POLITICAL VIOLENCE AS BAD FAITH IN
BEAUVOIR'S *THE BLOOD OF OTHERS*

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's novel *The Blood of Others* begins at the bedside of a mortally wounded Résistance fighter named Hélène Bertrand. We encounter her from the point of view of Jean Blomart, her friend and lover, who recounts the story of their relationship: their first meeting, unhappy romance, bitter breakup, and eventual reunion as fellow fighters for the liberation of occupied France.

The novel invites the reader to interpret Hélène and Jean's story as one of positive ethical development. On this progressive reading, although both characters are initially mired in bad faith and ethical irresponsibility, they ultimately transform themselves into ethically exemplary figures. Through their participation in violent political resistance against the occupation, they recognize their responsibility to humanity and actualize that responsibility in the form of positive political engagement.

I will argue, on the contrary, that throughout the novel Jean and Hélène exhibit a unique form of bad faith, distinct from the Sartrean conception, that Beauvoir identifies in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—a dangerous form of self-deception about the essentially ambiguous ethical status of every action that promotes the indiscriminate use of violence for political ends. I begin with an explanation of the Sartrean form of bad faith exhibited by both characters at the beginning of the novel. I then explain how their final ethical positions on political violence exemplify the form of bad faith Beauvoir describes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, a self-deception that allows the ethical agent to ignore the fundamentally ambiguous ethical status of every act, including ethically justified acts of political violence. Finally, I argue that Beauvoir's unique conception of bad faith indicates a fundamental philosophical disagreement with Sartre about the limits of human freedom, and reveals a serious flaw in Sartre's ethics: its inability to explain the seriousness of unethical acts of political violence, and its consequent vulnerability to such acts.

1. Hélène's egoism as bad faith: freedom without responsibility

The progressive reading of the novel is at least correct in its assessment of Hélène and Jean's original ethical position. At the beginning of the narrative, their ethical flaws are painfully evident. Hélène makes her earliest appearance as a strong-willed, selfish, and somewhat childish individual whose highest values are "chocolate and beautiful bicycles ."[1] She proudly proclaims her utter disinterest in the welfare of others: "We always seek to further our own interests… And I think that we're quite right… After all, we only have ourselves."[2] With the self-deceptive ambivalence that is characteristic of Sartre's conception of bad faith,

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[1] Beauvoir S., *The Blood of Others*, p. 71 and *Le sang des autres*, p. 92. Hereafter, texts will be cited with the page number in the English translation, followed by the page number in the original, e.g., p. 71/92.

[2] Ibid., p. 49/63.

Hélène fantasizes that she is completely self-sufficient and self-contained, while simultaneously admitting to herself the falseness of that fantasy. She even tries to imagine, in an early scene, that she is an oyster enclosed in her shell, and regrets only her unfortunate awareness that there is a world outside her shell. "I need no one", she tells herself, "I myself, Hélène, exist; isn't that enough?"[3] She ignores the interdependence of her own freedom with the freedom of others, in order to reject any ethical responsibility to others. She is, in effect, denying her facticity, that part of her identity that binds her to the rest of humanity.

Hélène's professed indifference to others is only partially undermined when she falls in love with Jean. Even her love expresses itself narcissistically—most vividly when, after the German invasion, she directly opposes Jean's will by using her family connections to obtain a safe military post for him in Paris, far from the front lines. When the Germans enter Paris, Hélène stays in order to work for a German firm, dining in luxury among German officers, while her Jewish friend Yvonne prepares to flee the country, others struggle to find food, and resisters are summarily executed. She even shrugs off the possible victory of fascism in Europe with a casual: "So what? It exists. And after it, something else will come."[4]

2. Jean's quietism as bad faith: freedom without consequence

Hélène's eventual conversion from egoist to principled martyr for the cause of human freedom is abrupt and, frankly, not altogether convincing, since the ambivalence her character initially displays toward her self-absorbed existence is less evident throughout the rest of the novel. Jean's ambivalence, in contrast, is always in evidence.

