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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A PHILOSOPHER IN DIALOGUE

by

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Introduction

The theme of our meeting and thus the focus for this paper is "Towards Ecumenism in World Philosophy." It is very clear that we are not looking for any single philosophical system as an answer to the world's deep philosophical needs. Rather we have brought a variety of philosophers and systems into dialogue with one another. It seems to me that dialogue--genuine dialogue--is the kind of unity for which we seek. I present some of the contributions of Simone de Beauvoir, a philosopher deeply concerned with grounding the possibility of genuine dialogue in her view of what it is to be human, and as someone who was herself a model of a philosopher in dialogue.

It is interesting that de Beauvoir rejected the appellation of "philosopher" precisely because she did not attempt to build a philosophical system. When asked specifically about her work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she responded:

> For me it is not philosophy; it is an essay. For me, a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or Sartre; someone who has built a great system, and not simply someone who likes philosophy, who can teach it, understand it, and who can make use of it in essays. . . .[1]

Over the years in which I've been teaching and thinking about philosophy, I have changed in coming to think of it less in terms

of system-building, less in terms of answers, and more in terms of the kinds of questions it makes us put to ourselves and the ways in which it helps us to see those questions as crucial to our everyday lives. I find I resonate strongly with the words of a theologian, Bernard Loomer, who wrote that as he got older,

> For myself, I find that I operate with fewer principles. I know much less than I used to. I have many more questions, and fewer answers. Sometimes I am not even sure that I am interested in the answers anymore. I get so interested in the questions that I do not have the patience to listen to someone who has gotten it all worked out in ways that I do not believe belong to life.[2]

I must ask, how does philosophy help us to live?

De Beauvoir stated: "My field is literature."[3] That may be, but the fact that she continually moved back and forth in her writing between the philosophical abstractions of essays like Pyrrhus and Cinéas and The Ethics of Ambiguity to the concreteness of her memoirs and novels, or made the same movement within a work like The Second Sex, does not make her less a philosopher. Rather it assures us that her philosophizing was continually grounded in life.

Part I: The Possibility and Need for Genuine Dialogue

We have just seen that Simone de Beauvoir did not herself engage in philosophical system-building. Rather she took as her early philosophical base the system of Jean-Paul Sartre as he ex-

pounded it in Being and Nothingness. The direction in which she moved from that base in her own philosophical essays, Pyrrhus and Cinéas and The Ethics of Ambiguity, is an early and deep indication of her concern for dialogue. For what she wished to argue in these works was that positive human relationships--ones in which there is a mutual promotion of freedom--are not only possible in the context of Sartrean ontology, but necessary.

Anyone familiar with Sartre's description of human relationships in Being and Nothingness will understand the significance of de Beauvoir's attempt. For many commentators on Being and Nothingness have despaired of the possibility of an ethics in the face of a summary statement such as: "The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the Mitsein: it is conflict."[4] Yet Sartre himself indicated "the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation" based on "a radical conversion,"[5] and offered a sketch of that conversion at the very end of Being and Nothingness in his section on "Ethical Implications." That sketch was further elaborated by de Beauvoir; moreover, it was she who developed a real argument for the necessity of such an ethics in human life.

Let us briefly examine the problem of human relationships in Sartre's ontology and his own suggestion for a conversion, and then go on to examine de Beauvoir's further developments.

In Sartre's ontology, the structure of our human existence is an inescapable desire to be God. As consciousness, being-for-itself, we human beings forever wish for a union with being-in-itself, a being that would be full of itself, but are forever at

a distance from such being. To be a conscious fullness of being would be to be God, to be a being whose existence is necessary and justified. But such a synthesis of the for-itself and in-itself is impossible; human consciousness always has the capacity to throw itself into question, to distance itself from its own being, to recognize its own contingency.

Yet we know that, at least for awhile, we might fool ourselves. Left alone, we might manage to convince ourselves of our own necessity, ignore the questions our consciousness could raise. But other people make this virtually impossible. To be "looked at," to be confronted with another consciousness, is to be reminded of our finitude. We are made aware of possibilities we have not yet actualized and may never actualize; we are made aware that we are not necessary to others. And so conflict does seem the necessary character of our relations with others when we are constant reminders to one another that we are not what we most deeply desire to be--God.

