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Beauvoir's Historical-Materialist Critique of Consequentialism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

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Abstract

This article argues that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* moves away from Beauvoir's early idealist emphasis on ontological freedom toward a historical materialist emphasis on concrete freedom, rejecting deontology's prioritization of morality over politics and consequentialism's prioritization of decision over action and of predicted over actual consequences. Because actions gain ethical value only through their material impact, and their historical value varies with human projects, our principal obligation is not correct decision but continual correction of our actions' real consequences for human freedom.

Résumé

Cet article soutient que *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* s'éloigne de la conception idéaliste que les premiers travaux de Beauvoir formulaient d'une liberté ontologique pour privilégier un matérialisme historique s'énonçant plutôt en termes de liberté concrète. L'ouvrage rejette ainsi tant la priorité donnée par la déontologie à la morale sur la politique que la primauté conférée par le conséquentialisme à la décision en regard de l'action et aux conséquences prévues par rapport aux conséquences réelles. Parce que les actions ne prennent de valeur éthique que par leur incidence matérielle et que leur valeur historique varie selon les projets humains, notre principale obligation n'est pas de prendre les bonnes décisions, mais de corriger continuellement les conséquences réelles de nos actions sur la liberté humaine.

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Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir – Ethics of Ambiguity – idealism – ontological freedom – historical materialism – Marxism – deontology – objective consequentialism

The Ethics of Ambiguity presents itself as a work of synthesis, refining existentialist doctrines to be compatible with ethics generally and Marxism specifically.[1] In this attempt to develop an existentialist-Marxist ethics, Beauvoir also seeks to bridge the divide between deontology and consequentialism, a synthesis of seemingly incompatible approaches intended to capture the ambiguity of our human condition as embodied consciousness—a synthesis of mind and body, subject and object, freedom and necessity.

Beauvoir later admits that of all her books, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* "is the one that most irritates me today," criticizing her early 1940s ethical writings for their idealism.[2] This suggests that she saw the book's synthesis of existentialism and Marxism, deontology and consequentialism, as a failure. I suggest instead that the work is successful because it ultimately abandons its project of synthesis. Although I will begin with Beauvoir's apparent intentions, my argument concerns the text's letter more than its spirit. I propose that, over the course of the book, Beauvoir moves toward a novel ethics that surpasses, rather than rejects or synthesizes, deontology and consequentialism. In the process, she also surpasses early existentialism, taking a step toward a uniquely historical materialist ethics compatible with, but no longer depending upon, the doctrine of unassailable, ontological freedom.[3]

The Ethics of Ambiguity consequently makes two important contributions to ethical and political thought. First, it expands existentialism's appeal to Marxists wary of its account of freedom—indeed, to anyone who accepts determinist or compatibilist over libertarian accounts. Second, it challenges some

1 I would like to thank Sonia Kruks, Claudia Bouliane, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Gallimard, 1969 [1947], translated by Bernard Frechtman as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, New York, Carol, 1996. Subsequent references to these works are respectively indicated by the abbreviations *PMA* and *EA*.

2 Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964 [1963], pp. 67–68. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *FCE*.

3 I share Angela Shepherd's view that "by examining de Beauvoir's work in the light of Marx, we can resolve some of the tensions." Shepherd, "De Beauvoir, Existentialism and Marx: A Dialectic on Freedom," *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, 70–90, p. 71.

Marxists' tendency to either substitute politics for ethics or default to consequentialism, breaking ground for an ethics uniquely suited to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's rejection of moralism and prioritization of the economic and political, while drawing on existentialism's spirit to insist Marxists acknowledge the fundamental ambiguity of freedom and necessity, individual and collective action, ethics and politics.[4] This is also more in keeping with the title *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, which suggests a work in transition, moving *toward* an ethics rather than completing one.

1 Moderate Idealism versus Historical Materialism

There is reasonable disagreement over Beauvoir's final views, but we can roughly sketch the poles she moves between without deciding exactly where she arrives. In early 1940s works like *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she takes a position she later criticizes as idealism, but which I will call "moderate idealism."[5] On this view, human embodiment has aspects of Cartesian dualism: mind is causally distinct from body, self-determining in its activity as consciousness. This causal independence of mind grounds existentialism's distinctly *ontological* conception of freedom: we can be free not only from physical coercion by others but in relation to our own bodies, situations, and past. As she says in 1945's "Moral Idealism and Political Realism":

> [N]o end can be inscribed in reality. […] [I]t requires the spontaneity of a consciousness that, surpassing the given, throws itself toward the future. No historical tradition, no geographical structure, no economic fact can impose a course of action. […]

4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Clemens Dutt, W. Lough, and C.P. Magill, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5, New York, International Publishers, 1976 [1932], 19–539, pp. 31–32, 241. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation MECW. See also Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," trans. Victor Schnittke, in MECW, vol. 29, 1987 [1859], 257–417, pp. 263–264; Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, trans. Emile Burns, in MECW, vol. 25, 1987 [1877], 5–309, pp. 86–88.

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, trans. Marybeth Timmermann, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2004 [1944], 89–149. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation PCE.

> [...] Whatever the given situation, it never necessarily implies one future or another since man's reaction to his situation is free.[6]

All of Beauvoir's work during this period preserves the idealist view that consciousness is fundamentally free in its reaction to its situation: "[In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*] I was also drawn towards Sartre's theory that whatever the circumstances, we have a liberty of action that enables us to surmount them."[7] Although our *concrete* freedom, our ability to materially realize our choices, can be constrained, we remain able to transcend our situation thanks to our deeper, unassailable freedom of volition: "[F]reedom remains infinite in all cases. [...] Violence can act only upon the facticity of man, upon his exterior. [...] [V]iolence does not reach him in his heart because he was still free in the face of the goal that he proposed to himself."[8] Even when action is impossible, the willing of goals remains free.

