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## **Simone de Beauvoir: Facilitator For Feminist Ethics**

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- ¶1. When thinking for women was popularly considered neither their province, privilege, nor possibility, Descartes demonstrated with his letters to Elizabeth of Bohemia and his teaching of Christina of Sweden as well as with his theory about thinking, that this popular conception was incorrect. As Descartes in the seventeenth century freed women to *think* for themselves, I propose that Simone de Beauvoir in the twentieth century freed women to act for themselves. Simone de Beauvoir's unique insights into the ambiguity of human activity, and her notion of the process of ethical being, I assert, not only freed women to act for themselves in such ways as to actually applaud "freedom of choice" but to originate new ethical theories.
  
- ¶2. De Beauvoir most clearly drafted her ethics in three texts. In brief, de Beauvoir initiated ethical considerations in her *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, and in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* formulated a system of ethics that articulates the existential situation in terms of moral choice and moral responsibility based on the principle of freedom. *The Second Sex* clarifies the reality of women's particular situation in relation to this system and interprets further what this means beginning with her definition of woman.

## **The Historical Narrative**

- ¶3. While women contributed to philosophy in isolated incidences throughout history, they were generally barred from education and consequently from studying and writing philosophy. In *The Second Sex*, listing many of her predecessors unfortunately not included in the English translation, de Beauvoir recognized the legacy of those women thinkers who by happenstance and determination overcame these handicaps and contributed to philosophy. Here, de Beauvoir expressed her admiration for her French forerunner, twelfth century Héloïse, recognizing Héloïse as one who in her letters to Abélard, revealed how her ethics was conceived from insights into her existential situation. In these letters she had analyzed her actions and their consequences based on criteria that differed from Abélard's criteria. Héloïse was one of a roster of early women philosopher anomalies, following upon such notables as Aspasia, the Cynic Hipparchia of Maroneia, and Hypatia of Alexandria.
- ¶4. Closer in time to de Beauvoir were those more numerous seventeenth century women philosophers who knew Descartes personally or knew his work—Marie de Gournay in France, Anna van Schurman in Holland, Mary Astell and Anne Conway in England. Whether they rejected or accepted his thinking, they dared to *think* for themselves in part because of Descartes. His *cogito* allowed women the freedom that religious and scholarly practice did not to interpret and express an opinion on profound matters. To *think*, as he argued, was to do so without regard to situation—male or female body, passion, desk, or kitchen table.
- ¶5. De Beauvoir's "willing" like Descartes' "thinking" is also neither male nor female per se, but unlike Descartes takes into consideration the contingencies of time, place, and imposed limitations. While Héloïse had written of her situation—the givenness of it, the laws of marriage, the realities of female experience, the traditions of education and the church, the physical consequences of physical acts, be they pregnancies or castrations—contingencies necessarily affecting choice and action, De Beauvoir's "willing" also took into account experience of changing situation in relation to freedom of intention and choice. Hence, for de Beauvoir contingencies are integral to the "willing" subject.
- ¶6. Of the seventeenth century women philosophers mentioned, it is the thinking of de Gournay that is closer to de Beauvoir's thinking about ethics. Mary Astell had proposed a school for women to accommodate a philosophy of knowledge that would inspire right living based on Cartesian principles, a retirement from the material world that would give women opportunity for reflection. Anne Conway had argued that there was no need for duality of substance. For her, the world was composed of spiritual monads, its "materiality" being nothing but resistance. In contrast, Marie de Gournay's treatise *On the Equality of Men and Women* relies on the principle of women's rational nature, and rests on the reality of women's experience that unites body and soul. The reality of de Gournay is one that prevents women from engaging in activities suited to a rational nature: studying, writing, teaching, and in addition leading nations and serving God by baptizing and preaching.