Jean Blomart is a young bourgeois with a guilty conscience. He has abandoned the privileges of his upbringing to become an ordinary laborer in a printing press. He takes an active role in the labor movement, but refuses to join to a political party, believing that party politics would endanger the principal value according to which he has organized his existence: individual freedom. Like Hélène, Jean longs for an illusory kind of freedom: transcendence without facticity, a complete self-sufficiency that does not impinge upon the freedom of others. However, unlike Hélène, he does not use this fantasy as a direct excuse for moral indifference. He fully admits its impossibility: "I cannot blot myself out [*m'effacer*]. I cannot withdraw into myself. I exist outside myself and everywhere in the world. There is not an inch of my path [*un pouce de ma route*] which does not trespass on the path of someone else."[5] Instead, Jean uses that very impossibility as a justification of inaction. He reasons that if he cannot act as pure, unconditioned freedom—if his every act shapes the lives of others without their consent—then the only way to protect freedom is not to act at all. "My one and only aim", he admits, "is not to dirty my hands."[6] Above all, he has tried to live a life "which owed nothing to anyone and which could not be a source of unhappiness to anyone."[7]

This quietist stance initially leads Jean to a position of neutrality toward the approaching war, an evasion of decision disguised as a conscientious middle ground. He declares his willingness to sacrifice his own life to stop the spread of fascism, but draws the line at spilling the blood of others: "I could pay with my body, with my blood, but the remainder of mankind was no coin for my use; what superman's mind [*quelle pensée souveraine*]

[3] Ibid., p. 43/55.
[4] Ibid., p. 207/266.
[5] Ibid., p. 115/149.
[6] Ibid., p. 104/134.
[7] Ibid., p. 67/87.

would allow itself to compare them, to count them, to claim that it knew their just measure?"[8] Jean correctly recognizes that the utilitarian calculus that sacrifices the individual to humanity, and the present to the future, necessarily reduces concrete individuals to something less than human in order to accomplish its end. But his alternative of inaction is, like Hélène's fantasy of self-sufficient freedom, a self-deception: he, too, denies his facticity. His very existence impinges upon the other's world. He does not avoid impacting the lives of others by not acting. He only avoids acknowledging his role in shaping their destiny, allowing himself to deny responsibility for consequences he has passively helped realize. By denying the necessary impact of his own facticity upon others, Jean pretends, in bad faith, that he can choose and act for himself alone, and that others must do the same.

3. The paradox of action: freedom against itself

Jean and Hélène both eventually recognize, through their relationship to one another, that they bear an active responsibility for others, initiating a radical transformation in their attitudes toward the war and the question of political violence. They both become committed Résistance members, willingly risking not only their own lives, but also the lives of others. They plan and participate in violent attacks against the occupying forces, knowing that for each Résistance attack, the Germans will execute innocent prisoners in retaliation. If the progressive reading of the novel is correct, this transformation indicates a development from bad faith to authenticity, from the evasion of moral decision to an ethically responsible and engaged existence.

However, while it is true that Jean and Hélène have surmounted one form of bad faith—the denial of ethical responsibility through the illusion of freedom without facticity—they both display another form of bad faith that they have failed to recognize or overcome. This aspect of the novel illustrates a unique conception of bad faith distinct from Sartre's version, one that is found in Beauvoir's later essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While Sartrean bad faith consists in the refusal to fully acknowledge the dual nature of human existence as both transcendence and facticity, Beauvoir's conception of bad faith focuses, not upon this dual aspect of existence, but upon its profound consequences for ethical action.

The ambiguity of human existence, its tension of wanting to be and being, of future and past, of freedom and facticity, lends to human activity a corresponding ambiguity which Beauvoir calls the paradox of action: "No action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against man."[9] On one level, this simply means that one can act on behalf of others only by acting upon their facticity, as things, since one cannot act directly upon another's freedom. But this paradox has its basis in a more fundamental paradox in the relation of human action to human existence. By choosing to act, I define my being. However, by actualizing a possibility, I act against my own freedom by attempting to give my being the character of a thing, to establish it as a definite kind of being: as a being-in-itself.[10]

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[8] Ibid., p. 120/54.