Ontological freedom grounds the existentialist concept of authenticity by drawing a causal divide between existence and situation. As Tove Pettersen notes, "It is by putting their internal ontological freedom to use that human beings create values."[9] Because my actions originate in spontaneous choices, my values are truly *mine*, not products of my past or circumstances. As Beauvoir emphasizes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, "It is totally mine only if I founded it in its totality. The only reality that belongs entirely to me is, therefore, my act."[10]

But Beauvoir is moving toward a *more moderate* idealism, acknowledging that our situation can restrict concrete freedom to the point of *near* immanence:[11]

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6 Simone de Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," trans. Anne Deing Cordero, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004, 175–193, pp. 179–180. Essay first published in 1945.

7 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green, Cleveland, OH, World Publishing, 1962 [1960], p. 434. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *PL*.

8 *PCE*, p. 124.

9 Tove Pettersen, "Existential Humanism and Moral Freedom in Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics," in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Humanist Thinker*, ed. Tove Pettersen and Annlaug Bjørsnøs, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2015, 69–91, p. 71.

10 *PCE*, p. 93.

11 On the contrast between ontological and concrete freedom, see Kristana Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics*, Chicago, Open Court, 2001; Pettersen, "Existential Humanism," p. 71.

> Liberty is the very modal essence of existence [...]. On the other hand, actual concrete possibilities vary from one person to the next. Some can attain to only a small part of those opportunities that are available to mankind at large [...]. Their transcendency is lost in the general mass of humanity, and takes on the appearance of immanence.[12]

Nevertheless, this position remains idealist. Acts of consciousness are not necessitated by material events, and even the most drastic restriction of concrete possibilities produces only the "appearance" of immanence. Only two years after *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, in *The Second Sex*, this distinction between real and apparent immanence almost disappears, raising the possibility that oppression might make *any* transcendence impossible: "Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into 'in-itself,' [...]; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression."[13] Even our freedom for authenticity, presumably grounded in ontological freedom, can be constrained by our situation: "[I]t is not a mysterious essence that dictates good or bad faith to men and women; it is their situation that disposes them to seek the truth to a greater or lesser extent."[14]

Yet I do not claim that Beauvoir rejects ontological freedom at any point in her philosophical development. I suggest her views about freedom are *undecided* and *in transition*. She is moving away from moderate idealism toward a historical materialism that no longer *requires* a commitment to ontological freedom, though she may maintain that commitment, all the same.[15]

Beauvoir's moderate idealism also implies a questionable notion of "embodiment." While it departs from Cartesianism, recognizing mind and body as inseparable, consciousness's causal independence associates it more closely with selfhood, as though the body were primarily a negative constraint on freedom. Although *The Ethics of Ambiguity* eventually moves away from that view, its first sections endorse it, particularly its opening pages, where Beauvoir

12 *PL*, p. 434.

13 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Vintage Books, 2011 [1949], p. 16. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *SS*.

14 *SS*, p. 15.

15 On the question of freedom's limits, see Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity, and Society*, London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 98–102; "Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits to Freedom," *Social Text*, no. 17, 1987, 111–122, p. 114; Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, pp. 141–142; Gail Weiss, "Oppression and the Possibilities of Ethics for Simone de Beauvoir," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 18, 2002, 9–21, p. 13.

repeatedly emphasizes consciousness's "tragic" relation to the body, describing the self as "a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things."[16]

This undecided attitude toward dualism is clear from the book's first paragraph, which announces our condition as "tragic ambivalence," conflating *ambivalence* with *ambiguity*, identifying with consciousness against the body and betraying ambivalence toward, rather than assumption of, our ambiguous condition.[17] Beauvoir even risks implying this tragic character is inescapable, rather than a contingent, historical symptom of moral and political failings. If our condition is irreparably tragic—if the "lack" or "failure" at the heart of being is also moral lack and political failure—then any synthesis of existentialism and Marxism is doomed from the start.

The text gradually overcomes this ambivalence, however, moving toward the standpoint of her 1950s–1970s works: historical materialism. I intend this category broadly: it need not be Marxist, much less dialectical. As Eva Lundgren-Gothlin and Sonia Kruks note, despite strong sympathies with Marx, Beauvoir rejects deterministic versions of historical materialism espoused by many Marxists and the French Communist Party, subjecting Friedrich Engels's version to extensive critique.[18]

I will use "historical materialism" to mean, first, that the primary causes of history are found in material and political rather than ideological and moral events. Second, historical materialism recognizes that human nature is deeply historical and variable because labor transforms our powers and desires, transforming human nature in the process. We are to some degree a product of history, not pure spontaneity, but we also have a degree of freedom from history since we can, over time, become causally independent of material causes that formerly shaped our consciousness.

Although this remains compatible with the existentialist view that we transcend the given, against idealism, "transcendence" is not equivalent to consciousness. Transcendence is as ambiguous as our nature: the given is surpassed

16 *EA*, p. 7.

17 *EA*, p. 7. Debra B. Bergoffen argues that this ambivalence is rooted in a tension between the "gloomy" Sartrean "desire to be" and a Beauvoirian desire that "delights in disclosure *per se*." Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997, pp. 77–79.

