

Simone de Beauvoir

The Ethics of Ambiguity

Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986)



Perhaps the most important feminist of the 20th century, she is studied more extensively in women's studies programs.

The work we are exploring--*The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1949)--is not as well known as her very seminal work: *The Second Sex* (1949). *The Second Sex* is her contribution to feminist philosophy; in it she argues that women remain in the position of "the Other" and are therefore unable to achieve complete human freedom.

Like Sartre, she called for positive social change throughout her life.

In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she expounds a defense of Existentialist Ethics (one that echoes Sartre's from *Existentialism is a Humanism*, but (at least from my point of view) seems a bit more assertive, better-articulated, and in the end stronger philosophically). Perhaps de Beauvoir discerned the necessity to expand on and explain what Sartre had said in his 1947 lecture.

de Beauvoir and Sartre were lifelong friends and lovers, though they always had an open relationship. Their promiscuous lifestyle and controversial political views made both Sartre and de Beauvoir quite famous—one might say infamous. They both spent most of their lives politically active and trying to reconcile philosophically Existentialism with Marxism (de Beauvoir eventually abandoned socialism in her later years).

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir is still very critical of Marxism and socialism. It is not until later in their careers that Sartre and de Beauvoir "convert" to a Marxist philosophy (or at least see it as compatible with Existentialism).

"Grown-Up Children"

Man's unhappiness, says Descartes, is due to his having first been born a child. And indeed the unfortunate choices that most men make can only be explained on the basis of childhood. The child's situation is characterized by his finding himself in a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit. (pg. 35)

What point is de Beauvoir making here about the world of the child, about childhood?

She says later on that there are some who *remain* in a childlike state beyond childhood.

"Grown-Up Children"

There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. Like the child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them. This is the case, for example, of slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. the southern planters were not altogether wrong in considering the negroes who docilely submitted to their paternalism as "grown-up children." To the extent that they respected the world of the whites the situation of the black slaves was exactly an infantile state. This is also the situation of women in many civilizations; they can only submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by the males. Even today in Western countries, among women who have not had their work and apprenticeship in freedom, there are still many who take shelter in the shadow of men; they adopt without discussion the opinions recognized by their husband or their lover, and that allows them to develop childish qualities which are forbidden to adults because they are based on a feeling of irresponsibility. (pg. 37)

These situations differ from that of a child in certain respects. The "child's situation is imposed on him, whereas the woman chooses it or at least consents to it."

De Beauvoir does not blame the oppressed individuals she speaks of entirely for not fully recognizing the extent of their oppression, but when this *is* recognized, then there is no excuse for denying ones freedom and responsibility (this would be dishonest).

It is rare, however, to maintain this infantile state beyond adolescence...

Collapse of the "Serious World"

De Beauvoir describes the experience we typically have during adolescence when we start to see flaws in this infantile state of our childhood--we start to see holes in it. With revolt and astonishment, we start to ask questions like "Why must I act this way?"; "What good is it?"; and "What will happen if I act another way?"

According to de Beauvoir, this is when one discovers one's subjectivity *and* the subjectivity of others.

Once adolescence comes, we start to waver and vacillate, we start to notice contradictions among adults as well as hesitation and weakness. "Men no longer appear as gods." Adults are fallible.

At the same time the adolescent starts to discover the "human character" of the reality about him. Language, customs, ethics, values: all of these have their source in "uncertain creatures" (humans).

Collapse of the "Serious World"

We also discover that we are called on to participate, to choose and to decide. This is what makes adolescence so difficult. The individual must at last assume their "subjectivity."

The collapsing of what de Beauvoir calls "the serious world" (in this case, the serious world of the adults) is a deliverance. Although irresponsible, the child is defenseless against the "obscure powers" (the parent's retort: "Because I said so"). But with liberation comes confusion...doubtless, our decisions can always be reconsidered, but conversions are difficult.

Moral choice is "free", but it is also unforeseeable (remember Sartre's despair). The child does not contain the person they will become, yet it is always on the basis of what they *have been* that they decide what they *want to be*.

This "moment of justification" that de Beauvoir refers to extends throughout our whole adult life. We are placed thenceforth on a "moral plane."

Making Oneself a "Lack of Being"

De Beauvoir claims that every individual casts herself into the world by making herself a "lack of being."

What does she mean by this? How do we, in our projects, make ourselves a "lack of being"?

When we set up a goal or project for ourselves, we contribute as well to "human signification", we "disclose" meaning.



