

FAILURE AND FREEDOM IN BEAUVOIR'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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Comments and reading recommendations welcome!

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Beauvoir and the History of Ethical Theory

- Beauvoir dons the mantle of 'the tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel' for existentialism's claim that 'the source of all values resides in the freedom of man' (EA 16)
- And yet, existentialism 'appears to us as the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place' (EA 34)
- At the same time, no existentialist has yet offered an ethics; Sartre has merely '[opened] up the perspective for' one (EA 10)
- Therefore, Beauvoir's moral period work is the first attempt to articulate an ethics, properly understood [sic!]

Beauvoir and Kant

- 'Man is free, but he finds his law in his very freedom.' (EA 170)
- An ethics of ambiguity will aim to show that 'individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.' (EA 17)
- 'By freely taking his own freedom as an end within himself and in his acts,' she says, 'man constitutes a kingdom of ends.' (WE 325)

Beauvoir versus Kant

- Morality doesn't address us solely or primarily as rational agents
- Instead, it addresses us, as we are, in all our ambiguity: we are both agents capable of transforming the world and vulnerable bodies shaped by forces beyond our control
- Morality is subjective
 - o But this subjectivism 'does not lead to the anarchy of personal whim' (EA 170)
 - o Rather, from within our individual subjectivity we can come to see that 'the cause of freedom is...universally human' (EA 93)
- So, morality is *subjective* and yet also *universal*

- Like Kantian aesthetics
- Unlike Kantian ethics

Webber's Beauvoir

- According to Webber, Beauvoir offers an argument, in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, that seeks to establish a 'categorical imperative of authenticity', which 'is intended to lead the individual from the value they place on their own ends to the imperative to treat human existence [and human agency] as objectively valuable' (RE 178).
- 'To treat the achievement of an end as valuable is to treat the achieved end as having some property that makes it valuable', such that 'adding it to the world would be valuable' (RE 177).
- We are all committed to the idea that our projects have a value that doesn't depend on our own commitment to them. If we felt that we valued our ends *only* because *we* were pursuing them, these ends would seem 'arbitrary and unjustified' (RE 176).
- This, in turn, means that in order to pursue some end as part of my project, I have to suppose that that end will *still* be valuable even once it is no longer being actively pursued (RE 177).
- So, in writing a book, I am committed to 'the idea that its value lies in its being a *potential* means for other ends' (RE 177, emphasis added).

Beauvoir's Subjectivism and the Ongoing-Project-Dependence of Value

- Ends are only valuable in the context of projects; in its 'original springing forth', human agency has, as yet, no value:

'It is desire which creates the desirable, and the project which sets up the end. It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged. But first it locates itself beyond any pessimism, as beyond any optimism, for **the fact of its original springing forth is a pure contingency.**' (EAOR 14)
- Even the value of humanity depends on our 'according value to one another':

'Let men attach value to words, forms, colors, mathematical theorems, physical laws, and athletic prowess; **let them accord value to one another in love and friendship, and the objects, the events, and the men immediately have this value;** they have it absolutely.' (EA 171)
- Beauvoir's existentialism assimilates subjectivity and freedom:

'In existentialism, on the contrary, **the self is not.** I exist as an authentic subject, in a constantly renewed upspringing that is opposed to the fixed reality of things. I throw myself without help and without guidance into a world where I am not installed ahead of time waiting for myself. I am free, and **my projects are not defined by preexisting interests; they posit their own ends.** In the philosophy of immanence, the outcome of my actions is given. If I go back from there to their starting point, it appears itself as defined. It is a sort of projection of the object self onto the plane of interiority. In the philosophy of transcendence, the subject exists uniquely as a starting point. I cannot mask its presence, and I cannot conceal from myself the fact that **all my acts have their source in my subjectivity. When people resent existentialism for its subjectivity, they are really reproaching it for assimilating subjectivity and freedom.**' (EPW 212)
- I found my goals value in choosing them; they are not 'absolutely useful', and their value disappears if I stop willing them:

