

The Creation of Meaning: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics

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Abstract

This paper will argue that the philosophical significance of *The Second Sex* lies in its development of the existential ethics that de Beauvoir explored in her previous philosophical writings, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. De Beauvoir's ethics is based on two notions of freedom; that is, freedom, as it is understood by both herself and Sartre, as constituent of humanity (natural freedom), and the concept of moral freedom that de Beauvoir introduces to existentialism and that is inherently linked with the concept of situation (facticity). While the creation of an individual meaning to one's life is, for de Beauvoir, of prime importance in living an authentic existence, her innovation is to insist that the individual quest for freedom is not in conflict with others but rather is *enabled* by the self/other relationship. It will be argued therefore, that de Beauvoir's ethics is both individual and relational; it is concerned with the particularity of an individual meaning that is inherently linked with the facticity of the other. Freedom becomes both the defining characteristic of human existence and also its ethical ideal. This ethical ideal is achieved through a genuine reciprocal recognition that is accepting both of the ambiguity of humanity and of the risk involved in fully assuming one's freedom.

Ethics appears to existentialism not as the formal respect of eternal and supraterrrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history, such as it unfolds on our earth... In other words, the task of man is one: to fashion the world by giving it a meaning. This meaning is not given ahead of time, just as the existence of each man is not justified ahead of time either. (Beauvoir, 1947b, p.325)

In all of her writing, regardless of genre, Simone de Beauvoir seeks to establish a meaning to human existence; a meaning that is the particular creation of each individual, but that also acknowledges the ambiguity that characterises the human condition. Her understanding of subjectivity and the duality of self and Other is always from an ethical and, consequently, from a relational perspective; the ethical interpretation necessarily emerging from her interdependent understanding of self/other. This struggle to equate existential particularity with the inherent bond that de Beauvoir envisages as integral to the self/other relationship is evident in all of her work but this paper will focus on the

period of her philosophical writings up to and including *The Second Sex*. The notion that the creation of a meaning to existence is inextricably tied to an ethical response to the other is addressed by de Beauvoir in the philosophical essay *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and again in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This general exploration of the possibility of an existential ethics is given a particularity and a concrete dimension through her exploration of the place of women in society in *The Second Sex*. In the Introduction to the *Second Sex*, de Beauvoir states:

In particular those who are condemned to stagnation are often pronounced happy on the pretext that happiness consists in being at rest. *This notion we reject, for our perspective is that of existential ethics.* Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 28. Italics, mine).

In introducing the notion of what may be called a ‘gendered self’ in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir outlines an existential ethics that is grounded in a new way of viewing the self, and, by implication, a new way of viewing the other. It is important to note, however, that de Beauvoir is not proposing an ethics of sexual difference. She is not *responding* to a patriarchal society as a feminist; but rather is rendering a phenomenological and existential depiction of how (and why) woman has been deemed ‘the inessential’. The roots of her enquiry are in philosophy; the product of that enquiry is of significance to feminism and social studies but is equally important to philosophy. By outlining the reasons for fashioning the feminine mystique, de Beauvoir effectively dismantles it, leaving the way open for the feminist debate that followed. While it is important to stress that this was not her original intention, it is interesting to note that her own words about mystery/mirage are true in this sense: “Mystery is never more than a mirage that vanishes as we draw near to look at it” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 289). By removing the cloak

of mystique that shrouded women, de Beauvoir effectively discloses it as the hidden tool of oppression.

In this sense, the uniqueness of the concept of a ‘gendered self’, which de Beauvoir explores in *The Second Sex*, cannot be over-emphasised. This is not only because a ‘gendered self’ questions the status of women in traditional western philosophy but also, and crucially, because it challenges the accepted philosophical concept of ‘self-hood’. By questioning Western philosophy’s accepted definition of ‘self’ as gender-neutral and by meticulously outlining the practical application of such a theorisation of ‘self-hood’, de Beauvoir effectively questions the traditional mode of Western philosophical enquiry (i.e. its definition of truth/knowledge).¹ It is also important to note that in raising the question of the ‘natural’ otherness of women, de Beauvoir implicitly challenges the accepted dominant/inferior mores that are endemic in other areas of human society. The ethical considerations of *The Second Sex* are equally applicable to other marginalized or oppressed groups, not considered ‘essential’ by society, e.g. the old, the poor, the disabled. The importance of *The Second Sex* as a philosophical work is therefore its articulation of an existential ethics that has, as its foundation, the reciprocal recognition (and acceptance of difference) of one human being facing another, with the consequent social and political implications of such reciprocal recognition. In elucidating a ‘case study’ of the situated life of women, de Beauvoir challenges ethical systems that universalise lived experience within absolute values.

