

BEAUVOIR ON THE UNITY OF ETHICS AND METAETHICS

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Comments and reading recommendations welcome!

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Ambiguity, Freedom, Anxiety, Justification

- We are *ambiguous*—double-sided—creatures, in that we experience ourselves as both subjects and objects.
- We have *natural freedom*, the capacity to ‘transcend’ ourselves, throwing ourselves forward toward the future as ‘movement and transcendence’ (PC 96).
- We enter the world already inside of what Beauvoir calls a *situation*—a set of material and social circumstances, including our individual embodiment.
- Ways of denying ambiguity
 - Denying the object side: “What I *really* am is...” “...an immortal soul” (Plato; Descartes); “...an instance of rational agency” (Kant)
 - Denying the subject side: “our experiences of subjectivity and agency are illusory” (Spinoza; cf. Dennett).
- We experience *anxiety* in the face of the tension between our experience of ourselves as ‘a pure internality against which no external power can take hold’, and at the same time our experience of ourselves ‘as thing[s] crushed by the dark weight of other things’ (EA 5).
- The only psychically satisfying way to respond to anxiety is via an attempt to ‘*justify*’ ourselves. (Beauvoir’s idiosyncratic conception of justification amounts to a secular version of Christian salvation.)
- The existential imperative: If we want to justify ourselves, we ‘must will freedom itself, first of all and absolutely’ (PMA 34-35).
- In order to ‘will freedom absolutely’, each of us must:
 - Will our own freedom.
 - Will the freedom of others.
 - Seek to abolish all oppression.
 - ‘[A] freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others...’ (EA 97).
 - ‘[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’ (EA 95).
- We will freedom by adopting projects.
- ‘To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future’ (PMA 127/ EA 97).
 - We are bound to ‘surpass the given’, whether we like it or not.
 - However, to surpass the given *toward an open future*, we must relate to our own natural freedom in a way that embraces it rather than fleeing it.

- Projects are the source of all normativity: '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...' (EA 14).
- Only some projects can help to 'justify' our lives.
 - Those projects through which we *assume* our ambiguity (e.g., take it up as a burden, a responsibility) can succeed at justification.
 - Those that deny our ambiguity in various ways fail.
 - The 'serious man' 'seek[s] the guarantee for his existence outside of himself', and 'believe[s] in unconditioned values which would set themselves up athwart his freedom like things' (EA 52-53).
 - The serious man 'imagines that the accession to [more-than-human] values...permanently confers value upon himself. Shielded with "rights" he fulfills himself as a being who is escaping from the stress of existence' (EA 49-50).
 - Successful justificatory projects embrace a radical ethos of democracy at every level of life: because nobody is in charge, everybody is in charge, together.

Beauvoir on the Relationship between Ethics and Metaethics

- Beauvoir denies that there are mind-independent moral truths.
- She advances an 'error theory' of moral realism.
- She claims that it is positively immoral to believe in the metaethical position of moral realism.
- In contrast to contemporary metaethical anti-realists, Beauvoir thinks that her metaethical commitments go hand-in-hand with highly revisionary first-order ethical commitments.
- Existentialist ethics 'is the rejection of all the previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; *it is the rejection of every principle of authority*' (EA 153-54, emphasis added).
 - This is a rejection of the putative authority of timeless, objective moral truths over the human individual as much as a rejection of the putative political authority of some people over others.
 - The rejection of 'every principle of authority' includes principles, like Kant's Categorical Imperative, which attribute a trumping authority to an abstract rationality governed by laws. For Beauvoir, 'nothing is decided in advance' (EA 35).
- In the face of moral disagreement, Beauvoir's comradely moral vision *invites* everyone to join in projects of universal human liberation, but refuses to pretend that it can *conscript* membership in these projects on pain of irrationality or contradiction. (Cf. Foot 2002, 169-70 n.15.)
 - 'I can always save myself [but] that doesn't give me the right to contend that an other ought to be able to save himself. *For this salvation is ... carried out by my freedom*—therefore it is unpredictable and cannot be assigned to the other as *Sollen* [as an "ought"]' (WD 321).

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