Five

EXISTENTIAL HUMANISM AND MORAL FREEDOM IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S ETHICS

Tove Pettersen

This chapter elucidates the close connection between Beauvoir's ethics and humanism, and argues that her humanism is an existential humanism. Beauvoir's concept of freedom is inspected, followed by a discussion of her reasons for making moral freedom the leading normative value, and her claim that we must act for humanity. In Beauvoir's ethics, freedom is not reserved for the elite, but understood as everyone being "able to surpass the given toward an open future." By addressing the continuing friction between individual freedom and public interests, Beauvoir's normative thinking remains highly relevant today. It also exemplifies the enduring importance of humanistic reflections and demonstrates how, through critical and creative thinking, the humanities can contribute to a free, well-functioning democratic society.

> To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like: it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future.
>
> *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Simone de Beauvoir

1. Introduction

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the foundation of all values is human freedom. Consequently, norms are not given by nature, biology, science, or God, but created and installed by individuals. However, when particular sets of norms are internalized and societies, for generations, are organized in accordance with certain standards, the human-made origin of norms and arrangements can become obscured. What was once socially constructed might later be perceived as fixed and natural. In several works, Beauvoir is concerned with revealing how conventional norms and standards, privileges and discrimination were established, and how they are sustained, prolonged, and often masked. *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (2004e), *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1976), *The Second Sex* (2010), "Right-Wing Thought Today" (2012d), and *The Coming of Age* (1973) are examples of such works. De-masking oppressive myths and false justifications of privilege is a core theme in Beauvoir's philosophy, as well as an important topic in her novels. She considers such de-masking to be the first step toward liberation of the under-privileged. Beauvoir also provides a normative theory, in which the opportunity—as well as limits—to enjoy one's freedom extends equally to all.

In revealing the origin of norms and social structures, and by articulating and defending certain values over others, Beauvoir acts in perfect accordance with the most important tasks of the humanities: to articulate, analyze, criticize, assess, and create values. Philosophy and literature are two humanistic disciplines wherein critical discussions of values and experiences have a particular and prominent place, and these are also the two disciplines in which Beauvoir excelled and made a significant contribution. She states:

> [Literature] allows one to undergo imaginary experiences that are as complete and disturbing as lived experiences. The reader ponders, doubts, and takes sides; and this hesitant development of his thought enriches him in a way no teaching of doctrines could. (2004b, p. 270)

With its focus on critical and creative thinking, the humanities fosters understanding and breadth of vision, while creating an entirely new way of thinking and acting. With regard to moral philosophy, Beauvoir remarks:

> The great moralists were not virtuous souls, docilely subject to a preestablished code of good and evil. They created a new universe of values through words that were actions, through actions that bit into the world; and they changed the face of the earth more profoundly than kings and conquerors. (2004c, p. 188)

In this chapter, I will discuss aspects of Beauvoir's normative philosophy in relation to humanism. These aspects demonstrate that Beauvoir, by urging her readers to engage actively in public life by reflecting upon lived experiences and challenging the canon, is an important humanist thinker. They also reveal a close connection between Beauvoir's ethics and humanism. To support the claim that Beauvoir is a humanist thinker, I will first examine the core value of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics—freedom—and then present her arguments for why we should sustain and promote this value in particular. These arguments, I contend, reveal that Beauvoir's ethics can be understood as a particular form of humanism: namely, existential humanism. Apart from remaining highly relevant today, Beauvoir's ethics also exemplifies the enduring importance of humanistic reflections and demonstrates how critical and creative thinking in the humanities can serve to uphold a free and well-functioning democratic society (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 23, 72).

2. Freedom—According to Beauvoir

A. Three Types of Freedom

Beauvoir uses her entire output—but particularly *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (2004e), *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1976), *The Second Sex* (2010), and *The*

Coming of Age (1973)—to portray different aspects of freedom. Her basic view is, in short, that freedom is the wellspring of all the other values and a sine qua non for living a meaningful but also a moral life. In that light, it ought to be a fundamental constitutive of everyone's normative outlook. Kristana Arp distinguishes three types of freedom in Beauvoir's work: ontological; concrete; and moral (2001). It should be noted that what Arp terms "ontological freedom," Beauvoir herself terms "natural freedom," while "moral freedom" is also sometimes referred to as "genuine freedom" or "ethical freedom (1976, pp. 24–25). In what follows, I want to elaborate on these three aspects of freedom.

Ontological freedom is the freedom we all have—by virtue of being human (ibid., p. 25). Beauvoir maintains that freedom is the most characteristic feature of our species—before emotions, rationality, or care, which have been suggested by other philosophers. Ontological freedom pertains to several aspects of being human and is related to Beauvoir's philosophical anthropology: it indicates that our consciousness is free, and can transcend our personal situation (ibid., p. 7).

Beauvoir's understanding of ontological freedom also rejects the notion of a predetermined gendered essence that must unfold, as she claimed in her famous statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2010, p. 283). Also, ontological freedom refers to Beauvoir's understanding of free will: human beings have the capacity to act autonomously (2004e, p. 124). It is by putting their internal ontological freedom to use that human beings create values. In our actions, we protect and sustain or undermine and destroy certain normative values; we can choose to espouse justice, care, and freedom, or injustice, injury, and oppression.

Can ontological freedom find concrete expression in freely chosen actions? That will depend on the context, as the agent's situation can open or close the possibilities to exercise it (1976, p. 82). Beauvoir's second type—*concrete freedom*—refers to the degree of external freedom people possess in a particular situation. Aspects of an agent's situation will affect the capacity to choose freely and act thereon. People without civil and political rights, who live in poverty and distress, who have been manipulated to believe they are less competent or valuable than others, can hardly act as freely as more fortunate ones (ibid., p. 83). People living in impoverished conditions have to spend their time and energy satisfying their basic needs for food and security (ibid., p. 88, 2004e, p. 137; Arp, 2001, pp. 120–124). Poverty, manipulation, and lack of rights are incompatible with Beauvoir's concept of freedom. Oppressive conditions can wear ontological freedom down, or prevent its exercise. Our given ontological freedom and the context of our lives—the concrete freedom—always work together. Ontological freedom is of little value if we lack concrete freedom, but concrete freedom is equally worthless if our ontological freedom is diluted by oppression and manipulation. Without the one, we cannot enjoy the other.

