

Simone de Beauvoir

Freedom, Oppression, Revolt

Indefinite Conquests of Existence Over Being

We will skip the first section of Chapter 3 (titled "The Aesthetic Attitude") and begin our analysis of de Beauvoir's account starting with the second section (titled "Freedom and Liberation"). De Beauvoir begins by describing four positive uses of freedom, what she calls "indefinite conquest of existence over being." (pg. 79)

1. Science
2. Art
3. *technics*
4. Philosophy

By assuming themselves, she says, they take on (in light of this assumption) an honest, "veridical" meaning of the word "progress". Remember in the previous chapter de Beauvoir's critique of terms such as "useful" (they have no meaning in themselves, but require a compliment). She seems to feel the same way about the term "progress".

Indefinite Conquests of Existence Over Being

It is not a matter, in these fields, of approaching a fixed limit (e.g. absolute knowledge, absolute "happiness", perfection of beauty, etc.). In that case all of these efforts would be doomed to failure. For humanity, its a matter of pursuing the expansion of his existence (this very effort is an absolute).

So how do these "expand man's existence"?

Science condemns itself to failure when, yielding to the infatuation of the serious, it aspires to attain being, to contain it, and to possess it; but it finds its truth if it considers itself as a free engagement of thought in the given, aiming, at each discovery, not at fusion with the thing, but at the possibility of new discoveries; what the mind then projects is the concrete accomplishment of its freedom. (pg. 79)

Science, "Technics", Art...

De Beauvoir claims that "technics" is often used as an "objective justification" for science (by technics, she seems to be referring to what we might call "technology"). Technics sets up as absolute goals the saving of time and work which it enables us to realize (as well as the comfort and luxury it enables us to enjoy).

She thinks that it is contradictory to speak of "saving up existence"--it "exists only to be spent." And there is a good case, de Beauvoir adds, that technological advancements do not make us happier today than those in former times.

But it is not a matter of giving humans time and happiness, of "stopping the movement of life", it is a question of "fulfilling" it.

If technology attempts to make up for this "lack at the heart of existence," then it fails radically. But if technology moves forward in order to push itself further forward, if it opens up new possibilities for man, then it escapes criticism (as far as she is concerned).

Science, "Technics", Art...

So how can technology be used to try and fill up the "lack at the heart of existence"? How can it be used to open up new possibilities?

Think of a particular technological advancement since the time de Beauvoir is writing this (the internet, for example). How do you think she would feel about this?

As for Art, de Beauvoir says that it should not attempt to set up inhuman idols. Rather, it should reveal existence as a reason for existence. (This is rather vague, though there are several examples of "existentialist" artworks. Particularly in the realm of Literature and Cinema, existentialist philosophy has had quite an impact. In cinema, the work of directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Goddard are often referred to as "existentialist").

Oppression

Though it may be permissible to dream of a world where humans will know no other use of their freedom than this "free unfurling", where constructive activity would be possible for all, de Beauvoir points out that today the fact is that there are those who can justify their existence only by "negative" action.

Sometimes "transcendence" is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. This is what, for de Beauvoir, defines a situation of *oppression*. Such a situation, she claims, is never "natural"...Sure, we must always assume some misfortunes, and there is always the possibility of failure, but oppression divides the world into two opposing clans.

Only man can be the enemy of man, only he can rob man of meaning. It belongs only to us to confer meaning, and each of us depends on the others. "One does not submit to war or occupation as one submits to an earthquake." When in the midst of the others, we must take a side for or against.

Oppression

This interdependence explains why oppression is possible, and also why it is hateful. It is the others, de Beauvoir claims, who help open up my future to me. But instead of allowing me to participate in constructive movement, the oppressor cuts me off from my future. When they do this, they are in a sense changing me into a thing (an *in-itself*).

Those who are free from oppression are allowed to "enlighten" mankind by pushing it forward with their "constructive movement"; those who are oppressed simply "mark time" to support the collectivity...

