absolute subjects in a world where others live and act as objects in that world.

But suppose too that this person has shown kindness to individual slaves on their visits to the cacao fields. Perhaps they have laughed with the children, played games with them, brought food or other goods for them to take to their families. On some level, one might consider these



“kindnesses” to reflect some sort of moral goodness, or to represent discrete instances of “moral actions.” Nevertheless, within my view of autonomy—and within Beauvoir’s view of moral freedom—this person would not be considered to be autonomous with respect to their work.

On the one hand, this person’s actions resemble that of Beauvoir’s serious man. Like the serious man, this person has lost themselves in their object (i.e. their company’s profits) not only at the expense of their own autonomy (or moral freedom) but also at the expense of others’ possibilities for autonomy. And they fail to see this sacrifice *as* a sacrifice. Thus, any individual kindnesses that they may have shown to those working under their oppressive rule is all but negated by the fact that they objectify those to whom they show these kindnesses. What’s more, they do not act in such a way that opens up possibilities for others to assume their autonomy. Instead, they actively work *against* these sorts of possibilities when it comes to the slave labor used to further their company’s products (and profits).

The larger point is that, on my view, while all instances of autonomous action (*as I have characterized it*) correspond to a moral attunement to the world, not all instances of being morally attuned to the world correspond to an instance of autonomous action. What’s more, not all actions that comprise some small “goodness”—for instance, the aforementioned person’s small kindnesses to the child slaves they oppressed—are indicative of that person’s moral attunement to the world. And these are points that I have maintained throughout this chapter.

What’s more, it is important to remember that both for Beauvoir and for the view of autonomy and moral attunement that I have explored here, the primary ethical-moral concern is not with whether or not a particular action “counts” as a moral action. “Willing oneself morally” and “morally attuning oneself to the world” are both modes of being, or ways of living in the

world. They are not criteria for evaluating the moral permissibility or impermissibility of an action, nor are they criteria for evaluating the good or evil of individual agents.

**A misguided definition of ‘autonomy’:**

One could also argue that given the basic definition of autonomy—that is, “self-governance”—one need not “confront the ambiguity of the situation” in order to act autonomously. In other words, it seems strange to suggest that one would *fail* to meet the conditions for “self-governance” simply by failing to confront this ambiguity. And in this respect, it might seem that I offer an off-base or arbitrary definition of autonomy.

As I have already discussed, one of the problems that occurs when a person fails to confront the ambiguity of the human situation is that they fail to see and appreciate the world for what it is. This sort of failure would seem to undermine one’s ability to self-govern, especially since this governing is accomplished through one’s actions and decisions.

Furthermore, failing to confront the ambiguity of the human situation and to promote the freedom of others is also to fail to recognize the ways in which one *is* already situated in the world. For as I have argued, and as Beauvoir maintains, one *is* already both subject and object, both independent and dependent, both vulnerable and powerful. This *is* the situation in which everyone always already finds themselves. Thus, to include this concept of ambiguity in a definition of autonomy seems anything but arbitrary. It is to insist that in order to act autonomously, a person must govern themselves in a way that reflects how the world actually *is*.

**A problem with my definition of ‘flourishing’:**

One might also argue that by defining flourishing in terms of possibility and availability, I risk characterizing a number of apparently “un-flourishing” lives *as* flourishing simply because of a person’s *ability* to examine their values critically, and so on. In other words, one could imagine a case in which a person refuses to examine their values critically, fails to act in a way that reflect these values, and lives under oppressive circumstances that inhibit their ability to do either one. However, if they are still, on some level, *able* to engage in this sort of critical evaluation and action—if their oppressive circumstances don’t completely *eliminate* the possibility of them doing so—would they still be considered to lead a “flourishing life” according to my definition? And if not, at what point does one draw a distinction between “oppressed enough/not oppressed enough,” or “reflective enough/not reflective enough” in order to delineate the non-flourishing lives from the flourishing ones?