Moral freedom (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 32) means choosing to act in such a way as to protect and sustain one's own freedom and that of others (ibid., pp. 25–34, 72–73). Unlike ontological freedom, which is ontologically given, and concrete freedom, which is politically and historically pre-established, moral freedom is something each individual must freely embrace. One must want "health, knowledge, well-being and leisure for *all men* so that their freedom is not consumed in fighting sickness, ignorance, and misery" (Beauvoir, 2004e, p. 137, emphasis added). Of the three forms, only moral freedom requires a free and active commitment on the part of each individual. We can obviously benefit from ontological and concrete freedom without taking the freedom of others into account, and we can undoubtedly espouse a different normative value. It is exactly our ontological and concrete freedom that gives the possibility to do so (Arp, 2001, pp. 113–115, 150–151; Pettersen, 2011, pp. 96–98).

Moral freedom is the normative core value in Beauvoir's ethics, concrete freedom is the cornerstone of her political thinking, while ontological freedom is a metaphysical precondition for her moral philosophy. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's three types of freedom are closely connected, and find expression in several aspects— ethical, political, and social—of human life.

Where other ethicists often begin by arguing why we should choose a specific value—utility maximization, fairness, caring, or happiness—Beauvoir starts by amplifying the metaphysical and political preconditions of our ability to choose our values. She does not assume that all human beings can enjoy their ontological freedom.

Works such as *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex* and *The Coming of Age* can be read as examinations of both the *internal* and *external* conditions enabling us to act as moral beings. Having the capacity and possibility to choose freely—by being so constituted (ontological freedom) and by living under social and political conditions where it is actually feasible (concrete freedom)—is a necessary condition for being able to choose one value rather than another. In that sense, ontological and concrete freedoms are also preconditions for choosing whether to act morally.

B. Unconstrained Freedom

By introducing moral freedom, Beauvoir counters familiar arguments against existentialism, namely that making human beings the sole creators of all values could result in a world of solipsistic egoists, miserable relativists, and lonely subjectivists who, in the name of freedom, can choose any value—including values that lead them to oppress everyone else (2004a, p. 203, 1976, p. 156). This would correspond to some of the behavioral types Beauvoir also criticizes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, among which is a type she terms "the adventurer." Although adventurers make free choices and transcend their situ-

ations, they have not achieved moral freedom because they fail to consider the freedom of others when acting (1976, pp. 59–63).

Beauvoir claims that even if we, as human beings, have the capacity to subjugate others and ourselves, we can also choose *not* to do everything of which we are capable. If we chose to acknowledge others' freedom as well as our own, we will refrain from acts of subjugation. Choosing to respect our own and others' freedom means we are voluntarily restraining the potential use of our capacities. Consequently, in assuming moral freedom as our normative value, we also relate to concrete and ontological freedoms in a particular way: our actions must not detract from our own or others' opportunities to lead an autonomous life. The type of activities and projects in which we participate must not obliterate our own or others' opportunities to flourish and develop. In other words, having moral freedom as our normative guideline does not license us to do whatever we like, but rather, it gives us the opportunity to preserve and protect our own freedom and that of others (ibid., p. 156). This is the admonition that follows from Beauvoir's normative core value.

It was important for Beauvoir to dismantle the understanding of freedom as being equivalent to having "the power to do anything you like" (ibid., p. 91). The way she rejected this view makes her ethics highly relevant today. Now, freedom is commonly understood in a similar way as it was by the opponents of existentialism—the freedom to do as one likes. In contemporary society, "freedom" is frequently perceived as the absence of external and internal constraints on the agent.

In "Right-Wing Thought Today," Beauvoir identifies the agents who defend this way of exercising "freedom" as commonly belonging to a group of privileged individuals, which defines the concept in extension and comprehension of only its own situation. "In earlier times for proslavery Americans, the idea of Freedom included the right to possess slaves; for the bourgeois of today it includes the right to exploit the proletariat" (2012d, p. 152).

During current times, claiming the right to use drugs, buy and sell sexual services, consume pornography, carry weapons, or express hatred in public is often justified on the same conception of freedom, generally advocated by a group of (would-be) privileged. Not only does this version of freedom fail to respect the freedom of others (moral freedom), it also commonly remains ignorant of the internal and external conditions (ontological and concrete freedom) that must be in place to make authentic choices. Agents under oppression, who lack ontological and concrete freedom, often cannot act fully autonomously. Those who take advantage of others deprivation not only lack moral freedom themselves, but also act oppressively and contribute to the perpetuation of injustice. Consequently, Beauvoir has the following view:

> We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself. A freedom interested in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition

> of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future. (1976, pp. 90–91)

C. The Eradication of Freedom

Beauvoir's ethics not only challenge a widespread and influential understanding of freedom—then as much as now—it actually does so without denying the importance of individual freedom. The alternative to unconstrained individual freedom is not to destroy it in a collective movement where some speak on behalf of the rest and determine their common goal. Beauvoir strives equally to defend freedom from thinkers and political movements who attempt to eradicate it, and from those who would abuse it. One way of destroying freedom is to be found in "the myth of solidarity" (2004e, p. 107), which depicts human beings as part of an organism, and each individual's role as determined by exteriority only, "by the place of all others" (ibid.).

According to the myth of solidarity, each individual is understood as fundamentally determined by forces beyond their control, as pure passivity. However, Beauvoir holds that people cannot be fully determined and passive, because if they were, they would never act. "But" she says, "he does act; he does question himself. He is free, and his freedom is interiority" (ibid). In a similar vein, Beauvoir dismisses Freudianism in *The Second Sex*. Freudianism, she says, replaces ontological freedom, and consequently ethics, with "the idea of normality"; indeed, human history as such is falsified by denying that human acts can be "motivated by freely posited aims," aims that can be desired solely for their own sake (2010, p. 59).

Beauvoir is equally suspicious of the idea of the universal. Unlike Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy requires us to disregard the individual and choose the universal, she insists on seeing and respecting the individual (1976, p. 156). Unlike G. F. W. Hegel, for whom "particularity appears only as a moment of the totality in which it must surpass itself" (ibid., p. 17), the particular in Beauvoir's philosophy is not absorbed in the idea of a *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times). She will not submit the individual to any abstract law, deterministic theory, or any inevitable historical movement: Beauvoir never forfeits the idea that individuals have their own ontological freedom, and therefore are always capable of changing their goals, their situation as well as the course of history.