Their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures; there leisure is just about sufficient enough for them to regain their strength; the oppressor feeds himself on their transcendence and refuses to extend it by a free recognition. The oppressed has only one solution: to deny the harmony of that mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude him, to prove that he is a man and that he is free by revolting against the tyrants. in order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature. (pg. 83)

Oppression (cont'd)

What do you think she means when she says that oppression is sometimes "camouflaged" behind a "natural situation"? How have oppressors, historically, argued that the oppression was "natural"? Can you think of any specific examples?

When a conservative wishes to show that the proletariat is not oppressed, he declares that the present distribution of wealth is a natural fact and that there is thus no means of rejecting it; and doubtless he has a good case for proving that, strictly speaking, he is not *stealing* from the worker the product of his labor, since the word theft supposes social conventions which in other respects authorizes this type of exploitation; but what the revolutionary means by this word is that the present regime is a human fact. As such, it has to be rejected. This rejection cuts off the will of the oppressor, in his turn, from the future toward which he was hoping to thrust himself alone; another future is substituted, that of revolution. The struggle is not one of words and ideologies; it is real and concrete: if it is this future which triumphs, and not the former, then it is the oppressed who is realized as a positive and an open freedom and the oppressor who becomes an obstacle and a thing. (pp. 83-84)

So she describes a possible proletariat revolt where the roles seem to be reversed. Someone's freedom must be denied somewhere along the lines...

"Surpassing the Given..."

De Beauvoir describes two ways of "surpassing the given" (using freedom to "transcend" our facticity; making ourselves a "lack of being"). The first is like taking a trip (the "given" is present insofar as it is accepted). The second is like waking up in a prison cell and figuring out how to escape (the "given" is present insofar as it is rejected).

Around page 86, de Beauvoir begins a critique of Hegelian accounts of revolution (don't worry if you were confused here). Her point is that revolt is never harmoniously integrated into the development of the world (à la Hegel or Marx). Rather, it explodes at the heart of the world and breaks its continuity, providing for a total epoch shift.

"Surpassing the Given..."

Marx was correct, de Beauvoir asserts, in defining the proletariat attitude in strictly negative terms. The goal of the oppressed class is to put an end to themselves as an oppressed class. The Only issue for them is a negative one (the situation they find themselves in must be eliminated). All parties involved have an interest in eliminating this situation; each one needs to have all men free.

It is obvious why this is the case for the oppressed, but what interest does the oppressed have in such a change?

She insists that, if we are honest about our freedom and the responsibility which attends it, we must furnish the oppressed with the means of "transcending the situation", of developing what Marx called a class consciousness.

But the "conservative" (the one who wants to maintain or "conserve" the present situation) has an objection...

The Conservative Objection

"But what right does one have to want something for others?" asks the conservative, who meanwhile regards the workingman as "a grown-up child" and who does not hesitate to dispose of the child's will. Indeed, there is nothing more arbitrary than intervening as a stranger in a destiny which is not ours...But the cause of freedom is not that of others more than it is mine: it is universally human. If I want the slave to become conscious of his servitude, it is both in order not to be a tyrant myself--for any abstention is complicity, and complicity in this case is tyranny--and in order that new possibilities might be opened up to the liberated slave and through him to all men. To want existence, to want to disclose a world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will. (pp. 86-87)

So for the existentialist, one must help the oppressed conscious of their servitude, because otherwise one is complicit. Also, new possibilities will be opened up not just for the newly liberated slave, but also through him/her for all humans. So...what new possibilities were opened up, for example, to *all humans*, after the slaves were emancipated in the United States? Can you think of some examples? Surely, there are plenty to choose from...

The Conservative Objection

Moreover, the oppressor is lying if he says that the oppressed *positively* wants oppression. It is rather the case that the oppressed abstains from not wanting it because he/she is unaware that there is an option to reject it.

De Beauvoir points out that while the cause of freedom is the same for everyone, the urgency of liberation is not the same for all. For the oppressed, it is a literal necessity, but for those who already enjoy the positive aspects of freedom, the cause is a "moral exigency."

The oppressed are more totally engaged in the struggle, but everyone is affected by this struggle in a very essential way. According to de Beauvoir, one cannot fulfill oneself morally without taking part in the struggle.

The problem of oppression is complicated, de Beauvoir admits, and today oppression has more than one form or aspect. The aim is to abolish all oppression/suppression, but where do we start? What order should be followed? What tactics should be adopted?

