Simone de Beauvoir's Ambiguously Marxist Critique of Consequentialism

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Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* presents itself as a work of synthesis, intended to refine existentialist doctrine to be more compatible with ethics generally and Marxist revolutionary politics specifically. In her attempt to develop a distinctly existentialist-Marxist ethics, Beauvoir also seeks to bridge the divide between deontological and consequentialist frameworks, a synthesis of seemingly incompatible ethical approaches rooted in the need for a more complete acknowledgement of the ambiguity of our human condition as embodied consciousness.

In her 1963 memoir, written sixteen years after its publication, Beauvoir admits that of all her books, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* "is the one that most irritates me today," criticizing it and her other writings of the period for their idealism.[1] This suggests she saw the book's attempted synthesis of existentialist and Marxist, deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics as a failure. I'd like to suggest, instead, that the work is successful precisely to the degree it fails as a synthesis, moving definitely away from her earlier views toward a form of historical materialism no longer tied to a *distinctly* existentialist view of freedom. To use her own language, Beauvoir surpasses (*dépasser*) existentialism, surpassing both deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics in the process. In doing so, she takes steps toward a novel, distinctly historical materialist ethics, one that may be compatible with an existentialist view of freedom but no longer depends on it.

The Ethics of Ambiguity consequently makes two important contributions to ethical and political thought. First, it expands the potential appeal of the *existential* (rather than existential*ist*) philosophical tradition to those adherents of the Marxist and socialist traditions who may be wary of narrower existentialist doctrines of freedom and responsibility. Second, it challenges the Marxist tendency to either substitute politics for ethics or simply redirect consequentialist ethics toward a socialist redefinition of objective happiness, pointing the way toward a distinctly Marxist ethics uniquely suited to Marx's rejection of moralism and prioritization of the economic and political over the moral, while drawing on the spirit of existential thought to better acknowledge the deep and real ambiguity of the relationships between freedom and necessity, individual and collective action, and ethics and politics. This interpretation is also more in keeping with the book's title *Pour une moral de l'ambiguïté*, suggesting that the book is one of transition, working *toward* an ethical theory rather than offering a completed one.

I. Between Moderate Idealist and Historical Materialist Views of Freedom

What are the poles of the book's failed synthesis and successful surpassing? There is, of course, a great deal of reasonable disagreement over Beauvoir's precise early and late views, so I'll just roughly sketch two extremes she moves between, without deciding *exactly* how far she moves in her later view. In early theoretical works like 1944's *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she is closer to a position she will later criticize as idealism. On this view, human embodiment preserves aspects of Cartesian dualism, because the mind is causally distinct from the body. It is spontaneous and self-determining in its *activity as consciousness*, though often unfree in its ability realize its intentions in specific ends of forms of concrete activity in the world. As she emphasizes in a 1945 essay:

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[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964, pp 67-68. Hereafter *FCE*.

> No end can be inscribed in reality […] it requires the spontaneity of a consciousness that, surpassing [*dépassant*] the given, throws itself [*se jette*] toward the future. No historical tradition, no geographical structure, no economic fact can impose a course [*ligne*] of action. […] Whatever the given situation, it never necessarily implies one future or another since man's reaction to his situation is free.[2]

All of her work of this period carefully retains this idealist idea that our consciousness is fundamentally free in its reaction or response to our material situation: "but [in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*] I was also drawn towards Sartre's theory that whatever the circumstances, we have a liberty of action that enables us to surmount them."[3] However, at the same time she is moving away from the stronger idealism of Sartre's early theory of freedom by acknowledging that our material situation can dramatically restrict our ability to realize that freedom in concrete action:

> So I distinguished two separate aspects of liberty: Liberty is the very modal essence of existence. […] On the other hand, actual concrete possibilities vary from one person to the next. Some can attain to only a small part of those opportunities that are available to man kind at large. […] Their transcendency is lost in the general mass of humanity, and takes on the appearance of immanence. (*PL* 549)

Note that this pole is still perfectly compatible with the view that we are fundamentally embodied and that the body may have a causal impact on the mind—it only insists that acts of consciousness aren't *reducible* to or *necessitated* by material events. Her position, though more moderate than Sartre's, remains idealist because, as she emphasizes, even the most drastic restriction of concrete possibilities produces only the *appearance* of immanence. Only five years later in *The Second Sex*, this distinction between real and apparent immanence seems to disappear, suggesting the possibility that our material situation can become so oppressive as to make *any* form of transcendence impossible: "Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into 'in-itself' […] if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression."[4]