D. Freedom as an Infinite Movement

According to Beauvoir, freedom is also always a *movement*; it cannot be limited to a specific time, place, or event. This feature is shared by all three of Beauvoir's aspects of freedom. One cannot truly want freedom without es-

pousing it as infinite motion, a movement that continually rejects the restrictions that may divert or stop its progress toward itself.

Besides viewing freedom as an infinite movement, Beauvoir also sees human beings in a similar light. Human beings are not only characterized by a positive will, as they are for Kant, but also by "lack of being," a negativity (ibid., pp. 42, 118). This means that human beings are always more than what is manifest at any given moment, and also capable of becoming more—or something different—in the future (2004e, p. 98). When our-being-in-the-world is always in the becoming, our ends cannot be determined once and for all, and our engagement in the world will never reach its completion. Our being is an ongoing movement—always open to intervention, alternation, and re-signification. After the book is written or the political issue resolved, one's choices are not exhausted: one must then decide whether to write a new book, to engage in other political issues. If moral freedom is embraced, one also ensures that one's goals and activities do not thwart the future freedom of oneself and others.

E. Moral Freedom as Relational Freedom

In everything Beauvoir wrote, but especially in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she explains why we should embrace moral freedom. Some arguments emphasize that we should maintain our own freedom as well as that of others for our own good. Others focus on the interests of others, while still others hold that moral freedom is in our common interest. The three different types of arguments need to be separated only for analytical purposes as they all, from different perspectives, build a case for why we should choose to act ethically: it is for our own *and* the sakes of others that we should espouse freedom. This reveals an important aspect of Beauvoir's ethics: it is consistently intersubjective. In Beauvoir's ethics, the agent's motivation for acting morally is neither purely egoistic nor completely altruistic.

The reason Beauvoir transcends a traditional dichotomist thinking can be traced back to her ontology. For Beauvoir, a human being is present in the world as a being *connected* with others: "I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship" (1976, p. 72). Moreover, she does not understand one individual's being-in-the-world as separate from, or fundamentally antagonistic to, another's being-in-the world. Rather, for Beauvoir, it is my-*and*-your-being-in the world, it is *our* being-in-the-world—it is being-with (*Mitsein*) (2010, p. 17). Human beings are perceived as unique and free individuals, who are also interconnected with other unique and free beings, which is why we can neither be fully immersed in a collective movement, nor appear as completely separated and isolated beings.

Beauvoir's emphasis on human beings as fundamentally relational departs from the individualistic ontology of many traditional philosophers—

including other existentialist philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus—where individuals are envisaged as fundamentally isolated and separate from each other. Moreover, Beauvoir's accentuating of human beings as embodied and situated beings departs from Cartesian dualism, where the individual mind and will are given priority over body and situation, as is also the case with Kant and Hegel. She also exceeds a Marxist ontology where the common, bodily, and material needs unify individuals and stamp out their particularities and individual wills. Instead, Beauvoir accentuates reciprocity, connectedness, embodiment, *and* our freedom as irreducible individual features. In so doing, she anticipates the relational ontology and meta-methodology advocated by many contemporary feminist ethicists.

Beauvoir's ontology charts a middle way between approaching human beings as individualistic, self-sufficient, and self-governing on the one hand, and collectivistic, dependent, and determined beings on the other. It is also a middle way between an idealistic and a materialistic approach. In Beauvoir's philosophy, human beings are *both* separate *and* connected; they have minds *and* bodies; they are free *and* restricted, autonomous *and* heteronomous beings. Beauvoir's transcendence of traditional dualisms echoes her notion of ambiguity; after all, her ethics is an "ethics of ambiguity." She states:

> As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. (1976, p. 7)

Beauvoir's clear rejection of dualist thinking based on the binary logic of either-or, and its elimination of ambiguity by attempting to make human beings either pure inwardness or pure externality, not only anticipates the relational ontology of contemporary feminism, but also the feminist concept of relational autonomy. Relational autonomy is an alternative to the traditional Kantian notion of autonomy where human beings are understood as sovereign beings that act and decide alone, unencumbered by attachments to others. It is also an alternative to traditions wherein human beings are considered to be deprived of agency (see Pettersen, 2009–2010). Beauvoir's relational ontology also informs her view of society. "A society is a whole made up of individual parts. Its members are separate, but they are united by the need for reciprocal relationships" (1973, p. 321).

Beauvoir's concept of moral freedom must be understood relationally and in light of ambiguity. Ontological freedom is given to each individual, and must be exercised by individual choices if the external situation permits it (concrete freedom). However, as human beings are related, there also exists a connection when it comes to freedom; our freedoms are also interrelated:

"Our freedoms support each other like the stone in an arch, but in an arch that no pillars support" (2004e, p. 140). Hence, in sync with much feminist ethics and in contrast to an individualistic version of freedom, it would also make sense to call Beauvoir's concept of moral freedom "relational freedom." According to Beauvoir, relational freedom is precisely the kind of freedom we should adopt as our core normative value. But why choose this as our maxim? Why select the freedom of all as our moral goal?

3. Humanism—and Beauvoir's Ethics of Freedom

As there are no pre-given values, freedom is necessary if we are to create meaning in our lives. Making life meaningful is an ongoing process. That process has what could be portrayed as several stages or phases. The first thing we need to do is exercise our freedom by choosing the individual projects we want to engage in. Otherwise, we will end up leading inauthentic and unhappy lives.

A. Existential Meaning

The first argument for why we should embrace freedom emphasizes our personal existential situation and its relation with freedom. By practicing our freedom, we can establish our goals and create and participate in self-chosen projects that give our lives meaning. Only when our projects are freely embraced can our lives be autonomous and authentic. If we let others decide how we should live—for example, by uncritically adopting traditional gender roles, or submitting to religious or political doctrines—we are just following directives and norms not freely consented to. This is equivalent to living un-freely. As un-free, we experience existential meaninglessness and we do not develop our full potential (2010, pp. 661–664) because only our own freedom can be the source of authentic values and meaning. When norms are imposed from without, or simply uncritically adopted, they are heteronomous and inauthentic.

Our actions and projects reveal the extent to which we are free; through them, we sustain and create authentic values—or we perpetuate the values imposed on us by others. This explains why one of the most heinous punishments that can be imposed on a human being is that of Sisyphus. The meaninglessness of having to perform pointless tasks over and over again—like filling and emptying the same ditch, or writing lines at school—is more intolerable than the feeling of exhaustion one gets from doing this work (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 30). Likewise, a life in prison is the hardest punishment because it keeps the individual's existence in a state of pure facticity, a situation that cannot (easily) be changed.

