

GOING FURTHER SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Interview with Simone de Beauvoir on feminism:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmEAB3ekkvU>

Short interview with Beauvoir on the nature of choice:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTsFvT_wew8&list=RDCMUCs_uxxQ3l4osUmLgOcf7jXA&index=5

Jonathan Webber on Simone de Beauvoir:

<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/existentialist-classics-jonathan-webber/>
<https://www.jonathanwebber.co.uk/articles/BeauvoirAndTheMeaningOfLife.pdf> https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/rethinkingexistentialism/?page_id=488

Webber: YouTube series on Existentialism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMc4bO211b4> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nY2weq7-00Q>

Interesting analysis of the differences between men and women as leaders:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/camianderson1/2020/04/19/why-do-women-make-such-good-leaders-during-covid-19/>

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH BEAUVOIR

I: If asked for the definition of man according to existentialism, would you have to summarise a great many philosophical works?

B: Yes, I think it's quite impossible.

[Existentialism claims that "existence is prior to essence", with essence translating as "nature" or "character". But at certain points both claims come under pressure:

Beauvoir argues that there is a nature or character to human life and that is the valuing of our projects, those things we set out to do. Valuing our actions and their goals is central to being human. However, the challenge is not to the idea that there is a human nature, but to the idea that there are determinate ways in which we are supposed to live our lives. The claim is less a metaphysical one (she says she is not concerned with metaphysics) but an empirical one: how we go about living our lives either recognises our responsibility for our actions as choices (authenticity) or does not (bad faith or inauthenticity)].

[Beauvoir also argues that the person who does not live authentically does not really "exist". They become an object rather than a subject. Suchon says, in the context of women, that "they are moved, rather than moving", they do not initiate their actions but shaped by the pressures that come from outside. There is an echo of Aristotle's notion that something is only what it is if it fulfils its proper function: an eye that does not see is not really an "eye". A doctor who does not heal is not really a "doctor". There is also an anticipation of Arendt's arguments that human beings are distinct from objects in being responsible for their actions, which responsibility begins in thinking, reflecting, debating, and acting upon the understanding they develop. Wollstonecraft falls into this tradition as well, arguing that only through the virtues of thinking, reflecting, engaging with others with mutual respect, can we truly flourish as human beings. Without this we become twisted and diminished in all our capacities, with the outcome being surliness, tyranny

over others, meanness of spirit, cunning and manipulation of others, with anger, and bitterness at our core.]

I: But perhaps we can overcome the difficulty by approaching the problem of man's existence in different aspects in a less general way, for example, What values do you recognise in man?

B: Well, man himself. We think that, and this is one of the most important points of existentialism, that man is ultimately the reason for his own being, his own future, the very aim of all his activities. That is, we find good all that saves the interests, happiness, and development of man. And bad is all that goes against such. This is absolutely the fundamental basis of what we may call our ethics or even morals. Can we account for actions that aim at destruction? Is it a form of misrepresentation of our goals or a limitation of our perspectives?

I: Man is both his own cause and purpose?

B: Perhaps not cause, but certainly his own purpose, his very reason for existence.

I: So what is his cause then?

B: That's a metaphysical question that I don't think I'm in a position to settle. We don't ask such metaphysical questions, like many philosophers since Kant. We are here and what interests us is knowing what to do.

I: Currently in this conception of the world according to the existentialists, God isn't present?

B: Not in Sartre's existentialism, but he is in Gabriel Marcel's. But in the existentialism of Sartre as defined in *Being and Nothingness* and in Sartre's next work that'll soon be published by Gallimard called *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, God isn't present. There's no God. We are atheists to be precise.

I: So what is it that makes man accept living and acting? What guides our actions?

B: What guides us is precisely concern for others in large part and also concern for one's own happiness. The two are inextricably linked, because each of us is bound to all and no one can be realised except through and with others. And nothing valid is done for or by others if it does not correspond to something deeply rooted in oneself.

I: How did you approach the question of God? You said at 15 years old you had a definitive crisis?

B: That's not quite right. It wasn't a crisis, it was rather a kind of awareness. I realised one day, when 13 or 14, not exactly sure when, that I no longer believed. When I was little I believed quite fervently in angels, baby Jesus, etc. Then I began believing less in all that external mythology, but still believed in God.