The opposite pole toward which Beauvoir's view of freedom moves in her later work is that of historical materialism. I intend this category quite broadly: it need not be limited to explicitly Marxist, much less dialectical, conceptions. By historical materialism I will mean, first, that the primary causes of history are found in material and political rather than ideological and moral events. Second, historical materialism recognizes that human nature is itself deeply historical and variable because our material activity continually transforms our powers, needs, and desires, transforming our very nature. This implies that we are to some degree a *product of* history, not pure spontaneity, but also that we have a degree of freedom *from* history, since we can, over time, *become* causally independent of material causes that *formerly* shaped our thinking and values.

Note that this pole is still perfectly compatible with the existentialist view that we transcend or surpass the given; however, against the idealist pole, we do so relatively, not absolutely. Our acts of consciousness, our reactions to and evaluations of our material circumstances, are not directly determined by our immediate situation. But they are not truly spontaneous; they have a history in antecedent material causes that shaped our needs, values, worldviews, and characters. If we're material

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[2] Simone de Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" (1945), in *Philosophical Writings*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp. 179-180. Hereafter *PW*.
[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1962, p. 549.
[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York, Vintage Books, 2011, p. 16.

all the way down, then we're historical all the way down, too. Historical materialism retains space for a more modest conception of human freedom compatible with historical necessity, perhaps even with determinism, but a more nuanced version than the vulgar, mechanistic variety that Beauvoir usually condemns.[5]

II. Deontological Aspects of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Beauvoir's ambivalence between the poles of idealism and historical materialism is reflected in her ambivalence between deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics. Her attempt to synthesize the two traditions reflects her desire for an impossible synthesis of earlier, idealist versions of existentialism with historical materialism, so she succeeds to the degree that she gives up that impossible attempt. I will suggest that's exactly what *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, considered as a whole, ultimately does. It initially entertains a revision of deontological ethics only to leave it entirely behind for an internal critique of consequentialism that produces a novel, distinctively historical materialist ethics.

Beauvoir sometimes seems to ground the ethics of ambiguity in a deontological categorical imperative. She declares the individual "a unique and irreducible value" and identifies freedom as "the supreme end at which man must aim," concluding that all other goods, including the consequentialist's criterion of happiness are "subordinated to this absolute condition of realization."[6] However, she rejects Kant's identification of freedom with a will determined by reason against inclination, arguing instead that we pursue freedom consistently only by "refusing to set up as absolute the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself" (*EA* 14). This might lead us to conclude that Beauvoir's ethics is a modest revision of deontology where an existentialist criterion of good faith replaces Kant's notion of good will. Indeed, considering that Beauvoir devotes the entirety of section II, "Personal Freedom and Others" to a bestiary of representative characters fleeing moral ambiguity—the serious man, the subman, the adventurer, and so on—the reader might reasonably suspect that Beauvoir's ethics is merely an ethics of good faith, deontologically equating ethical actions those that proceed from the right form of will.

But Beauvoir instead moves decisively away from deontology's focus on the free activity of consciousness and instead focuses on the consequences of our decisions for individuals' concrete freedom of action. "To will freedom," she says, is "to will to disclose beings," but following Heidegger's example, from whom she borrows that language (*erschliessen*), disclosure is not an abstract but concrete form of knowledge, aiming at "the opening of ever new possibilities for man" (*EA* 78-79). Moreover, the primary obstacle to this activity is not found in unfreedom of the mind but in material oppression: "transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back on itself" not, as in Kant, from heteronomy of the will and not, as we might expect from an existentialist ethics, out of bad faith, but "because it is cut off from its goals"—consciousness's act of transcending the given is thwarted from truly realizing itself in the form of material action (*EA* 81). So although, like Kant, she prioritizes

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[5] I will suggest that Beauvoir only moves *toward* this view, not wholeheartedly adopts it. Kate Kirkpatrick has helpfully distinguished three distinct ways we might interpret Beauvoir's view of freedom: freedom over my attitude toward my circumstances, freedom in apprehending and modifying the real, and freedom to choose my reactions despite limitations to my ability to realize my will in action (2023, 4). However, all three still commit Beauvoir to the moderate idealist doctrine of the spontaneity of consciousness, an "inalienable metaphysical freedom" over my attitudes, ways of apprehending, and reactions to my situations. As I explain further in section VI., I believe that by the 1950s and 60s, Beauvoir is no longer committed to *any metaphysical* conception of freedom, even if she is unwilling to explicitly embrace a determinist form of materialism.