Beauvoir depicts inauthentic lives in many of her writings, and her portrayal of women's situation in *The Second Sex* is possibly the best known.

Here she explains why women living as traditional mothers and wives often find their lives meaningless: they did not freely choose to live this way; they are only following conventions. In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir describes how external (culture, body, myths) and internal (emotional and existential) factors restrict elderly persons' freedom of choice:

> A limited future, and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to. In many instances it paralyses them. All their plans have either been carried out or abandoned, and their life has closed in about itself; nothing requires their present; they no longer have anything whatsoever to do. (1973, p. 562)

Consequently, when the elderly lose the opportunity to pursue freely chosen projects in the world, they may experience meaninglessness and, as Beauvoir mentions, melancholia, depression, anxiety, or even suicidal tendencies. She also draws attention to how the consequences of choosing an inauthentic life in youth extend into old age. When old, there are no, or very few, new freely chosen projects or relationships to engage in. The opportunity to start something new is limited, and the elderly are "thrown out" of the community and become more isolated (2012e, p. 342). Therefore, the best investment in old age is to create and engage in projects and relationships during young adulthood that can be prolonged into old age.

B. Ethical Responsibility

Those capable of making free choices, but who refrain from doing so, will not only experience meaninglessness, but also, according to Beauvoir, live unethically. In addition to its existential side, autonomous choice also has a significant ethical dimension. It is the first step toward living as a moral person, and thus, another reason why we should embrace freedom. Beauvoir writes, "to will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence" (1976, p. 25). In other words, "to will oneself moral and to will oneself free is one and the same decision" (ibid., p. 24).

One of Beauvoir's points, advanced in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, is that when we unreflectively follow conventions, indulge in pre-established ethical systems, a religion, a political ideology, or just "go with the flow," we do not take responsibility for our actions and ourselves. Disclaiming this ethical responsibility by uncritically following others can lead not only to dogmatism and fanaticism, but also to violence, brutality, and evil carried out in the name of a principle, a religion or an ideology (ibid., pp, 44, 49). Living by the dictate of others is to reject our freedom and dismiss an ethical responsibility for our own lives.

Beauvoir applies this idea in *The Second Sex* when she asserts that women are partly culpable for their oppressed situation (2010, p. 10). This culpability arises, in Beauvoir's view, because in most cases, we have *some* responsibility for our own situation. Unless we are completely determined from outside, an agent can always choose to act one way instead of another. Apart from cases of extreme oppression, individuals cannot escape the moral responsibility for their lives and actions simply by claiming that they had followed the rules or some authority. Consistently, and on every occasion, Beauvoir argues against determinism—a view that denies ontological freedom (see Pettersen, 2009).

C. The Paradox of Choosing to Be an Object

One objection to the argument that our own freedom and that of others should be our leading normative goal is that if we are free, we can also choose to be un-free. But "deliberately to will oneself not free," Beauvoir replies, is a contradiction (1976, p. 25). Why? Simply because agents need freedom in order to voluntarily subjugate themselves to others, a topic Beauvoir explores in "Must We Burn Sade?" (2012a). "Un-free" has meaning only in relation to "free." We cannot choose to be un-free unless we have the freedom to choose; consequently, it is a contradiction to want to choose to be un-free. Slaves, for instance, do not possess sufficient concrete freedom to choose between a free and an un-free life.

However, even in the absence of concrete freedom, slaves still have ontological freedom—by virtue of being members of the human race. On the basis of their ontological freedom, they can choose to consent or oppose their own oppression. Therefore, one might suggest, slaves' ontological freedom also allows them to choose to be the objects of others even if their concrete freedom does not.

The problem with this argument is that human beings are not simply objects. Human beings are human precisely because they *have* ontological freedom. Hence, the choice to subjugate oneself cannot be made once and for all. Given the free will every human being possesses, slaves can change their mind at any time. They can choose to replace submission with revolt. Furthermore, even if slaves never change their minds and always want to be un-free, they can only do so by *repeatedly* choosing lack of freedom. This is only possible if they are free. If the other has forced them into slavery, they have not chosen to be un-free. However, in cases of extreme oppression or any other situation where ontological freedom has been demolished—something that is indeed possible—individuals cannot choose to be un-free. In "Preface to Treblinka" (2012c), Beauvoir analyzes the impact an extremely oppressive situation can have on an agent's possibilities to act.

Finally, choosing to be un-free is also to lock oneself inside facticity, to make one's own life meaningless. Nobody really wants to live such an inhuman life, says Beauvoir; such a desire is an expression of self-deception. For a free being, willing not to be free is not only contradictory, but also self-destructive (1976, p. 33).

D. Free Recognition

Persons who are the only free individuals among un-free persons, or who are completely alone in the world, will soon discover that their freely chosen goals and projects become meaningless. Initially, individuals must choose their own projects freely, but at some point they will need to have them acknowledged by others. This is not to say that one cannot enjoy a solitary hike, but when hikers reach a mountain peak, they may wish to have company—or at least to share their accomplishments with others upon returning home. Likewise, one may enjoy writing in solitude, or tending the garden alone, but sooner or later, one craves the responses of others. Moreover, some projects can only be realized in cooperation with other people: My idea of how to solve a political problem will never be anything but a fantasy if I do not interact with others (Arp, 2001, pp. 71–72).

We are mutually dependent rather than self-sufficient in our attempt to justify our existence in a meaningful way. Existential justification is, therefore, also constituted inter-subjectively; "there is no escaping it," says Beauvoir (1976, p. 72). Individuals need the approval of others in order not to be devastated with regard to their own individual finiteness, as well as to experience joy and meaningfulness (2004e, p. 97; see Pettersen, 2008). In other words, "no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" (1976, p. 67).

The recognition of others is only fully satisfactory when given freely by free subjects. "The other's freedom alone is capable of necessitating my being. My essential need is therefore to be faced with free men," Beauvoir claims. "My projects," she continues, "lose all meaning not if my death is announced, but if the end of the world is announced to me" (2004e, p. 129). People whose ontological freedom remains intact must give the recognition; the response of an indoctrinated individual will not suffice.

Those who respond to our projects must also have concrete freedom; if they are forced to voice an opinion, it is of little worth. Consequently, there is a correlation between my own freedom and the freedom of others. In Beauvoir's philosophy, my freedom and yours are not opposites, but interwoven. I cannot expect others' free recognition, which I need, if I do not recognize them. We cannot force each other to mutual recognition, but we are all equally dependent on each other's free recognition (ibid., p. 133, 1976, pp. 71–72).

