

## Beauvoir's Politics of Ambiguity

Dr. Christine Daigle, Philosophy Department, Brock University

In this paper<sup>1</sup>, I will argue that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) can be read as a paradigm work that offers the grounds for a positive ethics and politics. Reading it in conjunction with the earlier essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) unveils the political program at work in Beauvoir's thought and her conception of the ambiguous political agent. I will explain the notion of ambiguity as well as her revised notion of alterity. These can serve as a solid foundation for a feminist ethics and politics in which interpersonal relations are dramatically re-assessed. Beauvoir's phenomenological analyses are intertwined with ethical and political proposals that posit that the individual ought to seek authentic experiences through ambiguous relations with the Other. One ought to enact an ambiguous encounter between ambiguous beings. The right conditions have to be put in place for this experience and flourishing of ambiguity to occur. For Beauvoir, this implies a rejection of the patriarchal system of values and meaning which negates ambiguity by its determination of the feminine and the masculine. Beauvoir's ethical proposal is deeply connected to political demands for radical socio-economical changes that will create the conditions for the ethical project of ambiguity to unfold. This must happen through a transformation of the social imaginaries that permeate our lives. I will explain how authenticity as lived ambiguity and freedom is the cornerstone of her politics.

### The human being as ambiguous

Adopting the existentialist stance, Beauvoir rejects traditional moralities that focus on the rational, somewhat disembodied, subject. Rather, she wants to acknowledge the fact that the "subject" is, to borrow a Nietzschean formulation, "a subjective multiplicity."<sup>2</sup> In Beauvoir, this multiplicity is referred to as ambiguity. Simply put, to say that the human being is ambiguous is to say that one is both a subject and an object, that one is both mind and body, that one is both a being for-itself and a being for-others, that one is both immanence and transcendence. It is to say that one is free and yet situated, thus having to make oneself free and it is to say that this freedom will be achieved only when one realizes that one's freedom is bound to that of the Other. At the time she is writing *The Ethics of Ambiguity*<sup>3</sup>, Beauvoir is still speaking in universal terms, i.e., she considers this notion of ambiguity to hold for all humans, independently of their particular situations. Granted, she is already acknowledging the weight of situation and her notion of freedom is not the Sartrean absolute freedom. Hers is a view that makes room for the various obstacles to freedom that are to be found in one's situation. But, at the time of the essay, she still fails to understand how the situation of woman differs fundamentally from that of man and how our sexual and gendered beings impact and complexify ambiguity.

In *The Second Sex*<sup>4</sup>, she determines that there is no such thing as an asexual being and that one's sex largely determines one's being for-itself and being for-others. Beauvoir's analyses point to the fact that a supposedly asexual for-itself, such as the one to be found in *Being and*

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper presents work that is still in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche makes that point in *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 12.

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New York: Citadel Press, 1976 (hereafter EA).

<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage, 1989 (hereafter SS).

*Nothingness*<sup>5</sup>, and possibly in her own earlier ethical essays, would in fact be male. She has introduced the notion according to which the subject is an ambiguous being that is a situated embodied freedom. As ambiguous, I am a sexed gendered embodied consciousness.

### **Beauvoir's Gendered Phenomenology**

Beauvoir's method in *The Second Sex* allows her to uncover another layer of ambiguity: that related to sex and gender. Her analysis acknowledges sexual difference and its impact on consciousness. If one is an embodied consciousness, then one is necessarily sexed. Gender, however, is another issue and involves the subject's dealing with one's own sexuality ambiguously as an embodied freedom.

It is in part 1, chapter 1, "The Data of Biology," that Beauvoir articulates her views on embodiment. It is crucial for her to distinguish between the biological body and the social body. While it is impossible to deny that there are sexual differences among human beings, these differences take on meaning only in the social realm. Biologically, they determine the human being in that they make the individual a sexed being but in themselves, these sexual categories do not carry any meaning.<sup>6</sup> In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir said so much when she claimed that "the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world [...] And on the other hand, it *determines* no behavior." (EA 41)

The human being exists in a world and this presence in and to the world requires that one be embodied. It is as body that one is in the world. However, the particular structures of one's body count as its facticity. She says: man is his body. Is woman her body? Beauvoir hesitates here because of all the meaning that sexual differentiation acquires as human beings perform their tasks for the species. The male is his body and never feels alienated from it. The female, however, sees her body taken by the male, "violated [the French "*violée*" is better translated as "raped"], the female is then alienated – she becomes, in part, another than herself. She carries the fetus inside her abdomen [...] Tenanted by another, who battens upon her substance throughout the period of pregnancy, the female is at once herself and other than herself." (SS 22) Only the female human being experiences her body as other than herself. The male provides his semen but his body remains intact in its individuality. However, the female who performs her task for the species becomes other than herself.