18 *SS*, pp. 62–68; Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex,"* trans. Linda Schenk, Hanover, NH, Wesleyan University Press, 1996, pp. 83–123; Sonia Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir: Engaging Discrepant Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010, 258–280, p. 260; Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, trans. Richard Dixon and Clemens Dutt, in *MECW*, vol. 4, 1975 [1845], pp. 5–211.

only through the will's concrete realization, and we transcend it relatively, not absolutely. Although our reactions are not directly determined by our situation, they are not spontaneous: consciousness has a material history that shapes our needs, values, and character. If we're material all the way down, we're historical all the way down too. Historical materialism allows for modest freedom compatible with historical necessity, albeit a more nuanced version than the mechanistic determinism Beauvoir condemns. Again, however, I will claim not that Beauvoir fully embraces historical materialism and rejects ontological freedom but only that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* no longer *requires* ontological freedom.

2 Deontological Aspects of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Beauvoir's ambivalence between idealism and historical materialism mirrors her ambivalence between deontology and consequentialism. Her attempt to synthesize them reflects an attempt to synthesize her earlier, more idealistic existentialism with historical materialism, so she succeeds to the degree that she moves beyond that attempt. Why think Beauvoir intends such a synthesis? She will ultimately move beyond both dichotomies; however, I begin with her apparent intentions because my claim may seem at odds with how the text presents itself. She never explicitly rejects either deontology or consequentialism, while she explicitly endorses key principles from both traditions. Many readers will be tempted to conclude that the deficiency in each is its exclusion of the other, and so the remedy is their synthesis. My goal is to show that although she adopts aspects of each tradition, she still offers a substantial enough critique of each to develop an ethics that surpasses both.

If Beauvoir moves ethics beyond the deontological-consequentialist dichotomy, why approach the text through that framework? First, my intended audience includes those outside the existential tradition, especially Marxists who might be persuaded that her work is a useful resource for developing a distinctly socialist ethics. Second, she herself situates it in that framework, regularly contrasting a Kantian ethics of individual freedom to an ethics of collective utility and devoting the book's final section to consequentialist and deontological arguments for and against support for the USSR.[19] By situating Beauvoir's ethics in critical relation to the dichotomy in which debates over

19 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, rev. ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1785]. See Beauvoir's objections to treating "the useful" as an absolute value (*EA*, pp. 11–12, 15, 22, 49, 95, 111–115), which explicitly identify "utilitarian ethics" as their target (*EA*, p. 112).

Marxism are often framed, we will better understand the link between her ethics' focus on oppression and the Marxist tradition, which, at its best, also evades the false choice between freedom and utility.[20]

Admittedly, Beauvoir's ambivalence toward this false choice sometimes appears to resolve itself on the Kantian side. She compares her position to Kantian deontology, telling us that a "Kantian rationalist" who refuses to kill one person to save a thousand is wrong in practice but "right in the sense that in each murder the outrage is total."[21] I will use *deontology* to mean any ethics that shares the categorical imperative of respect for individual freedom, an imperative Beauvoir explicitly endorses: because the individual is "a unique and irreducible value," freedom is "the supreme end at which man must aim."[22] This is an example of how the text implies that Beauvoir's aim is synthesis. She commits herself not just to any deontological principle but to its *first* principle, concluding that any consequentialist standard of the greater good is secondary: "[T]hus comfort, happiness, all relative goods which human projects define, will be subordinated to this absolute condition of realization."[23]

Although she focuses on Marxist variations of consequentialism, arguing that "fascist ideology and Marxist ideology converge" insofar as their "collectivist conception of man" makes liberation "rest on a contempt for the individual," she ultimately targets the foundational principle shared by every variety.[24] Consequentialists may disagree about whether utility should measure actions or rules and whether its goal is happiness defined as pleasure, satisfaction of need, or flourishing. But they share a single foundational principle: individual ends are subordinated to the net utility of all, against Beauvoir's conviction that freedom "alone is capable of establishing the value of every end."[25]

Beauvoir departs from Kantian deontology, however, by rejecting his definition of freedom as a will determined by reason alone, for we pursue freedom only by "refusing to set up as absolute the ends toward which my transcendence

20 This is compatible with a third possibility—virtue ethics—but the book never directly considers it. Traditional virtue ethics' attempt to ground obligation in natural purpose may be incompatible with Beauvoir's view that we create values, and its identification of universal virtues may be incompatible with her view that values vary relative to freely chosen projects. The cultivation of virtuous character might even dispose us to inauthenticity, since character traits are rooted in past rather than present decisions.

21 *EA*, pp. 113–114.

22 *EA*, pp. 107, 113.

23 *EA*, p. 113.

24 *EA*, pp. 103, 108.

25 *EA*, p. 113.

thrusts itself."[26] We might be tempted to conclude that she is proposing only a modest revision of deontology, replacing Kantian good will with existentialist authenticity. Still, she also rejects deontology's focus on the will, emphasizing instead our decisions' practical consequences for others' freedom. "To will freedom," she says, is "to will to disclose beings."[27] But following Heidegger, from whom she borrows that language [*erschliessen*], disclosure is a concrete, not abstract, form of knowledge aimed at "the opening of ever new possibilities for man."[28] Its primary obstacle is not an unfree mind but material oppression: "transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back on itself" not from bad faith but "because it is cut off from its goals"—transcendence is thwarted from realizing itself as material action.[29]

So, although Beauvoir prioritizes freedom, against Kant, she defines freedom not as a freely determined will but as the realization of the will in concrete ends. Consequences matter more than intentions, but, against the consequentialist's emphasis on happiness, what ultimately matters is the consequences of our actions for others' freedom. And while freedom does depend on our form of decision-making—the free activity of consciousness—it also requires the realization of consciousness in the material world, which in turn depends upon *others*: "[M]y freedom, in order to fulfill itself [*s'accomplir*], requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up [*constituent*] the world of tomorrow, define my future."[30] Our ontological freedom of consciousness is not real until it is *accomplished* through actions that *successfully build* a shared world that serves our projects. Gail Weiss aptly calls this Beauvoir's "corporealization of freedom," which "must be concretely embodied if it is to exist at all."[31] Against Beauvoir's early idealism, our freedom to concretely act in ways that successfully realize our projects takes priority over whether those projects are freely willed.