Hence, denying or restricting others' freedom means to deny oneself the freely given support of, and interaction with others.

One might object that in order to receive the free recognition of others, it could be sufficient to assure the freedom and rights for *some* groups only, say the white and the heterosexuals. However, restricting freedom to only some groups not only concerns those who are directly deprived of their freedom and rights, but also, indirectly, to all. Later in life, someone might want a same-sex marriage or interracial friendship, only to find it banned by discriminatory laws or prejudices. As everyone's chances of succeeding in living a meaningful life increase if the world is populated with free individuals, to support and work for extending freedom equally to all is in everyone's mutual interest.

The focus of existentialists on individual choice has often been interpreted as a sign of solipsism and lack of concern for community (Beauvoir, 2004a). Beauvoir's focus on inter-subjectivity and reciprocity counters this objection—or, at least demonstrates that it does not hold true for all versions of it. It makes her philosophical stance unique with regard to other existentialists and to a traditional moral philosophy that emphasizes the isolated and disconnected individual. Beauvoir's focus on human interconnection also explains why the traditional border between ethical and political philosophy cannot be crystal clear in her normative thinking.

E. Mutual Recognition and Authentic Relationships

Mutual recognition has not only existential, ethical, and political implications, but also significant (inter)personal consequences, as the recognition of one's own freedom and that of others—assuming moral freedom—is necessary in order to enter into authentic relationships. Authentic relationships such as real friendship and genuine love are, according to Beauvoir, important elements of a meaningful life; to recognize freedom of self and others constitutes a necessary foundation for forming such bonds. Relationships are authentic when they are freely assumed and when the parties recognize others' freedom as well as their own. Only on these terms can authentic love or genuine friendship develop (2010, p. 735). In such relationships, each party recognizes the other and themselves as human beings equal to all others (neither inferior nor superior), and, at the same time, as unique from all others. Consequently, neither attempts to submit to the other or to oppress the other. On love, Beauvoir writes:

> Genuine love ought to be founded on mutual recognition of two liberties, the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as the other: neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. (2010, p. 677)

The fundamental inter-subjectivity and the required reciprocity between free individuals—constitutive premises in Beauvoir's philosophy—are also dis-

played on the interpersonal and private levels: both parties in a relationship must maintain and exercise their own ontological as well as concrete freedom, and must expect and acknowledge the same for the other. In other words, both parties must also assume moral freedom in their private relationships in order for the relationships to be authentic.

Persons who do not assume moral freedom will not function well in relationships. In *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir reveals how and why women trapped in immanence find life meaningless since they have not actively chosen this life. She also describes how women's relationships are hampered due to submissiveness (2010; see also Pettersen, 2007–2008). Inauthentic love, for example, is characterized by lack of freedom and recognition. A tyrant is not free, Beauvoir points out (1976, pp. 61, 71). Indeed, a tyrant may have power—the concrete freedom to force others into submission—but will never feel real support or recognition from others as long as they are oppressed. Only in the company of other free human beings can we unfold as both unique and equal beings, and be recognized as such:

> [I]t is when the slavery of half of humanity is abolished and with it the whole hypocritical system it implies that the "division" of humanity will reveal its authentic meaning and the human couple will discover its true form. (2010, p. 766)

F. Humanity—the Ultimate Goal of Transcendence

Justifying our lives is an ongoing process with different stages. First, we must freely and deliberately choose our projects. In addition, we also need the recognition of other free individuals. However, others' acknowledgement is not enough to bestow upon our lives an enduring purpose. Even if we enjoy the support and affirmation of a particular group—be it family, friends, or the politically like-minded—we still need, at some point, a *wider* justification of our projects and our existence. We also want to participate in something larger, something extending beyond our mortal life, an ultimate justification of our projects. What could constitute such an ultimate justification of our projects and our transcendence?

In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir addresses several possible ultimate goals of our transcendence. One is to withdraw from the world and enjoy the moment (*ataraxia*), as both the Stoics and Cineas recommended. Another is to pursue the idea of the universal, as Hegel and Kant proposed; a third is to posit God as our ultimate objective—an option recommended by Kierkegaard among others. Beauvoir rejects all three. Instead, we "must turn toward men" (2004e, p. 106) and act for humanity. It is only in humanity that we can find the ultimate goal of our transcendence. Before inspecting what is meant by "humanity," we shall review what humanity is *not* for Beauvoir.

When Beauvoir posits humanity as our ultimate goal, she rejects a view of humankind as a unified, impersonal entity with a common goal, which she believes Hegel and Kant advocate. She also rejects an impersonal, universal source from which all values originate, a view found in religion. She furthermore distances herself from Hegel's and Karl Marx's understanding of humanity as they ignore human beings' ontological freedom by subjugating everyone in a deterministic, collectivistic movement. For Beauvoir, humanity is not a homogenous entity striving for the same goal. There is only a "plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself" (1976, pp. 17–18).

If humanity cannot be understood as an impersonal, unified, and collectivistic movement, can one instead envision humankind as an assembly of separate and antagonistic individuals, where only particular perspectives and isolated projects exist? This view appears accurate, says Beauvoir, since "the place each one occupies is always a foreign place" and "the bread that one eats is always the bread of another" (2004e, p. 107). In other words, "I am an instrument for some, only by becoming an obstacle for others. It is impossible to serve them all" (ibid., p. 108). However, even if our acts are often in tension with those of others, Beauvoir also dismisses the view of human beings as fundamentally divided and antagonistic. Such a view contradicts her emphasis on inter-subjectivity and free, reciprocal recognition. Ignoring relationality when describing humankind is just as deceptive as overlooking human beings' ontological freedom. According to Beauvoir, human beings are related, and "the me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject–object relationship" (1976, p. 72).

How then, are we to understand the "indissoluble" relationship between others and oneself that needs to be taken into account in our conception of humanity? Beauvoir asks whether it might be a *pre-established order* between people working for the "accomplishment of human unity across temporal dispersion" such as promised by Hegel, or the idea of evolution, or perhaps an unbroken *continuity* between individual actions (2004e, p. 108). She rejects these views as well.