¹ While many philosophers have implied or argued that the female mind was incapable of rational thought, others, most notably John Stuart Mill (in *The Subjection of Women*, first published in 1861), have denounced this view. Beauvoir acknowledges what Mill, in a truly remarkable book for its time, says about the subjection of women:

“The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience and they turned the whole force of education to effect their purpose. All women are brought up from the earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others.....and no-one can safely pronounce that if women’s nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men’s, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities that would unfold themselves” (Mill, 1986, p.21, 62)

A pervasive but often unacknowledged influence in all of de Beauvoir's philosophy is that of phenomenology. De Beauvoir, in common with other existentialists, appropriates a phenomenological methodology to ground her existentialism. However, unlike most other philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, de Beauvoir focuses not on individual consciousness but on the relationship of that consciousness with others. In the review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, de Beauvoir states that the phenomenological notion of intentionality — that is, the direct relation between subject and object — has important implications for an understanding of ethics: “One of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of the subject and the object” (Beauvoir, 1945a, p.160). The phenomenological understanding of consciousness means that consciousness always reaches out beyond itself; it is always, and necessarily, consciousness of something. However, de Beauvoir, true to her existentialism, also accepts that consciousness desires autonomy (as in the master/slave dialectic). In accord with Sartre, therefore, she asserts that the ontological freedom to transcend itself is a fundamental constituent of humanity but, crucially, because her philosophical focus is ethical rather than ontological, she implicitly questions Sartre's notion of *absolute* freedom. De Beauvoir argues that the development of a coherent ethics means that existential freedom cannot simply be synonymous with consciousness but, rather, must also be understood as embedded within the person's social and physical existence. By introducing the *significance* of situated freedom into existentialism, de Beauvoir effectively changes the existential focus from a concern with one's own freedom into a concern that necessarily incorporates the freedom of others. Freedom becomes both the defining characteristic of human existence and also its ethical ideal.

A failure to recognise how de Beauvoir relies on the principles of phenomenology has contributed to a negative analysis of *The Second Sex* as empirically flawed or inadequate. But de Beauvoir is not providing a model for how women *ought* to be,

but rather is disclosing through phenomenological analysis how woman *is*. Heinämaa (2006) claims that de Beauvoir's question 'What is a woman?' in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, is phenomenological and is far more complex than it first appears. De Beauvoir is seeking to unravel the fabric of myth and social expectation that attaches to femininity in order to disclose how a female person 'becomes' a woman. In this sense, her account of 'becoming' a woman is not just as a social or cultural construct but is also a phenomenological description of the meanings of sexual difference. She is not defining a gender-specific theory but rather is attempting to show the plurality of actions and practices that constitute the meanings that attach to the category of woman. As an existentialist, de Beauvoir denies that there are essential features that determine being; as a phenomenologist she seeks to disclose and raise questions about the ways in which the assumption of innate essentiality becomes accepted reality.

Our body is not first posited in the world the way a tree or a rock is. It lives in the world; it is our general way of having a world. It expresses our existence, which signifies not that it is an exterior accompaniment of our existence, but that our existence realizes itself in it. Thus, in restoring our body to us, phenomenology also restores things to us. Through the body we can 'frequent' the world, understand it; we can 'have a world' (Beauvoir, 1945a, p.161).

While *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* deal, in the main, with self/other relations between *individual* consciousnesses, *The Second Sex* deals with self/other relations between two 'groups' of people, the male and female genders. De Beauvoir attempts to uncover why men have always assumed essential status and meticulously traces the biological and historical origins of the presumed inferiority of women. She concludes that woman's subservient status cannot be justified on the basis of biology or individual consciousness but rather on the creation and maintenance of the *mystification* of woman as Other, the consequence of which is that:

“...woman knows and chooses herself not so much as she exists for herself (*pour-soi*) but as man defines her” (Beauvoir, 1949, p.169, trans. Simons, 1999, p.69).