Consequently, authenticity's demand to avoid bad faith is secondary to a more primary ethical demand to free people materially and politically, putting them in a material position or "setting up" a "world" in which such authenticity can be realized: "[T]he struggle is not one of words and ideologies; it is real and concrete."[32] Although this is not a rejection of ontological freedom, it is,

26 *EA*, p. 14.
27 *EA*, p. 78.
28 *EA*, p. 80; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967 [1927].
29 *EA*, p. 81.
30 *EA*, p. 82; *PMA*, p. 116.
31 Weiss, "Oppression and the Possibilities of Ethics," p. 10.
32 *EA*, p. 84.

as Kruks argues, a departure from the early Sartrean view Beauvoir sometimes claims to share, for "we can no longer conceive of an ontological freedom which exists independently of social and political freedom."[33]

3 Consequentialist Aspects of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Beauvoir's historical materialism will refuse many Marxists' lazy solution of rejecting deontology for the wholesale embrace of consequentialism. Although her ethics focuses on consequences, she rejects the consequentialist standard of utility to happiness for the same reason she rejects any other substantive content: "[I]t is one of the lies of the serious mind to attempt to give the word 'useful' an absolute meaning; nothing is useful if it is not useful to man; nothing is useful to man if the latter is not in a position to define his own ends and values, if he is not free."[34] Utility is defined in relation to an end, but "[i]t is desire that creates the desirable and the project that sets up the end."[35] Because our freedom is precisely to choose the projects that create those criteria, we cannot, as Kant does, abstract from the very desires that motivate projects.[36] But neither can we impose purportedly objective ends upon others, such as the consequentialist's principle of net utility to happiness or the Marxist's appeal to the satisfaction of need, emancipation of labor, or development of human powers.

This leads Beauvoir to a paradoxical imperative: we must take others' good "as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*."[37] How do we act for another's good without giving it content? We must "treat the other [...] as a freedom *so that his end may be* freedom," empowering others to act upon ends that serve their freely chosen projects, yet leaving them free to surpass those projects for new ones.[38] This may seem a modest adjustment to consequentialism; rather than act on one conception of the good, allow for many freely chosen conceptions of the good by increasing

33 Sonia Kruks, "Limits to Freedom," p. 113.

34 *EA*, p. 95.

35 *EA*, p. 15.

36 Kruks notes that this objection is rooted in the ambiguity of human embodiment: "What all these accounts presume is that a definitive boundary exists between mind and body." Facticity is not a flaw but "constitutive of the very personhood without which we simply would not be able to engage in judgment at all." Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 127, 130.

37 *EA*, p. 142.

38 *EA*, p. 142, emphasis added.

others' situational opportunities, increasing their power to concretely realize them, and preserving their freedom to change their conception of the good. But this apparently modest adjustment implies a profound internal critique of consequentialism, exposing its deeper continuities with the idealist presuppositions of deontological ethics.

4 Ontological Ethical Ambiguity: Beyond Consequentialism

Consider Beauvoir's response to two cases of attempted suicide. In the first, we rightly act against someone's immediate freedom for the sake of their future freedom:

> Out of disappointment in love a young girl takes an overdose of phenolbarbital; in the morning friends find her dying, they call a doctor, she is saved; later on she becomes a happy mother of a family; her friends were right in considering her suicide as a hasty and heedless act and in putting her into a position to reject it or return to it freely.[39]

Notice the girl's friends take into account not only her rashness, which suggests that the choice was not truly free, but also its motivation: she rejected her freedom only from despair over the realization of her freely chosen project of motherhood.

Beauvoir contrasts this case to melancholic asylum patients "who have tried to commit suicide twenty times, who devote their freedom to seeking the means of escaping their jailers and of putting an end to their intolerable anguish; the doctor who gives them a friendly pat on the shoulder is their tyrant and their torturer."[40] Perhaps the doctor should offer more substantial support than casual encouragement, providing new treatments or granting release from the asylum. But the doctor's primary ethical mistake is indifference to their freedom, which they concretely demonstrate in their "devotion" to the project of escaping either the asylum or their lives.

Beauvoir's analysis initially appears consequentialist. We might think that the girl's friends are justified because they carefully predicted that saving their friend's life would ultimately promote her freedom, temporarily violating it only to allow her to reconsider the choice more freely. In contrast, the doc-

39 *EA*, p. 142.

40 *EA*, pp. 142–143.

tor's decision-making disregards consequences, treating life as an unconditioned good and unreasonably predicting that encouragement alone will help, despite the overwhelming likelihood that their suicide attempts will continue. On a typical consequentialist analysis, in both cases the action is ethical if the *decision-making process* leads to a *reasonable prediction* that the consequences will achieve a greater good. Provided that process is sound, the act is ethical *even if the prediction fails*. Had the friends' prediction been wrong—the girl did not, after all, go on to enjoy a happy family life—their decision would still be ethical. And had the doctor been right—the patients did, after all, improbably recover—the doctor's action would still be *un*ethical.