For Beauvoir, sexual differences ought not to be disregarded. Since one is one's body, one is necessarily of one sex or of another. The data provided by biology thus provides us with insight into the differences between male and female consciousnesses. However, Beauvoir is adamant: as important as these biological facts are, they are not entirely determining. The facts are important "For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny." (SS 32-33)

---

<sup>5</sup> See Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Kristana Arp and Julie Ward present detailed analyses of this distinction between the biological and the social body in their respective articles. See Arp, Kristana. "Beauvoir's Concept of Bodily Alienation". *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. Margaret A. Simons (ed.). University Park (Pennsylvania): The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 161-177; Ward, Julie K. "Beauvoir's Two Senses of 'Body' in *The Second Sex*" *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. Margaret A. Simons (ed.). University Park (Pennsylvania): The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 223-242. Ward argues that, in this chapter, Beauvoir presents a social-constructivist view of the body and that "The body itself should, on Beauvoir's grounds, come to be seen as a cultural and historical idea, not as a natural fact." (ibid. p. 238)

She insists: the body of the human being is not a thing, it is a situation, “it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects.” (SS 34) Consciousness is situated. It is this body as situation. This particular body that I am, makes me, as conscious being, who I am. But as a being that exists, I am not what I am and I am what I am not, to borrow one of Sartre’s formulas for the for-itself. I am a project, constantly transcending myself and making myself.

Therefore, what matters is not the body as it is, but what I make of it, what I, as consciousness, make of myself. What matters for woman, given her biology, is the meaning given to her bodily situation. From thence follows the famous opening sentence of book II of *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (SS 267) If woman is prevented from giving her body her own meaning by a socio-historical context of oppression, she cannot accomplish herself authentically as an ambiguous human being.

The social body that imposes a given meaning to the body of woman generates ambiguity for the individual but it is an inauthentic form of ambiguity. The point for Beauvoir is to generate the conditions for individuals to be able to live as authentically ambiguous. Beauvoir’s discussion of sexuality shows that it is in the erotic experience that one most fully realizes one’s ambiguous embodiment. Thus she says: “The erotic experience is one that most poignantly discloses to human beings the ambiguity of their condition; in it they are aware of themselves as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject.” (SS 402) While Beauvoir’s analysis of the lived experience of woman shows that the erotic encounter is lived as conflictual, it need not be that way. She proposes that it is the history of male oppression that has created this situation but that authentic human beings could have a different, and better, erotic experience. Beauvoir describes it in terms of generosity.<sup>7</sup> In an interesting passage from Book II, she explains that the “battle of the sexes” will be resolved once “woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after her flesh while recognizing her freedom” thus making her feel as the essential other. If both lovers give themselves to the other freely they can enjoy common pleasure. She says that “Under a concrete and carnal form there is mutual recognition of the ego and of the other in the keenest awareness of the other and of the ego. [...] the dimension [...] of the *other* still exists; but the fact is that alterity has no longer a hostile implication [...] What is required for such harmony is [...] a mutual generosity of body and soul.” (SS 401-402)

So, for Beauvoir, while it is true that historically women and men have not been able to enjoy such harmonious relationships, there is nothing inherent in their being that precludes such, on the contrary. As ambiguous beings, we are a longing and an appeal for such. However, the weight of situation, the socio-historical pull has pushed us toward conflictual inauthentic relations. While it is clear that even in the authentically ambiguous encounter the meeting with the Other is problematic, that one puts oneself at risk, the outcome is not necessarily conflict as Sartre would have it. Rather, it can be an authentic achievement of ambiguity. If this is to happen, though, each party to the relationship must aim to live their ambiguity authentically.

