

ACTING FOR OTHERS

MORAL ONTOLOGY IN BEAUVOIR'S *PYRRHUS AND CINEAS*¹

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There are prominent resemblances between issues addressed by Simone de Beauvoir in her early essay on moral philosophy, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), and issues attracting the attention of contemporary feminist ethicists, especially those concerned with the ethics of care. They include a focus on relationships, interaction, and mutual dependency. Both emphasize concrete ethical challenges rooted in everyday life, such as those affecting parents and children. Both are critical of the level of abstraction and insensitivity to the situation of the moral agent in utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. And both condemn the “moral point of view,” i.e. the assumption that it is possible to speak with a universal voice on behalf of humanity: “One cannot have a point of view other than [one’s] own,” Beauvoir asserts, refuting the possibility of a universal ethics (PC 112).

However, while many feminist ethicists tend to respond to the rejections of ethical universalism by turning their attention toward the needs of concrete others, Beauvoir questions this ethical approach as well. According to Beauvoir, it is as difficult to act in the best interest of the concrete other – of one’s own child, for instance – as on behalf of humankind.

Beauvoir’s arguments regarding the impossibility of taking the other’s point of view have far more radical consequences than skepticism about universal ethics. She finds acting out of care and consideration for the concrete other to be as difficult – and potentially as tyrannical – as acting for the good of the whole of humanity. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she addresses important but often neglected problems with ethical approaches that focus on the concrete as opposed to the generalized other.

My focus will be on the question of what one *can* do for the other as it relates to contemporary discussions about feminist ethics. Beauvoir’s analysis of the impenetrability of the concrete other in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* reveals some often overlooked difficulties associated with an ethical tradition preoccupied with the unique and singular other. Her essay on moral philosophy can help elucidate important and thorny questions related to paternalism, autonomy, and partialism.²

After having argued in the first part of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* against abstract and universal goals as reliable guides for moral behavior, Beauvoir turns to the concrete other.³ The first basic and ethically relevant question concerns identifying which of these concrete others is my neighbor. Beauvoir’s answer is interesting. No one *is* my neighbor, but I can *make* myself the neighbor of another by my *actions*, she suggests.

Beauvoir opens *Pyrrhus and Cineas* with a story of a child she once knew who cried because his friend had died. His parents told him to stop crying because, “after all, that little boy was not your brother” (PC 92). But his friend became his brother, according to Beauvoir, when he cried for him. In other words: It is your involvement with the other that creates ethical bonds. Beauvoir uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to further illustrate this point. When Christ was asked “Who is my

neighbor?," he did not answer by reciting names, but rather told the story of the Good Samaritan whose acts towards the concrete other made him the neighbor of the injured man (PC 93).

By turning her attention toward the concrete other, Beauvoir creates a moral ontology different from the universalistic tradition where one regards the generalized other as the target of one's deeds. However, she does not limit herself to a particularistic ethics of closeness, or friendships, or relationships, whose focus is often limited to a certain group of people. How does she navigate between the universalistic and the particularistic positions of these two basic ethical points of view? She does so by rejecting contracts and conventions, as well as kinship relations and pure coincidence, as means of achieving neighborliness. Ethical bonds originate when the agent makes an uncoerced *choice* to be the other's neighbor, and reaches out to him or her. For Beauvoir, moral bonds are never predetermined. This is an ontological position not often advocated in contemporary ethics.

Nevertheless, an agent is not doing the right thing simply by choosing a recipient and acting in his name. Devotion is often perceived as an ethically praiseworthy commitment, but Beauvoir reveals how what appears to be other-regarding behavior can become an instrument of power.³ Everyday observations of the givers and receivers of good deeds give us a glimpse of these difficulties. The recipients of care and attention often resist, are indifferent to, or are not grateful for the ministrations of others, while caregivers often feel frustrated and bitter for the lack of appreciation.

"The mother", Beauvoir writes, "who contemplates her grown son, like the volunteer nurse who contemplates her cured patients, says with regret, 'You no longer need me!' This regret often takes the form of a reproach" (PC 118).⁴ Notice how examples from everyday life inspire Beauvoir to ask a meta-ethical question that should be mandatory for any ethical theory focusing on the interests of the concrete other, such as the ethics of care: What can we do for the concrete other?