The Sub Man

There are those, de Beauvoir claims, who restrain themselves from making themselves a "lack of being"; they make themselves "blind and deaf," without "love and desire." (pg. 42).

This apathy, she claims, is a manifestation of a fundamental fear of existence. Those who so restrain themselves are considered by her *sub-men* (not the most politically correct term).

The **sub-man** rejects the passion which is the human condition--the urge that drives us forward and calls on us to "exist", to become engaged with our freedom properly. She compares the sub-man to the bad painter who is immediately satisfied with his paintings, whereas the artistic genius immediately recognizes the demand for a higher sort of work. The "original poverty" of the sub-man's projects exempts him from seeking to legitimize it. Around him is a dull and insignificant world.

Sure, some of the sub-man's behavior will indicate certain goals and circumscribe certain values, but his acts are never positive choices (only "flights").

He cannot help being a "presence", but maintains this on the plane of bare "facticity" (a term we encountered with Sartre). But man cannot "merge with trees and pebbles" (he cannot become an "in-itself").

The Sub Man

To those who recognize freedom, the sub-man arouses contempt. One recognizes him to be responsible for himself just as he is "not willing himself" (i.e. ignoring his freedom). No man is a datum that is just passively suffered, and this rejection of existence is just another way of existing (cannot opt out of existence). This is the defeat of the sub-man: that no man is a tomb while he is alive.

His "negativity" is revealed positively as anguish, desire, appeal, etc. He is thereby led to embrace, or take refuge in, the ready-made values of the serious world.

He is afraid of engaging himself in a project as he is afraid of being disengaged and thereby of being in a state of danger before the future, in the midst of its possibilities...He will proclaim certain opinions; he will take shelter behind a label; and to hide his indifference he will readily abandon himself to verbal outburst or even physical violence...though we have defined him as a denial and a flight, the sub-man is not a harmless creature. He realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of. In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements...where there is no risk, those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from among the sub-men. (pg. 44)

What the sub-man fears is the "shock of the unforeseen"; this reminds him of the agony of his freedom. In order to get rid of his freedom, he must engage it properly. The sub-man's attitude then logically passes over into the *serious man*.

The Serious Man

The **serious man** typically forces himself to submerge his freedom in the content acceptable by society. He "loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity."

De Beauvoir sees this attitude as an almost deceitful stupidity; it gets rid of man's freedom by claiming to subordinate it to some "would-be" unconditioned values. He imagines that adherence to these values permanently confers value on him.

Of all of the "disingenuous attitudes towards existence," the serious man is the most widespread. One does not readily accept one's freedom along with all of the attendant anxiety and doubt.

What is to be done? What is to be believed? Often the young man, who has not, like the sub-man, first rejected existence, so that these questions are not even raised, is nevertheless frightened at having to answer them. After a more or less long crisis, either he turns back toward the world of his parents and teachers or he adheres to the values which are new but seem just as sure. Instead of assuming an affectivity that would throw him dangerously beyond himself, he represses it. (pg. 47)

The Serious Man

The serious man is not defined in terms of the end/goal/aim pursued:

The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of his being able to lose himself in it. So much so, that the movement towards the object is, in fact, through his arbitrary act the most radical assertion of subjectivity: to believe for belief's sake, to will for will's sake, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one's freedom in its empty and absurd form of freedom of indifference. (pg. 47)

This "freedom of indifference" is what makes the serious man no better than the sub-man. The serious man ceaselessly renews the denial of freedom, like a "mythomaniac who forgets that she has written a love letter to herself." The serious man makes himself a slave to the end he has set up (or that he has borrowed from convention). Some, of course, are denied any instruments of escape: those who are "enslaved" or "mystified". The less economic and social circumstances allow the individual to act upon the world, the more the world appears as a given.

“Useful”

The serious man forgets that every goal is at the same time a point of departure and that human freedom is ultimate. It is he who accords an absolute meaning to terms like "useful".

"Useful" has no more meaning in itself, claims de Beauvoir, as do terms like "right" "left" "up" or "down". "Useful" designates a relationship and requires a compliment. Something cannot be "useful" unless it is "useful for" this or that.

The serious man puts nothing into question, and this is what makes him so dangerous (he thinks that his "useful" is useful in itself).

