# The Ethics of Ambiguity

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Raised by a conservative father and devoutly Catholic mother in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir grew up with her parents' sensibilities but proved a brilliant thinker early on: she read the classics from a young age, taught her younger sister throughout their childhood, and decided in her teenage years to give up on religion entirely. Her family's financial collapse during World War One meant her father could not afford to pay a dowry, but this actually delighted de Beauvoir, who hoped to pursue a career as an intellectual rather than being locked into a marriage. She studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, and placed second in the nation on the competitive *agrégation* exam in her subject, which she became the youngest person to pass. Jean-Paul Sartre came in first, and they struck up a friendship while studying for the exam. They became both actual and intellectual bedfellows, and remained so throughout their lives, although their relationship was famously open: throughout her life, de Beauvoir had various relationships with both men and women, including a number of prominent intellectuals. Sartre proposed marriage to her in 1931, but she refused. They both taught philosophy in schools throughout the 1930s, but they both lost their jobs in the early 1940s: de Beauvoir was fired by the Nazi-controlled government for her political beliefs, and Sartre was captured as a prisoner of war. She briefly returned to teaching but lost her job again, this time for allegedly seducing a female student, and went on to spend the rest of her life as a writer. She went on to publish eight books from 1943-1949, including three novels and her two most important works of nonfiction: *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and *The Second Sex* (1949). To this day, she is still best remembered for *The Second Sex*. The book is widely credited with jumpstarting the following decades' feminist movements in France. Many of her novels, like *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954, and the book for which she won the prestigious Prix Goncourt), were fictionalizations of her real experiences. Because of her literary success, the scandal of her and Sartre's relationship, and the popularity of Sartre's journal *Les Temps Modernes*, she played a prominent role in the French public sphere for the rest of her life. During the 1950s and 1960s she continued writing prolifically, and in the 1970s she became a prominent member of the French women's liberation movement (now better known as the second wave of feminism), playing an instrumental role in the fight to legalize abortion in France. She died of pneumonia in Paris in 1986.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *The Ethics of Ambiguity* does not address any political or historical events directly, a number of important developments lurk in the background of de Beauvoir's ethical concerns and serve as important examples for her writing on politics in the final section of the book. In 1947, when the book was published, France was coping not only with the aftermath of World War Two—including the results of German occupation and the French population's troubling tendency to collaborate with the Nazis—but also with the beginning of the end of its colonial empire. After the end of the war, France officially rebranded its Empire the French Union, renaming its colonies as "overseas departments," "territories," and "protectorates," but in practice doing little to change the structure of government or the oppression of France's non-European subjects. For de Beauvoir, this false gesture at restructuring—one largely enacted by powerful French people who maintained the same patronizing mindset toward non-Europeans as they had during the era of official empire—is a clear example of how oppressors justify their actions by denying the freedom and agency of the people they subjugate. A parallel set of developments concerns the Soviet Union, which had clearly turned from a possibly genuine socialist movement to a repressive authoritarian government under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. De Beauvoir ties this shift to Marxists' demand for orthodoxy, which she takes as an immoral kind of seriousness: rather than acknowledging people's freedom to question the party line, communists insisted on absolute loyalty and justified repression and atrocities by their belief that they were on the right side of history. This kind of thinking, according to de Beauvoir, sacrifices the present for an imagined future—a future which will never turn out exactly as any individual person or party can wish. In doing so, the Soviet Union actually undermined the precise reason they sought to shape the future: human freedom. A final important historical trend is the history of existentialism itself, which became incredibly controversial with Sartre's rising popularity in France: many accused it of solipsism (locating all morality in the individual, and so making it permissible for individuals to trample on others' rights) and moral subjectivism (claiming that morality is up to individuals, so people can choose to do absolutely whatever they want). In large part, de Beauvoir wrote this book in order to show not only that existentialism's belief in individual freedom did not require it to reject ethics altogether, but also that in fact a reasonable ethical system requires human freedom as its most foundational value.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Simone de Beauvoir published more than 20 books in a wide range of genres and formats during her lifetime. These range

from the seminal study of patriarchy *The Second Sex* (1949) to straightforwardly philosophical works like *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944); novels about her own relationships (*She Came to Stay*, 1943) and her intellectual work and political activism during World War Two (*The Mandarins*, 1954), among various other themes; biographical works, travelogues, and even a feminist play set in the 14th century, *Who Shall Die* (1945). The most important influence on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is Sartre's seminal work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), in which he lays out his existentialist philosophy in detail. Sartre and de Beauvoir in turn rely heavily on the notoriously complex *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger (1927), often considered the most important philosophical work of the 20th century. Other prominent existentialist works include Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). De Beauvoir also engages Hegel's philosophical system, set out primarily in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1816/1830); Marx and Engels' political thought, laid out in various works including Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880) and Marx's commentary on Hegel, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843); and Kant's ethics, which he primarily explicated in the short *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir also cites various works of fiction as examples of different ethical attitudes. These include the writings of French fascist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle—including the novel *Gilles* (1939) and the short story *The Empty Suitcase* (1924)—which, along with Drieu La Rochelle's eventual suicide, de Beauvoir sees as emblematic of the nihilist attitude; and John Dos Passos's *The Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), from which de Beauvoir takes an important plot point as an example of the kind of difficult ethical choices that political revolutionaries face. In the book, a group of miners are arrested for striking, and their fellow partisans have to decide whether to fight for their liberation or turn them into political pawns in order to create media attention (they pick the former, and—accordingly to de Beauvoir—rightly so).

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (English version: *The Ethics of Ambiguity*)
- **When Written:** 1945-7
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1947, parts serialized in 1946
- **Literary Period:** Existentialism
- **Genre:** Philosophy
- **Antagonist:** Restrictions to human freedom
- **Point of View:** Narratively third-person, but entirely about how to live from a first-person perspective of living in the world

## EXTRA CREDIT

**In Death as in Life.** Beyond spending nearly their whole lives as lovers and reading everything one another wrote before publication, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir chose to be buried together in Paris's Montparnasse Cemetery.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 20th-century French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir asks what ethics looks like from the perspective of the existentialist philosophy she has developed in conjunction with Jean-Paul Sartre. Whereas most ethical systems try to determine what people ought to do based on abstract principles of morality, existentialists believe that it makes no sense to talk about such absolute ethical principles, because morality is actually something that people develop in and through their lives, rather than something woven into the timeless fabric of the universe. Instead of starting with a picture of the good, right, or just, de Beauvoir starts with the basic fact of human freedom, which she argues must be the foundation of all morality because it is the fact in virtue of which people can make moral decisions at all.

De Beauvoir divides her book into three parts, respectively covering the philosophical underpinnings of her "ethics of ambiguity," the different kinds of ethical attitudes people can have depending on how they relate to their freedom, and what existentialism has to say about how people should relate to other human beings.