'If an engineer constructs a dam, or a woman brings children into the world, they want the dam or the children to justify definitively that they exist. **They [DD/JG: wrongly!] want the ends that they pursue to be affirmed as absolutely useful.** If, on the contrary, a

man has failed in his undertakings, he likes to repeat with Ecclesiastes that “All is vanity.” But **to declare [DD/JG: with Beauvoir!] that it is I who, in choosing my goals, found their value** is to refuse myself all alibis. No success saves me. In order for it to continue to appear as a success to me, **I must continue to want [vouloir] it**, and this volition is necessarily manifested by new acts. And no failure exempts me from pursuing the struggle. There exists no point of view exterior to myself from which I could scorn my own volitions.’ (EPW 214)

- The aspiration to ‘objectivity’ is ‘inhuman and consequently false’:

‘We have already attempted to answer this objection. One can formulate it only by placing himself on the grounds of **an inhuman and consequently false objectivity**... Mankind can not fool itself completely since it is precisely Mankind which creates the criteria of true and false.’ (EA 171)
- Good results are not external to the good will (i.e., achieved projects don’t have value outside of the will that pursues them):

‘There is a very old saying which goes: "Do what you must, come what may." That amounts to saying in a different way that **the result is not external to the good will** which fulfills itself in aiming at it.’ (EA 173)
- There are no values prior to human judgment (including the value of human agency!):

‘Along with the idea of a God guaranteeing Good and Evil, existentialism **rejects the notion of ready-made values whose affirmation precedes human judgment.**’ (WE 325)
- Existentialism ‘refuses to set up as absolutes the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself’:

‘[Existentialist conversion] ‘refuses to set up as absolutes the ends toward which my thrusts itself’, [instead] considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them.’ (EA 13)

Without Failure, No Ethics!

- Failure is a key concept for understanding Beauvoir’s claim that she is offering the first ethics.
 - o Kirkpatrick (2024, 43) on Webber (2018): ‘Where’s the ambiguity? Where’s the tragedy? Where’s the tension?’
- What sets existentialism apart from other ethical theories is that it acknowledges the reality and inevitability of failure.
 - o ‘**[W]ithout failure, no ethics**; for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact coincidence with himself, in a perfect plenitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning.’ (EA 9)
 - o Montaigne, in the epigraph to EA: ‘Life in itself is neither good nor evil, it is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it.’ (EA 3)

Three Faces of Failure, Three Faces of Freedom

- Ontological failure
 - o Ontological failure corresponds to our infinite ontological freedom.
 - o Ontological failure is inevitable and total:
 - We can never be our being.
 - We can never coincide with ourselves or our projects.

- Ethical failure

- Ethical failure corresponds to our ethical freedom.
 - We can ‘raise [our natural freedom] to the height of moral freedom’ (EA 33) ‘by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence’ (EA 25).
- We can do this by assuming our ambiguity and willing freedom universally.
- Or, we can fail to do so, condemning ourselves to ‘real earthly damnation’ (EA 35).

- Empirical failure and freedom

- Empirical failure corresponds to power.
- Empirical success and failure are scalar.
- Not only do we fail to be being or to be identical to our projects, we fail (to an extent) in each of our projects.
 - ‘In *Plutarch Lied* Pierrefeufu rightly says that in war there is no victory which can not be regarded as unsuccessful, for the objective which one aims at is the total annihilation of the enemy and this result is never attained; yet there are wars which are won and wars which are lost. **So is it with any activity; failure and success are two aspects of reality which at the start are not perceptible.**’ (EA 139)
- If my projects include collaborative, open-ended, intergenerational endeavors, they can be taken up and transformed after my death, extending indefinitely into the future—but this continuation of their value is not guaranteed, because it depends on what other people contingently choose to do, and the possibility of empirical failure always looms.

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