- ¶7. Before de Beauvoir, most ethics defined women as being not quite fully human or lacking the definitive human status, that of the male. For it was in her lifetime, toward the middle of the twentieth century, that western Europe and the United States allowed full citizenship to women, a practice which is not yet global at the close of the century.<sup>[1]</sup> Hence women were bound in systems that ignored women's reality and/or denied their full participation in human reality. However, consequent to de Beauvoir, increasingly other women philosophers have formulated ethical systems that are inclusive and which in the end better and deepen the field of ethics.
- ¶8. The irony is that while today Susan Bordo among others argues that Descartes's *cogito* led to the super "masculinization" of philosophy, it is evident from the foregoing that it also led to the "feminization" of philosophy in that it sanctioned women to *think*, and in so doing, to contribute to philosophy.<sup>[2]</sup>
- ¶9. The purpose of this historical background was to demonstrate that philosophical influences in de Beauvoir's work were not only the male philosopher's works she had studied, nor the ideas of her male contemporaries.<sup>[3]</sup> It was also to provide a prelude to Simone de Beauvoir's own experiences of her time: two world wars, and a world that did not recognize women as voting citizens in France until 1948, nor encourage women in academe, especially in philosophy, nor permit women in either the public or domestic scene equal authority. So, the issues of oppression and/or violence in both the public and domestic arenas were present in de Beauvoir's life as a woman philosopher and became issues in her philosophy.

## The Argument

- ¶10. It has recently come to light with the discovery of Simone de Beauvoir's diary, that her interest in philosophy and in ethics in particular came early in her life. " 'Ah, there is a lot to do to make myself a philosopher!' " Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1927, the pertinent year of the diary for the argument being made here.<sup>[4]</sup> "Philosophy," she wrote, is an "intellectual passion that reflects a need within herself, a love whose loss would be as though she had been deprived of life."<sup>[5]</sup> In the same year, she wrote, " 'I felt ashamed for my lack of certitudes' for not having figured out 'how to live.' "<sup>[6]</sup>

- ¶11. The questions about "how to live" were first formulated in her 1944 text *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*.<sup>[7]</sup> This text is based on the story in Plutarch of Cinéas' interrogation of the Greek general Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus, who has conquered country after country, tells Cinéas he will retire once he has conquered India. Cinéas responds by asking him, why not retire now then? Hence, the book poses the question, why live at all? In reflecting on the questions, when do we begin to live-conquering the world, the universe-and when do we stop, de Beauvoir reasons, we find ourselves in absurdity. As with Don Juan's always one more woman to conquer, where does it end, she asks?
- ¶12. So the inquiry becomes involved with "is there a limit on human projects, and for what good are they?" De Beauvoir cites Voltaire's *Candide* answering, we act for our own good, "to cultivate our garden." But this instigates the issue of what is "our" garden. A young girl scooping water to quench her thirst is confronted with the question, but aren't you taking from the millions thirsty in China? She answers, but they are in China, I am thirsty here. The argument now concerns who is affected by my projects, who is my neighbor, and what is the relationship between me and my neighbor? Hence, early on for Simone de Beauvoir the questions why live and, what does it mean to live a good life concern actions that involve problems of limits of time and space and connectiveness.
- ¶13. These problems in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* are examined on the usual male terrain of philosophy-Socrates, Dostoyevsky, the Stoics, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Jean Paul Sartre. Beginning in *Candide's* garden and the human situation, the text ends in a consideration of others, communication, and action. Each instant, each thought and feeling is a project that defines one's presence. In the terrain of life, she argues, it is the freedom to act that allows for transcendence through action, freedom willed not only to one's self but to others. She concludes that it is only with death that freedom is impossible.
- ¶14. The first words in the next text in sequence, the 1947 *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, quote Montaigne: "The continuous work of our life is to build death."<sup>[8]</sup> The Ethics formulates an ethics of ambiguity, the ambiguity of existence and essence, of being in the world and of the world, of choosing to live only to be conquered by death. It ensues upon the inquiry of *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, but it begins to change the ethical terrain to include women when it differentiates the experiences of men and women.