[6] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York, Carol Publishing Group, 1996, p. 113. Hereafter *EA*.

freedom over happiness, unlike Kant, she defines freedom not abstractly as a freely determined will but as the concrete realization of that freely determined will in the form of particular actions that realize particular concrete ends.[7]

In other words, Beauvoir identifies some sympathies with deontology only to better underline the differences. It's true that we can, in the form of bad faith, fail to assume our freedom or even actively flee it. Our freedom does depend to a significant degree on a correct kind of decision-making or state of will and so on the free activity of consciousness. However, our freedom also requires the realization of consciousness in the material world, which in turn ultimately depends upon *others*: "my freedom, in order to fulfill itself [*s'accomplir*], requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up [*constituent*] the world of tomorrow, define my future" (*EA* 82).[8]

In short, against the idealist pole toward which early existentialism tends, our freedom to *concretely* act on our freely chosen projects takes ethical priority over whether our act of choosing those projects was entirely free. Ethics' primary demand is not to be authentic and avoid bad faith. Its primary demand is that we work to free people materially and politically, putting them in a material position where their authenticity can be truly realized: "the struggle is not one of words and ideologies; it is real and concrete" (*EA* 84).

III. Consequentialist Aspects of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

One virtue of Beauvoir's ethical contribution to the historical materialist tradition is that she refuses the lazy solution so many Marxists take: simply rejecting deontology for the wholesale embrace of consequentialism. Where then does this leave her ethics situated in relation to consequentialism? Like the consequentialist, she places our ethical focus on the consequences of our actions for others. However, she refuses to evaluate outcomes using the consequentialist standard of happiness for the same reason she rejects any substantive content for a categorical imperative toward freedom: "it is one of the lies of the serious mind to attempt to give the word 'useful' an absolute meaning; nothing is useful if it is not useful to man; nothing is useful to man if the latter is not in a position to define his own ends and values, if he is not free" (*EA* 95). Utility must be defined in relation to an end, but "it is desire that creates the desirable and the project that sets up the end" (*EA* 15). Our freedom is precisely the freedom to choose the projects that will, in turn, determine our ends. So we cannot, as the Kantian does, act for freedom by abstracting from the very inclinations and desires that motivate those projects.[9] But neither can we act on behalf of ends that we assume others ought to pursue, such as the consequentialist's criteria of happiness, wellbeing, or the increase of pleasure over suffering—

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[7] Notice that this is a different emphasis than her objection to Kantian ethics in the earlier 1944 essay *Pyrrhus and Cineus*. There she suggests the primary error of Kantian ethics is that it overlooks our constitutive individuality: "The respect for the human person in general cannot suffice to guide us because we are dealing with separate and opposed individuals" (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *PW* 127). The principal "ambiguity" of ethics, on that view, is rooted in the opposition between individuals' freely chosen projects or ends. Here, however, the more primary ambiguity is the tension between my freely chosen ends and my actions, between my nature as a consciousness and as a body that has meaning, identity, and reality only insofar as I realize those ends materially, which in turn grounds the secondary tensions among individuals' actions.

[8] Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté,* Gallimard 1969, p. 116. Hereafter *PMA*.

[9] As Sonia Kruks emphasizes, Beauvoir's rejection of the Kantian and Rawlsian demand to determine ends independent of inclination is rooted in her commitment to assuming the ambiguity of human embodiment: "What all these accounts presume is that a definitive boundary exists between mind and body" (2012, 127). Contrasting Arendt's demand that political judgment must be liberated from "subjective private conditions" and individual "idiosyncrasies" (1977, 220) , Kruks points out that for Beauvoir individual facticities are not flaws but "constitutive of the very personhood without which we simply would not be able to engage in judgment at all" (130).

or, for that matter, Marxist criteria such as the satisfaction of need, the emancipation of labor, or the development of human powers.

This leads Beauvoir to a seemingly impossible ethical imperative: we must take others' good "as an absolute end of our action"; but "we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*" (*EA* 142). But how can I act for another's good without knowing what that good is? Beauvoir answers that we must "treat the other as a freedom *so that his end may be* freedom." In short, our goal is to make people free to act upon particular ends that serve their freely chosen projects, while at the same time being careful to leave them free to surpass those ends and projects with new ones.