In the section on Myth in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir outlines the extent to which the Church, literature and patriarchal society have maintained and supported the myth of femininity to the detriment of the ethical rights of women. She argues that these myths are accepted in spite of empirical evidence to the contrary. In an echo of her analysis of the slave’s oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she claims that by cloaking woman in the veil of mystery, by placing her as ‘naturally’ inferior, patriarchal society ‘justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse (SS, p. 285). Mystification thus has the insidious result of convincing both oppressed and oppressor that they operate within the ‘natural’ order and that the privileges or abuses committed therein are, therefore, both inevitable and justified. De Beauvoir elucidates the experience of embodied consciousness as a different experience for women and for men; crucially, woman’s embodied being is experienced as synonymous with a lack of concrete freedom. However, de Beauvoir’s claim, in *The Second Sex*, is that, in spite of the mythological significance attached to them, biological facts are not, of themselves, a determinate feature of the humanity of woman and cannot be used as the basis for her assumed inferiority:

But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 65).

This is an important point as it indicates the wider ethical implications of the process of mystification and its consequent assumption of the inferiority of other groups, marginalized on the basis of skin colour, age, race, physical/mental capabilities or, indeed, the assumption of their ‘natural’ inferiority. When *The Second Sex* is read in isolation from de Beauvoir’s other philosophical work, this wider application may not be considered.

This same notion of the facticity of human embodiment (and the mythology that attaches to it) is made by de Beauvoir in a journal detailing her experiences of a visit to America in 1947. Barber (2001) notes that in *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, Beauvoir concurs with Gunnar Myrdal² that the problem of blacks is really a white one:

The defaults and blemishes thrown up as reproaches to blacks are precisely created by the terrible handicap of segregation and discrimination; they are the effect and not the cause of the attitude of whites in their regard. There is here a vicious circle which Bernard Shaw, among others, has denounced with this quip, 'The haughty American nation ... obliges the black people to shine its shoes and then demonstrates their physical and mental inferiority by the fact that they can only shine shoes' (Beauvoir in Barber, 2001, p.167).

De Beauvoir is here arguing that myth is used as a response to the existential dilemma of life itself; that is life with its anguished recognition of the responsibility of freedom and the necessary awareness of the existence of the Other. She argues that though racists are themselves responsible for racial problems, in bad faith they claim that their attitudes are causally produced by those they denigrate. De Beauvoir abhors this abdication of responsibility to the need of the other. Yet, as a privileged white woman in the American South of 1947, de Beauvoir is forced to feel complicit with the racism that surrounds her:

Something is falling upon our shoulders which will not leave us as we cross the entire South; it is our own skin which has become heavy and suffocating and its colour burns us.... We traverse on foot this enemy town, this town where in spite of ourselves we are the enemies,

² The massive sociological study of American race relations, *An American Dilemma* (1944) was compiled under the direction of Gunnar Myrdal. This includes an appendix on women by Alva Myrdal entitled "A Parallel to the Negro Problem". Simons (1999) notes that while Beauvoir refers to Myrdal's book in *The Second Sex* and also in letters to Nelson Algren (p.170), Beauvoir's friendship with the black author Richard Wright was more influential in Beauvoir's understanding of oppression. See "Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, and *The Second Sex*" in Simons (1999).

justly responsible for the colour of our skin and for all that which, in spite of ourselves, it implies (Beauvoir in Barber, 2001, p.170).

De Beauvoir's point is that the individual must accept the responsibility that begins with the other's need. It is not enough to theorise that the other is 'naturally' inferior or that their oppression is not of my making. One is responsible for the other whether one has inflicted any wrong on the other or not. This sentiment has already been expressed by de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as the notion that in order to will oneself free, one must also will the freedom of others.

The ethical questions Beauvoir raises in *The Second Sex* then are: If 'being a woman' is defined as 'inessential', how can a woman's lived life have meaning? What is her reality as a human being? And, crucially, how can she ever attain her full human potential? These questions are not only important for feminist theorists, they must also be seen as essentially ethical questions which are directly related to de Beauvoir's notion of embodied consciousness and situated freedom; concepts that must necessarily apply to all of humanity.