- ¶15. One of the problems here becomes how can a person choose or act, denied freedom? What does denial of freedom mean, when does it occur, and what does it have to do with responsibility? When freedom is denied, in the case of women, who at this time can not vote nor enter the public sphere in any meaningful way, or in the private sphere are forced to operate under the authoritarian thumb of father or husband, then, Simone de Beauvoir claims, a "ceiling" is in place that prevents women from acting in their full humanity or full freedom and responsibility.<sup>[9]</sup> She compares this situation to that of a child, a prisoner of war, a slave, or in Linda A. Bell's interpretation of de Beauvoir, a person kept in a "perpetual twilight of awareness."<sup>[10]</sup> For an ethical subject, choices are possible but limited, and the future, depending on the severity of the oppression, is all but non-existent. The very words "ceiling" and "choice" become part of ethical theories by women philosophers decades later.
- ¶16. The notion of care, necessarily involved in one's own choices, is integral to de Beauvoir's existential ethics.<sup>[11]</sup> Freedom, the principle of de Beauvoir's ethics, is neither solipsistic nor without consequences. One cannot morally will freedom only to one's self. Evil results from refusing to choose to be, in choosing a replacement for being, or in choosing freedom only for one's self, for that is not really choosing freedom. Finally, in its definition of ethics as relational activity, it is, indeed, a Field-Being ethics.
- ¶17. Here, in her view that freedom involves the freedom of others, women are taken into account specifically. Theory is borne out in human experience, not only adult or male experience but experience of young and old, male and female, in public and private, in war and in peace. If freedom is the principle for ethical action, then it follows that women deserve freedom equally, as does a child in time, when she or he enters adolescence.
- ¶18. It is in the *The Second Sex*, published two years later, that Simone de Beauvoir more fully formulates her ethics in the experience of women, and develops it from the concept of the situated body-subject. Margaret Simons claims that in this 1949 text, "Freedom is a central theme...Beauvoir is celebrating woman's freedom, the expansion of her choices, not confinement."<sup>[12]</sup> This very goal is to awaken women and instruct them to see how they inhabit a larger ethical world than the previous one, which was less open to choice and more confined by ready-made laws, gods, customs, interpretations of religions and philosophy.

- ¶19. Woman herself is defined by de Beauvoir in ethical terms. For de Beauvoir, woman is not defined by nature, rather woman "is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life."[\[13\]](#) Hence, "woman is defined as a human being in quest of values in a world of values."[\[14\]](#) In redefining woman, de Beauvoir, opened woman to herself, to becoming, and changed woman from a thing or idea acted upon to an actor. In her ethics, when choice and value are open to women, the future is open to her. Without a future there is no ethical possibility, no real humanness, no womanness.

## The Consequences

- ¶20. In conclusion, if Descartes gave women permission to *think*, certainly Simone de Beauvoir gave women permission to act, to be, to become, to fulfill their existence. By redefining ethics and redefining woman, Simone De Beauvoir presented the world with a legacy of existential ethics and a notion of woman that has more clearly permitted woman to act on her own behalf and hence to reflect on the meaning of ethical action. Perhaps one proof of her influence was the international commemorative conference on Simone de Beauvoir that took place, January 1999, in Paris.
- ¶21. Margaret Simons, who interviewed Simone de Beauvoir on numerous occasions and who recently commented on the significance of her 1927 diary, believes that "all feminist dialogue entails a dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir,"[\[15\]](#) but I suggest here that, acknowledged or not, it is evident that "all women philosophers doing ethics also entail a dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir."[\[16\]](#) Simons believes de Beauvoir actually formulated different moral problems, one being the opposite of solipsism or ethical egotism, that is, what Simons terms, the "solaltrism" of women's experience, where the problem is one of self abdication rather than of self gratification.
- ¶22. What does this mean for each woman inquiring into the most profound moral questions of our quotidian lives? To those women concerned with ethics in medicine, science, and politics? These are questions currently being explored by Annette Baier, Seyla Benhabib, Carol Gilligan, Sandra Harding, Sarah Hoagland, Virginia Held, Chandra Tadpole Mohanty, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and such women writers of ethics today, as Gloria Anzaldúa with her concept of "borderlands," a concept that extends the "field," and is used as a practical term to regard not only sex, but gender, culture, and race.[\[17\]](#) Some of these philosophers write on issues not directly linked to de Beauvoir's ethics. Still many never mention Simone de Beauvoir, and some lump her contributions with Sartre's.[\[18\]](#) But, it will be unfortunate if philosophers of ethics, especially women, neglect to recognize and acknowledge de Beauvoir's innovative notions.[\[19\]](#) Today, because women writing ethics proliferate, women philosophers choose to limit their controversies to their contemporaries, but

still, I contend, an understanding of the fragile history of the tradition is advantageous to an understanding of the changing philosophical landscape.