On the one hand, the ability to engage in critical reflection is not the only component of my definition of human flourishing. This definition also includes the ability to engage in creative pursuits and the relative freedom from oppression. Thus, a person who lives under severely oppressive circumstances yet still retains a minimum ability to reflect on her values and preferences would *not* be considered to lead a flourishing life according to my definition.

On the other hand, I am not interested in drawing hard and fast lines between which individual lives are considered to be “flourishing” and which ones are not. While the distinction between “flourishing” and “not flourishing” might be interesting as moral categories, the categories themselves are fluid and non-absolute. More than that, just as Beauvoir criticizes the idea of ethics providing “recipes” for action, I too have no interest in concocting a recipe for human flourishing. Instead of creating a metric for evaluating individuals and their particular levels of flourishing, I have envisioned a moral trajectory. When a person is able to assume their

autonomy, then they morally attune themselves to the world, and this attunement helps to promote their own and others' flourishing.

**Unachievable conditions:**

Moreover, one might argue that my conditions for “moral attunement” and “human flourishing” are unachievable for enough people such that this un-achievability renders these conditions philosophically and practically useless. And the fact that these conditions are currently unachievable (or at least very difficult to achieve) for many people might very well be the case. The oppressive circumstances that individuals encounter in their lives certainly inhibits their abilities to examine their values, act in a way that reflects those values, and promote their own and others' freedoms.

Nonetheless, the very fact that so many people live under oppressive circumstances—whether because of political fact, subjection to racism, sexism, homophobia, disability discrimination, or classism, or even their own family arrangements—should demonstrate the need for a moral philosophy that values and champions human flourishing as I have defined it. And this is precisely why I have characterized this flourishing in terms of possibility and availability. It is a goal for which we should, and perhaps *must*, strive. It is a goal that inspires action—not one that is already realized, and not one whose current realization inspires complacency.

**Unachievable autonomy:**

Similarly, one could also argue that the conditions one must meet in order to “achieve” the sort of autonomy that I am proposing set expectations far beyond most human beings’

capabilities. In other words, if the standards for autonomy are set so high that few people will ever be considered autonomous, the notion of autonomy itself becomes more of an unattainable ideal than a mode-of-being toward which people should strive to maintain.

Linda Barclay articulates this sort of concern, particularly in regard to certain procedural conceptions of autonomy (other than her own, of course). As she explains, these conceptions:

[seem] to encourage constant ratiocination and critical reflection on one's attachments to others in the light of the acquisition of new ends, desires, or values. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the integrity and quality of our most valuable attachments and loyalties will not survive constant scrutiny and assessment. This concern falsely presupposes that an autonomous agent must *constantly* reassess her various attachments and commitments each time she acquires new ends or aspirations. I see no reason to burden the idea of individual autonomy with this implausible account of how often and to what degree it must be exercised.<sup>201</sup>

Interestingly, Barclay's concerns about procedural autonomy echo the concerns raised by John Christman in his worries about the "perfectionist" strains of various conceptions of substantive autonomy.<sup>202</sup> And if one's account of autonomy—if my account of autonomy—is so implausible or perfectionist that very few will ever be considered autonomous, then autonomy itself might appear to be a philosophically (and practically) worthless concept.

One could have a legitimate concern about whether Beauvoir posits a similarly implausible conception of (moral) freedom. If assuming one's moral freedom requires one not only to be cognizant of the ambiguity of the human situation but also to accept this ambiguity and to expand the possibilities of freedom for others, then very few people might be able to meet

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<sup>201</sup> Linda Barclay. "Autonomy and the Social Self." *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 61

<sup>202</sup> John Christman (2004). "Relational Autonomy, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Constitution of Selves." *Philosophical Studies*. 117(1-2): 143-164.

the conditions for moral freedom. This moral exercise seems highly intellectual, and even highly intricate and detailed at that.

But the ability to recognize the ambiguity of the human situation need not be as intellectualized as Beauvoir describes it. In fact, the daunting aspects of this exercise might simply derive from the description itself: casting an exercise in philosophical terms might very well have the effect of making that exercise seem more intellectually rigorous than it really is. With this in mind, I think that people can and often do “recognize the ambiguity of the human situation” without characterizing what they are doing as such. I have even offered examples of this recognition throughout this chapter.