In order for any human being to be able to flourish as an ambiguous being, it is necessary that some social, economic, and cultural changes happen. As she states in her conclusion: “when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form.” (SS 731)

---

<sup>7</sup> I defer here to Debra B. Bergoffen’s essay for a detailed analysis. See her *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

## Problems

Although Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity is attractive, it is still plagued by some problems. Some have to do with the notion of lived ambiguity and others have to do with the notion of ambiguous sexuality. The problems are related to an articulation of lived ambiguity. What would it be? Beauvoir wants the individual to live its own ambiguity, the apex of which is to be found in the sexual encounter (which is understood to be the paradigm for all other encounters), and yet, it is not clear what a human experience of embodied consciousness freed from the social body that carries meaning, values and oppression would be. Would we be dealing with something like a phenomenal body, halfway between the biological and the social body? Or would lived authentic ambiguity be an oscillation, a reversibility, rather than a genuine ambiguity experienced in simultaneity? Would the only experience possible for an individual be that constant passage from one to the other, for example, from consciousness to flesh or from the self to the Other? (as in the act of generosity where I must be myself who gives to an other than me. Generosity, erotic or not, seems to require at least minimally a pair in which one gives and the other receives, that is, where each assumes a non-ambiguous role). Is it at all conceivable, concretely, to live as consciousness and as flesh, at the very same time, even as pre-reflective consciousness as awareness and passive flesh at the same time? As a consciousness/flesh? Can passive flesh be lived *at the same time* as free consciousness, albeit pre-reflective? Is flesh all that passive anyway? If not, then flesh is always conscious and one cannot be one's body as object.

Sexual ambiguity is also problematic. By putting its emphasis on human ambiguity, Beauvoir's philosophy goes well beyond the sexual differences that she notes. However, if her notion of ambiguity does not necessarily entail an elimination of categories, we may still wonder whether it commands a multiplication of categories. If, for example, gender is ambiguous and not related to the sexual characteristics of the body, as Beauvoir would have it, should we not then multiply categories? In between the two poles of the "hyper-masculine" and the "hyper-feminine", would there not be an infinite variety of genders? Or is gender rather a performative role enacted in a constant flux and oscillation between these two poles? When she addresses sexuality and sexual relations that bear a potential for authentically ambiguous relations, Beauvoir maintains traditional male and female binary distinctions. Is she caught in language maybe? If we are to follow her however, it seems that we must move well beyond these categories and explore a multitude of genders. But how does one determine these? Or, am I on the wrong path here and is not ambiguity about the very absence of these categories? Is lived ambiguity the pure pleasure to exist as fluid and ambiguous?

In the context of this paper, a more interesting problem is related to the foundation of her ethics. Beauvoir, like many other existentialists and/or phenomenologists, is faced with an important problem when comes the time to ground her ethics and politics. Her critique of the traditional understanding of human reality is convincing. The philosophical tradition has put the individual in boxes, thus essentializing the human being. The binaries of traditional philosophizing have allowed for this process to unfold. However, because the human being is fundamentally ambiguous, as Beauvoir's analysis shows, it is imperative to dismiss such oppressive and alienating binary thinking. But, in order to make that very case, Beauvoir must herself opt for a metaphysical absolute that will ground her argument. In fact, we can speak of a triad of absolutes here: authenticity, ambiguity and freedom. These operate as the measuring stick(s) in her analysis. They are chosen as a starting point and hold absolutely. Beauvoir stipulates that one must live authentically, which means that one must live as ambiguous. Further, one must live as free, must make oneself free, because one *is* free. Nothing justifies these

demands other than the fact that, in her philosophy, authenticity, ambiguity and freedom hold as absolute values.

To Beauvoir's defence, I would suggest that unless it is willing to collapse in extreme relativism, it seems that any philosophy must opt for fundamental values that hold absolutely. Now, that does not mean that one must fall into the trap of absolutism whereby absolute values command absolute rules and principles. There can be flexibility and, may I say, ambiguity in how absolute values are lived by. This is what Beauvoir proposes in her ethics and politics. Her essays "Political Realism and Moral Idealism" (1945) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* make that clear. In those pieces, she clearly shows that nihilism and idealism are not viable ethical and political options. Nihilism, which is the rejection of any and all values, is akin to extreme relativism that refuses to hold to any specific values. Ethical and political life necessitate some valuing. In order to do anything, one must hold something as valuable. Action is value-oriented. Thus nihilism and extreme relativism cannot ground an ethics and a politics because they reject values. Likewise, moral idealism, which is an absolutist and universalist view of morality and values, cannot hold. The problems that emerge for the moral idealist are tremendous.