In Part One, "Ambiguity and Freedom," de Beauvoir starts by explaining the ways in which human experience is ambiguous: people honestly pursue their goals even though they know they will die; everyone feels like a subject with a will in the world, but experiences everyone else as an object, and yet also knows that others also see them as an object; and as much as people feel empowered to act in the world, they also recognize that the world is infinitely greater than they are and can easily overwhelm them. Most philosophers, de Beauvoir explains, have tried to resolve one or the other half of this ambiguity: they have argued that people are immortal or only their intentions matter, for instance. Existentialism, on the other hand, recognizes that this resolution into one or the other side of the binary is impossible; no matter how much people try to impose their will on the world and pursue their goals, they will inevitably fail. This failure is precisely why people need ethics: to give themselves something to strive for. Many philosophers accuse existentialism of making morality look meaningless and subjective; on the contrary, de Beauvoir argues (following Sartre), morality is subjective but meaningful precisely because all meaning is subjective.

De Beauvoir briefly summaries Sartre's philosophy and argues that people do not necessarily fail by ultimately falling short of

their goals for themselves; rather, they can learn to "take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession." By embracing their ambiguity rather than despairing in it, people can come to desire not the impossible moral perfection promised to them by other, abstract systems of ethics, but rather desire "to be a disclosure of being." All action, de Beauvoir explains, "discloses" who the actor is, because action results from people's abilities, values, and commitments. The only fulfillable desire is the desire to authentically disclose oneself, which is the same as the desire for one's own freedom—one's capacity to be what one is, rather than trying to become a value set out by someone else.

Freedom, de Beauvoir shows, is both the starting point and ultimate goal of ethics: everyone is *naturally* free, meaning they are capable of spontaneously acting, but it is up to them to turn this natural freedom into genuine *moral* freedom by "willing themselves free." This requires carefully reflecting on one's individual actions and broad personal project, which means establishing continuity between one's past, present, and future. Having provided an account of a morally good will, De Beauvoir ends her first section by asking what moral evil looks like. While she agrees that people cannot will themselves unfree, she notes that people start with natural but not moral freedom and can certainly prevent themselves from reaching moral freedom by refusing to accept life's ambiguity or work for the betterment of oneself and the world. This is the equivalent of moral evil for existentialists. Importantly, de Beauvoir notes, whereas many ethical systems chalk evil up to human imperfections or moral error, only existentialists hold people truly and completely responsible for their errors, which is why the existentialist picture of ethics actually provides a more complete account of good and evil and is less forgiving of selfishness and indifference to others.

In Part Two, "Personal Freedom and Others," de Beauvoir provides a detailed picture of the ways people morally err, especially when they refuse to honor the freedom of others. She starts with an image of childhood, in which the child sees the grown-up world as full of fixed and serious values, but also sees themselves as safely confined to a separate world of play, in which their actions have no moral consequences. As people grow into adolescents, however, they realize that adults are imperfect, values are not absolute, and their own actions have moral and practical consequences. In other words, adolescents realize their freedom, but also their responsibility, and from this point onwards, they have to choose what to do with them—whether to turn their natural freedom into moral freedom or somehow evade the question.

The worst response to this dilemma, according to de Beauvoir, is to become a "sub-man." The "sub-man" is so afraid of action and its consequences that he tries to do nothing at all—he wishes he were an inanimate object so he would not have to take responsibility for his actions. The serious man, like the sub-man, tries as hard as possible to deny his own freedom; he does so by choosing and loyally adhering to a set of fixed values that come from somewhere else. He "believe[s] for belief's sake," just so that he does not have to confront the responsibility of choosing beliefs based on his own independent thought. Next is the nihilist, who accepts the fact that there are no absolute moral values in the world but sees this as a tragedy rather than as an opportunity to seize his freedom and make his own values; the nihilist pursues a will to destruction, "commit[ting] disorder and anarchy" in a vain attempt to show everyone else that their values are made up. Often, the nihilist ends up committing **suicide**—he understands the ambiguity of human life but not his freedom to live anyway. The next kind of person is the adventurer, who is "close to a genuinely moral attitude" because he eagerly throws himself into a variety of projects and embraces his own freedom. However, the adventurer has no genuine moral commitments; he only wants to conquer and succeed in his projects but does not care what the projects actually are. He is often willing to trample on others' freedom for the sake of his own enjoyment, and in doing so he proves that he can never be genuinely free because any individual's genuine freedom relies on the freedom of everyone else (both because of people's shared humanity and because of people's concrete interdependence on one another in order to survive in the world). De Beauvoir's final figure is the passionate person, who is the inverse of the adventurer and also close to, but just short of, genuine freedom: the passionate person has the right kind of sincere moral commitment, but cares so strongly that he is incapable of detaching himself when he cannot achieve his goals and thus sacrifices his own freedom.

In the book's third and longest part, which is subdivided into five shorter sections, de Beauvoir takes up a series of issues that all center on the relationship between a free individual and the rest of humanity. She has already argued that each person's freedom depends on everyone else's, but here she explores the implications of that argument. In the first subsection she argues that "The Aesthetic Attitude," or the abstracted, distant perspective often taken by critics and philosophers, is intellectuals' way of evading their own status as concrete, individual, free human beings. In the second subsection, she looks at "Freedom and Liberation," and specifically what the continuous, incremental fight for the freedom of the oppressed looks like from an existentialist perspective. Many are in positions so dire that the only way they can promote their freedom is by a purely negative revolt against the forces that are oppressing them. Oppressors often fear and criminalize this kind of response, but there is no question that the freedom of the oppressed to pursue their goals without being coerced into a way of life they have not chosen is a meaningful freedom, while the oppressor's freedom to deny others their freedom is no freedom at all (because it undermines others' freedom, and anyone's genuine freedom depends on everyone else's). Oppressors often try to distract people from the value of

freedom by creating and elevating other values, like a culture's distinctive past or the productive potential of capitalism. But tradition and capitalism only matter insofar as they promote freedom, which again proves that freedom is the most fundamental end of human action.

In the third section of her final part, de Beauvoir asks how the oppressed should act for the sake of their freedom. She concludes that it is sometimes necessary to perpetuate injustice in order to fight injustice. This includes committing violence against people who have contributed to oppression out of obligation or ignorance (those who are *responsible* but not *guilty* for ignorance), or having to choose one liberation struggle instead of another when two conflict; it can even mean sacrificing one's comrades or oneself. In order to successfully revolt against tyrants who deny people's freedom and reduce them to their facticity, people have to use those same tools and reduce both their enemies and themselves to facticity. Both tyrants and revolutionaries promise their followers that their sacrifices are for the sake of a better, freer future, but this is the same mistake that philosophers make when they see ethics as an absolute rather than a respect for freedom embedded in every action. By reducing the individual's value to zero, tyrants and revolutionaries undermine their own project, turning society's value to zero, too. This is why de Beauvoir favors democracy, which prioritizes "the dignity of each man" and refuses to sacrifice any for an imagined future fulfillment that will never truly come about (since people's struggle for freedom has no end). The real ethical problem, however, comes up when one must choose between two people's competing freedoms; one must decide based on which in turn opens more freedom in the future, which is the same reason that unjust revolution is better than unjust tyranny.