No pre-given order between acts exists, and the assumption that there is continuity between each individual's acts is highly problematic: if my son emulates and perpetuates my actions without the possibility to resist or refuse, it indicates a deterministic view of human beings. This is clearly not an accurate depiction; human beings are free. Consequently, "if I am free, my son is also free," and "actions cannot be transmitted across successive generations as if they were gliding along calm water" (ibid., p. 106). Every individual can act freely, and each generation can change the course of history. Therefore, "with each man humanity makes a fresh start" (ibid., p. 110). Beauvoir repeatedly insists that the individual's freedom cannot be merged or subjugated

into a unit. Each human being's ontological freedom is entirely separate; human beings cannot be considered as a whole.

If each individual's goal can neither be united with an overall goal, nor be viewed as completely separate and antagonistic, then perhaps individuals can be unified in groups, or classes? That is possible, says Beauvoir, but only by opposing another group or another class and thereby reintroducing a fundamental antagonism: "If I serve the proletariat, I combat capitalism: the soldier only defends his country by killing its adversaries" (2004e, p. 108). It appears as if we cannot transcend humankind as such, only parts of it, because working for one part will always be to work against another. Cannot these groups then agree upon an overall goal—such as progress and enlightenment? Yes, but it can be difficult to reach a consensus on what is considered progress and enlightenment: the same person can be a martyr from one perspective, and a terrorist from another. Establishing a single goal for the whole of humanity is highly problematic, and potentially repressive.

Therefore, at first glance, it would seem meaningless to "act for humanity" when humanity cannot be considered an indivisible whole, or have a predefined ultimate goal. Also, when no values are given—another constitutive premise in Beauvoir's moral philosophy—it follows that there exists no a priori ultimate goal for humanity, just as there is no pre-given mission for each individual. In her own words, "each man's life and all of humanity thus appear absolutely gratuitous at every instant, as neither required nor called by anything" (ibid., p. 110).

All of the aforementioned views on humanity—be they Marx's, Hegel's, or Kant's—derive from beliefs about human nature. This is precisely why Beauvoir rejects them; they are founded on philosophical anthropologies that depart significantly from her own existentialist depiction of human beings. Let me enlarge. The term "humanity" sometimes refers to all, or sometimes only to a group of human beings, past, present or future. Moreover, it is often linked with characteristics or attributes that are taken to be uniquely constitutive of human beings (Giustiniani, 1985, pp. 168, 171). For instance, when uttering the phrase, "We are united in our common humanity," "we" can be referring to a group of people, or all people collectively. What "we" are assumed to share in virtue of being human, could be reason, emotions, a need for care, that we are beings loved by God—or ontological freedom. Beauvoir strongly emphasizes the final alternative, while clearly rejecting the penultimate possibility.

From this it follows that the expression "to act for humanity"—which Beauvoir suggests is the ultimate goal of our transcendence—is also closely related to her understanding of what characterizes human beings and, based on this, what she believes to be in their best interest. For Beauvoir, this is for all individuals to be able to exercise their freedom—together with other free individuals. Therefore, we can also suggest what it means to Beauvoir to have

humanity as the ultimate objective of transcendence: this involves sustaining and supporting freedom for all in an unending, unconstrained movement. In doing so, we uphold humanity's defining characteristic, namely freedom. In this way, each individual's project merges with a greater, meaningful project that transcends our mortal lives. Still, this merging does not destroy the individual or particular, and does not define the future once and for all. The ultimate goal of our transcendence is to act for humanity, and to act for humanity is to assume moral freedom.

In addition to becoming part of a meaningful project that, by sustaining and supporting the freedom of all transcends individual mortality, acting for humanity has yet another quality. It is only through free interaction that we can make our *human* nature manifest—unlike non-human *creatures*, which live for the immediate satisfaction of needs or which are slaves of externally given doctrines. In addition, to provide an opportunity for people to express and acknowledge their individuality and to form the basis of authentic relationships, interaction between free individuals is also the only form of activity that has no goal beyond itself. In order to make this possible, we depend on others, for without interaction with other free persons, we would not be immersed in a human world, a meaningful world, but only in an animalistic world without civilization and culture. To act for humanity, to take responsibility for the freedom of self and other, is what makes us uniquely human.

G. Existential Humanism

The reason Beauvoir is so deeply preoccupied with humanity—the human condition, human needs and welfare, their lives, experiences and values—is because she is a humanist thinker. Beauvoir is a humanist thinker in several ways. She is trained as a scholar in one of the humanistic sciences; she fosters critical thinking; and she has a strong political engagement. She also reflects upon human beings from a broad range of perspectives, and uses an interdisciplinary approach. More precisely, she develops a philosophy of human beings' being in the world, where their characteristics, experiences and welfare are the center of attention. In what follows, I shall enlarge on how, in this way, Beauvoir is a humanist thinker.

Beauvoir develops a theory of humanity based on her conception of human nature. She is also a humanist thinker in the sense that she has developed a notion of what constitutes human nature. In contrast to anti-humanists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, the mature Marx, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, Beauvoir does not entirely reject the idea of an immutable human nature.

Despite her de-masking and dismissal of several myths concerning human nature—and women in particular—she does not view some human features such as ontological freedom, rationality, transcendence, and relationality

as simply historical or social constructions. Instead, she sees them as given by nature, and therefore formative of her philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, and most importantly, they are not considered as given only to select groups, for instance, Germans, French, white people, or men, and withheld from others. Beauvoir argues that "the Other"—those excluded from "humanity" such as women, the elderly, blacks, and Jews—must also be recognized as having the same characteristics and in turn the same rights and opportunities as those traditionally encompassed by "humanity." Hence, her philosophy carries a strong appeal to act and engage in the world, to work for social justice—a hallmark of humanism.

Moreover, as Beauvoir rejects religion and dismisses any supernatural or external guidance for our lives, her humanism is secular. Each individual has the right as well as the responsibility to give their own life meaning, value, and purpose by using their own reason. They are free—and expected—to examine any doctrine and value system before choosing to approve or reject it (1976, p. 156). In Beauvoir's ethics, where individuals take responsibility for themselves and each other, human beings can be good without God; they can be moral and trustworthy beings through free and rational interaction.

The emphasis Beauvoir places on human interactions in her ethics could, one may object, turn her humanism into a cult, where humankind is substituted for God, where the human being is taken as an end and supreme value to worship. This is not the case. As Jean-Paul Sartre also points out, existentialism does not view human beings as ends in themselves because they are constantly in the making. The cult of humanity, as expressed, for instance, by August Comte, "leads ultimately to an insular . . . humanism and—this needs to be said—to fascism. We do not want that type of humanism," Sartre says, "but rather what is called an existential humanism" (2007, pp. 52–53). This is precisely what Beauvoir's humanism is; it is first and foremost an "existential humanism."