This may seem, at first, a small adjustment to consequentialism: rather than act for others on one *particular* conception of the good, instead we should define their good more broadly to make it compatible with many different freely chosen narrower conceptions of the good life. We act for others' good, then, by increasing the situational opportunities which they can use toward their own freely chosen conception of the good, increasing their power to realize those possibilities in concrete action, and preserving their continued ability to choose new ones. However, as we'll see, this seemingly modest adjustment implies a serious internal critique of consequentialism, exposing its deeper continuities with idealist and deontological approaches to ethics.

IV. Ontological Ethical Ambiguity: Beyond Consequentialism

Consider Beauvoir's ethical response to two contrasting cases of attempted suicide. The first case is one in which we rightly decide to act against someone's immediate freedom for the sake of their greater overall freedom:

> Out of disappointment in love a young girl takes an overdose of phenol-barbital; in the morning friends find her dying, they call a doctor, she is saved; later on [*par la suite*] she becomes a happy mother of a family; her friends were right in considering her suicide as a hasty and heedless [*précipité et étourdi*] act and in putting her into a position to reject it or return to it freely." (*EA* 142, *PMA* 199)

Notice that the girl's friends have taken into account not only the decision's rashness, a sign that her choice was less than truly free, but also its motivation in disappointed love—in other words, despair over precisely her freely chosen projects of motherhood and family that she turned against her own freedom.

To this she contrasts the case of melancholic patients in asylums "who have tried to commit suicide twenty times, who devote [*consacrent*] their freedom to seeking the means of escaping their jailers and of putting an end to their intolerable anguish; the doctor who gives them a friendly pat on the shoulder is their tyrant and their torturer" (*EA* 142-143, *PMA* 199). In this scenario, if the doctor believes the patients can overcome their situation, they should offer direct, substantial support rather than casual encouragement. They might find new forms of treatment or even help the patient be released from the asylum. But the failure here isn't simply insufficient solicitude. It's the doctor's utter indifference to the patients' freedom, which they have concretely demonstrated by their repeated attempts, their "devotion" to escaping either the asylum or their lives.

Beauvoir's analysis may seem close to the consequentialist one. We might think the friends' action is justified because they correctly predicted, on the basis of reasonable assessment of all of the available evidence, that saving the girl's life would ultimately promote her freely chosen projects. They temporarily violated her freedom in relation to a hasty decision, but preserved her ability to reconsider the choice more fully and freely. So, their action is morally justified by their decision-making process as a *reasonable prediction* of moral *consequences* (though for another's freedom rather than, as for the

traditional consequentialist, their happiness or welfare). In contrast, the doctor's decision-making process either completely disregards the action's moral consequences, treating life as an unconditioned good and suicide as an unconditioned evil, or it predicts those consequences without sufficient examination of the evidence, which clearly indicates the patients will continue in their attempts and cannot be helped by causal encouragement.

So, on a consequentialist reading of the two cases, the decision is ethical or unethical based on a *reasonable*, evidence-based *prediction* of whether our action will promote their ends as freely chosen. Provided the decision-making process is sound and the prediction is reasonable, the act will be ethical regardless of whether the prediction proves true. Had the young girl's friends been wrong and she had not gone on to a happy life, their action would still be ethical. And had the doctor *not* been wrong, and the patients recovered fully after their twentieth attempt, their action would still be *un*ethical.

However, Beauvoir's analysis departs from this in a startling way that has provoked surprisingly little commentary. She tells us, "No behavior is ever authorized to begin with (142). The phrasing of the original French is more forceful, suggesting that not just the action, but *we ourselves*, have no ethical status until the consequences have been realized: "*nous ne sommes jamais autorisés d'abord*" (*PMA* 198). That the woman's friends carefully took into account the hastiness of the decision or its origins in despair over her own freely chosen project of family life may make the *decision justified*, but it does not make the *action ethical*. On the contrary, the action *becomes* ethical only *after the fact*, when, "later on [*par la suite*] she becomes a happy mother of a family" (*EA* 142, *PMA* 199).

The surprising implication is that if the girl had *not* gone on to lead a happy life, then the very same action, decided in the very same way, would have instead proven *unethical*. The ethical status of our actions depends on their real rather than intended consequences. Because the ethics of ambiguity includes the ambiguity of both mental and material aspects of our nature, our freedom, and our actions, it is an ethics primarily governing our *realized projects*, not just our *projections*.