In her "Political Realism and Moral Idealism", Beauvoir explores such questions, using the characters of Creon and Antigone as representatives of realism and idealism, respectively. She shows that both positions are untenable and that, in fact, the realms of ethics and politics, which are intertwined, are permeated by ambiguity. The moral idealism of Antigone conflates with a situation that is so complex and ambiguous that absolute values cannot hold. The situation will always restrict and constrain freedom in one way or another such that rules and principles will have to be bent to be exercised in a concrete particular situation. The political realism of Creon is also problematic. It fails to take fundamental values as its measure and thus runs the risk of being arbitrary in its application. Both positions represent extremes on the ethical/political spectrum and are not acceptable to Beauvoir. To put it in very simple terms: things are never black or white and the ethical and the political are grey zones in which we need values to shed some light and guide us, all the while not binding us. Decision-making is always, and ought to always be, tainted by uncertainty and ambiguity<sup>8</sup>.

In Beauvoir's philosophy, there is also a difficulty related to freedom, namely the problem related to the fact that we are free and yet have to make ourselves free. The problem is not so much that one must actualize one's freedom and act as a free being. Rather, it is related to the oppression that Beauvoir's analysis so convincingly unveils. In a context of oppression how is it possible for individuals to live as free? Beauvoir's project in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* aims to show that human beings are free ambiguous embodied beings. As such, they need to be freed from a pattern of oppression that denies their ambiguity. The patriarchal system is one that denies ambiguity. This means that efforts have to be made to generate the right socio-political-economic conditions so that individuals may flourish as ambiguous. However, the problem is this: since the individual is a situated freedom (since her ambiguous being makes her a freedom who must make herself free), how is it possible for the individual to free herself from an oppressing situation? In the case of woman, she is faced with centuries-old oppression and negation of her freedom. It is a system of oppression that is so efficient that woman has internalized it and contributes herself to perpetuating it (as Beauvoir has shown so vividly in her analyses of the mother).

---

<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir explores the ambiguity of the ethical and the political further in her novels *The Blood of Others* (1945) and *The Mandarins* (1954).

This is the whole problem of thinking the emancipation of the oppressed individual, a liberation that must begin by a realization, on the part of the oppressed, that she is indeed oppressed. But this is exactly the problem: how does the oppressed, who does not see herself as such, come to it? How is an oppressive and alienating system come to be acknowledged as such so that the situation that is made for the individual may begin to change?

The phenomenological exercise conducted in *The Second Sex* contributes to this “awakening” by unveiling mechanisms of oppression. Beauvoir has theorized quite extensively on the social and political role of literature (fiction and non-fiction alike). Literature is, for Beauvoir, a metaphysical adventure. Its task is to uncover truth(s) about the world. This truth, being constituted by an intentional consciousness, is necessarily subjective. One is always speaking from one’s own perspective. By unveiling reality, the writer plays an important role that makes of literature a political commitment. Sartre, with whom she agrees on this point, defines literature as “littérature engagée”, committed literature. The writer unveils the world to a reader and in this conversation, can bind the reader’s freedom and commit it to change the world. Writers and readers are bound through the piece of writing that lays between them. The writing presents truth, a subjective truth that “speaks” to the reader’s own. The reader makes of it his own subjective truth. By doing so, the reader binds him/herself to changing the world.

*The Second Sex* unveils the world to its reader and, by doing so, binds the freedom of the reader and commits it. If the world that is unveiled is one wherein injustice reigns, the reader is compromised and cannot escape the duty to change the world in order to allow the flourishing of freedom. Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* demonstrates that in this world, individuals cannot live as ambiguous and free. The reader must work toward it. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*<sup>9</sup>, Beauvoir had shown that the individual must appeal to the freedom of the Other. The “metaphysical” duty of human beings is to unveil being but also to appeal to the Other who will ground and justify this unveiling. For the appeal to resonate, the Other must be free. If she is not, she must be made free. The act of writing is an appeal of this kind. So *The Second Sex* is such an appeal. In brief, I think that what Beauvoir has described in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and what she undertakes to do herself in *The Second Sex* show how it is possible to free oneself from oppression, however efficient it is: the unveiling of oppression, which is a task, entails acts to remedy it. The free individual cannot stand unaffected by a world in which he cannot truly and entirely be free. I also think that liberation from oppression may be possible thanks to the fact that an appeal is made to the pre-reflective in the individual via fiction writing and phenomenological descriptions of lived experience<sup>10</sup>.