This question in need of serious ethical consideration demonstrates Beauvoir's early sensitivity to the experience and lived lives of concrete others. . What she demonstrates in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is summed up in an oft-quoted later remark: "In truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life" (**SOURCE?** 1948). Today's feminist ethics stress the importance of giving ethical consideration to the experiences of ordinary life. Contemporary traditional ethics have been criticized, for not doing so (See Gilligan 1982, Noddings 1983, Walker 1998, Pettersen 2008).

The Motive for Other-Regarding Actions

If we intend to act on behalf of the other, we need first to question whether our actions are indeed taken on behalf of the other or merely depicted or defined as such. If a moral agent, a caregiver for instance, is saddened when a patient recovers or a dependent little son grows up and becomes independent, one may doubt whether the devotion and good deeds were really results of caring for the good of the other person. Beauvoir questions the motive of the apparently self-sacrificing and altruistic

agent. In her opinion, our motivation for behaving in a seemingly altruistic way is frequently not for the good of the other, but rather for our own good.

Confusing our own goals with those of others can be done deliberately or inadvertently. Beauvoir does not discuss these options or the ethically relevant differences between them, but instead clarifies the existential aspects of the motives of other-regarding agents. Rather than serving the best interest of the other, they allow the giver to invest his or her *own* life with meaning. The son gives the caretaker meaning, as does the patient.⁵ The self-sacrificing agent does not act for the other, but rather to fill his own life with meaning.

I am not accusing Beauvoir of psychological egoism, i.e. of reducing all other-regarding deeds to expressions of self-interest. Rather, I sense that she wants to draw attention to the ease with which moral agents can, and often do, conflate their own good with the good of the concrete other. This happens, for instance, when the agent takes on the other's good as her/his life project. The patient's recovery, or children's adulthood, however, dissolves the caregiver's meaningful project. The caregiver's regrets and complaints are not necessarily expressions of an evil disposition, or of disapproval with the health and happiness of the receiving other, nor a wish for others to feel pain. Rather they convey the sense of anxiety arising from fear of losing a meaningful project and having to face the absurdity of life. Still, one cannot rightfully *term* such devotion as acting in the name of another, Beauvoir points out, before she embarks on discussing other problematical aspects of devotion to the concrete other.

Devotion, says Beauvoir, represents a "rest." The devoted father avoids taking responsibility for his own desires, declaring that he, on the contrary, is acting for the good of the other (PC e.199, n62). Here she draws attention to an overlooked and undoubtedly provocative issue in contemporary ethical debates. Devotion, she asserts, can be ethically dubious. Systematically prioritizing the interests of another, or of several others, is a way of surrendering of one's own freedom. Devotion and strong altruistic care are ways of avoiding responsibility for one's own life. They can be understood as a flight from the existential challenge involved in creating a life of one's own.

Dedicating oneself to others can even be a way of dehumanizing oneself. In Kant's point of view,, the self-denying person is reduced, or reduces herself, to a pure mean. The devotion Beauvoir writes about in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* resembles what she says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1946) is typical of the sub-man, and later demonstrates in *The Second Sex* (1949) as a technique to which many women resort. This is indeed a different perspective on the other-regarding agents, who are habitually and often uncritically praised for their commitment to their fellow human beings. As Beauvoir shows, devotion is not in itself ethically praiseworthy.

Instead of imposing *my* subjective goal on others, is it not possible that I am being guided by some universal, objective or accepted values when I act for the concrete other? Parents often act in the name of their children in order to allow them to achieve health, wealth, and happiness. But, as Beauvoir points out, we cannot rightfully consider this strategy as acting authentically for the other. One acts instead

in the name of a cause. This too is typical of the sub-man, insofar as do-gooders abandon freedom, avoid responsibility for themselves and their acts, and are sometimes willing to harm people in the name of a cause. “[T]he inquisitor,” she writes, “has the heretic burned at the stake in the name of what is good; no one would claim that he is devoted to him” (PC 119).