Note that this isn't just a semantic difference about cases where we reasonably predict an action will promote someone's freedom but the prediction fails. The point is not merely that traditional consequentialist calls both the decision and the action ethical, while Beauvoir allows that the decision can be justified while the action remains unethical. Rather, the point is that a justified decision that led to the unethical action also ceases, in an important sense, to be justified: we are *no longer released from responsibility* for the decision. Beauvoir's distinction between the ethical status of the decision-making process and the ethical status of action suggests that we remain morally obligated toward others in relation to specific actions in the past, even when we decided that action in the best, most morally responsible way possible. On both deontological and consequentialist approaches, responsible decision-making absolves us of responsibility. But on Beauvoir's view, each present decision creates a new, future responsibility: the responsibility to ensure that we make our reasonably-*predicted* consequences *become true*.

V. Toward an Existential-Materialist Ethics

Notice this also means, against the consequentialist view, that ethics is ontologically, not just epistemically, ambiguous. The problem is not uncertainty in our prediction of the consequences our actions for another's realization of their freedom. It's not that we don't *know whether* the action is ethical until its consequences have been realized. Rather, the realized consequences *make* it ethical: the action has no ethical status apart from its real impact on the young woman's concrete possibilities for realizing her freely chosen projects. It is only *to the degree* that the young woman *successfully* realizes her freely chosen projects (in this case, marriage and family) that her friends' action *becomes* justified.

Recall Beauvoir's insistence that it is "desire which creates the desirable, and the project that sets up the end" (*EA* 15). Recall, too, that Beauvoir places the focus of ethics not on the freedom of

consciousness, our ability to spontaneously choose our projects, but on our ability to realize those projects in action. This reflects Beauvoir's more decisive shift toward a materialist understanding of human freedom, a position highlighted by her much-discussed 1960 account of an earlier disagreement in 1940 with Sartre about the limits of freedom. Against Sartre's suggestion that a woman in a harem remains free because "even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several quite different ways" (434), Beauvoir insists freedom requires an "*active* transcendence of some given context" in contrast to a passive, stoic resignation.

The question isn't simply one of activity versus passivity, but whether one's available actions will in fact realize one's projects. It's not enough that we can live in different ways, transcending this or that particular fact. Our situation must allow for us to choose and realize projects that will substantially alter that very situation. Can we act to *surpass* our situation rather than merely choose different actions *within* it? To be free, the oppressed don't merely need live possibilities for just any action, but for actions that will overcome precisely the oppressive structure of their situation.[10]

So, regardless of whether or not Beauvoir remains committed to modest idealism—the view that the activity of consciousness is spontaneous—her move toward materialism is a move toward prioritizing the material realization our freely chosen projects. However free consciousness may or may not be in its own activity, transcendence is fully realized only in practice, and only to the degree we realize the *larger overarching* projects that give our particular ends and activities meaning, rather than just individual isolated actions divorced from those projects.

The Ethics of Ambiguity is clearly moving closer to Beauvoir's later more materialist views about freedom, in which even moderate idealism becomes suspect. Perhaps the strongest expression of her late view is found in her 1955 polemical essay, "Right-Wing Thought Today," where she decries the bourgeois thinkers for whom "material factors have only a secondary role" and who mistakenly believe "thought transcends those contingencies" and "a man's material reality and situation count for nothing; only his subjective reactions matter" (*PW* 122-23). In her 1963 reflections on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she pointedly objects to the way it prioritizes mind over body, saying "the attitudes I examine are explained by objective conditions" (*FCE* 67). In other words, its emphasis on the ways consciousness may react to our ambiguous condition, taking flight into the life of the serious man, the subman, and so on, underestimates the degree to which those reactions are not entirely free and spontaneous, but themselves rooted in past material situations.

However, while this criticism certainly applies to the first sections of the book, its third and longest section "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity," in which she most fully develops the details of her ethics, has more in common with her later position. In fact, Beauvoir seems to suggest that her ethical writings in the 1940s fail to accurate capture the views she held *at the time*: "What I find hard to understand is the idealism that blemishes these essays. In reality, men defined themselves for me by