Now that she has shown that the question of whose freedom to prioritize relies on thinking about the future, de Beauvoir turns in the fourth section to the concept of the future, which she argues is split: people both imagine the future as a continuation of the present and hope for a utopian, perfect future, one with no connection to the present, in which "Glory, Happiness, or Justice" magically descends upon the earth. This latter concept of the future is precisely what can convince people to sacrifice the present, but it is based on a false hope for perfection, when in reality all human striving is limited, and ambiguity is a constant feature of existence. Politicians take advantage of people's wishful thinking and weakness for ideals, promising them a perfect future in order to turn them into instruments; this is how Europe justified colonialism, for instance. Instead, de Beauvoir insists, people should celebrate their existence, their finite projects and finite wills, rather than letting themselves be seduced by the promise of infinity.

In the last section, de Beauvoir returns to the question of ambiguity and investigates in further depth what ethical decision-making requires. She determines that such decisions must aim at the freedom of "the individual as such" and accept violence only when it "opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save." She offers French politics as an example: the people who consider themselves "enlightened elites" pretend to govern on behalf of France's colonial subjects, but actually use their gestures to the colonized people's well-being as a front to continue oppressing and exploiting them. Instead of trying to "civilize" non-Europeans, she thinks, the only ethical stance is to act for the sake of people's freedom itself. She then looks at the Soviet Union, which has too easily used the goals of its revolution as an excuse to oppress people, even though it is theoretically possible that oppression would sometimes be ethical in order to help push forward people's liberation. Pursuing this difficult decision—to use violence and oppression to fight violence and oppression—means taking on an enormous responsibility and being extremely vigilant, detailed, and reflective. Needless to say, most politicians and revolutionaries fall short of this standard, which is why they, too, need critics: insofar as they respect freedom, they must embrace free resistance to their own ways.

In a brief conclusion, de Beauvoir offers some big-picture remarks about existentialist ethics' relationship to her critics and other ethical systems. While existentialism focuses on the individual, since it is the individual who makes free decisions and pursues their own projects, she insists that existentialism is not solipsistic because it sees other people's freedom as necessary for any individual's. She asks whether the existentialist conception of subjective moral value is really meaningful, but reminds the reader that nothing is meaningful outside of subjective human perspectives, and that it simply does not make sense to hold human morality to the standard of objective truth, which no individual human could ever access. By centering morality on concrete action and people's finite projects, de Beauvoir concludes, existentialists affirm individuals' potential to make concrete contributions to the world and embrace their own freedom; if everyone did this, people could finally stop dreaming about a completely free utopia, because they would have it.

## CHARACTERS

**Simone de Beauvoir** – The author of the work, de Beauvoir was a prominent 20th century French existentialist philosopher, feminist theorist, and novelist, still best known for her historical and theoretical study of women's oppression, *The Second Sex*, as well as her political activism. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she aims to show how the existentialist philosophy developed most prominently by Jean-Paul Sartre can be the basis for an ethical system.

**Sartre** – A famous 20th century French philosopher and Simone de Beauvoir's lifelong partner, both intellectually and romantically. In his landmark treatise *Being and Nothingness*, he

developed the basic philosophical framework upon which de Beauvoir builds in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In short, he argues that people are fundamentally free and have no inherent nature apart from what they make of themselves, arguments which form the basis of de Beauvoir's argument that humans ought to act on the basis of and for the sake of their own freedom, and are completely ethically responsible for their actions.

**Hegel** – A groundbreaking early 19th-century German philosopher who, through a notoriously complicated philosophical system, essentially argued that all binaries—such as those between the self and the other or the mind and the world—would eventually become integrated and develop towards a single, unified Absolute. He was the central influence on Marx's philosophy of class struggle and social change. For de Beauvoir, Hegel's system takes a unique stance on ambiguity precisely because he tries to unify binaries rather than giving primacy to one or the other (like philosophers who argue that only one's intentions or the outcomes of one's actions truly matter, that people should ignore the world's restrictions on their will or absolutely succumb to them). However, she believes he still falsely tries to resolve ambiguity, when in reality it never can be resolved and individuals must instead learn to confront the tension between their will and the world, their selves and their desires, their competing desires for static being and dynamic existence. For de Beauvoir, Hegel's system denies the importance of the here and now by claiming that individual lives are valuable only because they can incorporate themselves into some sort of totality in the future. In lieu of Hegel's universal vision of ethics, de Beauvoir proposes that individuals' lives are valuable because of their own projects, which they pursue constantly at every time, rather than merely because they can contribute to some future utopia.

**Kant** – An 18th-century German philosopher whose monumental influence on all subsequent Western philosophical thought is difficult to understate. Although Kant's complex writings covered (and revolutionized) virtually every field of philosophy, de Beauvoir focuses on his ethics: essentially, Kant thought that action is moral when the principles or motives behind an action could hold universally for all rational beings. While de Beauvoir agrees with Kant that freedom is the fundamental characteristic of human life and morality should be tied to the character of the human will (rather than handed down by a Godlike legislator), she does not think that morality is about whether one's principles are consistent in principle, but rather about the concrete circumstances, conditions, and effects of people's actions. For instance, whereas Kant would reject all killing in any situation because it would not be consistent with human freedom as a universal principle, de Beauvoir accepts such violence in the kind of particular situations when, even though killing is a violation of freedom, it is likely to ultimately help expand human freedom (for instance, as in killing one's oppressors).

**Marx** – A 19th-century German economist, sociologist, and philosopher best known for his theory of class struggle and its profound impact on subsequent politics across the globe. While existentialism has close affinities with Marxism, de Beauvoir sees Marxism as unable to commit to considering people free, because it considers revolution a necessary historical goal and action valuable *only* insofar as it advances the political cause.

**The Child** – The first of various figures that de Beauvoir uses to illustrate people's moral development and varying attitudes toward their freedom, the child sees the world of adult values as distant, inaccessible, and absolutely serious. Children trust adults' assessments of good and evil, which they imagine to be real, definite things, rather than values created by people. At the same time, they also see themselves as removed from the serious world, instead able to inhabit the world of play, in which they can pursue whatever temporary ends they want without consequence in the process of exploring their freedom. This is much like a genuinely free life, except genuinely free people are also ethically responsible for their choices (unlike children, whose choices usually have no real consequences). Literal children are not the only ones who live like children ethically: many people, like oppressed people who believe themselves to be inferior rather than understanding their predicament, also gain the moral security of childhood, in which they are responsible for nothing because they are cut off from the "serious" world.