In the section entitled "Ethical Implications," Sartre states that existential psychoanalysis can make the structure of human existence as the desire to be God explicit for us.

> Existential psychoanalysis is going to reveal to man the real goal of his pursuit, which is being as a synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself; existential psychoanalysis is going to acquaint man with his passion. In truth there are many men who have practiced this

> psychoanalysis on themselves and who have not waited to learn its principles in order to make use of them as a means of deliverance and salvation.[6]

Sartre is using in this passage the very same words he used earlier, namely "deliverance and salvation," and he has indicated that existential psychoanalysis can effect "deliverance and salvation." In existential psychoanalysis, then, must lie the key to the "radical conversion" making an ethics of positive human relationships possible. We have just seen that existential psychoanalysis will make us explicitly aware of our passion toward being God, and in so doing, it will at the same time reveal to us the uselessness of this passion, the futility of this desire. All attempts at being God are equivalent because they all end in failure.[7] "Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations."[8]

The question is, then, how an explicit consciousness of this passion and its failure can effect anything but despair, much less the possibility of positive human relationships. Sartre begins his answer by showing that our knowledge of our own nature as a lack of being, and thus of our nature as free, can help us toward working out a new ethics by showing us the inauthenticity of the old. As Sartre explains:

> . . . the principal result of existential psychoanalysis must be to make us repudiate the _spirit of seriousness_. The spirit of seriousness has two characteristics: it

> considers values as transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity, and it transfers the quality of "desirable" from the ontological structure of things to their simple material constitution. For the spirit of seriousness, for example, <u>bread</u> is desirable because it is <u>necessary</u> to live (a value written in an intelligible heaven) and because bread <u>is</u> nourishing.[9]

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.[10] We see objects as possessing values in themselves and our only responsibility as responding to them properly. To obey is much easier than to question and create.

> But ontology and existential psychoanalysis (or the spontaneous and empirical application which men have always made of these disciplines) must reveal to the moral agent that he is <u>the being by whom values exist</u>. It is then that his 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. As soon as freedom discovers the quest for being and the appropriation of the in-itself [the quest toward being God] as <u>its own possibles</u>, it will apprehend by and in anguish that they are possibles only on the ground of the possibility of other possibles.[11]

Thus, through existential psychoanalysis, we see that it is <u>we</u>

who are responsible for the value we have placed on the goal of being God, and that this value is not determined apart from and for us. This value is only a possibility for us, and when we see it as a possibility, we must realize that we have other possibilities as well. Sartre explains that up to this point all choices were made in light of the value we placed on being God.[12] Then, through a series of questions, he indicates what new choice may be possible for us when we reject the spirit of seriousness.

> What will become of freedom if it turns its back upon this value? Will freedom carry this value along with it whatever it does and even in its very turning back upon the in-itself for-itself [God]? Will freedom be reapprehended from behind by the value which it wishes to contemplate? Or will freedom by the very fact that it apprehends itself as a freedom in relation to itself, be able to put an end to the reign of this value? In particular is it possible for freedom to take itself for a value as the source of all value, or must it necessarily be defined in relation to a transcendent value which haunts it? And in case it could will itself as its own possible and its determining value, what would this mean? A freedom which wills itself freedom is in fact a being-which-is-not-what-it-is and which-is-what-it-is-not, and which chooses as the ideal of being, being-what-it-is-not and not-being-what-it-is.[13]

What Sartre is here indicating is that it may be possible for us to choose freely not to value being God, but to choose to value

freedom itself instead. This does not mean, however, that the desire to be God can be overcome, since this desire is part of the human structure, but that we may be able to cease placing value on its goal, and value what it means to be human instead.

De Beauvoir's The Ethics of Ambiguity takes up the challenge of Sartre's "Ethical Implications." She recognizes the difficulty for what it is; we have no hope of surmounting our failure at being God.