De Beauvoir's belief is that the inherent ambiguity of the human person is central to the notion of genuine recognition. All of her ethical thought leads to this notion of the possibility of a genuine recognition between self and other. Throughout *The Ethics of Ambiguity* de Beauvoir argues for the affirmation and acceptance of the ambiguities that make us human and that are ultimately the very foundation of an ethical or meaningful life. She claims that, traditionally, philosophers have sought to mask this ambiguity: "They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance" (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 7). Consequently, de Beauvoir argues, the ethics proposed by such philosophies has tried to eliminate the ambiguity by making the individual 'pure inwardness or pure externality' (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 8). While acknowledging that Hegel attempts to reconcile all aspects of man's condition within 'the fertile restlessness of the Spirit',

de Beauvoir rejects what she terms Hegel's optimism, just as she rejects all abstract or universalist ethics: "Those reasonable metaphysics, those consoling ethics with which they would like to entice us only accentuate the disorder from which we suffer" (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 8). De Beauvoir is here claiming that an ethics that does not recognise the fundamental ambiguity of human existence cannot claim to address the concrete reality of human existence. In spite of a rational or a consoling ethics, the individual is still acutely aware of the paradox that is his lived life.

De Beauvoir's argument therefore is that ambiguity is constituent of human existence, and thus cannot be denied. She claims that, from the beginning, existentialism recognised this and defined itself as 'a philosophy of ambiguity' (1947a, p. 9). In a defence of existentialism viewed as "a philosophy of the absurd and of despair" (1947a, p. 10) — a critique levelled against Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* — De Beauvoir is intent on differentiating between absurdity and ambiguity. She argues that, while the absurdity of existence implies that life cannot have a meaning, the ambiguity of human existence lies in the continually sought-after state of a created meaning. There is no fixed meaning which is intrinsic or granted to human existence; rather it is a meaning that is continually realised through individual action. The meaning of one's existence emerges through an active acknowledgement of the ambiguities of a life towards death, the temporality of past, present and future and the intersubjective relationship of self and other. Ambiguity is therefore at the core of what it means to be human, and the ethics that is built on that ambiguity bears within it, not the certainty of success, but the acceptance of the possibility of failure:

The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won. Absurdity challenges every ethics; but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 129).

De Beauvoir, a self-professed atheist, rejects all externally imposed moral absolutes, and argues that the individual must create meaning and moral value through the exercise of his/her own freedom. This implies that morality is never fixed, nor is it an integral part of the human condition, but rather it is an activity that originates in the individual consciousness and is made concrete through engagement with the world. Humanity bears responsibility for its own disclosure of meaningful or moral existence:

Existence asserts itself as an absolute, which must seek its justification within itself and not suppress itself, even though it may be lost by preserving itself. To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realising it (Beauvoir, 1947a, p.13).

De Beauvoir agrees with Hegel that the encounter with the other is what reveals to the individual consciousness its ambiguity as both subject and object (*pour-soi/en-soi*). The struggle in the master/slave dialectic, as Hegel understands it, is to overcome this ambiguity by demanding recognition as a subject, by essentially attaining mastery over that (other consciousness) which seeks to relegate oneself to object. De Beauvoir, as we have seen, does not accept that genuine recognition occurs only on this level of reciprocity. Rather, she argues that genuine recognition can occur only when both existents simultaneously acknowledge each other as both subject and object, that is, when both existents accept and assume their ambiguity. This acceptance of ambiguity is, essentially, within each individual. It is an awareness that, while one wishes to see oneself as free, one can experience oneself as having a stable connection with the world only through one's encounter with the other. Therefore, the struggle to accept one's ambiguity is an ongoing *internal* struggle. In an effort to avoid this struggle, individuals may resort to self-deception or what may be described as Sartrean 'bad faith'. This is characterised by a 'projection' on to the other of that which one seeks to avoid in oneself, namely a fear of accepting and acting upon a freedom that implicitly entails a recognition of the claim of the other:

In these combats in which they believe themselves to be confronting each other, it's against himself that each one battles, projecting into his partner this part of himself that he repudiates. Instead of living the ambiguity of his condition, each tries to force the other to bear the abjection of it and to reserve for himself its honour. (Beauvoir, 1949, p.737, trans. Bauer, 2001, p. 232).