**The Sub-Man** – For de Beauvoir, the ethically worst kind of person is the "sub-man." "Sub-men" spend their energies trying to reject their own freedom and hide from the world, often because they fear the consequences and responsibility that come with action. The sub-man strives to be an inanimate object, to have no impact on the world, but the sub-man can also easily turn into a serious man or nihilist.

**The Serious Man** – The serious man dedicates his life and energies to some cause, values, or "idol" that he considers absolutely good, and for which he is willing to sacrifice absolutely anything. Serious men tend to be the kind of people who enforce authoritarian governments or proclaim that things should be judged in terms of their "usefulness." The serious man's absolute dedication to the values he chooses are a way of "los[ing] himself," denying his own freedom to choose how to live and what values to pursue. Instead, he takes comfort in letting an external value system dominate his way of thinking. When they fail to realize their singular goals, serious men often turn into sub-men or nihilists.

**The Nihilist** – When they reach adolescence and learn that the serious values of the adult world are actually flimsy and subjective, some people take this realization in stride and begin to form their own value system, while others turn into nihilists who believe that, because nothing in particular is absolutely

valuable for everyone, nothing matters at all. Giving up on existence, they try to destroy it by creating "disorder and anarchy" or even committing **suicide**.

**The Adventurer** – The adventurer correctly recognizes that there are no absolute, readymade values in the world, and then takes advantage of this ambiguity in order to zealously pursue personal projects. However, unlike a genuinely free person, the adventurer is driven not by a commitment to people's collective freedom, but rather merely by a taste for power and desire for conquest. Examples include explorers who are indifferent to the number of people they murder and prolific lovers who care more about seducing others than treating them with dignity. Accordingly, while the adventurer is "close to a genuinely moral attitude," he has the right freedom but directs it wrongly, particularly because he does not understand the mutual interdependence between his own freedom and everyone else's.

**The Passionate Man** – Whereas the adventurer takes advantage of his freedom but directs it wrongly, the passionate man directs himself toward a worthy end but attaches himself so seriously that he loses his freedom and can never move onto other ends. Caught up in the quest to possess the object of his desire, the impassioned man forgets that ambiguity is a permanent state of affairs: it is impossible to ever completely fulfill his desires. He is distinct from the serious man: while the serious man chooses externally-imposed values that have nothing to do with himself, the passionate man chooses a concrete project that involves his own individual subjectivity (for instance, a romantic relationship or artistic pursuit).

**The Tyrant** – Unlike de Beauvoir's other figures, the tyrant does not fall in any particular part of the moral hierarchy, although tyrants are clearly evil. Rather, the tyrant is a catch-all category for people who trample on others during their quest to fulfill their desires, referring occasionally to normal people who instrumentalize others in their daily lives as well as to actual authoritarian leaders who take their followers and victims alike as faceless objects rather than full people with their own freedom, desires, and rights.

## TERMS

Ambiguity – Most specifically, by talking about life's ambiguity, **Simone de Beauvoir** points to the sense in which life has *no fixed meaning*, but that rather its meaning is up to every individual, depending on their commitments, actions, and predilections. She carefully distinguishes this from absurdity, or the notion that life can never have meaning at all. Ambiguity results from the paradoxes at the center of the human condition: people both have subjectivity and appear as objects to everyone else; they recognize their own freedom as well as their powerlessness in relation to the world as a whole; and they (at best) relentlessly pursue their goals even though they know they are going to die. It is therefore ambiguous whether people are subjects with freedom or objects with facticity, but there is no real truth of the matter one way or the other. Rather, people are both, and living ethically requires coming to terms with this tension or ambiguity at the foundation of human life. Because everyone confronts different circumstances but everyone is also free, each individual has the opportunity to construct their own identity through the way they apply their individual will to the world.

Being – Following **Sartre**, **de Beauvoir** uses "being" and "existence" to refer to two different aspects of human experience. Being refers to the definable character or essence of something or someone. Therefore, when de Beauvoir talks about people rejecting, disclosing, or pursuing *being*, she is talking respectively about people's refusal to define themselves in a static and singular way, the way that one's actions reveal the character of one's person, and the way that people act in order to shape themselves into what they want to become. However, while people always have some kind of *being* at any given point in their lives, what they do *not* have is a single, enduring nature, an *absolute* being that defines them completely throughout their lives; indeed, it is only because people's being changes that they have anything to aim for, and the changeability of being is proof of people's freedom. Accordingly, it is a mistake to pursue a singular, absolute, static being, as is the idea that one can achieve one's potential and simply "be" what one is meant to be, without continuing to grow and improve (or transcend oneself). Instead, for de Beauvoir, people constantly strive to become the being they project or imagine, and in doing so transcend their current form of being, although they will never reach precisely the version they imagine. This specific use of the term "Being" is in part de Beauvoir's way of critiquing (and taking from) the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who developed a picture close to de Beauvoir and Sartre's, but believed that people could reach the kind of absolute, authentic Being that de Beauvoir and Sartre reject.

Disclosure – A complex term expounded most significantly by Heidegger, the concept of disclosure refers to the sense in which one's actions meaningfully reveal one's underlying self: for instance, by choosing to join a certain political struggle, one discloses that one is a person who takes an interest in others' freedom in general and perhaps has particular personal commitments to the specific others on whose behalf one is fighting. For de Beauvoir, all action discloses people's being (because it reflects their free choice of what to do in circumstances they never choose). While it is never possible for people to become exactly what they want to be through their own will, it is always possible for them to disclose being through their actions, and so the way to "win" at life (or act ethically) is to simply desire that one's actions disclose one's being, or

reveal one's authentic and free self.

Ethics – Broadly speaking, ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions of value, including what people ought to do, what is right and wrong, and what the best kind of human life looks like. Traditionally, these questions have been answered directly, from a universal perspective that declares specific values, actions, or ways of making decisions categorically right and wrong. However, for **de Beauvoir**, this way of thinking not only takes an impossible perspective that no individual can ever assume, but also denies individuals' fundamental freedom to make their own decisions in complex ethical situations, in which it is impossible to know what exactly will result from one's decision. Instead, de Beauvoir grounds her "ethics of ambiguity" in the very fact of human freedom.

Existence – As distinguished from being, existence is simply something's status as a thing in the world, and human existence in particular is defined by people's freedom to act and believe what they want, their inability to choose the world or situation in which they are born, and their ultimate, inevitable death. Human existence is finite, but there are infinite possible existences for any given human being, so **de Beauvoir** argues that existence has "a finiteness which is open on the infinite." While there is no reason for people's existences—people just exist, as a matter of brute fact—it is up to individuals to justify and make something out of their own existences, and de Beauvoir thinks that the way to do this is to pursue projects that aim at the ultimate goal of freedom itself.