Beauvoir herself, we should note, does not speak of her theory as "humanism"; nor does she explicitly claim to be part of this tradition. Instead, she speaks of "humanity." However, as humanism can be understood as a particular type of theory concerning humanity, based on a particular philosophical anthropology, in what follows, I shall examine Beauvoir's understanding of humanity more closely. I want to demonstrate how her understanding of "humanity" reveals and legitimizes my claim that she is not only a humanist thinker, but more precisely, an *existential* humanist thinker.

The first reason why Beauvoir's humanism is an existential humanism is exactly that she views humanity as an open-ended quest. Preserving and sustaining freedom is an infinite movement, a goal that cannot be surpassed. This accommodates the existentialist view that being human is always transcendence (Beauvoir, 2004e, p. 106; Sartre, 2007, p. 52). As Beauvoir puts it:

> It is a perpetual surpassing of itself; an appeal in need of response constantly emanates from it; a void in need of fulfillment is constantly hollowed out by it. . . . Our transcendence can never surpass humanity but only accompany it, and yet it will be completely grasped again in each instant because in each instant Humanity is. (2004e, p. 106)

Moreover, Beauvoir's notion of humanity as the ultimate goal of our transcendence is a "thin" concept. The only predefined content of "acting for humanity" is to maintain and facilitate what it is that makes us human: our freedom to surpass the given, and our freedom to choose our own projects. Since humanity, in Beauvoir's existential humanism, is always in the becoming and never fixed or subjected to pre-established doctrines, it *cannot* become a cult (ibid., p. 106).

Second, Beauvoir's humanism is an existential humanism because it fully acknowledges two significant existential premises: there are no external legislators, and human beings create all values through their own choices (1976, pp. 15, 156). Since human beings have no external legislator, it is entirely up to us *if* and *how* we want to respond to these fundamental and ambiguous features of our situation. However, no matter *what* we do, or how we act, we participate in a perpetual creation of values. Even if we choose not to create, or refuse to adhere to any values, we still do. In that situation we have become—exactly as the critics of existentialism assert—ethical relativists or nihilists, deliberately indifferent to what values are created, destroyed or lost. This is also an ethical stand, and we are also accountable for being indifferent to the sort of values that are created and destroyed. However, if we chose to protect our own freedom and that of others—assuming moral freedom—we join a common project that transcends our own limited existence; we act on behalf of humanity per se. If we choose to respect the freedom of all individuals in their singularity, we act for humanity. To assume moral freedom *is* to place humanity as the ultimate purpose of our transcendence. This clearly makes Beauvoir's humanism existential.

The third reason why Beauvoir's humanism is existential is that it is founded on her existential view of human beings. Her concept of humanity is closely related to her view of human beings as ambiguous beings, while understanding that each individual is situated as well as free, autonomous as well as dependent (Fullbrook and Fullbrook, 1998, pp. 104–105; Kruks, 2012, p. 60). This is the core of her existential-philosophical anthropology, and it colors her view of humanity and in turn her humanism. Based on this existential view of human beings, Beauvoir sees humanity as a collection of free and unique individuals, each with their own goals and aspirations: "Humanity is a discontinuous succession of free men who are irretrievably isolated by their subjectivity" (2004c, 109). However, as "no man is an island," in Beauvoir's philosophy, we also need the recognition of other free individuals, as well as the concrete freedom facilitated by others, in order to live meaningful lives.

This is why her concept of humanity, and in turn her humanism, embraces the freedom of both self and others (moral freedom).

Sonia Kruks terms Beauvoir's humanism an "ambiguous humanism" (2012, p. 32) and points out how it challenges the "abstract humanism" based on "the Western 'man of reason.'" By this, Kruks means the "'sovereign' subject," which is a humanism that also "functions ideologically; it masks and legitimizes structures of oppression" by viewing the "'Others' as (at best) 'dubiously human'" (ibid., p. 38). Beauvoir's humanism, on the other hand, acknowledges the ambiguity of human existence, Kruks asserts. It is "a humanism for which flourishing is not to be confounded with the presence of the individualistic liberal order that has accompanied abstract humanism in the West" (ibid., p. 32). Although ambiguity is an important aspect of Beauvoir's humanism, it is an integral part of her existential philosophical anthropology. It should therefore be subsumed under what I argue is her existential humanism, not as an independent version of humanism.

Fourth, when Beauvoir claims that acting for humanity is the ultimate goal of our transcendence, she situates humanism within the last stage of her existential ethics. By merging her existentialist ethics and a secular humanism, each individual becomes connected with humanity as a whole. This goal is transcendent and infinite, but not religious. Rather, it is human-made. This is a move that does away with the problem of existential restlessness and meaninglessness. Even though each individual is mortal, and our projects finite, humanity is not. Beauvoir writes, "it is only by prolonging itself through the freedom of others that it manages to surpass death itself and to realize itself as an indefinite unity" (1976, p. 32).

In addition, by linking humanism with existential ethics, Beauvoir avoids the problem of infinite regress in her moral philosophy. Having moral freedom as the ultimate goal of our transcendence is not just an instrument to achieve yet another end. Acting for humanity is also the ultimate goal of our transcendence because it cannot be surpassed or completed, thus can never obstruct the infinite movement of freedom and transcendence (2004e, p. 106). By infusing existential ethics with humanism, Beauvoir sustains and fulfills the relational and intersubjective mode of thinking in her philosophy. It is not by turning inward, but by throwing oneself into the world and interacting with others for the good of humanity per se that our transcendence becomes truly meaningful.

G. Moral Freedom and Responsibility

Only in a free society can one throw oneself into the world and interact with other free individuals. Only in a free society are individuals granted the opportunity to choose their own projects, their relationships, and the possibility of participating in a common life. Such a society is not given by nature, but actively created by human beings. Some of our ancestors used *their* freedom

to facilitate such a life. They fought for causes such as the abolishment of slavery, women's rights, and against fascism and the Nazi occupation. In their efforts, they made moral freedom their overall goal as they struggled to uphold their own and others' freedom. At the same time, they were acting on behalf of humanity, as described by Beauvoir.