Beauvoir's analysis departs from this in a startling way, however. She insists, "No behavior is ever authorized to begin with."[41] The girl's friends' careful consideration of the decision's haste and origin in despair made their *decision justified*, but it did not make the *action ethical*. The action will *become* ethical only when "later on she becomes a happy mother of a family."[42] The surprising implication is that if she had *not* achieved that happy life, the very same action, decided in the very same way, would have *become unethical*. The action's ethical status depends on its real rather than its intended consequences.

The point is not merely that consequentialists equate ethical decision and action, while Beauvoir believes justified decisions can lead to unethical actions. Rather, a *once*-justified decision that leads to unethical action thereby *becomes unjustified*. In marked contrast to both deontology and consequentialism, justified decisions do not release us from responsibility. We remain ethically obligated to past actions, even those decided in the most responsible way possible. Every ethical decision creates a future responsibility to make its predicted consequences *become true*.

5 Toward an Existential-Materialist Ethics

So, against the consequentialist view, ethics is ontologically, not just epistemically, ambiguous. The problem is not that the girl's friends didn't *know* their action was ethical until its consequences were realized. Rather, the consequences *made* it ethical: the action had no ethical status until it impacted her concrete ability to realize her projects. An action *becomes* justified only *to the degree* that it *successfully* realizes another's freely chosen ends. Ethics focuses

41 *EA*, p. 142.

42 *EA*, p. 142.

not on our freedom of consciousness, our ability to choose projects, but on our ability to realize them.

This reflects Beauvoir's shift toward a more materialist view of freedom, highlighted in her 1940 disagreement with Jean-Paul Sartre about freedom's limits. Against his suggestion that a woman in a harem remains free because "even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several quite different ways," Beauvoir insists that freedom requires "*active* transcendence" in contrast to passive resignation.[43] The issue isn't simply activity versus passivity but whether activity realizes the overarching projects that give individuals' actions their meaning. It's not enough that I can live in different ways, transcending this or that particular fact. Recall that freedom is fulfilled only if it "emerge[s] into an open future," possible only with the help of others "who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future."[44] My situation is free only as part of an *open world*: possible actions that realize greater, overarching projects that will, in turn, create new future situations. Can I *transform* my situation rather than merely choose *within* it? The oppressed need not just any possibilities but possibilities for precisely those actions that will overcome their oppression.

Beauvoir directly associates Sartre's position in this disagreement with her early idealism, concluding, "To defend my attitude I should have had to abandon the plane of individual, and therefore idealistic, morality on which we had set ourselves."[45] So, although Beauvoir remains committed to ontological freedom, she moves closer to materialism, prioritizing the concrete realization of our projects. Transcendence is realized only in practice, and only to the degree that we realize the overarching projects that set up our world, *structure* our situations, and give our particular ends meaning—not through particular actions *within* our situation, divorced from open-ended, world-building projects.

Consequently, we should reconsider dominant interpretations of the book as a modest development of Beauvoir's views in earlier ethical writings. Of 1944's *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she says, "My subjectivism was, inevitably, doubled up with a streak of idealism that deprived my speculations of all, or nearly all, their significance. This first essay only interests me today insofar as it marks a stage in my development."[46] She even characterizes her attitude toward her ethically themed play published the following year as one of "condemna-

43 *PL*, p. 346.
44 *EA*, p. 82.
45 *PL*, p. 346.
46 *PL*, p. 435.

tion," though with "certain reservations": "[T]he idealism which permeates *Les Bouches inutiles* I find embarrassing."[47]

This near repudiation of her ethical writings of the early 1940s has been downplayed by scholars who find continuity between her early and late ethics in what I will call the "moral freedom thesis": the view that for Beauvoir concrete freedom has secondary value as a means to the more primary, intrinsic value of "moral freedom." For example, for Pettersen, moral freedom is "the normative core value" because human beings are "fundamentally relational."[48] For Kristana Arp, concrete freedom or power is a "foundation [...] for the development of moral freedom" because "to attain moral freedom," we "must be able and willing to interact with other morally free individuals."[49] Similarly, for Kate Kirkpatrick, moral freedom depends on "recognizing our indeterminacy and interdependence," which in turn requires "the meeting of material needs."[50]

But this depends on how we define "moral freedom." If we define it only by its aim, the freedom of all, then it is indeed primary. Beauvoir, however, describes it as *willing* freedom. In contrast to ontological freedom, our ability to will any end, and concrete freedom, our ability to realize any end, moral freedom is our ability to *will freedom as an end*. That is why, as Pettersen notes, Beauvoir also calls it "genuine" or "authentic freedom" [*la liberté authentique*]: because it is principally about the form of our will, about whether we exercise it in good or bad faith.[51] It is "moral" in the sense of being volitional rather than practical. The correct contrast is not to the amoral or immoral but to the *political*.

Consequently, I will use "authentic freedom" rather than "moral freedom," since we can, after all, make authentic choices that are morally neutral or immoral, indifferent or opposed to, the freedom of others. In her later memoirs, Beauvoir clearly rejects the conflation of authenticity and morality, identifying it with Sartre's early "morality of authenticity," which held that "from the point of view of freedom, all situations could be salvaged if one accepted (assumed) them as a project."[52] She criticizes that view as "still very close to Stoicism":

47 *PL*, pp. 465–466. Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Bouches inutiles: pièce en deux actes et huit tableaux*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, translated by Liz Stanley and Catherine Naji as *The Useless Mouths*, in *"The Useless Mouths" and Other Literary Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2011, pp. 33–87.