Existentialism – A loose term for the ideas of a group of philosophers, artists, and writers who think about morality and action from the perspective of the human individual living in a concrete world, rather than in abstract terms dealing with hypothetical human nature, and who generally put individual authenticity and freedom at the forefront of their thought. While various philosophers are included and excluded under the label "existentialism," most narrowly it refers to a set of French philosophers in the 1940s and 1950s, including **Jean-Paul Sartre** (with whom it is most strongly associated), **Simone de Beauvoir**, and others like Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This group also took heavily after the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who rejected the label existentialism, and in turn after earlier thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. When de Beauvoir talks about existentialism, however, she is specifically talking about Sartre's philosophy, as developed in his central work, *Being and Nothingness*.

Facticity – A term with a variety of meanings in different philosophical contexts, but which for **de Beauvoir** and **Sartre** specifically refers to the brute facts about any given individual, divorced from their freedom and will. Objects have facticity alone, and treating someone in terms of their facticity (an attitude de Beauvoir criticizes throughout this book) is equivalent to reducing someone to an object by focusing on their externally visible traits and not on their subjective freedom and capacity for transcendence.

Freedom – The central concept in **de Beauvoir**'s system, which refers to the simple fact that people have the capacity to choose how to act, even if they have to undertake these actions in a world they do not choose. In turn, people are also free to determine their values and what they can become in the future. As a result of their freedom, then, people are fully responsible for their actions. For de Beauvoir, freedom underlies all moral values and justifies itself: it makes no sense to ask *why* people are free, because they simply *are*. People's freedom naturally rejects forces that constrain it, for instance by battling illnesses and fighting against oppression, and so is a continual "movement of liberation" that has no definite start or end, but must be embraced in every particular moment of action. Accordingly, to act ethically is to embrace and pursue one's own freedom, which becomes both the basic justification and ultimate goal of human action.

Marxism – A school of thought and politics based on the insights of **Karl Marx**. Marxism focuses primarily on the material economic relations between different social classes and political Marxists attempt to spur (and have often succeeded in creating) socialist revolutions against property-owning classes that exploit the labor of the working classes. Like existentialism, Marxism thinks morality is about how people should act within concrete circumstances, rather than abstract principles. However, **de Beauvoir** criticizes Marxism's dogmatic faith in revolution, which often leads its leaders to become **tyrants**: willing to do anything in order to create a free society, they end up trampling on freedom so much that they undermine their own initial goal.

Morality – A term closely related to ethics. In general, at least as the terms are used in this book, ethics is a field of philosophical inquiry that tries to understand morality, or what is good and right for people to do.

Revolt – For **de Beauvoir**, revolt is a unique form of action because it is one of the only ways to embrace freedom through negativity: rather than building freedom through the pursuit of certain positive goals, in revolt oppressed people pursue the freedom they have been denied, purely by rejecting the forces that deny it. Revolt is people's struggle to claim a right to envision their own futures, instead of letting oppressors define their futures for them. This is far from the model of what free action usually entails, and revolt alone cannot lead people to genuinely free lives, which require that people fulfill their freedom by pursuing positive goals. Yet revolt also shows how concrete circumstances are the most important factors determining what course of action people must take for the sake of their freedom. Precisely because revolt is a solution of last resort, de Beauvoir also sees it as dangerous: people can become so attached to revolt and criticism that they are unable to pursue positive values and transcend their being once they

have enough freedom to act without being oppressed. Lacking something to revolt against or criticize, they sometimes become **nihilists** or **serious men**.

Subjectivity – A term with two related but distinct uses. First, subjectivity is the state of having an individual, particular perspective on the world and acting from that perspective. For **de Beauvoir**, this is characteristic of all human life and one of the reasons people are fundamentally free. Secondly, subjectivity is used to contrast with objectivity: something that is subjective varies depending on the observer, whereas something that is objective should be the same regardless of the observer. For de Beauvoir, morality is subjective in the first sense—it relies on people's individual perspective and role in the world. While existentialists are often accused of making morality subjective in the second sense—the implication of their philosophy allegedly being that there is no "true" morality because people could choose their own version—de Beauvoir responds by arguing that freedom is an objective fact (as is subjectivity in the first sense), on the basis of which existentialists can develop an ethical system.

Transcendence – The opposite of facticity: the capacity to become something other than what one already is, as well as the process of doing so. For **de Beauvoir**, people are constantly transcending themselves, growing into something new by pursuing their goals. However, people must also avoid the dangerous tendency to "lose [themselves] in" their transcendence by focusing so much on what they want to be that they forget what they actually are—and the fact that no one can ever be exactly what they imagine they will be in the future.

Will – The capacity to decide between alternatives and pursue a particular alternative. To "will oneself free" therefore means to make the decisions and take the actions involved in affirming and pursuing one's freedom. While in conventional philosophy, people are morally formed and then make willful choices that reflect their inner character or being, for existentialists like **de Beauvoir** and **Sartre** people actually form themselves through their will, by selecting and pursuing certain goals for themselves (and then fulfilling those goals to a greater or lesser extent).

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### EXISTENTIALISM AND ETHICS

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir attempts to do something that, in a lecture she delivered just before beginning to write the book, she claimed would be impossible: to create an ethical system based on the tenets of the existentialist school of philosophy that she developed along with her lifelong philosophical and romantic partner, Jean-Paul Sartre (whose major work, *Being and Nothingness*, opened but did not resolve the question of an existentialist ethics). This difficult because existentialism both insists that people should be able to freely decide their moral principles for action and holds that people will inevitably fail to become what they seek to be; existentialism's critics argue that both of these claims prevent the philosophy from making claims about what is ethically right and achievable for human beings. However, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir shows that the existentialist picture of the human condition does indeed imply ethical principles before arguing that, in fact, existentialism is the *only* doctrine that provides an adequate account of morality: it begins from a realistic, finite, human perspective that acknowledges the inevitability of moral failure, but also holds people responsible for that failure by developing a concept of moral evil. Meanwhile, de Beauvoir shows that other forms of ethics take up an impersonal perspective that is impossible for any real human to assume, deny human freedom by insisting that people must always follow certain abstract principles in particular situations, and see moral failure as the natural result of moral error along the path to virtue, rather than the positive result of an evil will.