Gradually I refined God so much that he no longer was relevant to this world. Because God couldn't be stupid like the people I saw, the priests I talked to. He was different and not interested in trivialities. He ended up not corresponding to anyone or anything. I then realised God no longer existed for me, he had eventually evaporated.

I: As you say, that was early. Did you reconsider the question later?

B: Later I studied philosophy and everything I learned I won't say proved, but continued to support the idea that God wasn't even a question. I read, for example, Kant at 18, and like him I thought that you should reject metaphysics or ontology and ask questions that start from our existence on the Earth. Without seeking to penetrate to the chain of cause and effect beyond.

[It seems her focus here is on Kant's view that our experience of the world is all we have access to, while something beyond our world, the realm of the *noumenal*, is beyond our understanding.]

I: If I understood correctly, your atheism first came as an intuition?

B: I realised I had no reason to believe. But the people around me also believed without any reason. It was rather that some believed without any

reason and I stopped believing without any positive reason. But how can you prove something doesn't exist? Isn't it up to the others to prove the contrary? I never found proof in my reasoning, in my head or heart.

I: Proof to believe?

B: Yes, proof of God.

I: Is there a contrary proof of God? [A proof that God doesn't exist?]

B: Philosophically, yes, in a way. As I think Sartre shows well in *Being and Nothingness*, the kind of synthesis we call God, and we're entering into philosophy, the "in-itself" and "for-itself" is unattainable and even unthinkable.

[We can't distinguish between the "in-itself and the "for-itself" when it comes to our grasp of God, which is needed if we are to understand what we are saying; "in-itself is defined as that which has no existence beyond its fact of existing, while "for-itself is defined as that which has a concern for it-self, or consciousness of itself Everything in the empirical world can be grasped in these ways, so our understanding of God is "unthinkable"]

A believer might say that they believe precisely because it's absurd and incomprehensible, But that seems rather desperate to me.

I: In general, what do you think of believers?

B: In general, I have quite particular opinions about each because they're just as diverse as non-believers.

[Reminiscent of Suchon's claim that there are as many ways to be a neutralist as there are neutralists, anticipating Arendt's claim that there is no "group" responsibility, only individuals who are individually responsible].

There are progressive priests that I get along with rather well. On the other had, there are atheists who favour oppression that I don't agree with at all. They are also believers who simply use religion as a justification for capitalism or colonialism whom I don't get along with. It depends, as you

know, the church is very much divided. In particular, even with the church of France, there are huge differences. You have some priests who fight with FLN [the political movement fighting for Algerian independence from France] and others who are completely in favour of the Algerian colonizers.

I: Doesn't this prove that there's freedom in Christianity, just as in your existentialist world?

B: Absolutely, I think that God, in the end, is a sort of false alibi. Many believers have told me that one is just as lost in a world with God, if you really try to see where good and evil are, and what his will are, as in a world without God. Because who is going to interpret the will of God anyway?

Who is going to interpret the way transcendence translates into our world? It is each in their own consciousness. And each consciousness is just as solitary as the non-believers one.

I: Unless you believe in revelation

B: Even if you believe in revelation. Even if you thought you knew God revealed his will to you to continue oppressing Algerians or letting people starve, whether this is fine or wrong, it is up to each person to decide.

[The existentialist claim that our responsibility cannot be given up is not challenged by taking God to be all powerful]

Ultimately, each person must interpret God according to their own inclinations.

[Revelation may present us with a view, but we then need to make a judgement about that view, this is a distinction made by Descartes, that having something present itself to consciousness is part of a two step process, the second step being acceptance, rejection, or suspension of judgement.]

Beauvoir appears to reject the idea that we can merely suspend judgement: if we do not judge, speak, or act, then we allow others to judge, speak and act for us. Hannah Arendt takes up this point too.

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Perhaps, however, following Descartes here, genuine suspension of judgement is a viable action if it is the expression of not knowing something and actively seeking deeper understanding. For Suchon, this idea shows up as a form of resistance to being pushed in one way or another by the status quo.

A note on the idea of choice and freedom: Our nature includes being free as well as situated in a specific world of others, so that we are limited in our ability to understand and engage with that freedom.