[10] Kirkpatrick is surely correct that "Beauvoir's point in the not-every-situation passage is not a rejection of the conception of freedom-as-transcendence, but rather […] a denunciation of their 'idealist' morality" (2023, 7). But the question is precisely what is to count as "transcendence"—in particularly, what is to count as an *idealist* understanding of transcendence. She rightly denies that Sartre takes a *strong idealist* view that freedom is "absolute" and "does not admit of degrees" (5). But the crucial question is whether Beauvoir is calling into question *even the moderate idealist* view that *only material action*, not the activity of *consciousness*, is subject to such degrees. As I've interpreted the dispute, Beauvoir is moving toward the view that transcendence should not be primarily identified with the activity consciousness (interpretation, attitude, and reaction), but with the material realization of our projects.)ur degree of freedom of consciousness is *inseparable* from our degree of material freedom in such a way that to be less free in action is to be *less free as such*, as consciousness—to have only *imaginary*, not real, "transcendence."

their bodies, their needs, their work; I set no form, no value above the individual of flesh and blood" (*FCE* 68).[11]

This move toward a more materialist view of human nature and freedom, according to which acts of consciousness are continuous with and only fully realized in the concrete accomplishment of our projects, is the basis for Beauvoir's first decisive break from consequentialism. If material reality is the only reality, then the freedom of consciousness, our criterion of the ethical, is realized only in the real consequences of an action. But like deontology, consequentialism evaluates actions not in their material reality but in their *relation to intentionality*, evaluating moral agents and their decision-making process rather than their actions. To ground ethics in the evaluation of *intended* consequences is still to ground ethics primarily in intention rather than consequences. And so Beauvoir's critique of consequentialism is an internal one: consequentialism fails its own criterion of grounding ethical evaluation in the reality of our actions rather than merely our intentions. Consequentialism remains deontological: a duty to intend good consequences.

We've already encountered one surprising outcome of this critique: even if we act against someone's freedom in the reasonable, well-considered, and justified conclusion that they will later recognize our action as consistent with their freedom, the action only *becomes* ethical *if and when* that justified belief proves true. This means that an ethics of ambiguity fundamentally shifts the temporal locus of ethics from the moment of decision-making to the moment of the action's aftermath. Our primary ethical obligation is not to have the right state of mind or will or to decide in the right way. Our primary ethical obligation is to return to every prior decision to confirm that it really did promote others' ability to freely choose their projects and concretely realize the ends given value by those projects. Just as a true ethics of consequence cannot be an ethics of merely *projected* consequences, so a true ethics of *freedom as project* cannot be an ethics of the *mere projection* of freedom.

So, the first principle of Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity is a materialist one. While we may *secondarily* morally evaluate agents by their decisions' intended relation to their own freedom (their good faith) and by their intended relation to others' freedom (their good will), the primary function of ethics is not to project or predict human freedom but to realize and accomplish it. It is our projects rather than our projections that are the *primary object* of ethical evaluation. The ethics of ambiguity is not an ethics of authenticity but an ethics of collective freedom.[12]

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[11] It is difficult to say with certainty whether Beauvoir is here admitting to having consciously held, at the time, a stronger, more determinist version of materialism than the *Ethics of Ambiguity* expressed, or if she is merely suggesting that such a position would have been more consistent with its prioritization of material human reality. Sonia Kruks suggests that Beauvoir continued to hold the view that there's a degree of indeterminacy in choice, an aspect undetermined by "brain circuitry" or "abstract reason" first, because "our affects and emotions, our dispositions and habits, our histories and personal experiences will enter into how we judge" and, second, because even if we were able to act purely from abstract reason, "we could still come to different, yet equally reasonable, conclusions" (2012, 149-50). That may well be, since Beauvoir never directly rejects her early criticisms of "deterministic" views. However, if that is her view, it seems to be rooted in an overly narrow, mechanistic version of determinism, one that need not be incompatible with holistic and compatibilist variations. We might think, for example, that to fully accept and assume the ambiguity of human embodiment means to deny *any* causal divide between mind and body. In rejecting traditional rationalist conceptions of "free will," we might, as Nietzsche invites us to, "carry [our] 'enlightenment' a step further" and reject the equally "misconceived concept" of "un-free will" (2001, §21). For example, we might see emotion, habit, and history not as exceptions to determinism but as part of the causal explanation of our brain circuitry, as well as part of the causal explanation of why we're able to adopt different conclusions even if they're equally valid from the standpoint of abstract reason.