Existentialism's critics argue that it cannot translate into an ethical system because existentialists do not declare what is morally right from the outset, but rather let people choose their own values and make their own moral choices. In other words, these critics accuse existentialism of being subjective, while also holding that morality has to be objective. De Beauvoir shows that existentialism is based on a central, objective value—human freedom, including people's freedom to make their own decisions. People's moral upstandingness can be judged by the coherence of their actions, both in relation to one another and in relation to the basic fact of human freedom. For de Beauvoir, then, people's subjectivity—their power over their decisions and justifications for action—is also the *objective* fact that underlies morality in the first place.

Although existentialism is centered around human subjectivity, de Beauvoir insists that it can still meaningfully distinguish good from evil. In the second section of her book, she explores the moral implications of a variety of different ways of living. She sees the "sub-man," who does everything possible to avoid his freedom, as the worst ethical stance, followed by "serious" and "nihilistic" people who fail to see their own power to shape their beliefs, "adventurers" who pursue their freedom but do not direct it toward any meaningful end and "impassioned"

people who do the opposite (find a proper end but lose their freedom in pursuing it). All fall short of genuine freedom, which requires people to give their abstract freedom "concrete content" by making particular decisions, committing to particular causes and relationships, and negotiating the particular place into which they are thrown in the world.

Ultimately, de Beauvoir actually argues that existentialism is actually the *only* truly moral system. First, she thinks only existentialism sees people as truly responsible for their choices. Whether philosophers like it or not, people *are* free, which means that normal ethical systems are simply false: it is wrong to expect people to decide based on formulas, as though there is only one way to "win" at life and one objectively correct action in each situation. This kind of ethics assumes the impossible perspective of "the plane of the universal," claiming to look down on all humanity from the philosopher's privileged viewpoint—which, in reality, can never be infinite because all human life is finite. Secondly, de Beauvoir thinks that only existentialism makes room for a concept of evil. If "the moral world is the world genuinely willed by man," evil must be the product of will, not error or nature. And yet most forms of ethics simply see evil as a regrettable part of human nature, the product of moral error along the path to moral good, or the result of some other external factor. Under existentialism, people can either choose to pursue their freedom and define themselves (a moral good) or choose to deny or evade their freedom (which is moral evil). This means that, except for in situations of oppression in which people have no possibility of pursuing their freedom, people are wholly responsible for their good or evil will and actions. In fact, de Beauvoir notes that many people see existentialism as "gloomy" precisely because it holds people responsible for their wrong actions, but she argues that these critics are used to overly optimistic philosophies that promise them an impossible moral perfection rather than facing the reality of what is possible in an individual human life: a definite, finite contribution to the freedom of the human species.

Although many observers have accused them of doing away with morality, De Beauvoir and her fellow existentialists fully agree that it is necessary to conceive of people's actions in terms of good and evil. Their ethical innovation is not making morality relative but rather showing that the way ethics has been done in the past—through appeals to abstract rules—is an inadequate solution for the problems that ethics needs to solve: the concrete dilemmas that individuals face in their particular life situations. Instead, then, existentialism makes ethics about how people orient themselves toward their own freedom and future, considerations which de Beauvoir thinks are necessary for any system to truly provide an account of what is ethical.

## AMBIGUITY, BEING, AND EXISTENCE

Simone de Beauvoir chose the title *The Ethics of Ambiguity* because she sees ambiguity as a central structuring feature in people's lives: people are at once subjects and objects, in control of their own lives and helpless against the world's forces. People have absolute freedom over their own limited power, and no matter how much they strive, they will never be what they strive to be precisely because their power is limited. De Beauvoir explains this argument in terms of the difference between being (a thing's singular, definite essence) and existence (the simple fact of something's presence as in the world). Human existence is defined by people's freedom and lack of any definite being. De Beauvoir's solution to the often demoralizing ambiguity of human life is not to try and escape it by ceasing to strive or expecting to become perfect against the odds; rather, she thinks that people should "assume" their ambiguity by recognizing that their goals are provisional and striving precisely to disclose their own being through their actions.

De Beauvoir sees a number of paradoxes at the heart of the human condition. All rest on the fact that life seems both subjectively meaningful and objectively meaningless. The first form of ambiguity is that between people's status as a subject and an object. People both feel like "a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects," but also recognize that every other person feels the same way and thus sees *them* as an object. Secondly, people know that they will die, which will render everything for which they have worked throughout their life meaningless to them. At the same time, they strive with their full energies toward these goals, despite knowing them to be of only relative importance. Humans are also both stuck in the material world (through their bodies and their inevitable deaths) and able to escape it through thought and imagination. And finally, people both have fixed selves, as a result of their past and the choices they have made, and complete freedom to do what they want with themselves in the future (and complete responsibility for those choices).

As a result of this glaring ambiguity, failure is inevitable: people can never completely fulfill their will, become precisely what they want to be, or make the exact impact they want to make on the world. And yet they must still act despite these limits, which is what makes an "ethics of ambiguity" necessary. The ambiguity folded into the human condition can be best described as the tension between being and existence. Many people think of humans in terms of being—that there is a common, distinctive fact of the matter about what humans naturally are or should be. But, for existentialists, this is false: rather, people simply *exist*, and they are free to try and become whatever they would like—but will inevitably fail to achieve the kind of singular being they aim for. Failure is an inherent part of any project, but people still achieve *something* in the process. In Sartre's words, man is "a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that*

*there might be* being." In other words, people first create an image of what they would like to be—something that, in the moment they create the image, they are not (therefore, they become "a lack of being"). This process of projection and striving takes place so that people can pursue their being—"so that there *might be* being." In reality, freedom necessarily means that perfection is impossible, because perfection would erase people's freedom: there would be nothing left to strive for or pursue. And yet, many people falsely try to give up one half of ambiguity by either resigning themselves to never improving or doing anything (like the sub-man or nihilist), or by pursuing a godlike power over the world but losing sight of the brute fact that one's power is always limited (like the adventurer).

Ultimately, for de Beauvoir, the solution to ambiguity is not to resolve it by choosing being or existence, a fixed identity or a constant transcending of what one already is. Rather, one must struggle with the tension of ambiguity and learn to "take delight in [one's] very effort toward an impossible possession." Whenever people reach their goals (and transcend their previous selves) they in turn set new goals and imagine new selves: there is always a gap between reality and the projection. In de Beauvoir's words, "with each step forward the horizon recedes a step." By realizing this, people can learn to take pleasure in striving itself, rather than merely in the prospect of becoming what they strive for, and hold both contradictory halves of ambiguity together: they can both recognize their finiteness (their limited power and inevitable deaths) and see their projects as meaningful goals. If even continuing to pursue their goals becomes impossible, they must be able to set new ones. For de Beauvoir, every act of striving, no matter how successful, is "a disclosure of being," which means it reflects what a person is at the very moment in which they strive. The only kind of striving that can actually be fulfilled is a striving to disclose one's being—in other words, a sincere attempt to act authentically.