Whether the goal is personal or socially defined, one cannot claim to act for the other. Acts proclaimed or interpreted as other-regarding are often in fact self-regarding. They are the agent’s way of controlling the beneficiary, of asserting paternalistic superiority or endowing their own life with meaning.

Is it possible then, to act or speak for another? According to Beauvoir, one only acts for another when responding “to the appeal that emanates from his will” (PC 119). But what can one do when confronted with another person’s will? When the other sets a goal for himself, *he* is the one who must also achieve it. Trying to accomplish the other’s goal for him would be tyrannical. Occasionally, one can lend a helping hand. But to avoid being despotic, one’s response must be tuned exactly to what the other wants (PC 119). Beauvoir requires approval by others to “rescue” them from paternalism and tyranny carried out in the name of devotion and altruism.

Unfortunately, consent is not enough for an action to be for the other – nor can the other’s approval relieve the moral agent of his responsibility for his own deeds. How can one know what the other wants? And does the other really know what he really wants him or herself?

The Will of The Concrete Other

To act for another is to respond to *his* appeal, but even if the other has articulated his will, Beauvoir still doubts whether we have access to the other’s will. Her objections and reflections are particularly relevant to contemporary branches of ethics such as professional ethics and the ethics of care, both of which target the needs of others.

(1) *First*, Beauvoir points out, the agent must be able to “entangle **[disentangle? disengage?]** the other’s essential project from those that contradict it and from those that relate to it only in a contingent manner” (PC 119). The difficulty involved in distinguishing between subsidiary and ultimate ends involves a discussion one can trace back to Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁶ How we can know, for instance, whether or not the partial goal our patients, students or children are asking us to assist them with might contradict their ultimate aim? If what they want now seems to contradict their longer-term good, both helping them and not helping them could be considered to act in a tyrannical and paternalistic way.

(2) How do we know that what the concrete other says he wants is what he *really* wants? What he wants now could be a whim, says Beauvoir, or, we might add, could reflect a sudden weakness of will.

We should not act on the spur of the moment, but rather see the other’s desire in relation to his lifespan. This point of view has something in common with virtue ethic. Evaluating whether an act is good or bad – virtuous or not – cannot be done from a short-term perspective, but rather must take into consideration an image of

one's life as a whole. The partial good must be seen from the perspective of the chief good.

(3) Even if one could distinguish between an intermediate good and the ultimate good, how can one know if what the other says expresses his *true* will? He might suffer from bad faith. Is he deceiving both himself and us? This is the do-gooder's dilemma. In order to avoid being tyrannical and paternalistic, we should not impose our will, or infer a desire not expressed by the individual himself.

But if we cannot have complete faith in the other's declared will, what can we do? Beauvoir says, "The good of the other is what he wants, but when it is a matter of discerning his true will, we can only resort to our judgment alone" (PC 120).

Note that Beauvoir does not appeal to pure reason, moral sentiment, convention, or consensus, or to abstract principles, in order to determine the chief good, but rather to judgment. Since we do not *know*, we must use our best judgment.

Exercising judgment is an integral part of the practice of virtue ethics. This is nevertheless where the parallel ends. The problem with judgment, in Beauvoir's eyes, arises when we try to move from what the other takes to be in his best interest to our own judgment of what that interest consists of. By making this move, we are not truly acting in the name of the other. We are in danger of subjecting him to our will as we overrule his desire. This might also involve undermining his autonomy and turning our back on our responsibility for our actions by bending his will to reflect ours.

Beauvoir has spotted a problem highly relevant for any ethical theory related to how others ought to act. In contrast to naturalistic versions of virtue ethics, Christian ethics, and some versions of feminist ethics, her existential philosophy leaves no room for predetermined purposes or ultimate ends. Several normative theories let us know in advance what the good life should be, or what mankind's ultimate goal is assumed to be. According to Beauvoir's philosophy, however, it is each individual's ethical responsibility to resolve these questions for himself and to define his own ultimate goal.

It is tempting to make one's own purpose is life the assumption of responsibility for the happiness and well being of another person, thereby appearing to justify one's own being by means of what is often is regarded as a morally praiseworthy project. Acting for another implies supporting the goal the other has defined for his own life. However, Beauvoir doubts the existence of any predetermined ultimate good, one that can be defined *once and for all*.