To this effect, in Gail Weiss’s introduction to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she claims that the knowledge that we gain about ambiguity not through an abstract rational process but through *experience*.<sup>203</sup> In other words, according to her interpretation of Beauvoir, there is no need to think that one needs both extraordinary time and intellectual capabilities to recognize the ambiguity of the human situation. One need not even understand this situation in such intellectual and philosophical terms. *One lives this situation every day*. One lives in this messy world, with its messy circumstances and its difficult-to-categorize problems and its complex individuals and its fundamental ambiguity each and every day. And perhaps even with minimal reflection, one can recognize that sometimes one feels supremely unfettered and free, and sometimes one feels inextricably attached to others. Sometimes one experiences oneself as a powerful subjective agent acting in the world, and other times one cannot help but experience oneself as an object acted upon by others.

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<sup>203</sup> Gail Weiss (2004).

In this respect, one could argue that the very theoretical components of Beauvoir's ethics are grounded in human experience. Her ethics are informed and even formed by human experience; they are not an attempt to make the human situation something other than it can be. And what human experience cannot be, according to Beauvoir, is failure-proof: clean, harmonious, perfectly organized and understandable. As I see it, my conceptions of autonomy and moral attunement not only accommodate this "messiness" of the human situation; I also ground these concepts in the lived experience of the ambiguity of the human situation. What's more, this lived experience need not be, and often is not, highly intellectualized.

**A perspective relevant only to a Western viewpoint:**

Along the same lines of the aforementioned criticism, however, one could also argue that not only Beauvoir's ethics but also my proposed expanded view of relational autonomy are intractably ethnocentric, privileging a specifically Western view of the self, freedom, and choice. It is, in fact, in this respect that Gail Weiss challenges the centering of freedom and choice in any ethical or moral worldview.<sup>204</sup> She maintains that any ethics grounded in freedom and choice tend to lead toward assignments of blame to individuals for failing to assume their freedom, or for failing to make the "right" choices. And such assignments are especially problematic when it comes to severely oppressed individuals who might not even possess the capacity to act on the moral freedom that Beauvoir characterizes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Advocating for a view that places relation at the center of ethical discourse, Weiss acknowledges that "this does not mean rejecting the importance of freedom and choice (or even existentialism) in the pursuit of an

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<sup>204</sup> Gail Weiss. "Challenging Choices: An Ethic of Oppression." *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

ethical existence, but rather, recognizing that *freedom and choice are not foundations for morality but goals to strive for.*<sup>205</sup> Care and the ability to enter into relations with others, Weiss argues, are the “distinctive qualities that make us human.”<sup>206</sup> What’s more, noting the ways in which Beauvoir’s ethics are, in fact, instructive to this sort of view, she maintains that freedom and choice are grounded in our capacity for care and relations with others.

Beyond criticisms regarding what centers an ethics of ambiguity, however, one could also charge the views that both Beauvoir and I articulate with advocating a narrowly Western view of the self. On a “particularized” reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the views that I describe in this chapter, one would be hard-pressed to deny their specifically Western influences, from existentialism to liberalism and beyond. In some ways, this might not be an inherent flaw of the arguments and concepts that Beauvoir and I propose. Perhaps the narrowness of Beauvoir’s ethics *fits* within her ethical perspective.

To explain, Beauvoir herself advocates an attention to the uniqueness and particularity of individuals and their circumstances. What’s more, she actively avoids ethical abstractions and clumsy claims to universalism. Thus, it might be possible that she would concede that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is intended for only a fraction of the world—namely, those who ascribe to, at the very least, a view of the self and moral freedom that is similar to the ones that she describes.