[12] According to Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir effected existentialism's ethical turn by delivering on the promise of an ethics at the end of *Being and Nothingness*. Central to this achievement was her development of the concept of moral freedom" (2023, 8). While this accurately describes Beauvoir's *secondary* criterion of justified decision-making, measured by our attitude to our own freedom and others, I am suggesting that her *primary* criterion of ethics is material rather than moral freedom. Rather than delivering on the promise of a distinctly existential*ist* ethics, she abandons the moderate idealism

But this leads Beauvoir to another surprising conclusion. Let's return to the example of the young girl whose friends save her life after a suicide attempt. We saw that if their action is ethical, it is not solely in virtue of their decision-making process; it became ethical when it in fact promoted the woman's freely chosen projects, enabling her to achieve the life of family she had envisioned for herself. That example demonstrated that ethics is ontologically, not merely epistemically, ambiguous: an action has no ethical value until and to the degree that it promotes or harms others' freely chosen projects. But we can now identify a further way that ethics is ontologically ambiguous: the ethical status of the action, once attained, can *change* in relation to *historical* changes in human projects.

VI. Toward an Existential Historical-Materialist Ethics

Beauvoir emphasizes this twist in a third variation of the moral dilemma of suicide. This time, in a variation of the doctor-patient scenario, she asks us to imagine that we have saved the life of someone who remains unconvinced that their life was worth saving: "a man whom I snatch from the death which he had chosen has the right to come and ask me for means and reasons for living" (*EA* 137). Notice she doesn't make this right dependent on any failure in my decision-making process. We could imagine a version of the case that is identical in every other respect to that of the young girl. Perhaps this man also acted hastily and thoughtlessly. Perhaps he too was motivated by despair over a freely chosen project that had given his freedom value and meaning. And imagine that, like the young girl's friends, I took into careful account all of the available evidence, reasonably predicting that the man would regret the suicide attempt, if only given the chance.

However, Beauvoir's ethics isn't primarily about my decision-making process; it's about the decision's real outcome for human freedom. It's not primarily about the state of my consciousness but about the real impact my actions have on others' freedom. As Beauvoir reminds us, "Violence is justified only if it opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save. […] The tyranny practiced against an invalid can be justified only by his getting better" (*EA* 137). She does not say it's justified by the reasonable expectation of such concrete outcomes; it's justified only if those concrete outcome do in fact follow.

So, in this case, I've discovered that, despite my best efforts, my action has *become* unethical. We've seen that for an ethics of ambiguity, I'm obligated not only to project freedom but to realize it. It's not enough that I decide my action in the right way, I must also successfully realize its consequences. It follows, then, that I'm also responsible for *correcting* my actions when they become unethical. In saving the man's life, I'd hoped to help him realize his freely chosen projects. But if it turns out that his suicide attempt was indeed his freely chosen, my action becomes unethical: I have in fact harmed his freedom. As Beauvoir emphasizes: "whatever the purity of the intention which animates me, any dictatorship is a fault for which I have to get myself pardoned" (137). Notice the strength of this language: *any* action requires acting materially upon others, treating them to *some* degree as body, as object. So every ethical action, no matter how carefully approached, initially makes me *guilty toward the other*. Ethics consists not in avoiding guilt but surmounting, not in my decision-making or even the initial action, but in taking *further* action: in *undoing the guilt* that I necessarily incur by taking any action at all.

So, in our example, I now have to correct my action to make it compatible with the freedom of the man I've saved against his will. One way to do this might be to acknowledge my mistake and the man's right to decide for himself, expressing my objections but promising not to interfere again. Beauvoir might accept that solution, but she offers another, much more interesting and surprising

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that anchors a distinctly existentialist view of freedom, delivering instead an *existential* ethics that is distinctly *historical-materialist*.

solution that underlines the deeply *historical* side of the ontological ambiguity of ethics. She says that I can correct my ethical failure by providing the man with both means and reasons for living. If I help him discover new projects in relation to which his life will gain value *and* if I help, as best I can, to provide him with the material ability to successfully accomplish those projects, then my *past* action will *change in status* from unethical to ethical. Note that it's not sufficient to merely persuade him to new projects. Since my action concretely harmed his freedom, its correction requires offering material assistance, *concretely reversing* that consequence.[13]

This underlines a movement in Beauvoir's ethical thinking not just in the direction of materialism, but in the specific direction of *historical* materialism. As you'll recall, I described historical materialism broadly as the view that human beings transform their nature through their material activity, creating new material possibilities upon which they may project new projects, realizing their freedom in endless new ways. In this way, we act both out of and against history. We are ambiguously historical: both agent and product of human history at the same time.[14]

But "it is desire which creates the desirable, […] human existence makes values spring up in the world" (*EA* 15). So, by creating projects in relation to which actions have value or disvalue, then as we change our projects, we retroactively change the ethical status of past actions in relation to those projects. In our example, if I successfully help the man choose and begin to realize a new project, my previous act of saving his life will retroactively change in ethical value, since the ethical value of a particular possibility or end is nothing more than its value or disvalue to the freely chosen overarching projects of every human being.

