

Week 8: Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986)

Simone de Beauvoir was born into a middle class family, dividing time between Paris and an estate in the country. Her autobiography *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* gives a detailed account of growing up as a female in France in the early twentieth century. Her education was extensive, primarily developed through her own reading and writing. She attended the Sorbonne (having passed the exam second place to Sartre), and lived in a time of rapid transition from the old ways to the new: traditional roles for women were the norm, but young people were starting to share ideas in university settings regardless of gender, creating a much more modern environment for her development as a philosopher. Despite the modernity of her experience, she has been neglected as a philosopher in her own right. More recent scholarship recognises that her philosophical thinking was superior to Sartre's, and both informed a great deal of his thinking and challenged it, going beyond the existentialism of the absurd to that of the situated, reflecting a deeper understanding of the human condition. Jonathan Webber (seeing *Going Further*) has done a recent reassessment of importance in developing the existentialist account. An excellent book on Beauvoir's ethics is *The Bonds of Freedom* by Kristana Arp.

20th century Existentialism: A philosophy associated primarily with Jean-Paul Sartre premised on the idea that there is no such thing as human "nature" and no God to tell us what the rules are. It is up to us to determine our own lives. Every choice we make is our responsibility alone. For Sartre we are defined by our consciousness, while for Beauvoir, we are defined by our embodied consciousness. Beauvoir emphasises our experiences as necessarily embodied, with embodiment entailing a physical body, a social / political world, and a set of relationships with others, all of which "situate" us in a particular place and time. Hers is a "situated ethics", an ethics for a being who is free yet also determined by her situation in a world of others. This dual nature of being both conditioned by our situations, and dependent on others, while at the same time free to project ourselves into our own future possibilities, gives rise to the ambiguity of our human condition, which is at the centre of her ethical view.

A key idea is that we cannot express our freedom without others to recognise it and we, in turn, must recognise the freedom of others. Only in this way can

we share in projects that increase the expression of freedom in a culture. The alternative to this is to live as objects among others and to view others as objects upon which we depend. It is living as an object that Beauvoir refers to as being the Other for other people. As Others, we are objects, not subjects.

Passages from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Chapter 1:

“Life in itself is neither good nor evil. It is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it.” MONTAIGNE.

“Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby introduced into his destiny. “Rational animal,” “thinking reed,” he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it. He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. At every moment he can grasp the non-temporal truth of his existence. But between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing. This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men.

“In spite of so many stubborn lies [through which philosophers attempt to resolve the ambiguity or tension at the centre of human life], at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither of the two wipes out the other. Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.

“From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity. ...But it is also claimed that existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd and of despair. It encloses man in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity. It is incapable of furnishing him with any principle for making

choices. Let him do as he pleases. In any case, the game is lost. Does not Sartre declare, in effect, that man is a “useless passion,” that he tries in vain to realize the synthesis of the for-oneself and the in-oneself, to make himself God? ...”

For Beauvoir, we are not useless or absurd: once we embrace our ambiguity, we are ready to be responsible for the flourishing of our own lives and those of others. The freedom we can all express requires a community of individuals who recognise each other and who share their world with one another. “Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity.” That is, our material conditions will turn us into mere objects unless we and others act towards each other as free beings acting in ways that support the freedom of others.

WEEK 9 MATERIALS:

Next Week: Hannah Arendt. Radio podcast: In our Times:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08c2ljg>

and

The Internet Encyclopedia entry on Arendt:

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/>