On a more generalized reading of both Beauvoir and my arguments, however, one might nonetheless find themes that transcend a narrowly Western perspective.<sup>207</sup> Consider, for

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>207</sup> This is not to say, of course, that there is one homogenous “Western perspective.” Nevertheless, the liberal and existentialist traditions are, among other philosophical traditions, historically identified as part of a “Western tradition.”



instance, Karen Vintges's response to how the theme of "self-creation" within Beauvoir's ethics is significant to a global, cross-cultural feminism:

In my view, the concept of ethical-spiritual self-creation does not suffer from a Western bias. Within all cultures and religions we find practices of ethical-spiritual self-creation through 'spiritual exercises,' for men and women. From this perspective, a global feminism can be articulated as a feminism that wants to endorse and enlarge women's ethical spiritual self-creation throughout cultures. Such a feminism takes the form of a cross-cultural coalition. It does not work from blueprints, but inside out and bottom up.<sup>208</sup>

Notably, Beauvoir does not explicitly endorse anything like a "spiritual self-creation" in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She does, however, endorse a contextualized ethics: one that emphasizes the uniqueness of individual people and their circumstances. To reiterate, her goal is not to create an ethics-as-recipe-book. Instead, she develops an ethics that reflects the lived experience of the ambiguity of the human situation: an ambiguity that does not obscure the lived experience of objectivity, dependence, and connectedness with others in order to privilege subjectivity, independence, and isolation. She creates an ethics that envisions freedom as something that is reciprocal and not atomistic or isolated. And I have centralized these same concepts in the conception of relational autonomy that I have articulated.

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<sup>208</sup> Karen Vintges. "Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker for the Twenty-First Century." pp. 224-225.

## Chapter 5 – Concluding Remarks

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Throughout this project, I have maintained that Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* has the potential to contribute unique insights to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions of the self, autonomy, and ethics. I have also constructed an outline of a view of relational autonomy that is not only inspired by Beauvoir's ethics but also distinct from other accounts of relational autonomy.

One might wonder why this is an important topic: why, when existentialism might currently seem like a precious and remote and irrelevant philosophical framework, it is even worthwhile to consider what Beauvoir's work can contribute to contemporary conversations.

In response, I think that Beauvoir's ethics is not "inescapably existentialist." In other words, it need not be pigeonholed as a set of positions that one can only accept by also accepting all the major tenets of existentialism.<sup>209</sup> For more than an attempt to create a decidedly *existentialist* ethics, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is also an attempt to capture the human experience—and the realities of the human situation—and to fashion a set of moral responses to that experience.

More importantly, it is *what* Beauvoir captures about the human situation that makes her ethics not only unique but also *relevant* to contemporary philosophical conversations. And what she captures is apparent even in the title of her work: the human situation is *ambiguous*, and any ethical or moral response to it must reflect an acknowledgement of this ambiguity. This insight, I think, transcends any classic characterization of existentialism (i.e. that "existence precedes

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<sup>209</sup> To be clear, Beauvoir *does* incorporate some of the central tenets of existentialism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, primarily in her argument that the world is essentially "value-less" and it is up to individuals (through their actions and decisions) to *give* it meaning and to establish their own values.

essence”). For, as I have argued, this ambiguity captures something that people *actually* experience, regardless of their particular philosophical commitments. We *do* experience ourselves as subjects in our own worlds and as objects in others. We *do* experience moments that reveal our seeming insignificance and moments that reveal our sovereign importance in the world. We *do* find ourselves feeling utterly isolated from others and then, at other moments (or even simultaneously), inescapably connected to others. Thus, Beauvoir’s ethics is one that reflects human experience: it does not inject an artificial or imagined vision of human life into its normative claims.

Furthermore, integrating Beauvoir’s conception of ambiguity (among other aspects of her ethics) into contemporary views of the self, autonomy, and ethics adds not only a greater robustness to these conversations but also possible “solutions” to problems and objections launched against, for instance, care ethics on the one hand and the value of autonomy within feminist philosophy on the other. Thus, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not merely an “interesting” philosophical text, historically speaking; it is also relevant to the development of current and future philosophical discourse.