[9] Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 99/143.

[10] In "Between the Ethical and the Political: The Difference of Ambiguity," Debra Bergoffen insightfuly describes this paradox as a tension between a desire for disclosure and a desire for possession. She uses these two forms of desire to distinguish the ethical, as "an openness" or "gift" that asks "neither for reciprocity nor recognition," from the political, which seeks to preserve and protect that which is disclosed in the original moment of the ethical.

It may be helpful to turn to the likely source of this idea: Heidegger's suggestion of a "primordial guilt [*ursprüngliches Schuldigsein*]" in the very nature of human being.[11] Heidegger says that we are always guilty (in a non-moral sense) of nullifying our possibilities by choosing one possibility over another. By actualizing our freedom in one way, we act against our freedom in another; we take away possibilities from which we were previously free to choose.

This paradox, in turn, affects our ethical actions: by trying to help the other actualize her freedom, we act against her freedom in some respect, for we help her nullify other possibilities through which she might have chosen to actualize her freedom. Ethical action not only always fails in some respect; it fails precisely in virtue of its success: freedom is actualized through the sacrifice of possibilities.[12] This paradox grounds Beauvoir's unique conception of authenticity, which demands that we recognize a primordial, insurmountable guilt toward the other, because every action on the other's behalf also involves a degree of sacrifice of the other's freedom: "Action has to be lived in its truth, that is, in the consciousness of the antinomies which it involves."[13]

The paradox of action also clarifies why Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, acknowledges that freedom can vary in degree according to our concrete situation.[14] She recognizes that our real possibilities—the live options delineated by our concrete situation, as opposed to merely formal possibilities—are integral to freedom, that, as Heidegger says, "Dasein is always essentially its possibility."[15] Consequently, we possess a greater or lesser degree of freedom according to which concrete possibilities for action are offered by our situation.

4. The antinomy of political action: are all means are bad?

Turning now to the issue of political violence, we discover that the paradox of action reappears as a tension between the means and end of political action. Because every action is both for and against human freedom, every means to a political end involves a real sacrifice of human freedom. As Jean declares: "All means are bad."[16]

Indeed, it is this recognition that initially leads Jean to adopt a neutral stance toward the war. However, after his conversion to the Résistance, he uses this same fact to justify political violence: "It was an impossible undertaking to value human lives, to compare the weight of a tear with the weight of a drop of blood; but he no longer set a value, every coin

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[11] Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, p. 262-63/284-85. I am in agreement with the recent scholarship that suggests a significant affinity with Heidegger in Beauvoir's philosophy. See, for example, Gothlin's comparison of Beauvoir's use of "disclosure" [*dévoilement*] and Heidegger's "*Erschlossenheit*" (Gothlin E., "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger") and Bauer on Beauvoir's use of Heidegger's term "Being-with" [*Mitsein*] (Bauer N., "Beauvoir's Heideggerian Ontology").

[12] For this reason, I would argue that Beauvoir scholarship has overemphasized her view, against Sartre's, that the individual's freedom does not need to conflict with the other's freedom. While this is true, it obscures a more consequential difference: Beauvoir believes that when we act upon another's freedom, we truly limit their degree of freedom, while Sartre insists that freedom is fundamentally unassailable.

[13] Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 129/186.

[14] A number of scholars have suggested a fundamental departure from Sartre in Beauvoir's conception of freedom. See, for example, Arp K., *The Bonds of Freedom*, Kruks S., "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom" and Weiss G., "Simone de Beauvoir: An Existential-Phenomenological Ethics." In my discussion, I have focused on Heidegger's influence on this point, but Kruks argues that Maurice Merleau-Ponty is an equally important point of reference on the development of Beauvoir's views of freedom.

[15] Heidegger M. *Being and Time*, p. 40/42.

