

**COMMITTEE III**  
Towards Ecumenism in World Philosophy

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**Discussant Paper on Linda Hansen's Paper**

**SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A PHILOSOPHER IN DIALOGUE**

by

**Joseph Bettis**  
Professor of Religious Studies  
Western Washington University  
Bellingham, Washington

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Joseph Bettis  
Western Washington University  
Bellingham, WA 98226  
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A RESPONSE TO LINDA HANSEN'S "SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR:  
A PHILOSOPHER IN DIALOGUE"

I want to begin by thanking Prof. Hansen for an excellent paper. In just a few short pages she has reminded us of some of the main themes that made Jean Paul Sartre the spokesman for an age, she has reviewed the ways in which Simone de Beauvoir built on Sartre's work, and she has indicated the ways in which their pioneering work provides a basis for further philosophical work.

In my comments I want to review the main points in Prof. Hansen's paper and then make a suggestion about how her paper defines an important element in the direction of the work of this committee.

I. From content to context.

Sartre's genius lay in his ability to relocate the ethical question. He showed us that the fundamental human question is not how to do good, but how to be authentic. This transition from doing to being is the transformation from content to context. It is what Nietzsche had called, perhaps infelicitously, the transition from slave morality to master morality. In the existential idiom of Sartre and de Beauvoir, it is the difference between bad faith and authenticity.

For Sartre and de Beauvoir, to be authentic is to be aware of our own finitude and to take responsibility for our actions and for our life, refusing to pass the buck along to society, fate or God. Bad faith, on the other hand, is the failure to take responsibility. We try to play God when we pretend to absolutize our value system by claiming to derive it from God or from anywhere other than the nothingness of our own self. Bad faith pretends to be responsible by defining responsibility as faithfulness to God's command (or to some other external authority). Genuine responsibility, however, includes living out of the realization that each of us must choose what our values are and what we affirm. To acknowledge that we choose our own values, that we create them out of the nothingness of the self, is to accept responsibility and to live authentically.<sup>1</sup>

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This analysis reveals the degree to which Sartre reflects his Judeo/Christian tradition. In that tradition, "sin" is not a naughty act, but a way of being. The important human transition is not from "immoral" to "moral," but from "unrighteous" to "righteous" or from "sinner" to "saved." It is from playing God to accepting finitude. This understanding of the tradition is, of course, contrary to the moralism of popular Christian piety. Take, for example, the story of the good Samaritan. A man falls among thieves and is robbed, beaten, and left for dead beside the road. After several people have ignored him, a Samaritan takes care of the victim.

Popular Christianity usually asks us to identify with the Samaritan and instructs us to emulate him, an interpretation of the story that leaves us in bad faith. Within its original context of responsibility, however, the story is a parable of authenticity. It is told in answer to the question, "who is my neighbor?" At the end of the story, the question is asked, who is the neighbor. The Samaritan (a person who is different) is the neighbor. We are invited to identify with the victim, the man in the ditch, and to look to the "good Samaritan," Jesus, for our salvation.

Our ethical choices take place either within the context of bad faith or within the context of inauthenticity. As long as we live in bad faith, . . ."it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations."<sup>2</sup> The content of bad faith is seriousness. Quoting Sartre: ". . . the principal result of existential psychoanalysis must be to make us repudiate the spirit of seriousness." (Hansen, p. 5)

As Prof. Hansen says, "The spirit of seriousness is in bad faith, because in it we attempt to hide from ourselves that we have created values and are responsible for them." Or, quoting Sartre again, ". . . freedom will become conscious of itself and will reveal itself in anguish as the unique source of value and the nothingness by which the world exists." (Hansen, p. 6) "Thus the radical conversion is not a change in the human structure to be God, but is a change in what we choose to value in that structure." (Hansen, p. 10)

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Actually, it seems to me that Hansen misinterprets this statement later in her paper. She writes that "although in terms of our capacity to succeed at being God, it makes no difference whether we get drunk alone or lead nations, in terms of our capacity to create a human 'world,' such a choice makes an enormous difference." (p.11) Actually, Sartre's point is that getting drunk or leading nations is irrelevant within the context of bad faith--trying to do good. And that would apply to creating a human world also. The only relevant distinction is between trying to do good (inauthenticity, or bad faith) and being conscious of one finitude and therefore of one's self as the uncaused source of value and meaning (authenticity). Within that context, it also makes no difference whether one drinks alone or leads nations. In either case one is living with the reality of being responsible for one's own life.