(4) What is considered good for a person at one point in his life may not necessarily be good for him at another point. One's life is likely to include diverse ends and changing preferences, making it as difficult to determine what serves the good of a concrete other as it is for the whole of humankind. As we change and develop, the "ultimate" good may change with us. What is good for the little boy might not serve the future man (PC 120). One must ask *who* should determine whether the anticipated will of the future man should trump the will of the existing little boy, as well as *what* kind of man the little boy should aspire to be.

(5) According to existential philosophers, several projects – not only one, as in the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato, Kant and others – might be good for an individual. Should one opt for art rather than philosophy, length of life rather than quality of life,

solitude rather than connectedness? According to existentialism, these are choices each individual must make. If I attempt to evaluate aspects of the good on behalf of the other, I am imposing my will and my judgment on that other person, and cannot claim to act *for* him. As is the case for the ultimate good of the other, our goals will change with advancing years, as will our judgment.

(6) Even when one takes into account the evolving and changing preferences during a person's lifetime, Beauvoir suggests that no matter what we give the other, he can never be fulfilled (PC 121). Cineas asks what comes next. Here Beauvoir addresses a thorny issue within contemporary ethics of care. How do we know when we have given enough care, and how are we supposed to make use of our limited resources for caring for others? (Pettersen 2008). As Beauvoir reminds us, the voice of the other will never stop, and, no matter what we do, there will always be another request for help. The only thing we can do is to provide "points of departure" allowing others to make use of their freedom to begin living on their own (PC 123).

Beauvoir's answer to the question, "Can I act *for* the other?" is no. Beauvoir's explanation of the impenetrability of the other's will and best interests helps our understanding of the values and ultimate goals many agents seek to impose on others. in our contemporary multicultural world. It is a significant contribution. to feminist ethical theory., suggesting that paternalism and egocentrism can be disguised as good deeds and that encouraging such conduct could well facilitate the oppression of the concrete other.

At the empirical level, this contribution is indeed important, but it is also novel in terms of moral philosophy, and of moral ontology in particular. Beauvoir does not assume human inter-connectedness as a pre-given, in contrast to many advocates of contemporary feminist ethics of care, who assume as a point of departure that human beings are connected and related. Nor does she portray human beings as self-sufficient and isolated, as is the case for mainstream ethical theories. Beauvoir explores the *possibilities* for interaction. This existential moral ontology prepares the ground for the existential ethics she developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Indeed, given Beauvoir's conclusion in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* -- that it is impossible to act for the other; that we cannot act or speak on behalf of humankind, nor on behalf of the concrete other -- one might expect her to give up on ethics. But she does not do so. This is in part because she has already taken issue with other existentialists on the interpretation of *Dasein*, our Being as human beings: "The fundamental error of devotion is that the devoted one considers the other as an object carrying an emptiness in its heart that would be possible to fill" (PC 122, n 65).

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, man's basic desires are destined to fail because the for-itself-in-itself -- i.e., God-likeness -- cannot be achieved. Beauvoir, on the other hand, says that ontologically mankind lacks nothing. There is no void. "Life" she says, "is a plenitude preceded by no painful absence" (PC 122, n 66) (Arp 2001, Bergoffen 1999, Pettersen 2008b). Ethics, in Beauvoir's view, is not about filling other people's empty voids with guidelines and goals, but rather concerns how one manage one's own freedom.

Situation and concrete freedom

If we cannot do anything *for* the other, we obviously cannot do anything against him either, Beauvoir points out. This is a paradox. Beauvoir does not deny the existence of violence, but just as good deeds cannot deprive others of their freedom, neither can violence. (PC 124). The other cannot be deprived of his ontological freedom by self-sacrifice or by acts of violence. "Violence can act only upon the facticity of man, upon his exterior," she writes (PC e124). She has no intention of minimizing the severity of violence by this statement, but rather stresses that we cannot be victims unless we choose to be (PC 118), a point to which she returns in *The Second Sex*.