- ¶23. Today, ethical theory has brought about practical improvements in a significant way to such diverse fields as medical experimentation that now differentiates women from the definitive male, domestic law, that now addresses domestic violence, and sports law, that now encourages a Mia Hamm. Simone de Beauvoir's freedom to ethically be, allows for fuller becoming. Largely because of Simone de Beauvoir in particular and because of her predecessors and legatees, there is, indeed, a future for more to come.

## END NOTES

1. The vote was given to women in England in 1918, the United States in 1920, and France in 1948.
2. Susan R. Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*, Albany: State University of NY Press (1987), claims that Cartesianism is ahistorical, detached, objective, and a flight from the feminine. From Ptolemy for over 1200 years, the world was essentially described as the same, then from 1490 it was a new world. Descartes's skepticism and individualization—separation anxiety are central to understanding the "new" world of the 17th century.
3. The Fullbrooks have argued and offered proofs that Sartre's Being and Nothingness considered to be the foundation of the The Ethics of Ambiguity, was actually instigated by Simone de Beauvoir. See Kate Fullbrook and , Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf (1993).
4. Simone de Beauvoir 1927 Diary, 116. In this diary de Beauvoir often anticipates Sartre. While she denied it later, here she sees herself as a philosopher passionately studying philosophy. See Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield (1999), 204.
5. Simone de Beauvoir 1927 Diary, 23-24, inibid., 215.
6. Simone de Beauvoir 1927 Diary, 116, inibid., 209.

7. Simone d. De Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Paris: Gallimard (1969).
8. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* , New York: Citadel (1994), 7.
9. De Beauvoir changes the metaphor that was used in women's writings over centuries. Previously the metaphor involved horizontal notions of confinement "narrow bounds" or "enchained circle." With her use of the word "ceiling," she makes the image a vertical one, one that is more appropriate to her meaning of oppression.
10. Linda A. Bell, *Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom* , Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (1993), 129.
11. De Beauvoir said, "I tried to show in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that every man needs the freedom of other men," Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* , New York: Citadel (1994), 71.
12. Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* , New York: Rowman & Littlefield (1999), 156-157.
13. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Modern Library (1968), 38.
14. *ibid.*, 52.
15. Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* , New York: Rowman & Littlefield (1999), 8.

16. Linda A. Bell, *Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (1993), concludes "an ethics of freedom adheres to the feminist ideals of nonoppressive social structures and for a 'feminist imagination' to be unfettered and 'pushed to its limits', p 265. But she cautions against "premature rejection of natures or essences," as Sartre's Notebook for an Ethics maintains (Jean P. Sartre, *Notebook for an Ethics*, translated by David P. Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago (1992)). Earlier, she had noted that John Stuart Mill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Wollstonecraft believed that biological nature is not destiny as much as is education, 90. She continued by quoting de Beauvoir "in human society nothing is natural...woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilization" with which, she claimed, Catharine MacKinnon agrees (Catharine MacKinnon, *Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (1993), 100).
17. Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, San Fransisco: Aunt Lute Books (1987).
18. Margaret Urban Walker in noting contemporary women philosophers from the 1960's forward does not mention Simone de Beauvoir. Walker's belief is that "feminist ethics" is imbued "with insights, commitments, and critical and interpretive techniques of feminist theories," and finds "gender bias in dominant theories," (Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understanding: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, New York: Routledge (1998)), 20-21. Daryl Koehn points out problems in the feminist care ethics of Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Annette Baier, Trudy Govier, and Diana Meyers, claiming that a "defensible ethic requires elements from both male and female ethics." See Daryl Koehn, *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust, and Empathy*, New York: Routledge (1998)), 4. While she lists the features of female ethics as being the relational self, benevolent concern for the vulnerable, the private being as public significance, valuing difference, emphasizing imaginative discourse that involves narrative and negotiation, and grappling with the world, she does not mention de Beauvoir, herself, as instigating these ethical features, but nods to existential ethics as celebrating the creative power of human action. See Koehn, 9. Although Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson conjoin ethical problems with political ones in their exploration of feminist ethics, they do not mention a debt to de Beauvoir's (Simone De Beauvoir, *Daring to be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics*, New York: Routledge (1998)). Linda A. Bell notes the separate texts of Sartre and de Beauvoir; nevertheless, she often speaks of them as one.

- [19.](#) Some women philosophers have already recognized this—Debra B. Bergoffen and Karen Vintges in particular, but others, too, e.g. Katherine Arens and Michele le Doeuff.

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