For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution--army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing. (pg. 49)

The serious can lead to a blind fanaticism. In order to justify the contradictory, absurd, and outrageous aspects of this behavior, the serious man takes refuge in disputing the serious of others (never his own, of course). As soon as the "idol" is not concerned, the serious slips into the attitude of the sub-man. Thus, when experts step outside their field of expertise, they are often lacking in sensitivity, intelligence, an humanity. Having abdicated freedom, he has nothing left but his techniques; when these are not applicable he either adheres to the most ordinary values or takes flight.

The Nihilist

A serious man's life loses all meaning if he finds himself cut off from his ends. He escapes the anguish of freedom only to fall into a state of preoccupation, of worry. Everything is a threat to him because his idol is an externality that is potentially threatened, perpetually capable of being shattered, by the universe around it. Despite precautions, he will never master the exterior world. He will be constantly upset by the uncontrollable cause of events.

He will always be saying that he is disappointed, for his wish to have the world harden into a thing is belied by the very movement of life. The future will contest his present successes; his children will disobey him, his will will be opposed by those of strangers; he will be a prey to ill-humor and bitterness. His very successes have a taste of ashes...The serious man wills himself to be a god; but he is not one and knows it...Transcending all goals, reflection wonders, "What's the use?"...Detached from the freedom that might have genuinely grounded them, all the ends that have been pursued appear arbitrary and useless. (pg. 52)

This failure of the serious brings about a radical disorder. Conscious of his inability to simply "be" something, he becomes nihilistic--he wants to be nothing, a stationary datum.

Nihilism is disappointed seriousness turned back upon itself. The universe exists and continues just in order for the nihilist to detest it and scoff at it. This is still very close to the serious. The **nihilist** wants to believe in the serious world; he confirms it by his very revolt. He feels himself as a negation and a freedom, but does not realize this freedom as a positive liberation.

The nihilist can push his scorn so far until he seeks the annihilation of the world he rejects. In this sense, he resigns himself to a project that is doomed to fail; he devotes himself to a project he is bent on ruining. He rejects projects one after another, systematically annulling his ends.

But this negation constantly belies itself. One cannot opt out of existence. the nihilist discloses, he manifests a positivity at his core in this negation. This implies a constant tension.

The Nihilist

The nihilist's attitude manifests a certain truth, according to de Beauvoir: in this attitude one experiences the "ambiguity" of the human condition. But the mistake is that it sees man not as a positive existence (of a lack), but as a lack at the heart of existence. In this case, freedom is experienced as a rejection; it is not the genuine fulfillment of freedom.

The nihilist is right, de Beauvoir thinks, in seeing that the world possesses no justification in itself and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and make himself exist validly.

So the nihilist rejects existence without managing to eliminate it. He denies his "transcendence". Both the man who delights in freedom *and* the nihilist are opposed to the serious. But in another sense the nihilist is an enemy, because the nihilist systematically rejects the world and man. It establishes a tyranny which freedom must stand up against.

The nihilist overlooks what de Beauvoir sees as the "absolute end" of freedom.

The Adventurer

The **adventurer** is the man who discerns that freedom *is* the universal, absolute end of man. Even in failure, he nevertheless takes delight in living. He will not turn aside from the things he does not believe in (as the *serious man* often does). He throws himself into his undertakings with zest, into exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, and politics. But "he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims, only to his conquest." He likes action for its own sake. The taste for adventure could arise out of nihilistic despair *or* be born directly from the happy days of childhood. It always implies that freedom is realized as independence (on regards to the serious world). The "ambiguity" of existence *is* felt as a lack, but in its positive aspect. To be an adventurer one requires abundant vitality and reflective skepticism. But the adventurer's attitude is not always pure. They are often attached to their career, their success. The zest for existence is never experienced in its "gratuity." (What do you think de Beauvoir means by this?) the love for adventure is often mixed with attachment to values of the serious. "Cortez was serving God and the emperor by serving his own pleasure." (pg. 59) The taste for conquest is often subtly tied up with taste for possession. But what distinguishes adventure from a simple game is that the adventurer does not limit himself to his existence in a solitary fashion. He asserts it in relationship to other existences. He has to declare himself. Every undertaking unfolds in a human world and affects men.

The Adventurer

The adventurer often remains indifferent to the content of his action, the human meaning of his action. He thinks he can assert his existence without taking into account the others, so the adventurer shares the *nihilist's* contempt for men. By this contempt, nothing prevents him from sacrificing these "insignificant beings" to his own will for power. He will treat them like instruments or destroy them if they get in the way.