The Conservative Objection (cont'd)

She seems to suggest, at this point, that it is a matter of opportunity and efficiency. (Like the hokey old adage: "Think globally, act locally.") It all depends on your individual situation. But she writes on pg. 89:

It is possible that [one] may be led to sacrifice temporarily a cause whose success is subordinate to that of a cause whose defense is more urgent...during the war, when Negro leaders in America were asked to drop their own claims for the sake of the general interest, Richard Wright refused; he thought that even in time of war his cause has to be defended. In any case, morality requires that the combatant be not blinded by the goal which he sets up for himself to the point of falling into the fanaticism of seriousness or passion. The cause which he serves must not lock itself up and thus create a new element of separation: through his own struggle he must seek to serve the universal cause of freedom.

So it looks like we may sometimes have to temporarily postpone specific goals for the greater, absolute goal of freedom for all.

The Conservative Objection (cont'd)

But the oppressor objects again: "But at what cost!? You are taking away my freedom and giving it to the other!"

De Beauvoir finds that a contradiction is dishonestly concealed here. We have to respect freedom, she claims, when it is intended for freedom. The kind of freedom that the oppressor wants is a demand for property, a feeling of possession, capital, comfort, moral security, etc.

She asserts that a freedom which is only interested in denying freedom must be denied. "I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor in prison." (pg.91)

But usually the oppressor is conscious that this argument will not work, so instead he presents himself as the defender of certain values. He is fighting for the "greater good" "what's best", etc.

It is not in his own name that he is fighting, but rather the name of civilization, of institutions and monuments, and of virtues which realize objectively the situation which he intends to maintain; he declares that all these things are good and beautiful in themselves; he defends a past which has assumed the icy dignity of being against an uncertain future whose values have not yet been won; this is what is well expressed by the label "conservative." As some people are curators of a museum or collection of medals, others make themselves the curators of the given world; stressing the sacrifices that are necessarily involved in all change, they side with what has been over against what has not yet been. (pg.91)

The Conservative Objection (cont'd)

So, what she calls a "conservative" is a defender of the past or of the status quo. She does not, however, want to disparage interest or veneration for the past (culture, art, religion, history, etc.). Some revolutionaries *do* reject the past (e.g. the Bolsheviks, the Maoist Cultural Revolution). No, de Beauvoir insists, to assert the reign of the human is to acknowledge man in the past as well as the future.

The fact of "having a past" is part of the human condition. "we must try, through our living projects, to turn to our account that freedom which was undertaken in the past and to integrate it into the present world." But she adds that the past only concerns us insofar as it has human signification. We must not be led into preferring the thing to man, the tradition/institution to the individuals involved. The "thing" only receives value from man anyway.

Oppression, then, can never justify itself in the name of some idol or some content it sets up itself. One does not really love the past, according to de Beauvoir, if one wants to "preserve it in hardened and mummified forms."

The past, for her, is an appeal; it is an appeal to the future.

"Production", "Progress", "Utility"

The oppressor does not always justify himself as a "conserver". Oftentimes, it is in the name of the future, of progress, of "production." "Only the colonist is capable of exploiting the wealth of which the native would let go to waste." (pg. 95)

Oppression, in these cases, tries to appeal to "utility" as a defense. But de Beauvoir has already shown how it is dishonest for "the serious" to give the word useful an absolute meaning. Nothing is useful, she claims, if it is not useful to man, and nothing is useful to man if he is not free.

Sure, oppressive regimes might achieve constructions that will serve man (think of modern-day China, perhaps), but they will only serve him when he is "free to use them." As long as the reign of the oppressor lasts, none of these "benefits" are real. Again, we cannot, according to the existentialist, prefer the thing to man.

The oppressor does, however, have a good case for showing that respect for freedom is never without difficulty, and it is hard to respect all freedoms at the same time. But this is the tension of the struggle, and one must reject oppression, she claims, at any cost.

The Antinomies of Action

A "reconciliation of all freedoms" is not possible, de Beauvoir claims, and no one any longer dares abandon themselves to these "utopian reveries." We cannot count on some collective conversion.