48 Pettersen, "Existential Humanism," p. 72.

49 Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom*, pp. 121, 113.

50 Kate Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'Disagreement' about Freedom," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 18, no. 11, 2023, 1–14, pp. 8–10.

51 Pettersen, "Existential Humanism," p. 71. *PMA*, p. 96.

52 *FCE*, p. 5.

"[H]e still aspired to *being*, to live morally was, according to him, to attain an absolutely meaningful mode of existence."[53]

But this also underlines that to *prioritize* concrete freedom does not mean to deny the moral importance of "authentic freedom" or so-called "moral freedom." Authentic freedom is still a necessary condition for *justified ethical decision-making*: I must "treat the other as freedom […] *so that* his end may be freedom," willing others' continued freedom in addition to their particular ends.[54] But this *mere willing* of others' freedom is not sufficient for *ethical action*. We will freedom as a *means* to the *concrete realization* of that freedom. The primary criterion is concrete freedom: ethics demands right action before right will, although it still demands both. As Beauvoir bluntly puts it: "An activity is good when you aim to conquer […] positions of privilege, both for yourself and for others: to set freedom free."[55] It is the activity, not the mere volition, that is good. The volition becomes good only insofar as the activity in fact conquers privilege and in practice sets others free. This prioritization of concrete action does not devalue authenticity. Because authentic freedom already prioritizes volition as such, independent of action, Beauvoir's ethics must prioritize the concrete in order to preserve the value of both. Our authentic freedom to will ourselves and others free has value only *secondarily* in relation to the value of our shared freedom to concretely act as we choose.

Notably, "*la liberté morale*" ("moral" or "ethical freedom") and "*la liberté authentique*" ("genuine" or "authentic freedom") appear only four times, and in only three passages, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.[56] In every case, Beauvoir emphasizes its continuity with, rather than priority over, concrete freedom: "If man wishes to save his existence […], his original spontaneity must be raised to the height of moral freedom by taking itself as an end through the *disclosure of a particular content*."[57] Similarly, "genuine freedom" is the "movement" of an existence "which *is* only by *making itself be*," attained "through *the being*—whether thing or man—at which he aims."[58] After *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, both "la liberté morale" and "la liberté authentique" disappear from her work, replaced by "abstract morality" and "abstract liberty," used only as criticisms.[59]

53 *FCE*, pp. 5, 7.
54 *EA*, p. 142, emphasis added.
55 *PL*, p. 434.
56 *PMA*, pp. 34, 37, 46; *EA*, pp. 24–26, 32.
57 *EA*, p. 32, emphasis added.
58 *EA*, pp. 25, 67, emphasis added.
59 *PL*, p. 465; *FCE*, pp. 129, 195.

To be sure, proponents of the "moral freedom" thesis acknowledge that Beauvoir has moved to the view that ontological freedom is empty apart from its concrete realization. But this shift in priority applies to authentic freedom too. Just as my ontological freedom to *choose* projects has no value apart from my practical ability to *realize* them, my authentic freedom to *will* myself and others free has no value apart from my practical ability to realize that freedom. Authentic freedom cannot be intrinsically valuable because it wills something other than itself: the more primary value of *realized* shared freedom—that is, *political* freedom. This priority will be reiterated only two years later in *The Second Sex*:

> [B]ecause of the fact that in woman this freedom remains abstract and empty, it cannot authentically assume itself except in revolt: [...] for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation.
>
> This liberation can only be collective, and it demands above all that the economic evolution of the feminine condition be accomplished.[60]

This continuity with *The Ethics of Ambiguity*'s prioritization of the political can be found throughout *The Second Sex*, which repeatedly suggests that women's material oppression can become so severe that, while "authentic freedom" remains, it is deprived of value: "[S]he has no grasp on the world; she does not escape her subjectivity [...]; there is only one way of accomplishing [her freedom] authentically: it is to project it by a positive action into human society."[61]

By the 1960s, Beauvoir will sharpen this position, already implicit in *The Second Sex*, into a criticism of the very same book:

> I should take a more materialist position today [...]. I should base the notion of woman as *other* [...] not on an idealistic and *a priori* struggle of consciences, but on the facts of supply and demand; [...] changing women's condition [...] depends on the future of labor in the world; it will change significantly only at the price of a revolution in production.[62]

Ultimately, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not a modification of but a decisive break from Beauvoir's earlier views. This prioritization of political freedom is con-

60 *SS*, p. 664.

61 *SS*, p. 717.

62 *FCE*, p. 192. Beauvoir repeats this criticism in her final memoir. Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974 [1972], pp. 448–449.

sistent with her broader trajectory, from the 1950s to the 1970s, away from her earlier focus on ontological freedom, on which the prioritization of authenticity depends. In 1963, she objects to the way *The Ethics of Ambiguity* prioritizes mind over body and authenticity over material need, asking, "Why did I write *concrete liberty* instead of *bread*, and subordinate the will to live to a search for the meaning of life?"[63] Of the book's portrayal of characteristic ways we flee from freedom, adopting the life and mindset of the "serious human," the "subhuman," the "adventurer," and so on, she says: "[T]he attitudes I examine are explained by objective conditions; I limited myself to isolating their moral significance to such an extent that my portraits are not situated on any level of reality."[64] In other words, inauthentic reactions to our material situation are not entirely spontaneous but rooted in our past situations.