He appears as an enemy in the eyes of others; his undertaking is not only a wager--it is a combat. He makes himself a tyrant or a hangman. But he cannot impose his tyranny without help and so is obliged to serve the regime that will allow him to exercise his tyranny. Thus the adventurer ultimately falls into the servitude of the object (with a pretext for independence).

He must submit to masters unless he makes himself the supreme master. Favorable circumstances are enough to transform the adventurer into a dictator. He carries the seed of one within him, since he regards mankind as indifferent matter destined to support the game of his existence. But what he then knows is the supreme servitude of tyranny. (pg. 62)

So the adventurer encloses himself in a false independence which will indeed be servitude. To the free man, he will only be a chance ally in whom no one can have confidence (he easily becomes an enemy).

The Passionate Man

De Beauvoir declares that the **passionate man** is almost the antithesis of the *adventurer*. He sets up the object of passion as an absolute, not as a thing detached from himself (like the *serious man*), but as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity alone.

A goal which is first willed in the name of the serious can become an object of passion. Inversely, a *passionate* attachment can wither into a *serious* relationship.

Particularly in amorous love, one does not want the beloved to be admired objectively; one prefers to think of her as unknown, unrecognized. The lover thinks that his appropriation is greater if he alone is revealing her worth.

Nothing exists outside of this stubborn project for the passionate man; nothing can induce him to modify his choices. "Only the object of his passion appears real and full to him; all the rest are insignificant. Any means I use towards my object of passion are justified."

The Passionate Man

Why not betray, kill, grow violent? It is never *nothing* that one destroys. The whole universe is perceived only as an ensemble of means and obstacles through which it is a matter of attaining the thing in which one has engaged his being. Not intending his freedom for men, the passionate man does not recognize them as freedoms either. He will not hesitate to treat them as things. If the object of his passion concerns the world in general, this tyranny becomes fanaticism. (pg. 66)

There is no serious fanaticism, she says, which does not have a passionate base. yet a conversion can start within passion itself. The cause of torment for the passionate man is his distance from the object. He must accept this distance instead of trying to eliminate it.

It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the other is revealed as an other. To love, for de Beauvoir, is to love the otherness and that freedom by which it escapes. Love is not possession; it is the renunciation of all possession, of all confusion. This "generosity" cannot be exercised with regards to just any object whatsoever (not to a table, a book, etc. but only to another freedom).

One can not love a pure thing in its independence and its separation, for the thing does not have a positive independence...Passion is converted to genuine freedom only if one destines his existence to other existences through the being--whether thing or man--at which he aims, without hoping to entrap it in the destiny of the in-itself. (pg.67)

Disingenuous Attitudes Toward Existence

In her analysis of these "disingenuous attitudes", de Beauvoir believes she has revealed that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It must always appeal to the existence of others.

"Freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes." (pg. 70) Freedom, for de Beauvoir, should not be engulfed in one goal, nor should it dissipate vainly without aiming at any goal. The bond we have with others, this interdependence of freedom that both Sartre and her speak of, does not immediately reveal itself to everyone. We are often hesitant to acknowledge that our freedom depends on that of others and that to want our own freedom is to want their freedom as well (perhaps Sartre and de Beauvoir have yet to really make a strong case for this themselves). Our first reaction is often hateful, and we see the others as a threat to our freedom and/or security.

But this hatred, according to de Beauvoir, is naive, and the desire immediately struggles against itself.

Disingenuous Attitudes Toward Existence

If I were everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. There would be nothing to possess, and I myself would be nothing...To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations...No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects. (pg. 71)

Freedom, for the existentialist, cannot will itself without aiming at an open future (remember Sartre's *despair*). Everyone needs the freedom of others (in a sense *wants* it). She admits that not everybody assumes honestly the consequences of such a wish (they may take on one of the "disingenuous attitudes" she has spoken of). But it is only the freedom of others, she contends, that keeps each one of us from hardening into "absurdity and facticity."

So Existentialism, again, is *not* solipsistic. The "me-others" relationship is as indissoluble as the "subject-object" relation.

One charge against Existentialism is that it is a formal doctrine that is incapable of proposing any positive, concrete content. But de Beauvoir's claim that "to will oneself is also to will others free" is not just some abstract formula. It points out, to each person, concrete action to be achieved. De Beauvoir admits that there are concrete and difficult problems that arise in our relations with others. She turns to these "positive" aspects of her morality in Chapter 3...