[16] Beauvoir S., *The Blood of Others*, p. 190/244.

was current, even this one; the blood of others. The price would never be too high."[17] Yet it is precisely this false alternative of unqualified rejection or approval of political violence that betrays Jean's bad faith. For Beauvoir, in order for an action to be authentic: "It must not conceal the antinomies between means and end, present and future; they must be lived in a permanent tension; one must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to the same thing, assume it lightly."[18]

Jean instead uses the inevitable failure of ethical action as a justification for completely ignoring the tension between means and end. He declares: "We must only be concerned with [*nous ne devons nous soucier que*] the end we have to achieve and do everything necessary to obtain it… One must act for what one wants, the rest is no concern of ours."[19] While he is correct that every ethical act fails—that "whatever one did, one was always guilty"—he falsely concludes that we do not need to worry about our methods. [20] Beauvoir concludes, on the contrary, that because every ethical act truly opposes, to some degree, its intended end, we must be more vigilant in constantly questioning whether the means do, indeed, promote that end: "What distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself [*se demande dans une interrogation incessante*]: Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn't this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it? In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself."[21]

It is just such a constant self-interrogation on the relation of political means and end that Jean exhibits throughout the majority of the novel, which begins and ends with Jean wondering if he is guilty of Hélène's murder, if his sacrifice of the blood of others is proportionate to his end. Nevertheless, in the novel's final moments, he overcomes his uncertainty and accepts political violence unconditionally. As he prepares to leave Hélène's bedside to begin a new Résistance mission, he tells himself that he accepts his "crimes," that they will be fully justified if his cause succeeds, and that "there is no other way."[22]

5. Beauvoir on bad faith and authenticity, freedom and sacrifice

Importantly, it is Hélène's influence that leads Jean to his final position of bad faith.[23] She persuades him that he is not guilty of her death, by insisting upon her freedom—she chose the actions that led to her death. This argument is questionable, however. For, as Jean asks, did she truly understand what she was choosing? Her situation may not have allowed her to fully disclose her possibilities; she may not (against the Sartrean view) have been entirely free in her choice. If Beauvoir is correct that freedom is never absolute, then Hélène may be denying the degree to which her facticity intervenes in the concrete realization of her freedom.

Indeed, in the story's conclusion, Jean realizes that even if Hélène's death was free, he is still responsible for the lives of those who will be executed in retaliation for his actions.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 133/192.

[19] Beauvoir S., *The Blood of Others*, p. 190/244-45.

[20] Ibid., 189-90/244.

[21] Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 133-4/193.

[22] Beauvoir S., *The Blood of Others*, p. 240.

[23] This indicates that we should not interpret Hélène as a positive representation of Beauvoir's philosophy in contrast to Jean as a critical representation of Sartre's philosophy. For a contrary view, see Holveck E., "*The Blood of Others*: A Novel Approach to the Ethics of Ambiguity."

Hélène has denied, not only her own facticity, but also that of the involuntary martyrs to her cause, as though their abstract freedom of choice absolved Jean of responsibility for using their deaths as a political means. Consequently, she displays a unique form of bad faith related to Beauvoir's conception of authenticity: she fails to recognize that her actions truly sacrifice the freedom of others, nullifying the very possibilities that constitute concrete freedom.

Hélène also tries to persuade Jean of his innocence by denying the transcendence of others. He should not feel remorseful, she says, because he is merely an innocent instrument to her end: "You were just a stone. Stones are necessary to make roads, otherwise how could one choose a way for oneself?"[24] Jean accepts this, deciding that he is no guiltier than the piece of steel that wounded her: "It did not kill you; it was not I who kill you."[25] The bad faith in this line of reasoning is evident. Hélène denies the transcendence of the individuals she uses to achieve her end, and Jean avoids recognizing his responsibility by reducing himself to pure, blameless facticity. In doing so, they reject the tension of means and end in political violence as merely apparent. The victims are merely things; nothing of real value has been sacrificed; there is no real crime, guilt, or loss. As Beauvoir says: "Reduced to pure facticity, congealed in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things which can be subtracted from the collectivity of other things without its leaving upon the earth any trace of its absence."[26]

While this attitude appears to exemplify the Sartrean conception of bad faith, in fact, Hélène and Jean are in a form of bad faith that only Beauvoir's philosophy has fully identified. Because Beauvoir recognizes that every action directly harms the other's freedom, she is able to acknowledge that the relative sacrifice of freedom in political action is nevertheless a real sacrifice that cannot be taken lightly.