An interesting question arises here: does the unveiling entail immediate concrete political acts to change the world? The changes that Beauvoir has in mind are radical and fundamental. The world that is needed for the flourishing of ambiguity is still at a distance. Many actions and changes are required to bring it about. Thus, I think that we are dealing with a complex situation. In fact, the unveiling reveals ambiguity. The human being is an ambiguous being and the world

---

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. “Pyrrhus and Cineas” in *Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Margaret A. Simons, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Basically the idea is this: an appeal to the reflective might be unsuccessful because the reflective is caught in patterns of oppression that it assimilates. The appeal to the pre-reflective would be able to touch directly the ontological freedom that is constrained by the reflective. Thus, the individual’s ontological freedom would be triggered in actualizing itself and making itself a practical freedom. This idea is connected to Kristeva’s explorations in *Sens et non-sens de la révolte* which I still have to examine carefully.

ought to be a place where this ambiguity can flourish.<sup>11</sup> What happens is that the unveiling operates internally to deconstruct the social imaginaries that oppress the individual. The first step to concrete political change is the critique and the ensuing transformation of the social imaginaries (the “system of hypocrisy” that Beauvoir was referring to at the end of *The Second Sex* (SS 731)). Once these are sufficiently transformed, concrete social and political changes can be implemented. They will need to be implemented as the social and political will no longer be the expression of our social imaginaries. The social imaginaries will also be deeply transformed by the new understanding of the human as ambiguous. This understanding is the result of the unveiling. These imaginaries will be shaped to value ambiguity, freedom and authenticity, which in turn, will lead to the adoption of the appropriate social and political measures to foster them. Thus the ultimate result will be a political realm that rests on absolutes without constituting itself as an absolutism (since the nature of the absolute upon which it will rest will itself be ambiguous). The social imaginaries will change with the ethical relation between individuals. In fact, both changes must go hand in hand. The ethical and the political are intertwined to such a degree that any change that is brought about in one realm will necessarily affect the other. Again, the understanding of the human being as ambiguous will transform the ethical relation in an important way. In a relation where I and the Other are no longer ontologically separated, reciprocity and generosity is possible. In a relation where my freedom is fundamentally tied to that of the Other, reciprocity and generosity is a necessity. Beauvoir has successfully shown that the individual is never in isolation and that, in order for him/her to flourish as ambiguous, the link to the Other must be brought to the forefront and fostered. The focus is no longer on the individual as a self-contained unity but on the subject as an intersubjectivity, that is, as caught in an intersubjective web.

## Conclusion

Beauvoir’s phenomenological analyses are intertwined with ethical and political proposals that posit that the individual ought to seek authentic experiences of ambiguous relations with the Other. One ought to enact an ambiguous encounter between ambiguous beings. The right conditions have to be put in place for this experience and flourishing of ambiguity to occur. For Beauvoir, this implies a rejection of the patriarchal system of values and meaning which negates ambiguity by its determination of the feminine and the masculine. Beauvoir’s ethical proposal is deeply connected to political demands for radical socio-economical changes that will create the conditions for the ethical project of ambiguity to unfold. If the human being is a situated and embodied consciousness, the situation that is made for the individual must be one that favours the individual’s flourishing. Only concrete changes will make this happen and these can only happen following the unveiling of reality and the transformation of the social imaginaries that it initiates.

Beauvoir’s project in *The Second Sex* is articulated in a complex manner. One may read the book as a genuine ethical and political program that is erected on the central notion of ambiguity. The human being is fundamentally ambiguous and ought to be able to live this ambiguity. Any system that denies this is alienating for the human being, male or female, and must be rejected. The book shows how authentic ambiguous relations between individuals are permeated by the appeal. The appeal to the Other to acknowledge one’s ambiguity and freedom, the appeal to

---

<sup>11</sup> This type of reasoning appears to be a good case of the naturalistic fallacy at work. Considered from another perspective, one is tempted to think of the Kantian “ought implies can.” Put together, we have the interesting result that one *ought* to live as ambiguous because one *is* ambiguous and one can fulfil the ought precisely because one is ambiguous!

reciprocate, the appeal to dwell in ambiguity. The book itself is an appeal to its readers. Its unveiling act is an appeal to the freedom of the reader. It may be that the philosophy of ambiguity is a misnomer after all and that it is a philosophy of the appeal that emerges out of Beauvoir's writings. She would probably say that philosophy itself is an appeal, and an appeal for change at that. In brief, for her, philosophy is ethical and political.