If we choose *not* to join a common project because we are not willing to act on behalf of humanity by assuming moral freedom, we are free riders in the humanity project. We benefit from the concrete freedom others fought to preserve, but without wanting to do our share to maintain it and ensure its continuation. When we fail to embrace moral freedom, we stand passive in the face of those who seek to undermine concrete freedom, and we fail to support others in their attempts to defend it. Shared freedom is a *common* good, created by human beings. If the number of free riders grows beyond a critical limit, this common good, which depends for its survival on our ongoing support, could collapse. By remaining passive or ignorant, or by actively exploiting others, we inflict damage on ourselves, on others and on humanity.

Within the framework of Beauvoir's existential ethics, our freedom and our interconnectedness have impact on our moral responsibilities. Both tell us what we can to do to support or destroy others. Ontological freedom is something each individual has by virtue of being human; it includes our free will and capacity to act autonomously. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir says that this freedom cannot be destroyed by others. Violence only affects the other's external condition, not their ontological freedom (2004e, p. 124). As presented in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, this is clearly a limitation in Beauvoir's portrayal of freedom. She operates here with a problematic body–mind dichotomy, not quite compatible with her efforts elsewhere to transcend binary modes of thought. Moreover, this dichotomy is empirically unsustainable. Destruction of ontological freedom is not limited to violence, torture, starvation, or imprisonment; it can also be damaged by daily neglect, lack of care and respect, violation of trust—and correspondingly be reinforced by mutual respect and recognition.

Because each of us is always a part of others' situations, it follows that we must aspire to not undermine their ontological freedom or destroy their concrete freedom. Although others' ontological freedom cannot be penetrated directly, as can the body, it can definitely be demolished indirectly by violence and lack of concrete freedom.

Many of our actions affect others' concrete freedom. If we actively deprive others of their rights and livelihood–or hamper their struggle for concrete freedom–we become the facticity they fight against. In such situations, Beauvoir argues, violence can be permissible (ibid., pp. 97–98). Our moral responsibility, therefore, not only requires us to act for the good of humanity and do nothing to violate other people's freedom, but it also requires us to avoid inhibiting their (struggle for) concrete freedom. We must make sure that our actions do not reduce or obstruct other people's free transcendence.

H. Moral Freedom and Democracy

The last reason we should assume moral freedom as our normative value concerns the political conditions that allow us to live a human life, a life where transcendence is equally possible for all. Democracy as a political system is able to sustain concrete freedom. Concrete freedom, ensured by a democratic form of government, is as important as ontological freedom for us to live an authentic life. Only by living in a free society is a *human* life possible.

Reciprocity also exists between each individual and society. Just as individuals must seek to preserve each other's freedom, society and individuals must also mutually recognize each other's freedom. What does this mean? According to Beauvoir, it means that, at every opportunity, the community must recognize the importance and dignity of each *individual* citizen—one by one. Society's respect for each individual is demonstrated by the public recognition of every citizen as a unique individual able to create individual values and life. This is what democratic states understand, Beauvoir contends, and what totalitarian regimes violate (1976, p. 106).

Society's recognition of individuals, says Beauvoir, is expressed through arranging and facilitating ceremonies such as baptism, marriage and burial (ibid.). It is also expressed, one could add, by facilitating education, job opportunities, health-care, child-care, and safety for all citizens, and by sustaining freedom of religion and speech and by invoking laws against discrimination. These arrangements are part of the concrete freedom each individual needs in order to use their ontological freedom and form authentic lives (Pettersen, 2013). Beauvoir points out that totalitarian regimes confine citizens in their facticity, preventing them from exercising their ontological freedom and creating meaningful lives for themselves (1976, pp. 106–108). Also, one may add, in some liberal societies, only privileged citizens have the opportunity to exercise freedom.

The political implication of Beauvoir's moral imperative to act for humanity—sustaining the freedom of self and all others—implies working for a society where concrete freedom extends to all citizens. In a democracy, humanity is understood as a collection of unique individuals, while in a totalitarian regime humanity is viewed collectively, as an entity that can be controlled and defined.

In return for having their unique values recognized and for providing the necessary framework for living authentic lives, individuals must also recognize society and act to maintain democracy. As Edward and Kate Fullbrook suggest, individuals can contribute to society in a number of ways—from the extreme sacrifice in emergency situations, to the daily care of fellow citizens or participating in elections (1998, pp. 110–112).

4. Concluding Remarks

Beauvoir points to the importance of democracy and equal freedom in the public domain, as many political philosophers do. She further emphasizes that to live an authentic life and to become autonomous political and moral agents, interaction among equally free individuals in the private sphere is also required. She shares this focus with feminist ethics and virtue ethics. Moreover, she maintains, with Sartre and Kierkegaard, that every human being is unique and autonomous. She refuses to let the uniqueness and responsibility of each individual be swallowed up by collectivist theory. Beauvoir's three aspects of freedom interact with three main spheres of human life: the individual, the social, and the political. This not only makes her philosophy conducive to different humanistic disciplines, it also makes her theory nuanced and complex enough to deal with real people facing real challenges in contemporary society.

For Beauvoir, concrete freedom constitutes a public good, and its defense a common goal. In its defense, she emphasizes the necessity of individual freedom, and at the same time argues that it must be restricted–by assuming moral freedom. Clearly, we cannot force others to embrace moral freedom, to act for humanity, or to take responsibility for the common good. We can only, with Beauvoir and other humanist thinkers, expound how fragile and mutually dependent our freedoms are, and hope this insight will inform our actions.

The arguments I have set forth, explaining why we should embrace moral freedom and act on behalf of humanity, are also arguments for the importance of the humanities. This is so because sustaining freedom also means helping to confront challenges that constantly threaten democracy and people's freedom. The many challenges facing contemporary society must be tackled in ways that do not undermine the freedom of individuals or of society. In this, the humanities plays an imperative role.

Beauvoir's own groundbreaking work in philosophy and literature, disciplines at the very heart of the humanities, is the best demonstration of what the humanities can do. As a humanist thinker, Beauvoir questioned and challenged traditional values and conventions and paved the way for novel reflections. Today, the humanities can—and should—explore the origins, validity, and possible outcomes of new, as well as old, ideas. We can form an opinion on which arrangements are likely to maintain or undermine freedom—to facilitate or inhibit a human life. The humanities can guide politicians and decision makers by supplying arguments and perspectives, as well as empowering individuals to reject some values while sustaining others. Through its critical and creative reflections on human-made values, the humanities can maintain and develop a well-functioning democracy.