> Man's passion is useless; he has no means of becoming the being that he is not. That . . . is true. And it is also true that in Being and Nothingness Sartre has insisted above all on the abortive aspect of the human adventure. It is only in the last pages that he opens up the perspective for an ethics. However, if we reflect upon his descriptions of existence, we perceive that they are far from condemning man without recourse.[14]

The title of de Beauvoir's book indicates what I believe to be her fundamental philosophical gift: her recognition of the essential ambiguity of the human condition and her willingness to try to live well within that.

> Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.[15]

So while Sartre emphasizes the abortive aspects of the human endeavor, de Beauvoir is more concerned to hold those in tension with what human beings can succeed at, and to show that the failure and the possible success are both integral aspects of the desire to be God that is the human structure.[16]

What is it that happens as consciousness strives toward union with being-in-itself? We do not succeed in becoming a fullness of being, but our very lack of being, our consciousness, brings being to light, discloses it, gives it meaning. Our distance from the world makes a "world"--a structure of meaning--possible.

> There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship "wanting to be" but rather "wanting to disclose being." Now, here there is not failure, but rather success. This end, which man proposes to himself by making himself lack of being, is, in effect, realized by him. By uprooting himself from the world, man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him.[17]

De Beauvoir uses the example of having an aesthetic experience of a landscape, wishing to contain the sky and the water, "that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone . . ."[18] But, of course, the wish cannot be fulfilled. Yet she notices her "delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession."[19] The experience is essentially ambiguous: "My contemplation is an

excruciation only because it is also a joy."[20] The possible joy in contemplation--in the capacity to give meaning--which comes from our distance from being, is as much a part of our move toward unity with being as is the failure to achieve that unity.

> This means that man, in his vain attempt to be God, makes himself exist as man, and if he is satisfied with this existence, he coincides exactly with himself. It is not granted him to exist without tending toward this being which he will never be. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves. His being is lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence.[21]

To exist as this lack of being is, as Sartre had said, to recognize our freedom as the basis of values.[22] There is no being, no God, outside of ourselves to whose judgment we can appeal to justify our passions. "But this does not mean that [human passion] can not justify itself, that it can not give itself reasons for being that it does not have."[23] And indeed, such a recognition of our capacity to shape our own meanings, our own "worlds," far from allowing complete license, forces us to feel "the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of ourselves . . ."[24]

Thus the radical conversion is not a change in the human structure of striving to be God, but is a change in what we choose to value in that structure. Rather than valuing the goal of being being (God), we may more authentically choose to value the

process of disclosing being. We may embrace the joy of that disclosure even with the pain of our remaining at a distance from being. And so, 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.

Now, we must ask more specifically what the implications of such a conversion are for our relationships with one another. In the light of our desire to be God, other human beings will, just as the landscape did, remind us of our limitations and our contingency.

> [Each individual] sees in every other man and particularly in those whose existence is asserted with most brilliance, a limit, a condemnation of himself. "Each consciousness," said Hegel, "seeks the death of the other." And indeed at every moment others are stealing the whole world away from me. The first movement is to hate them.[25]

De Beauvoir recognizes the inescapable element of conflict that arises in the context of our desire to be God. But once again, a recognition of our capacity to disclose being can mean that conflict is not the last word in human relationships.

> But this hatred is naive, and the desire immediately struggles against itself. If I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. . . . If he is reasonable, . . . man immediately

> understands that by taking the world away from me, others also give it to me, since a thing is given to me only by the movement which snatches it from me. To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations. . . . To make being "be" is to communicate with others by means of being.[26]

Thus, just as in an aesthetic experience like that of the landscape, there can be delight as well as pain in our contacts with one another. I have often felt such delight and pain in my contact with musicians. I wish that I could compose or perform as they do, that _my_ being were expressed in their work. But their existence neither expresses nor needs mine; they exist very well without me. And yet, in my distance from them, I can hear myself into their work, give their work a meaning for me. So, the work both reminds me of what I am not, _and_ at the same time makes it possible for me to give more meaning to my existence. For all the pain, I would not give up that joy.