While de Beauvoir's insistence that people can never achieve all their goals might initially seem like a grim reality check, in reality it offers a new way forward: instead of holding themselves to unrealistic standards, people should recognize that their efforts are valuable in themselves, rather than mere means to the ends they seek. Instead of seeing one's inevitable failure to resolve the ambiguity of human existence as a sign of moral failure, one can come to see his or her inevitable progress as an individual as a meaningful sign of success. Of course, this is not just about living more optimistically; rather, it is about learning to work with ambiguity rather than struggle impossibly against it.

## FREEDOM

Because existentialists believe that individuals are, initially, nothing in particular—and therefore are in charge of freely defining and finding meaning in their own existences—freedom itself becomes their central value. For de Beauvoir, this freedom is not only the necessary starting point of any serious philosophy, but also the precise reason that existentialism must refrain from absolutely defining morality for people who are ultimately free to make their own decisions, as well as the ultimate end point of moral action itself. This last point is crucial: moral action, according to de Beauvoir, is action undertaken precisely as part of a human will to freedom, because this is the final end behind all of the goals people choose for themselves. Accordingly, living a genuinely free life requires turning one's basic or natural freedom into a moral freedom; this requires taking charge of one's actions, and then directing one's moral freedom towards goals that serve the cause of freedom itself.

Freedom is the starting point of existentialist philosophy because it is humans' only fundamental trait. Therefore, an action's respect for freedom is a reflection of its respect for humanity. Sartre famously argued that "existence precedes essence," which means that people find themselves as living, thinking agents in the world before they have the chance to define what they are. (In the terms de Beauvoir uses here, it can be said that people have existence, but no singular, timeless being.) For existentialists, humans are not naturally destined to be anything at all; in other words, people are free to make what they want of themselves, within the circumstances into which they are born. In addition, freedom naturally pursues itself: de Beauvoir takes the example of an incarcerated person trying to break out of prison or an oppressed group's revolt. When their freedom is denied by others, human beings generally care about nothing more than winning back that freedom. To de Beauvoir, any action that denies, flees from, or degrades freedom—whether one's own or others'—is undermining people's humanity. This is why she despises "serious" values received from an external source—ones to which people are so dedicated that they are willing to trample on others for the sake of what they arbitrarily consider "useful" (when, in reality, human freedom is the only end with any value in itself). A good example is the colonial bureaucrat who "contests the importance of the happiness, the comfort, the very life of the native, but he reveres the Highway, the Economy, the French Empire." For de Beauvoir, nothing is more important than freedom, so it is wrong to destroy freedom in the name of anything besides freedom itself.

In fact, in existentialist ethics, not only is it wrong to destroy freedom, but freedom is actually the only true end of any ethical action. De Beauvoir sees the most important component of a moral attitude as the conceptually complex act of "will[ing] oneself free." For de Beauvoir, free action should aim at "precisely the free movement of existence." This might seem like a paradox, but what she means is that people should act so as to multiply their freedom, as well as the freedom of others. This means creating space for new projects and

pursuits in the future, especially for those whose freedom is denied by oppression in the present. She also means that all other ends ultimately aim at freedom. For instance, political actions aim to create a free society, one learns in order to expand their capabilities of free action through knowledge, and people make art to affirm their creative freedom and help others understand the world so they gain a fuller capacity to act in the future. De Beauvoir distinguishes between "natural" and "moral" freedom. "Natural" freedom is the "original spontaneity" of everyone's life: the fact that people do things of their own accord, without prompting or coercion from the outside. Yet it is possible to live out this natural freedom without pursuing any particular moral goals. Moral freedom is the ability to choose and pursue one's own goals and projects, and existentialism's task is to help people turn natural freedom into moral freedom.

Freedom is both the starting and ending point of de Beauvoir's "ethics of ambiguity." It is because of people's natural freedom that they are morally free, and by developing this moral freedom, people gain the tools to become genuinely and completely free. But this genuine freedom requires that people direct their moral freedom toward the expansion of freedom itself, recognizing that all other goals are merely intermediary and that the absolute measure of human action is its contribution to "the triumph of freedom over facticity."

## POLITICS, ETHICS, AND LIBERATION

Unlike many philosophers who see individual action and decision-making as separate issues to be judged by separate criteria, for de Beauvoir the political and the ethical are continuous: it is impossible to act ethically without taking into account the interests of other people, or to make political decisions that are not also ethical ones. Accordingly, de Beauvoir spends the last portion of her book exploring existentialism's implications for politics, especially in terms of how oppressed people should deal with their predicament. While she argues that "crime and tyranny" are sometimes the only way to create freedom in the face of oppression, she also considers it essential that revolutionaries do not themselves become oppressors once they seize power. Just as de Beauvoir thinks individuals inevitably fail to meet their lofty moral goals, yet must strive for them nonetheless, she thinks that a perfect society is impossible, but it is still imperative to work for a *better* society—even when violence is the only means to do so.

For de Beauvoir, there is no strict division between the ethical and the political. Contrary to those who see existentialism as a solipsistic doctrine, meaning that it is entirely focused on individual morality and gives people no reason to worry about anyone else's interests, de Beauvoir (like Sartre) argues that anyone's freedom is actually interdependent on the freedom of everyone else. This is true concretely, because one remains free to act in the world only when others are not oppressing them, and because one's individual decisions inevitably have effects for other people. Without other people, there is no future toward which one's actions can build. And it is also true theoretically, in the sense that every individual's pursuit of their own individual projects is also the pursuit of a vision of how the world as a whole could be if their projects were completed, and so each individual tries to "forge valid laws for all" in pursuing their ideals. Accordingly, to act ethically is to implicate other people (and their particular interests) in the consequences of one's actions, and to act politically is to pursue a personal project in conjunction with a collective one.

De Beauvoir highlights how oppression sets limit on freedom—this is why it is evil and needs to be overcome. Most straightforwardly, oppression often keeps people in a childlike or serious state. Some people remain like children because of oppression: they are so disempowered that none of their actions have any real consequences, and so they can never realize their freedom. For instance, in most contemporary societies women's desires and abilities are seldom taken seriously, and many women simply serve other people's ends because they never gain the resources necessary to understand their freedom and potential to pursue their own desires and interests outside the framework of patriarchy. Tyrants and oppressors keep people in a state of subjugation by reducing them to their facticity. Oppressed people become defined by what they are externally (a certain color, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, lineage, sexuality, economic status, and so on) but never by the most distinctive part of any human being's identity: their freedom and what they choose to do with it. Many tyrants also turn their followers and themselves into things, seeing their followers as mere instruments in their own quest for power and seeing themselves in terms of the facticity of their power, rather than in terms of their own humanity.