For de Beauvoir, moral freedom does not reside in the mastery of the other and the individual demand for recognition. Rather, it is concerned with enabling the freedom of both self and others. This is the ethical ideal of moral freedom and is what she means by 'the virtues of friendship and generosity'. However, she warns that this is not a passive acceptance or donation, but rather is a 'ceaseless struggle' within each individual. This is because, in granting the other the right to his/her freedom, one also grants him/her the right to challenge one's own freedom.

But friendship and generosity, which concretely realize this recognition of liberties, are not easy virtues. They are assuredly the highest accomplishment of the human being; it's thus that he or she achieves [se trouve] his or her truth. But this truth is that of a struggle ceaselessly sketched out [ébouchée], ceaselessly abolished. It requires that a human being at each instant master herself [se surmonte] (Beauvoir, 1949, Modified translation by Bauer, 2001, p. 229).

De Beauvoir is claiming that patriarchy's oppression of the effective freedom of women and its consequent denial of the true humanity of both men and women can be countered only through the ethical ideal of freedom. Freedom thus resides in an acceptance of both one's own ambiguity and an acceptance of the other in his/her ambiguity and otherness. The other is not a mirror of oneself but a person who must also have the freedom to be both subject and object for me. Genuine recognition entails an acknowledgement both of the freedom of the other to be other than that which I wish them to be and also a realisation that I cannot demand that the other accept me as I wish to be accepted. For de Beauvoir, what is primarily essential is a

recognition that the division of people into categories is nothing more than a wish to escape the fundamental ambiguity of human existence.

It is also in *The Second Sex* that de Beauvoir outlines the dangers associated with equating reciprocal recognition with effacing differences; in effect, finding the self in the other and defining equality as synonymous with assimilation. Conversely, de Beauvoir's ethic of ambiguity suggests a way that individual or social/political freedom can be based on a genuine recognition of the other that accepts and respects difference. This genuine recognition — or moral freedom — is marked by uncertainty, by the possibility of failure, and by the relinquishing of individual control or mastery.

What de Beauvoir elucidates in her writing, therefore, is not a prescriptive theory or set of ethical norms (this would, in any case, be contradictory to her basic existentialist beliefs), but rather freedom as a way of creating and justifying an individual meaning to human existence. Crucially, this individual meaning has an inherent connection to others; it is an ethical response that is both individual and relational within an understanding of freedom as both the basic characteristic of humanity and also its ethical ideal. For de Beauvoir, the ontological freedom that is constituent of human existence is the means through which each individual chooses and creates himself/herself. Freedom as the ethical ideal is made possible in existentialism — and, in turn, makes existential ethics possible — through de Beauvoir's unique concept of what she calls 'moral freedom'. This ethical ideal is achieved through a genuine reciprocal recognition that is accepting both of the ambiguity of humanity and of the risk involved in fully assuming one's freedom.

Critics of existentialism claim that there is a paradox in proclaiming freedom as an ultimate value. If the existentialist believes that freedom is constituent of humanity and freedom is also its ultimate value, then freedom attains the status of an absolute and becomes not a creation but a goal. However, freedom as an ethical ideal is not,

for de Beauvoir, synonymous with freedom as the ultimate value. De Beauvoir anticipates some critics of existential ethics and explains her position thus:

Does not this presence of a so to speak natural freedom contradict the notion of ethical freedom? What meaning can there be in the words *to will oneself free*, since at the beginning we *are* free? It is contradictory to set freedom up as something conquered if at first it is something given. This objection would mean something only if freedom were a thing or a quality naturally attached to a thing.... To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence.... To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 24-25).

Implicit in the above quotation is the question of choice. De Beauvoir believes that freedom is what constitutes humanity, but this ‘natural’ freedom is only brought to ‘moral’ freedom by the active choice of the individual – a choice that is inherently related to individual facticity. So freedom as the ethical ideal is not an ultimate value but rather is a choice to live an authentic life.