My unwillingness to give up the joy suggests that there is some sense in which I do "need" music. De Beauvoir recognizes this sense and would add that the musicians also "need" me. She wants to go further, then, than arguing that positive human existence and positive human relationships are possible; in some sense, the latter are necessary to the former.[27] What is the nature of that necessity?

The argument de Beauvoir offers is found in her philosophical essay, Pyrrhus and Cinéas. We have seen that, although absolute justification for the existence of any human being is lacking, this does not mean that we can have no reasons or purposes for our existence, but only that these reasons or purposes are human creations which come into being after we do, and which are contingent and thus capable of being surpassed. The lack of absolute meaning does not mean that the search for meaning is futile, but rather that the search can never end. To seek for absolute justification is to be in bad faith, but to seek contingent justifications, as long as we are aware of them as contingent, is an authentic and courageous attempt to live a meaningful life in the absence of absolute meaning.

Since we cannot be necessitated in an absolute sense by a God, we seek justifications elsewhere. One of my sources is, of course, myself, as I freely value my projects. But I am constantly surpassing my own projects; what seems valuable to me at one moment may begin to lose its value the next. This is why I also seek justification outside of myself; since I cannot find it in God, my next best chance for justification is to seek it from other human beings.

> I need them, because once I have surpassed my own goals, my acts fall back on themselves inert, useless, if they are not carried away by new projects toward a new future.[28]

Left to myself, my projects soon die and lose their value but if they are picked up and used by others, they are capable of attain-

ing a more lasting value. It is other human beings who are capable of creating a need for my projects, and thus a lasting value for my existence. In this way, musicians and I "need" one another. The musicians are not fulfilling a need that existed before them; but once their music exists, it can become a need for me as I incorporate it into my own life projects, my own life meaning. And in turn, my projects give meaning and so justification to their music.

> It belongs to human freedom to hollow out the place of this new fullness that we cause to surge in the world; this place did not exist, neither have we made it; we have only made the object that filled it. Only the Other can create a need out of what we give him. Each appeal, each demand comes from his freedom; in order that the object which I have founded appear as a good, the Other must make it his good. Then I am justified in having created it. Only the freedom of the Other is capable of necessitating my being. My essential need, then, is to have free men surrounding me. My project will lose all meaning not when my death is announced, but when they announce the end of the world.[29]

I and the musicians exist through projecting ourselves into the world. In order for us to be justified, our projects must fulfill needs and these needs, these values placed on our work and thus on ourselves, come to us not only from ourselves but also from one another.

What may not be immediately obvious, however, is the most important point in de Beauvoir's argument, namely that "Only the freedom of the Other is capable of necessitating my being. My essential need, then, is to have free men surrounding me." Why is it essential that those who give value to my projects be free? The answer is certainly implicit in Sartrean ontology. There are no values except those which we create, and we do this only by a projection of our freedom. For Sartre and de Beauvoir, freedom is the foundation of all values. We must value our own freedom in order that the values our freedom creates through projects be authentic values, in order that they be meaningful to us as their source. The same applies to the freedom of others. We want our projects to be valued by others in order that our existence be given meaning and justification by them. But in order that the value given to our existence be meaningful to us, we must value the freedom which is the source of our justification. That is, we must value the freedom which values us.

If others are kept in a situation which stifles the expression of their freedom, there will be no certainty whether the alleged values they seem to see in our being are authentic or simply pretended, and thus no certainty whether our being is justified or not. It is not the pretended valuation that comes from a group coerced into giving it that can justify our being, but only the true valuation that is freely given by one's fellow human beings. Musicians, although they certainly want praise for their work, only truly value the good opinions of those people who they know

would have expressed poor opinions freely had the work deserved it. Our opportunity for justification comes from the value given our projects by others, and value can only stem from free choices. Thus, in order to promote our own justification, we must promote the freedom of others. Our existence can be continually justified as long as there are free human beings to do so, even then beyond our own death.

This need to promote the freedom of others entails that we attempt to actualize equality. My projects, and thus my existence, can take on value from others only if others can understand my projects and use them as points of departure for their own.