Nevertheless, that criticism only applies to the book's beginning sections. Its third section, which develops her ethics in detail, has more in common with her later materialism. Beauvoir even suggests that her work during the 1940s failed to reflect the views she held *at the time*: "What I find hard to understand is the idealism that blemishes these essays. In reality, men *defined* themselves for me by their bodies, their needs, their work; I set no form, no value above the individual of flesh and blood."[65]

This self-criticism is not a casual one. In her memoirs, Beauvoir repeatedly identifies the rejection of idealism as a decisive turning point in her own and Sartre's development: "Sartre had labored since 1940 to repudiate idealism, to wrench himself away from his original individualism, to live in History."[66] While her early views betrayed "a weakness for idealism" that sought "to guarantee the human spirit its condition of sovereign freedom," Sartre's thought "was gradually stripping itself of all idealism."[67] She says, "I was put in the position of having to challenge [...] my oldest prejudices. Little by little, he wore away my resistance, I liquidated my ethical idealism."[68] In fact, as early as the 1930s, both already prioritized concrete freedom. What she rejects in their early work is its overemphasis on ontological and authentic freedom:

> We measured a man's worth by what he accomplished: his deeds and his works. There were good elements in this realism of ours; our mistake was

63 *FCE*, p. 68.
64 *FCE*, p. 67.
65 *FCE*, p. 68, emphasis added.
66 *FCE*, p. 260.
67 *PL*, p. 30; *FCE* p. 223.
68 *FCE*, p. 290.

> to assume that freedom of choice and action is a universal phenomenon. In this respect our morality remained bourgeois and idealist.[69]

Perhaps the strongest expression of her later anti-idealism is her 1955 polemical essay, "Right-Wing Thought Today," which decries bourgeois thinkers for whom "material factors have only a secondary role," who pretend that "thought transcends those contingencies" and "a man's material reality and situation count for nothing; only his subjective reactions matter."[70] Here Beauvoir directly questions the idealist doctrine of ontological freedom as consciousness's ability to completely transcend its situation. While *The Ethics of Ambiguity* no longer *requires* the existentialist doctrine of ontological freedom, her later work considers abandoning it altogether—a possibility even Marxist readings seem unwilling to entertain.[71]

But my central question concerns *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, not her later work. I claim only that Beauvoir moves toward a more materialist view, treating ontological freedom as valueless apart from its concrete expression. If material reality is the only reality, then freedom of consciousness is realized only in action's real consequences. This is the basis of her first critique of the foundations of consequentialism. Like deontology, consequentialism evaluates actions in their *relation to intentionality*, primarily evaluating moral agents and their decision-making process. But this still grounds ethics in intention. So, Beauvoir's critique is internal: consequentialism fails its own criterion of grounding ethics in reality rather than intention, a covertly deontological duty to intend good consequences.[72]

We have already encountered one surprising outcome: even if we act against someone's freedom in the justified belief that our action is consistent with their overall freedom, the action only becomes ethical *if and when* that belief

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69 *PL*, p. 40.

70 Simone de Beauvoir, "Right-Wing Thought Today," trans. Véronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison, in *Political Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2012 [1955], 112–193, pp. 122–123. In the essay's introduction, Kruks notes that this polemical piece, written before the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, betrays "a striking Manichaeism: either one is with the Communists, or one is against them." Sonia Kruks, introduction to "Right-Wing Thought Today," in *Political Writings*, ed. Simons and Timmermann, 105–112, p. 109.

71 See Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, p. 158; Sonia Kruks, *Politics of Ambiguity*, pp. 149–150; Gail Weiss, "Oppression and the Possibilities of Ethics," p. 17.

72 Contemporary consequentialists have since incorporated this criticism, calling the traditional view "subjective consequentialism" and the view Beauvoir anticipates (by almost forty years!) "objective consequentialism." Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1984, 134–171, p. 152.

proves true. An ethics of ambiguity shifts the temporal locus of ethics from the moment of decision-making to the action's aftermath. Our primary obligation is not to decide in the right way but to return to every prior decision to ensure that it promotes others' ability to concretely realize their ends. Just as a true ethics of consequence cannot be an ethics of merely projected consequences, a true ethics of freedom as project cannot be an ethics of merely projected freedom.

Consequently, Beauvoir's first ethical principle is a materialist one. While we *secondarily* morally evaluate *agents* and *decisions* by the moral use of their authentic freedom, by whether they intend their own freedom (good faith) and others' freedom (good will), ethics' primary goal is to accomplish, not merely intend, human freedom. Actions, not agents—projects, not projections—are ethics' primary object of evaluation. An ethics of ambiguity is primarily an ethics of collective freedom, only secondarily one of authenticity.

This leads Beauvoir to another surprising conclusion. In the example of the girl's attempted suicide, we saw that her friends' action was ethical not solely in virtue of their decision-making process; it became ethical when it concretely promoted her freely chosen projects, helping her achieve her goal of motherhood. I concluded that ethics is ontologically, not merely epistemically, ambiguous: an action has ethical value only to the degree that it promotes or harms concrete freedom. We can now identify another way ethics is ontologically ambiguous: a past action's ethical status can *change* in relation to *historical* changes in human projects.