Already in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir draws a line between ontological and concrete freedom, a distinction which explains why the agent cannot do anything for, or against, the other. Ontological freedom cannot be eradicated. Hence ethical conduct which aims at acting for the good of the concrete other, or ethical theories which justify such action, are destined to fail. The given freedom of the concrete other prevents the moral agent from acting for another.

This explains, I believe, why some commentators think that existentialism cannot provide us with an ethic. Although Beauvoir agrees with other existentialists that ontological freedom creates unbridgeable space between individuals, erecting a wall of inaccessibility, we are, she insists, always free to take action in any situation. Even if we cannot partake of each other's ontological freedom, we can indeed make a difference in the *situations* of others and facilitate their ability to realize what they take to be their own good and accomplish what they believe is their true will.

The ambiguity of the human condition is revealed here. While ontological freedom separates individuals and makes them autonomous, it also provides a means of effecting changes related to their situation and their concrete freedom. This ambiguity is an important aspect of Beauvoir's ontology. In my opinion, it gives the agent two moral responsibilities. First, freedom makes the agent accountable for his actions, a responsibility we cannot avoid by devoting ourselves to others. Second, even if we cannot penetrate the other's ontological freedom, we are nevertheless constituent parts of the other's situation, and must therefore assume responsibility for the consequences of our actions affecting the other's concrete freedom.

If I refuse to help someone in need, "I am the very face of that misery," according to Beauvoir (PC 126). Even if we cannot act *for* the other, our actions affect their situation, a situation in which their opportunity to live an authentic life can be undermined or enhanced. I cannot escape this responsibility. In every situation one can choose freely to neglect or act to generously toward the other.

Ethical conduct must therefore target the situation of the other, not his or her ontological freedom. My action can change situations but cannot affect the will or the ontological freedom of the other: "I ask for health, knowledge, well-being, and leisure for men so that their freedom is not consumed in fighting sickness, ignorance, and misery" (PC 137). If my acts diminish the concrete freedom of others, I am to blame. Only when I act to preserve, promote, and strengthen the concrete freedom of others, can I be ethically commended.

My actions alone, however, do not constitute the totality of the other's situation, which is also determined by political, economic, and cultural factors. Therefore, in addition to encouraging the agent to reflect on his own motives and values and take responsibility for his response to another person's situation, Beauvoir's ethics requires us to be aware of the influence political, cultural, social, and even global factors have on the other person's concrete situation.

Simone de Beauvoir's ethics and moral philosophy are intrinsically connected with the lives people live. Her concern for the particular and concrete individual does not lead to solipsism, partialism, or paternalism. Rather it encourages us to be aware of our responsibility for the concrete freedom and well-being of others and of the fact that, however autonomous we may be, we are also mutually dependent on others. This is exactly the goal of much present-day ethics, and a compelling reason to pay close attention to what Beauvoir had to say on the subject more than six decades ago.

NOTES

1 This article is an edited version of the conference paper I presented at The 17th International Simone de Beauvoir Society Conference "Simone de Beauvoir – Then and Now," held June 18-20, 2009 at San José State University, California

2 In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she also argues against universal and abstract goals as meaningful projects to which to aspire. Given the limits of this article, it is impossible to give an account of Beauvoir's critique of the universalist tradition, a critique with whose substance most contemporary feminist ethicists would agree. I shall instead address some of her innovative perspectives while reviewing her objections to the ethical particularism which several feminist ethicists take to be an alternative to the universalist tradition

3 If the other needs me, my being appears to be justified, she says, adding that she is aware of the numerous difficulties which arise from this type of mentality.

4 Strict altruism, including devotion and self-denial, has traditionally been considered a female virtue. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir portrays devotion as women's way of avoiding existential freedom. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she remarks: "Many men, and even more women, wish for such a rest; let us devote ourselves" (PC 117). **[I can't seem to find the original French sentence in my copy here, but would you doublecheck the English translation you have? The above sounds very awkward.]**

5 The caregiver is not the only one to give; the needs of the recipient serve as gifts for the caregiver, gifts he uses to fulfill himself.

6 "Since there is evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these [ends] for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there is more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking." (Aristotle, NE, book 7).

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