If, on the contrary, freedom consists, as Sartre suggests, simply in the ability to choose from whichever possibilities are presented by one's situation, then the paradox of action is trivial: nothing of real value is sacrificed. For an action against human facticity does not directly harm the individual as transcendence; it affects that aspect of the individual that was never free to begin with. Likewise, the limitation of an individual's possibilities, the imposition of a situation that constrains action, is not a direct violation of freedom, since Sartre believes that consciousness remains unassailably free in any situation. Even taking the other's life does not clearly qualify as a serious or irreparable ethical loss. For if "there is no reality but in action" and if "man exists only to the extent that he realizes himself," then the sacrifice of an individual's future is a potential, rather than actual, loss.[27]

It is only by recognizing the paradox of action as an actual and direct harm to an individual's freedom that we can fully appreciate the sacrifice involved in ethical action. And it is only through such an appreciation that we can understand Beauvoir's insistence upon "a perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means."[28] Because the harm to freedom is actual, not potential, the sacrifice cannot be absolved or cancelled out, even by successful attainment of the end. Only because the harm to freedom is actual, not potential, is it always possible for the ethical subject to "ruin, by the means which he employs,

24 Beauvoir S., *The Blood of Others*, p. 238/307.
25 Ibid., p. 238/308.
26 Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 100/144-45.
27 Sartre, J.-P., *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 32/55.
28 Beauvoir S., *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 155/223.

the end he is aiming at."[29] Consequently, Beauvoir's ethics explains, in a way Sartre cannot, why we must never on principle decide the question of political violence, but rather legitimate or condemn violence only in the concrete situation, and why we must permanently challenge our decisions with the recognition of the insurmountably ambiguous ethical status of every action.

6. Conclusion

Because Beauvoir takes the refusal to assign a definite ethical value to action as her starting point, her philosophy departs dramatically from Sartrean existentialism. Like Beauvoir, Sartre provides methodological criteria for distinguishing bad faith and authenticity: authentic choice is made consistently with recognition of the dual aspect of human existence as transcendence and facticity, with recognition of responsibility for humankind, and on behalf of actions consistent with values to which one has freely committed.

However, Sartrean authenticity does not require the ethical subject to indefinitely maintain the ambiguous ethical status of the action beyond the moment of ethical decision, nor to endlessly revive the question of the action's actual utility to one's chosen end. His methodological criteria are designed to overcome ambiguity to whatever degree possible: to help us choose consistently with full recognition of what we choose for and against. Beauvoir's methodology, in contrast, insists that ambiguity is never overcome. Consequently, the morality of an action can never depend directly upon its designation as good or bad in relation to the subject's ends.

In this way, Beauvoir recognizes it is precisely the goodness of the well-considered action that seduces us away from the recognition of insurmountable ambiguity of every ethical action. The relatively "good" cases of political violence are dangerous precisely because they are good, encouraging us not only to see them as good without qualification, ignoring the real sacrifice they require, but also, more dangerously, tempting us to treat every case as equally unambiguous.

It is, consequently, Jean and Hélène's good conscience at the novel's end that condemns them. By considering their actions to be unambiguously ethical, to be actions that will certainly serve the greater good of humanity, they become vulnerable to future actions that do not, in fact, serve that end. This denial of the insurmountably ambiguous ethical status of every action is the distinctive form of bad faith that Beauvoir has identified, and that Jean, Hélène, and, possibly, Sartrean existentialism, have failed to escape.

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[29] Ibid.

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