

FREEDOM AND FUTURITY: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

APA Eastern

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Comments and reading recommendations welcome!

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Shape of the book project

1. *Moral psychology*: Beauvoir's philosophical psychology and the sources of the imperative to will freedom.
2. *Metaethics*: developing a Beauvoirian form of constructivism (Dover & Gingerich 2024).
3. *Normative ethics*: Beauvoir's reworking of the ideas of duty, pleasure, and virtue.

The Beauvoirian imperative

- Each of us (viz., us human subject-object ambiguities) must will freedom absolutely.
- Three 'formulations'. Each of us...
 - ...must will our own freedom.
 - ...must will the freedom of (some) others.
 - ...must seek to abolish all oppression.
- This is a hypothetical imperative at the level of motivation: the consequence of failing to will freedom absolutely is not irrationality but unmitigated anxiety.
- The imperative is addressed not to rational agents as such but to creatures with psyches that fit Beauvoir's phenomenological description of the human predicament. Whatever authority it has is grounded in the contingencies of human psychology.
- It has some very abstract first-order normative upshots, but to amount to a full ethical theory it needs to be supplemented with the thicker picture of ethical life that comes through in her political essays, novels, memoirs, travel writing, and letters.

How to will freedom

- Will it forward, into an indefinite open future.
- Will it outward, encompassing the other.
- Will it absolutely, without limit.

Quotations

1. '[T]he man who seeks to justify his life must will freedom itself, first of all and absolutely' (Beauvoir 1947, 34-35, our translation).
2. '[W]e must end by abolishing all suppression; each one must carry on his struggle in connection with that of the other and by integrating it into the general pattern' (Beauvoir [1947] 1948, 89).
3. 'Man willingly sees himself enclosed in the narrow circle of his own interests, enclosed in a life that death limits and empties of all meaning. Can one imagine a darker pessimism? What doctrine opens fewer doors to hope? How can people who have such an idea of their condition reproach existentialism for its lack of optimism?' (Beauvoir [1945] 2004, 210)

4. '[E]xistentialists affirm that man is transcendence; his life is engagement in the world, movement toward the Other, surpassing of the present toward a future that even death does not limit' (Beauvoir [1945] 2004, 212).
5. '[E]thics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art' (Beauvoir [1947] 1948, 134).
6. 'The movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness' (Beauvoir [1947] 1948, 135).
7. 'If we do not love life on our own account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way' (Beauvoir [1947] 1948, 135-36).
8. 'I can't at all see how the transition to practical ethics occurs. So far it remains formal—just like Kant's good will, which is defined by the will to be a good will...I only wonder how you'll resolve it; what I must assume; and, when I assume my freedom, what I do with that assumed freedom. Send me the continuation as soon as you can...' (Beauvoir [1930-1963] 2012, 211).
9. 'Man is the unique and sovereign master of his destiny if only he wants to be. This is what existentialism affirms, and certainly this is an optimism.' (Beauvoir [1945] 2004, 213).
10. '[F]reedom will never be given; it will always have to be won: that is what Trotsky was saying when he envisaged the future as a permanent revolution' (Beauvoir [1947] 1948, 119).

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