So, in contrast to the superficial materialism of the consequentialist, including many Marxists, when historical materialism is *consistently* applied to ethics we discover that because human nature is historical and variable, ethical value is historical and variable, too. By transforming human nature, history also transforms the ethical status of past actions. Ethics is ontologically ambiguous in three ways: first, because actions have no intrinsic ethical status; second, because that status is always one of degree, relative to the degree they promote or harm all of humanity's freely chosen projects; and finally, because an action's ethical status will change in degree and kind as we individually and collectively abandon, revise, or transform our projects.

Conclusion

We can now explicitly draw out Beauvoir's second internal critique of consequentialism: traditional consequentialism is insufficiently consequentialist because it *non-historically* evaluates action on the basis of *historical* criteria of value, allowing us to falsely perceive the value of an action and its

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[13] Emily Anne Parker argues that if we recognize Beauvoir's stress on "singularity" as "resistance to conceptuality and categorization" in contrast to "particularity" as "individuation within a category" (2015, 4), we can avoid the mistaken view that "Beauvoir's work vacillates between two pictures of ethical agency," either "keeping-to-oneself out of indecision" or an intrusive "colonizing involvement in the life of the other," where "to intervene on behalf of the other can be just as problematic as believing I have no obligation to do so" (6). I would add that when we recognize the historical and material nature of singularity's resistance to categorization, we better understand how to resolve this false choice: not by more successfully determining when and when not to intervene but by acknowledging that *every* intervention begins as a failure, "a fault for which I have to get myself pardoned" (*EA* 137), thus shifting our emphasis from *correctly deciding* our interventions to *continually correcting* our interventions.

[14] Beauvoir's direct critique of Engels in *The Second Sex* has led some to assume she rejects a Marxist theory of history. However, as Lundgren-Gothlin explains, "Implicit in *The Second Sex* is a tension between an open, more Hegelian Marxism, which is in harmony with the existentialist philosophy, and a more deterministic Marxist philosophy of history" (1996, 85). However, this dichotomy, which Beauvoir does seem to accept, is too simple. There are more open theories of Marxist determinism that should not be collapsed into the "vulgarized interpretation" popular with the French Communist Party that Beauvoir frequently criticized (87).

consequences as fixed. In doing so, consequentialism values projected over real consequences (in other words, *intentions* over consequences) in an additional way. Previously, we saw that consequentialism cared more about the manner in which we predict consequences than whether those predictions prove true. We now see that it cares more about whether those predictions were *once* true than whether they *continue* to be so. Even its concern for *realized* consequences is superficial and temporary. In contrast to consequentialism, Beauvoir's ethics obligates us to indefinitely return to, restore, and repair those actions in light of their continually new value in relation to continually new and variable human projects.

From Beauvoir's materialist critique of consequentialism's focus on projected rather than realized consequences, we drew a moral obligation to not just reasonably project human freedom, but also *realize* it in practice. From her historical materialist critique of consequentialism's assumption that past actions have non-historical value, we can now draw a further moral obligation to *repair or correct* our actions whenever they turn out, in practice, to harm human freedom. Finally, because the ethical value of our actions will vary in light of others' free decisions to change their projects, we can now draw a final and more foundational moral obligation that underlies the first two: we must endlessly *return* to our actions to *verify* their *continued* ethical success, exacting "a perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means" (*EA* 155).

Like deontological ethics, consequentialism fails by prioritizing the ethical status of agents, minds, and their decision-making processes. Its principal goal is to ease our conscience over our past actions with the knowledge that we decided in the best way we could at the time. In doing so, it releases us from further obligation toward that particular action. It frees us to walk away from our past justified decisions. But an ethics of ambiguity has the opposite implication: it continually withholds final justification and demands, above all else, that we preserve a troubled conscience, never leaving our past actions in the lurch. Morality begins not prior to decision, nor at the moment of new decisions, but in continual return to past decisions, realizing, maintaining, or transforming their accomplishments into greater harmony with our continually new, projected futures.

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