In order to defend these positions, I organized this project into three major sections: the first primarily an exegesis of Beauvoir’s ethics, the second an explanation and defense of the relevance of Beauvoir’s ethics to contemporary feminist philosophy, and the third and exercise in creating a unique philosophical position inspired by *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

More specifically, in Chapter 2, I outlined *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in its entirety, drawing careful attention to the themes that I think are most relevant to contemporary feminist philosophical discussions about the self, autonomy, and ethics. I also situated this discussion within the context of Beauvoir’s personal and literary history, exploring the important

transformations that occurred in her philosophical work, particularly during and after the Second World War. These transformations are not only compelling parts of Beauvoir's biography but also indicators of an ethics that is based upon and revelatory of concrete, lived human experience.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated just how and why Beauvoir's ethics are relevant to the contemporary feminist philosophy regarding the self, autonomy, and ethics. I pointed out not only thematic and topical similarities between Beauvoir's work and more current works but also ways in which Beauvoir's work *could* make unique contributions to these contemporary discussions.

And then in Chapter 4, I sketched a view of relational autonomy that is both inspired by *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and distinct from any other contemporary conceptions of autonomy. This chapter, then, is an example of one such unique contribution that Beauvoir's ethics can make to contemporary feminist philosophy.

For one, this view that I articulate in Chapter 4 incorporates an acknowledgement of "Beauvoirian ambiguity" into what it means for someone to act autonomously. This view also incorporates a type of reciprocity similar to the one that Beauvoir describes in her characterization of the assumption of moral freedom. And by including these (and other) elements of her ethics in this view of autonomy, I maintain that acting autonomously contributes to a person being "morally attuned to the world." Autonomy, then, becomes more than a behavior or set of capacities that individuals should aspire to within the liberal philosophical or political tradition. More than (and even beyond) this, autonomy becomes an integral part of what it means for someone to lead a flourishing life.

Accordingly, I maintain that this connection between autonomy, moral attunement to the world, and human flourishing helps to broaden and illuminate the value of autonomy, especially for feminist theorists. For beyond its typical association with independence and self-care, this view of autonomy becomes intertwined with *interdependence* and care for self and others. Even for theorists who advocate a relational conception of autonomy, I think that the conception of autonomy that I articulate in Chapter 4 expands upon this very relationality.

By and large, very little scholarship has been dedicated to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Even among Beauvoir scholars, much more attention is devoted to *The Second Sex* and to Beauvoir's novels and other literary works. I think that this can be attributed in part to an understandable feminist interest in a text (namely, *The Second Sex*) that many consider to be one of the "foremother texts" of modern Western feminism. But I also think that one can attribute this lack of attention to *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to both the private and public devaluing of Beauvoir *qua* philosopher. As I mentioned in other chapters, Beauvoir herself made disparaging remarks about her philosophical work and capabilities throughout her life.<sup>210</sup> Many people (Michèle le Doeuff and Margaret Simons included) have claimed that Beauvoir was simply being unfair to herself in these comments, especially considering the male/masculine-dominated (and even misogynistic) environment in which she lived, worked, and wrote. And it is this very misogyny which might explain the public devaluing of Beauvoir's philosophical work. For her work is characterized as being derivative, particularly of Sartre. *She* is characterized as being Sartre's shadow or helper. Undoubtedly, these characterizations detract from the insightful and unique philosophical

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<sup>210</sup> For instance, see Michèle le Doeuff, "Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism" *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*. trans. Colin Gordon. ed. Elaine Marks. Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987. (Originally published in 1979 in *Magazine Littéraire*, 145:18-21.) ; and Margaret Simon's "Introduction" to *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings* . ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

contributions that her work makes to the greater canon. Thus, beyond demonstrating how *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can make unique contributions to contemporary feminist philosophy, my project here also demonstrates how and why Beauvoir's ethics is a significant part of the philosophical canon at large.

To be fair, one might question the overall significance of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to the larger philosophical canon. It does not contain a "complete," systematic ethics comparable to Kant or Mill or Rawls. Beauvoir did not continue to expand upon and defend this text throughout the remainder of her career (though *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and its arguments do hold a noticeable influence on, among other works, *The Second Sex*<sup>211</sup>). And as I mentioned previously, Beauvoir herself denigrated not only the importance of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* but also her philosophical talent throughout much of her life.