Oppressors represent, in the eyes of all those of good will, the absurdity of facticity. Existentialist ethics calls for a triumph of freedom over facticity, so the oppressor must be suppressed. We cannot act upon the subjectivity of the oppressor, but must rather act upon their objective presence.

In other words, in the struggle of freedom for all, others will have to be treated like things (with violence--both literal and figurative). Certain men will have to be treated as things in order to win freedom for all.

The Antinomies of Action

De Beauvoir explains that freedom which is occupied in denying freedom is so outrageousness of violence which one practices against it is almost canceled out. But it is not just the oppressor who we are forced to treat with violence. The oppressor needs accomplices who are complicit, and these often become unfortunate casualties...

...mystification is one of the forms of oppression; ignorance is a situation in which man may be enclosed as narrowly as in a prison...doubtless, respectful minds take the object of their respect for their own; in this sense they are *responsible* for it, as they are responsible for their presence in the world: but they are not *guilty* if their adhesion is not a resignation of their freedom. When a young sixteen-year old Nazi died crying, "Heil Hitler!" he was not guilty, and it was not he whom we hated but his masters. The desirable would be to re-educate this misled youth; it would be necessary to expose the mystification and to put the men who are its victims in the presence of their freedom. But the urgency of the struggle forbids this slow labor. We are obliged to destroy not only the oppressor but also those who serve him, whether they do so out of ignorance or out of constraint. (pg. 98)

Guilt vs. Responsibility

Notice the distinction de Beauvoir makes between *guilt*, on the one hand, and *responsibility* on the other. We must destroy not only the oppressor, but also his servants (even though the servants may not be *guilty*, they are still *responsible*).

Since we can only conquer our enemies by acting upon their *facticity*, we also have to make ourselves things/objects (i.e. we must be willing to sacrifice ourselves/others (at least temporarily) to fight the greatest oppression).

"Every war, every revolution, demands the sacrifice of a generation, of a collectivity, by those who undertake it." (pg. 99)

Guilt vs. Responsibility

One finds oneself in a paradoxical situation: no action can be generated *for* man without its being immediately generated *against* men. This is a bitter truth that is often masked.

She warns that, in the struggle for freedom, we should not be tempted to fall into the attitude of the seriousness or nihilism. We should not set up as unconditioned the value of our end/goal (the serious), nor be blinded by the cause to the point of viewing as insignificant the mean who are being used as instruments (nihilism).

If the oppressor's contempt for man is convenient, it is also dangerous. Men (their subjects) lose a zest for life and a readiness to risk it...

The Individual vs. The Collectivity

De Beauvoir argues that a doctrine which aims at the liberation of man cannot rest on the rest on contempt for the individual (contra-Marx, contra-Hegel). It can propose to us no other salvation than subordination to the collectivity.

...if the individual is taught to consent to his sacrifice, the latter is abolished as such, and the soldier who has renounced himself in favor of his cause will die joyfully...We know how many edifying speeches this philosophy has inspired: it is by losing oneself that one finds himself, by dying that one fulfills his life...all leaders of men preach in this vain...The brave man dies gaily, of his own free will; the one who rejects death deserves only to die. There you have the problem elegantly resolved. (pp. 103-04)

The Individual vs. The Collectivity

Such a collectivist doctrine empties the human world of what de Beauvoir calls its "sensible thickness." Individuality is denied; moral salvation lies in surpassing towards an other who will also surpass (à la Hegel). The "system" is a huge mystification, claims de Beauvoir, and it subordinates all its "moments" to an end whose coming it dares not set up. (What would Wile. E Coyote do if he actually caught the Road Runner? Presumably eat him, but what then?)

But if the individual is nothing, then society can not be something (zero multiplied by any number is still zero). Only the subject, says de Beauvoir, can justify his own existence, and he cannot be regarded as a nothing (consciousness of all things is within him).