> The freedom of the Other can only do something for me if my own goals can serve in their turn as a point of departure; it is in utilizing the tool that I have made that the other prolongs it in existence; the learned person can only speak to men who are as knowledgeable as he; then he proposes his theory to them as the basis of new works. The Other can only accompany my transcendence if he is at the same point of the road as I. . . . I must then try to create for men situations in which they could accompany and surpass my transcendence; I need their freedom to be available to preserve me while surpassing me. I ask for health, knowledge, well-being, leisure for men so that their freedom is not consumed in fighting illness, ignorance, misery.[30]

In using the example of musicians earlier, we saw that they can receive true value for their work only from people who are free to

dislike the work as well as praise it. But, although this freedom from coercion is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient for musicians to receive justification; the justification can only be meaningful if it comes from those who have used their freedom to develop a knowledge of music. Thus, we must create for our fellow human beings situations which allow their freedom to develop.

There are dangers, of course, in our quest for justification. We may be so eager for justification that we ask to be valued by others for things that are not really our own projects, not really expressions of our freedom, and thus things for which we do not deserve to be valued.[31] De Beauvoir suggests as examples boasts of ancestors, fortune, or inherited physical advantages.[32] Or we may pretend that another's achievements are our own. "Under the balcony of Roxanne the handsome Christian borrows the voice of Cyrano, but in the end, it is Cyrano whom Roxanne loves."[33] To overcome this danger, we must want justification only for our _true_ being, only for those projects that genuinely express our freedom.[34]

But the other and more important danger is to refuse to recognize the contingency, the partialness, of these justifications, that is, to fall back into seeking absolute justification, into seeking to be God. A person who is admired for a poem s/he has written, for example, begins to believe that everything s/he does is necessary, even the way s/he eats and sleeps.[35] Or we may believe that since we have accomplished one thing which has been valued by others, we need seek to do nothing more.

If we continue to seek absolute justification, we will of course be disappointed when we realize that the others who confer justification on us are themselves contingent.

> As soon as the Other appears to me as limited, finite, the place which he created for me on earth is as contingent and vain as himself. "He needs me; but what need is there of him? How can this unjustifiable existence justify me?"[36]

The answer, of course, is that the Other cannot justify me, but only if I am seeking <u>absolute</u> or complete justification. But if I can resign myself to not being God, "to never being saved completely,"[37] I will want the partial justifications offered by others rather than only the constantly surpassed justifications I can offer myself, and allow others the freedom which makes these justifications possible.

The power of this argument lies in de Beauvoir's assumption that the search for justification is a universal one. For her, as for many others, it is simply a fact of being human that we seek purpose or justification for our existence. And, since for her, there is no God outside of us to whom we can turn for justification, we naturally turn to our fellow human beings, who, in order to provide justification, must be free. The argument is recapitulated by de Beauvoir in her later work, <u>The Ethics of Ambiguity</u>:

> Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men. Now, he needs such a

> justification; there is no escaping it. Moral anxiety does not come to man from without; he finds within himself the anxious question, "What's the use?" Or to put it better, he himself is this urgent interrogation.[38]

Our very being, then, is a drive toward justification. And since our justification needs the freedom of others, their freedom becomes a fundamental and inescapable issue for us.

As Thomas Anderson notes, the conclusion of de Beauvoir's argument is a "complete <u>interdependence</u>" among human beings.[39] I think it is crucial to note that, though it is an interdependence difficultly won and sustained, its possibilities are enormously rich. For in promoting freedom, we do not promote a community of sameness but of difference. The differences are risky; they can lead to brokenness and conflict. But they also offer the possibility of a dialogue leading to mutual enhancement. For de Beauvoir, the risk is well worth taking.

Part II: An Application of Positive Human Relations

The work of Sartre and de Beauvoir was not limited to a theoretical exposition of their existentialist principles. Particularly as regards the possibility of positive human relationships, each attempted to promote them, to work for the equality which de Beauvoir argued is so necessary to the justification of human life. They did this through writing, but also in social action. Each was concerned with the eventual <u>human</u> liberation brought about through a modified Marxism, but before this occurs,

they directed their attention to areas of particular oppression, for example, Sartre's concern for Jews and de Beauvoir's for women. Perhaps one of their best known attempts to promote liberation was their support of the Algerians against France.