But while Beauvoir does not fashion a fully-developed systematic ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (and, to be fair, creating an ethical *system* was never her intention), she does develop a set of categories, concepts, and ideas that are relevant not just for purposes of Beauvoir scholarship but also for navigating real, concrete ethical and moral problems. She also acknowledges that these categories, concepts, and ideas must honor the complexity and uniqueness of the moral problems that people encounter. In this respect, she recognizes what she considers to be the limits of traditional ethical systems:

It will be said that these considerations remain quite abstract. What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naïve abstraction. We don't ask the physicist, 'Which hypotheses are true?' Nor the artist, 'By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?' Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. (EA 134)

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<sup>211</sup> See Eva Gothlin. "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity." *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, then, does not offer clear distinctions between good and bad, morally permissible and impermissible. But what it *does* offer illuminates just why Beauvoir's ethics deserve greater attention and respect within the philosophical canon. For Beauvoir offers an ethics that attempts to capture the "messiness" and ambiguity of human life. She establishes the importance of human freedom without delving into atomistic individualism and while respecting the interdependency of human beings. And, as I argue, she also makes possible an ethics that not only promotes human flourishing but also connects freedom—or, on my view, autonomy—with human flourishing.

But even beyond human flourishing—and perhaps because *of* human flourishing—there is also the possibility of joy in Beauvoir's ethics<sup>212</sup>:

"...in order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness. If the satisfaction of an old man drinking a glass of wine counts for nothing, then production and wealth are only hollow myths; *they have meaning only if they are capable of being retrieved in individual and living joy*. The saving of time and the conquest of leisure have no meaning if we are not moved by the laugh of a child at play. *If we do not love life on our own account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way.*" (EA 135-136, emphasis added).

Accordingly, Beauvoir ties the very significance of ethics to "the joy of existence." To her, life is worth justifying—life is worth living, and actions and decisions are worth considering carefully—because "individual and living joy" is possible. This in and of itself is an extraordinary meta-ethical position. It gives a concreteness to ethical and moral philosophizing, to the simple act of caring about how and why we act in the world. For it is not hedonism that

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<sup>212</sup> Beauvoir's emphasis on joy certainly distinguishes her from other ethical systems/arguments, but perhaps most notably, it distinguishes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* from *Being and Nothingness*. As Monika Langer notes, the very fact that Beauvoir appreciates the freedom-limiting effects of oppression and the individual dependence on others also serves to prevent her ethics from being characterized as derivative of Sartre's work. Monika Langer. 1994. "A Philosophical Retrieval of Simone de Beauvoir's "Pour Une Morale de l'ambiguite." *Philosophy Today*. 38(2): 181-190.

she suggests in her conceptions of pleasure and joy: it is rather simple joy, the joys of friendship and laughter and love and children and small moments of pleasure and happiness. In this respect, one might argue that Beauvoir cares about ethics in part because she cares about people being able to enjoy their lives. Thus, a life of human flourishing is not only a life in which one is free but also a life in which one is able to experience joy.

Beauvoir is a thinker whose works deserves to be respected and paid careful attention, and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a text whose wisdom deserves to be considered and reconsidered within contemporary philosophical conversations. For one, her conception of ambiguity is wholly unique. And beyond this uniqueness is a wisdom: a wisdom that can, and perhaps should, be integrated into contemporary discussions of the self, autonomy, and ethics. What's more, her characterization of freedom (which is both reciprocal and relational) offers tremendous insight into contemporary discourse on relational autonomy. And as I have argued, rethinking autonomy through the lens of Beauvoir's ethics makes possible a revised conception of autonomy itself: one that blends relational autonomy with what I call "moral attunement with the world." In other words, integrating *The Ethics of Ambiguity* into contemporary philosophical discourse can help to add a moral dimension to autonomy.

Beauvoir, then, is not only a twentieth century thinker. She is also a thinker for twenty-first century philosophers.



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