However, it may be argued, if moral freedom is the choice that the person makes to live authentically, one can also make the choice *not* to live authentically. De Beauvoir accepts that one may choose not to ‘will oneself free’ but, nevertheless, believes that the choice to be ethical is in response to a deep human need:

Moral anxiety does not come to man from without; he finds within himself the anxious question, “What’s the use?” Or, to put it better, he himself is this urgent interrogation. He flees it only by fleeing himself, and as soon as he exists he answers. It may perhaps be said that it is for *himself* that he is moral, and that such an attitude is egotistical. But there is no ethics against which this charge, which immediately destroys itself, can not be levelled; for how can I worry about what does not

concern me? I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship (Beauvoir, 1947a, p.72).

While de Beauvoir believes that the person's very existence is synonymous with a need for the creation of a meaning to that existence, she does not give *reasons* why one should choose moral freedom; she does not set up a philosophical argument to address *why* one should choose to live ethically. Rather, she argues that if one is to answer the question "what meaning has my life?" one must first accept the ambiguity of an individual freedom that finds authenticity only in an inherent connection with others. The freedom of others is therefore the means through which my own freedom is realised.

A further objection to existential ethics is that of ethical subjectivism. De Beauvoir concludes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by posing a question about existentialist ethics: "Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not?" (Beauvoir, 1947a, p. 156). She observes that, while this existentialist view of ethics accords the individual an absolute value and accepts that only the individual himself is responsible for the creation of his own existence, it is not individualistic:

(This kind of ethics) ... 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 (Beauvoir, 1947a, p.156).

Moral freedom is therefore concerned, not simply with one's own freedom, but also, and integrally, with the freedom of others. Actions that diminish the freedom of self or others are not, therefore, moral or ethical actions; freedom that is understood as the power to control or master others, denies the freedom of others while also

undermining one's own freedom. The criterion for judging whether an action is right or wrong therefore is not subjective (or individualistic) but is rather from a consideration of the effect my actions have, not only on self, but also on others.

However, one may still query how one is to know that a certain action advances the cause of moral freedom. In the final section of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir concludes that, particularly in the political situation, we can never be totally sure that the action that we take advances moral freedom. However, she argues that this very uncertainty is the mark of ethical action. In accord with Kierkegaard, de Beauvoir claims that "morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (Beauvoir, 1947a, p.133). De Beauvoir is here articulating a basic premise of her philosophy; that existential ethics is not based on the certainty of success but rather on an acceptance of the possibility of failure.

This same basic premise is also the cornerstone of de Beauvoir's understanding of the self/other relationship. She believes that the relation with others is always marked by this dichotomy of autonomy and reliance, freedom and bondage. The internal struggle that is integral to human existence is always also the essential element of the self/other relationship; to be an authentic self is to accept one's lack of being, one's need of the other. To build on the freedom that characterises humanity is to reach towards others, to be less than autonomous in order to be more fully human. This is the development of natural freedom into the ethical ideal of humanity; a hope that gives humanity its meaning, an ideal that gives freedom its purpose.

This paper outlines the focus of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy as that of existentialist ethics. This is not to deny the significant impact of *The Second Sex* on feminism and the excellent research carried out by those theorists (rightly) concerned with the continued oppression of women, socially and politically. Nevertheless, the argument here is for a different interpretation of de Beauvoir's philosophy, an

interpretation that incorporates her profound concern for social and political injustice, for the ambiguity that is intrinsic to all of humanity, and for the innate need for a meaning that justifies existence. By establishing an ethics based on existentialist principles, it may be said that de Beauvoir offers a way of reconciling the divergent views of feminist and traditional philosophy. Standing on the periphery of both disciplines, she offers a view of the human person that surpasses gender and values the humanity of the individual existent. It is, therefore, the contention of this paper that the richness of de Beauvoir's philosophy can only be appreciated by reference to her unique appropriation and blending of existentialism and phenomenology to introduce an ethic that acknowledges and affirms the lived reality of the individual person, engaging with the world and with others.

The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another; it is never the given that confers superiorities: 'virtue', as the ancients called it, is defined at the level of 'that which depends on us'. In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory (Beauvoir, 1949, p.737).

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Simone de Beauvoir's ethics is very complex. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), her notions of "ambiguity," "disclosure," "natural freedom," "ethical freedom"-taking their departures from Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre-intertwine to form intricate bundles of argumentation.¹ Perhaps that is why only philosopher Kristana Arp has really attempted to draw out her ethical theory to its finer threads. Much of the secondary literature consists of articles from critical journals that affirm the value of her ethics without analyzing i