In this section, one application in particular will be briefly examined. I have chosen to use de Beauvoir's application to women for several reasons. First, it remained an area of consistent concern for de Beauvoir, and she grew more and more involved in working with other women against sexism. Secondly, due in part to her work, the liberation of women has become a prime area of concern in the world at large. And thirdly, and most importantly, _The Second Sex_, published in 1949, is the best systematic development of an application of Sartre and de Beauvoir's philosophical ideas on human relationships.

To anyone familiar with Sartrean existentialism, certain implicit assumptions regarding women will be obvious even before one turns specifically to _The Second Sex_. The first is that human conflict cannot originally be based on a "battle of the sexes" since some element of conflict is involved in every human relationship, because of the fact that human beings are separate individuals with different projects. If, despite their separateness, some people are capable of working together in harmony, this possibility will also hold for men and women. Secondly, since human freedom is interdependent, the liberation of women is necessary for the true freedom of men. And thirdly, what is most basic

to existentialism is the tenet that human beings, by reason of their being as consciousness through which they are capable of transcending their situation, are free. Women, as men, exist in and through situations, and part of the constant situation of both men and women is their biological nature. 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.

Let us turn to The Second Sex in looking more closely at this last conclusion. If the character of woman is not wholly defined by her biological nature, (if anatomy is not destiny), how does one account for all of the characteristics which women have shared through time? De Beauvoir does admit that women have shared many characteristics, including many undesirable ones. Her answer is that it has been the situation of woman that has created these common characteristics, not just her biological situation but the historical situation in which she has not been allowed the opportunity to freely develop her possibilities and attain all of her choices.

> We can now understand why there should be so many common features in the indictments drawn up against woman, from the Greeks to our times. Her condition has remained the same through superficial changes, and it is this condition that determined what is called the "character" of woman: she "revels in immanence," she is contrary, she is prudent

> and petty, she has no sense of fact or accuracy, she lacks morality, she is contemptibly utilitarian, she is false, theatrical, self-seeking and so on. There is an element of truth in all this. But we must only note that the varieties of behavior reported are not dictated to woman by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of the female brain: they are shaped as in a mold by her situation.[40]

The basic attitude toward woman, as de Beauvoir sees it, is to see in woman the Other, the object. Sartre's description of otherness was, of course, of a reciprocal relation; I objectify the Other but he can in his turn see himself as subject and objectify me. But women have not been encouraged to develop consciousness of themselves as subjects and so the subject-object relation goes only in one direction.

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the absolute--she is the Other.[41]

What has happened regarding the characteristics of woman is that a cause and effect relationship has been reversed. It has been assumed that her undesirable characteristics were the mark of a deterministic inferior nature, the effects of an originally

inferior human structure peculiar to the female, and that her inferior status was the logical consequence of her structure. Rather it is the other way around. Her inferior status is not the consequence but the cause of her inferior characteristics. Woman does not <u>have</u> an inferior nature, but she has <u>developed</u> one. She is involved in a vicious circle.

> This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he <u>is</u> inferior. But the significance of the verb <u>to be</u> must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of "to have become." Yes, women on the whole <u>are</u> today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?[42]

De Beauvoir's explanation brings out well the difference between two understandings of freedom--a difference crucial to understanding existentialist thought: freedom of choice and freedom of attainment. For her, woman <u>are</u> and always have been free by nature, but they have been allowed little use of their freedom within their situation. The result is that they have created themselves to be inferior human beings seeking to redeem themselves indirectly through men, as she describes in her chapter on "The Woman in Love."[43]

> Shut up in the sphere of the relative, destined to the male from childhood, habituated to seeing in him a superb being whom she cannot possibly equal, the woman who has not repressed her claim to humanity will dream of transcending her being toward one of those superior beings, of amalgamating herself with the sovereign subject.[44]

To the extent that women accept their situation, they are in bad faith as are those men who encourage women to do so.

What could help promote the freedom of women is the realization that <u>both</u> men and women suffer from women's inferior position. Women's suffering is obvious--their whole being is stifled. But everyone suffers with the unknown loss to the human community of women's free projects.