The Individual vs. The Collectivity

Nihilistic Pessimism and Rationalistic Optimism, two unfortunate by-products of many revolutionary struggles, always fail to "juggle away the bitter truth of sacrifice." (pg. 106) They also eliminate any reason for wanting it. De Beauvoir describes a young lady who needs to get "cured":

Someone told a young invalid who wept because she had to leave her home, her occupations, and her whole past life, "Get cured. The rest has no importance." "But if nothing has any importance," she answered, "what good is it to get cured?" She was right. In order for this world to have any importance, in order for our undertaking to have a meaning and be worthy of sacrifices, we must affirm the concrete and particular thickness of this world and the individual reality of our projects and ourselves. This is what democratic societies understand; they strive to confirm citizens in the feeling of their individual value; the whole ceremonious apparatus of baptism, marriage, and burial is the collectivity's homage to the individual; and the rites of justice seek to manifest society's respect for each of its members considered in his particularity. After or during a period of violence when men are treated like objects, one is astonished, even irritated at seeing human life rediscover, in certain cases, a sacred character...once the period of crisis...has passed, [democratic societies] aim to re-establish the individual within his rights; more than ever they must restore to their members the sense of their dignity, the sense of the dignity of each, taken one by one; the soldier must become a citizen again so that the city may continue to subsist as such, may continue to deserve one's dedicating oneself to it.

The Individual vs. The Collectivity

So even after blind violence, the democratic state resumes its respect for the individual and their rights (even those of the enemy).

If the individual is kept unique and irreducible, then sacrifice actually means something. A collectivist conception of man does not concede a valid existence to such sentiments as love or friendships. If individuals recognize themselves in their differences, then the individual relations are established among men, and each one becomes irreducible for a few others.

The "Danger" of Thought

Every authoritarian party regards thought as a danger and reflection as a crime. Even if the opponent is wrong, he/she brings to light a certain truth: "that there is a place in the world for error and subjectivity." He/she shows that men in power may also be mistaken.

The oppressor will often use the "doctrine of necessity" as a weapon:

The doctrine of necessity is much more a weapon than a faith; and if they use it, they do so because they know well enough that the soldier may act otherwise than he does...they know well enough that he is free and that they are fettering his freedom. It is the first sacrifice they impose on him: in order to achieve liberation of men he has to give up his own freedom, even his freedom of thought. In order to mask the violence, what they do is have recourse to a new violence which even invades his mind. (pg. 110)

Human efforts and lives can no more be treated as instruments than human work can be treated as simple merchandise. The most disciplined soldier would mutiny if skillful propaganda did not persuade him that he is dedicating himself to the cause of man (to his cause).

The only justification for sacrifice, de Beauvoir claims, is utility, but the "useful" (as we have already seen) is what serves humans. So to serve some men, we must do a disservice to others.

But by what principle do we decide who?

"Useful" for the Future

Recall that, according to de Beauvoir, the supreme end at which all must aim is absolute freedom.

Can we appeal to quantity in this struggle (the greatest freedom for the greatest number)?

This is logical...but is it right?

Can we appeal to uniqueness (spare those who are the most important, the "specialists")?

These are just another way, claims de Beauvoir, to rationalize massacres, and these rationalizations move from one "useful" to another.

The compliment of "useful", remember, is man (humans makes this word have any sense/meaning). But de Beauvoir adds that the future is also a compliment to "useful" (recall Sartre's claim that "Man is the future of man.").

Only a future, she insists, can take the present for its own and keep it alive by surpassing it, and no action is conceivable without this sovereign affirmation of the future.

The future she is speaking of is not a "future of finality", she warns, but a future of "constant transcending", a future of self-perpetuating freedom--not the illusion of a stationary future.

Conclusion

So what about the charges that Existentialist Ethics are too individualistic?

Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence. It is individualism in the sense in which the wisdom of the ancients, the Christian ethics of salvation, and the Kantian ideal of virtue also merit this name; it is opposed to the totalitarian doctrines which raise up beyond man the mirage of Mankind. But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of himself. (pg. 156)

Conclusion

What about the charges of caprice, meaninglessness, being void of value?

Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world around us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weaknesses within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive. There is a very old saying which goes: "Do what you must, come what may." That amounts to saying in a different way that the result is not external to the good will which fulfills itself in aiming at it. If it came to be that each man did what he must, existence would be saved in each one without there being any need of dreaming of a paradise where all would be reconciled in death. (pg. 159)