6 Toward an Existential Historical-Materialist Ethics

Beauvoir emphasizes this twist in a third variation of the suicide dilemma. Imagine a variation of the doctor-patient case in which I have saved someone who remains unconvinced their life was worth saving: "[A] man whom I snatch from the death which he had chosen has the right to come and ask me for means and reasons for living."[73] This need not involve any failure in my decision-making. Imagine a case identical to the young girl's in every other respect. Perhaps the man also acted thoughtlessly, motivated by despair over a project that gave his freedom meaning. And perhaps, like the girl's friends, I reasonably predicted the man would regret his suicide attempt, given the chance.

73 *EA*, p. 137.

However, Beauvoir's ethics is primarily not about my decision-making process but about its concrete outcome for others' freedom: "[V]iolence is justified only if it opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save. […] [T]he tyranny practiced against an invalid can be justified only by his getting better."[74] It is not justified by the reasonable expectation that he will get better; it is justified only if he gets better. So, despite my best efforts, my action has *become* unethical. Because I'm obligated not only to project freedom but to realize it, I am also responsible for *correcting* my actions when they become unethical. By saving the man's life, I hoped to help him better realize his freedom. Instead, because his suicide attempt was freely chosen, I have unintentionally harmed his freedom, and "whatever the purity of the intention which animates me, any dictatorship is a fault for which I have to get myself pardoned."[75] But *every* action treats others to some degree as objects; therefore, every action, no matter how careful, makes me *guilty toward others*. Ethics consists not in avoiding but in surmounting guilt; not in my decision-making, or even my initial action, but in taking *further* action: *undoing the guilt* I necessarily incur by taking any action at all.

So, I must now correct my action. I might acknowledge the man's right to decide, expressing my objections but promising not to interfere again. But Beauvoir offers a more surprising solution, underlining the deeply *historical* side of ethical ambiguity. I can correct my ethical failure by providing the man with "means and reasons for living."[76] If I help him discover and realize new projects that give him meaning, my *past* action will *change in status* from unethical to ethical. Since my action concretely harmed his freedom, I must offer means as well as reasons, concretely reversing that consequence.[77]

Consequently, Beauvoir is moving toward a distinctly *historical* materialism. I described historical materialism as the view that human beings transform their nature through their activity, creating new material possibilities that enable new projects, realizing their freedom in endless new ways. We are

74 *EA*, p. 137.

75 *EA*, p. 137.

76 *EA*, p. 137.

77 Emily Anne Parker argues that conflating Beauvoir's use of "singularity" ("resistance to conceptuality and categorization") with "particularity" makes her ethics falsely appear to vacillate between "keeping-to-oneself out of indecision" or "colonizing involvement in the life of the other." Parker, "Singularity in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2015, 1–16, pp. 4, 6. I would add that when we recognize the historical nature of this resistance to categorization, we can better resolve that false choice, shifting ethics' emphasis from correctly deciding *when* to intervene to continually *correcting* our interventions.

ambiguously historical, acting both from and against history, simultaneously its product and its agent.[78] Recall that "it is desire which creates the desirable, [...] human existence which makes values spring up in the world."[79] So, when we change our projects, we retroactively change the ethical status of past actions in relation to them. By helping the man realize a new project, I retroactively change the ethical status of my previous act of saving his life, since the ethical value of any end is nothing more than its value to the freely chosen projects of every human being.

In contrast to the superficial materialism of consequentialists, including many Marxists, when historical materialism is consistently applied to ethics, we realize that, because human nature is historical and variable, ethical value is historical and variable too. By transforming humanity, history also transforms the ethical status of the past. Ethics is ontologically ambiguous, then, in three distinct ways: (1) actions have no *intrinsic* ethical status; (2) ethical status is of *degree*, because it is relative to all of humanity's freely chosen projects; and (3) ethical status *changes* as we individually and collectively abandon or revise our projects.

We can now identify Beauvoir's second internal critique of the foundations of consequentialism: it *nonhistorically* evaluates actions on the basis of *historical* criteria of value, falsely implying that the value of an action is fixed. Previously, we saw that consequentialism cared more about how we predict consequences than whether those predictions prove true. But it also cares more about whether predictions were *once* true than whether they *continue* to be. Even its concern for *realized* consequences is superficial. In contrast, Beauvoir's ethics obligates us to indefinitely return to, maintain, and repair actions in light of their continually new value in relation to continually changing human projects.

From Beauvoir's *materialist critique* of consequentialism, we drew an obligation not just to reasonably project but to concretely realize human freedom. From her *historical materialist critique*, we can draw a further obligation to *correct* our actions whenever they harm freedom. Last, because ethical status varies in relation to changing projects, we can draw a final obligation that

78 Beauvoir's critique of Engels leads some to think she rejects Marx's theory of history; however, as Lundgren-Gothlin points out, "[I]mplicit in *The Second Sex* is a tension between an open, more Hegelian Marxism, which is in harmony with the existentialist philosophy, and a more deterministic Marxist philosophy of history" Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, p. 85.

79 *EA*, p. 15.

grounds the first two: we must *return* to our actions to *verify* their *continued* success, exacting "a perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means."[80]

Like deontology, consequentialism fails by prioritizing the ethical status of agents, minds, and decision-making. Its principal goal is to ease our conscience over past actions with the knowledge that we decided as best we could at the time. In doing so, it releases us from further obligation, freeing us to walk away from past decisions. An ethics of ambiguity has the opposite implication: it indefinitely withholds final justification and demands we preserve a troubled conscience. Ethics is centered not before or at the moment of decision but in our continual return to past decisions, and achieved by maintaining or transforming their accomplishments into harmony with continually new, projected futures.

80 *EA* p. 155.