Thus, allowing women the opportunity to project themselves freely into the world does not take away anything from men except the illusion of being necessary beings (to women), and the constant frustration of trying to live up to that impossible image. And the freedom of women may add considerably to the situation in which both men and women must live.

> To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him <u>also</u>; mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an <u>other</u>. The reciprocity of their relations will not do

> away with the miracles--desire, possession, love, dream, adventure--worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories; and the words that move us--giving, conquering, uniting--will not lose their meaning. On the contrary, 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.[45]

Written in the late 1940s, The Second Sex is a remarkable book partly because it was not written at a time when feminism was a widespread and respected movement. The book was written in virtual isolation, with the courage to take an unpopular stand, a stand which unleashed a flood of criticism upon herself but also offered hope to countless women. As Alice Schwarzer describes it,

> In the darkness of the Fifties and Sixties, before the new women's movement dawned, The Second Sex was like a secret code that we emerging women used to send messages to each other. And Simone de Beauvoir herself, her life and her work, was--and is--a symbol; a symbol of the possibility, despite everything, of living one's life the way one wants to, for oneself, free from conventions and prejudices, even as a woman.[46]

But, the other side of the courage and inspiration of de Beauvoir's isolated stand on women is that, as Mary Lowenthal Felstiner notes,

> . . . I think her book lacks the trust that it will land among open-minded women responsible for other parts of the same cause. Instead, The Second Sex bears the marks of isolation and defensiveness--an object lesson for women writers without a women's community. It hammers up superstructures to hang details on, and amasses details as if to cover possible cracks. The length and difficulty of the book show her at her task: to make a case covering all denials, all disclaimers; otherwise some reader might refuse to believe that women suffer subordination.[47]

Ironically, the author of the book which did so much to ground a renewed feminist movement would not at the time of the book's writing and for some time after call herself a "feminist." But eventually that changed, and de Beauvoir herself describes the change in a film about her life as one that arose out of dialogue. "[I] became a feminist, above all, after the book had existed for other women."[48] Just as she had earlier argued, she needed other women to give meaning and lasting value to her project.

What moved de Beauvoir into dialogue and community with feminists was the fact that the world, and particularly France, was not making great strides toward women's equality, and her increasing realization that socialism was not concretely working out a vision of the equality of women and men, and that some socialists were even opposed to it.[49]

> In my definition, feminists are women--or even men too--who are fighting to change women's condition, in association

> with the class struggle, but independently of it as well, without making the changes they strive for totally dependent on changing society as a whole. I would say that, in that sense, I am a feminist today, because I realised that we must fight for the situation of women, here and now, before our dreams of socialism come true. Apart from that, I realised that even in socialist countries, equality between men and women has not been achieved. Therefore it is absolutely essential for women to take their destiny into their own hands. That is why I have now joined the Women's Liberation Movement.[50]

I have often wondered how people who are involved in the struggle for liberation of particular groups resolve the tension between their work for one particular group and another, and between working against oppressors and yet holding a hope for eventual liberation for everyone. De Beauvoir is beginning to help me question whether a "resolution" of such tensions is possible or even desirable. From what we have already seen of her work, we know that she sees human freedom as interdependent. For any of us to be truly free, we all must be free. And in the passage above, true to her concern for the whole of the human community, she has given up neither on men nor on socialists, though it is clear to her that both groups oppress women. Yet she also does not let her interest in these groups stop her from taking the concrete steps she can take with other women to battle oppression. Rather

than "resolve" the tension, it seems to me that de Beauvoir is here expressing a choice to live within it, and that such a choice, such a lived dialogue, may be the best way to maintain faithfulness both with the oppressed and with a vision of liberation for all. And perhaps a choice to remain within the tension is also the best way to live faithfully an "ethics of ambiguity."

Conclusion

I first started to read Simone de Beauvoir about thirteen years ago. In those first readings, I found her analysis of the essential ambiguity of the human situation compelling, and particularly her insight that joy is possible even in the midst of conflict. Thus it seemed to me that de Beauvoir substantially modified the Sartrean vision, making it truer to my human experience, and yet without losing Sartre's insights as well.