Hansen identifies de Beauvoir's contribution to Sartre's analysis of the human condition as her "fundamental philosophical gift: her recognition of the essential ambiguity of the human condition and her willingness to try to live well within that."

## II. The Other

The only way in which we can make the transition from bad faith to authenticity, from the context of playing God to the context of accepting our finitude, is through our being met by other people. It is the other person that confronts us with our limitedness and therefore with our finitude and so protects us from the bad faith of attributing our values to some external source.

As Hansen points out, this can only take place if the other person is free. Thus, for Sartre and de Beauvoir, social justice is a necessary pre-condition of humanity. My own humanity depends on the freedom of the "others." Moreover, the limit that the other person represents for me and that creates the condition of my humanity requires difference. It is because the other person is different that I am reminded of my finitude. If the other person were like me, it would reinforce my bad faith, rather than challenging me to accept responsibility and to move into the context of authenticity.

The prime example of human difference is the difference between the sexes. (p.20)

I wonder if Prof. Hansen has it right here. She writes: "It is true that in many respects, female biology differs from that of the male. What cannot be assumed, however, is that a woman's

being is wholly a product of her biological make-up for such a belief would deny that she is free." (p. 21) In other words, it seems to me that Prof. Hansen is wanting to argue that beneath sexual differences, women and men share a common human condition of aloneness and need. Whereas, it seems to me that the thrust of Sartre and de Beauvoir's work is that people are different, and that the paradigm of that difference is the difference between women and men and that our hope lies in accepting that difference as the basis for our coming# together.

I believe Prof. Hansen is correct to call attention to the fact that historically this relationship has been destructive because both women and men have been encouraged to see women as objects, thus obscuring the fact that men are objects for women just as much as women are objects for men. The subject-object relationship has gone only one way. The authentic relationship is subject/object, subject/object. There can be no avoiding this essential difference of the other.

### III. Dialogue and Community

The place of the other is critical for building a viable community. Bad faith wants to build community on the basis of a presumed "least common denominator" of human nature. Bad faith assumes that if we can uncover our common human nature, that is the basis for unity. This is bad faith because it assumes that what I know about human nature is what human nature is. The other person is really not necessary. It assumes that there is a common given reality for which I do not have to take responsibility. I only must recognize it.

Dialogue precedes authentic community and not the other way around. Community comes only after difference, not before it. I cannot assume that what I know about my nature is true of others. I require dialogue with others as the necessary condition of community. As Prof. Hansen writes, "In such a vision, we seek for unity with one another and what we discover is difference. But these differences have the possibility of providing fuller lives for us all, and leading us to discover a community that is more complex and richer in meaning, a community in which each of our finite projects can enhance and be enhanced by others." (p. 29)

In terms of the work of our committee and of the conference, what this means, as Prof. Hansen makes clear in the conclusion of her paper, is that our coming together as human beings must not be predicated on what we have in common, but must look for the creation of a harmony that celebrates our differences. After all, the word "harmony" presupposes different notes, not one. Discovering our differences is not the end of the conversation, but its beginning.

A world at peace will not be a monotone world. It will be a world of dialogue between all its different inhabitants. This dialogue is possible, not on the basis of a common set of values--bad faith--but on the basis of responsibility as de Beauvoir understood it: willingness to see the self as the context for how we choose to experience our world. Then our dialogue will be authentic because it will be based on our finitude rather than on our presumption.