Only in the last couple of years have I come to appreciate more fully the courage of de Beauvoir's insight into the possibility and the reality of joy. Fidelity to the suffering in the human condition had felt more crucial to me, more noble perhaps, than fidelity to joy. I do think we must live within the tension of both, but I have begun to experience that fidelity to joy may sometimes call for the greater courage. And I am grateful to de Beauvoir for pointing the way to me.

I think her fidelity to joy is what made de Beauvoir move beyond the dominating and broken relationships of Sartre's

description into a vision of relationships characterized by equality and dialogue. 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 "unity" that is more complex and richer in meaning, a "community" in which each of our finite projects can enhance and be enhanced by others.

That de Beauvoir could see and work for such a vision, with the experience of joy that must have underlay it, without any sense that such vision and joy have any ultimate grounding, is all the more remarkable. And yet I find this problematic. If the human experience is essentially an experience of ambiguity, why did de Beauvoir not consider that the world too might be fundamentally ambiguous rather than absurd? And isn't it possible that the world too, and not just certain individuals within it, can best be understood in communal terms? Just as it was hard for de Beauvoir to come to trust a community of women who would sustain and continue and enhance her work, so was it hard for her to trust the world itself. I think that Sartre's description of the world as divided between consciousness and being-in-itself which de Beauvoir accepted, suffers from a fundamental dualism which stems from a distrust of being, a distrust of the world in which we live. It is difficult to explain why and how the world came to feel trustworthy to me; ambiguous human beings and an ambiguous world offer no guarantees. But it is a world in which

community and joy are possible. And trust in others and in the world makes it easier for me to give up pretensions to being God.

NOTES

[1]Margaret A. Simons and Jessica Benjamin, "Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview," trans. Véronique Zaytzeff, Feminist Studies V (Summer 1979), 338.

[2]Bernard Loomer, "S-I-Z-E Is the Measure," in Religious Experience and Process Theology, ed. Harry James Cargas and Bernard Lee (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 70.

[3]Simons and Benjamin, 338.

[4]Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969, c1953), p. 555.

[5]Ibid., P. 534, in footnote 13.

[6]Ibid., p. 797.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid., p. 796.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 797.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., pp. 797-98.

[14]Simone de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1972, c1948), p. 11.

[15]Ibid., p. 9.

[16]I developed a briefer version of this argument previously in "Pain and Joy in Human Relationships: Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone

de Beauvoir," Philosophy Today XXIII (Winter 1979), 338-46.

[17]Simone de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 12.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[22]Ibid., p. 15.

[23]Ibid., p. 12.

[24]Ibid., p. 16.

[25]Ibid., p. 70.

[26]Ibid., p. 71.

[27]I am grateful to Professor Thomas C. Anderson for his help in pointing out the importance of this argument. See his own development of it in The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), pp. 86-90.

[28]Simone de Beauvoir, Pyrrhus et Cinéas (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1949, c1944), p. 110. The English translation was done by Jane Weinstein and myself.

[29]Ibid., pp. 95-96.

[30]Ibid., pp. 114, 115.

[31]Ibid., p. 97.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., p. 98.

[36]Ibid., p. 99.

[37]Ibid., p. 98.

[38]De Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 72.

[39]Anderson, p. 86.

[40]Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974, c1952), pp. 663-64.

[41]Ibid., pp. xviii, xix.

[42]Ibid., p. xxviii.

[43]Ibid., pp. 712-743.

[44]Ibid., p. 713.

[45]Ibid., pp. 813-14.

[46]Alice Schwarzer, After "The Second Sex": Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, trans. Marianne Howarth (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 13.

[47]Mary Lowenthal Felstiner,"Seeing The Second Sex Through the Second Wave," Feminist Studies VI (Summer 1980), p. 250.

[48]Simone de Beauvoir, Simone de Beauvoir, a film by Josée Dayan and Malka Ribowska, as quoted in Simons and Benjamin, 332.

[49]Schwarzer, pp. 29-33.

[50]Ibid., p. 32.