While overcoming oppression is absolutely paramount for de Beauvoir, it is never a cut-and-dry process. In fact, movements responding to oppression can easily turn oppressive themselves when they too easily trample on freedom in their attempt to restore it. At the same time, however, sometimes this trampling *is* necessary, and much of de Beauvoir's third section concerns how to defeat the oppressor without installing a new form of oppression. For instance, in the most severe situations, the only appropriate response is pure revolt. Yet people accustomed to revolt often become paralyzed, serious, or nihilistic when they do need to make a positive plan for the future. In such conditions, the oppressed must turn the oppressor into an object for the sake of the freedom struggle, often through violence, precisely because the oppressor does not see the oppressed as human and therefore is willing to trample on their own fundamental freedom. Violence is always immoral, but de Beauvoir thinks it is sometimes necessary in order to open a free future. She does not believe in moral

perfection, for ethics and freedom only exist because humans are inevitably imperfect, and "the world has always been at war and always will be"; accordingly, she sees it as perfectly plausible that violence might be the only means to reduce violence in the long term and thinks that politicians and revolutionaries who promise a peaceful and fulfilling future are deceptive. Many supposed revolutionaries (like the Soviets) turn into authoritarians by deciding they are willing to sacrifice any other freedom for the sake of their cause, but ethical ones vigilantly weigh the full impact of every action, taking into account its impact on everyone's freedom. To achieve this vigilance, de Beauvoir thinks that revolutionary movements should allow and seriously weigh internal criticism, both because it improves the movement and, more fundamentally, because such movements are founded precisely on the principle of free resistance to power.

Although de Beauvoir's book is centrally about ethics, it is clear that she chooses to cover these political themes not only because existentialism rejects the distinction between politics and ethics but also as part of her own personal project, in order to help liberation struggles through her own platform as a public intellectual. Her examples of oppression and revolt, particularly with respect to French colonial Africa and World War II, are carefully chosen to show both the moral pitfalls of blind revolt and the necessity of doing everything realistic to fight the structures of oppression that continue to encircle a significant proportion of humankind.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### SUICIDE

Like revolt, suicide is a uniquely negative action: it has no positive goal and seeks only the destruction of what already exists (in this case, the self). De Beauvoir has a unique take on suicide, however: while it is often a sign of nihilistic moral cowardice, she says, sometimes it is actually the only way for people to pursue their freedom. In the first case, nihilists who realize that there are no inherent values built into the universe see this as proof that nothing at all is valuable (instead of that they are in charge of their own moral destinies). Completely attached to the idea that true moral values must be absolute, nihilists decide to pursue the destruction of all subjective moral values (even though all real values are subjective, and all subjective values are real). Suicide is one version of this process: the will to destroy freedom itself. In another kind of case, however, de Beauvoir thinks that suicide is precisely a means to freedom. When people are so oppressed that they have no hope of reclaiming their freedom through means like escape or successful revolt, suicide can be the only way for them to act freely.

De Beauvoir gives an example of each kind, asking how those with relationships to people trying to commit suicide should react. In her first example, "a young girl takes an overdose" because of heartbreak. It is clearly right to help her, because she is acting out of a momentary nihilism, a desire to destroy herself because she ran up against the limits of her freedom (her inability to be with the person she loved). In the second example, de Beauvoir considers "melancholic patients who have tried to commit suicide twenty times" and are locked in asylums with no hope of "putting an end to their intolerable anguish." In this case, if such a patient has no way out of the asylum, it is acceptable to support their suicide, which represents their only way to act freely, in defiance of their oppressor (the society that imprisons them in the asylum).

Suicide accordingly represents how, for existentialists, it makes little sense to talk about morality in terms of absolute approval or rejection for certain kinds of action. While most conventional moral systems would ask whether suicide is wrong in the abstract, de Beauvoir thinks it only makes sense to ask about it in particular, concrete situations, depending on whether it ultimately gets in the way of people's later freedom (like the overdosing girl who will later overcome her heartbreak) or actually constitutes a person's only possible free act (like the asylum patient). More broadly, then, the example of suicide represents the limits of conventional ethics and the need for a system like existentialism, which refuses to judge people except in the actual circumstances of their lives.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Citadel edition of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* published in 1948.

### Part 1 Quotes

"The continuous work of our life," says Montaigne, "is to build death." He quotes the Latin poets: *Prima, quae vitam dedit, hora corpsit*. And again: *Nascentes morimur*. Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and the plant merely undergo.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 5-6

**Explanation and Analysis**

The opening lines of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* acknowledge the endless generations of philosophers who have insisted that consciousness—and specifically, people's awareness that they will die—is the defining characteristic of the human condition. De Beauvoir translates this classical argument into a theory of the ambiguity that she considers central to human life. Quoting the famed Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne's 1580 essay "That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die," she foreshadows her own goal in this book: to show people how to affirm their lives by recognizing that living and dying are one and the same process. The two quotes from Montaigne in turn come from the Roman philosopher Seneca ("the hour that gives us life begins to take it away") and astronomer-poet Marcus Manilius ("as we are born we die"). This is the central ambiguity in human life: people build up a place in the world as they fade away toward nonexistence; they know they will eventually leave the world, unlike other kinds of living beings, and yet they feel their actions and contributions to the world are absolutely valuable. They are both everything (to themselves) and nothing (to the world), and they must decide how to act in light of this duality. While de Beauvoir expresses this ambiguity in a myriad of other ways throughout her book—people feel like subjects but know that others see them as objects; they are conditioned by the past but free to build the future; they have powerful wills and yet the world limits their power—she starts with this formulation of ambiguity because it shows how ambiguity has long been recognized, but almost never been taken seriously, by philosophers of the past.

> Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means. The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Though they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth's. Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their grandeur more brilliantly, and in no other age has this grandeur been so horribly flouted. In spite of so many stubborn lies, 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.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** Part 1: Ambiguity and Freedom 7-8

**Explanation and Analysis**

As she elaborates on her discussion of human ambiguity, de Beauvoir argues that people recognize their ambiguity in relation to not only nature, but also the human species itself. Knowing that "society" should serve people, people serve "society" instead; every increase in human power is also an increase in humans' powerlessness; the more society expands, the more insignificant the individual begins to look. By showing that ambiguity is a feature of human relationships as well as the human condition, de Beauvoir opens the difficult questions she takes up in the final part of her book: how the freedom of the individual relates to the freedom of the collective, and how people can fight for the freedom of humanity as a whole without destroying freedom in the process of amassing the power needed to overcome oppression.

> 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.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 8

**Explanation and Analysis**

After providing a basic account of what human ambiguity entails and how past philosophers have failed to deal with it, de Beauvoir explains that she will make it the centerpiece of her ethics. Whereas most philosophy reduces mind to matter or matter to mind—which allows thinkers to say, for example, that the human soul is eternal and therefore one's actions in this life do not matter except insofar as they bring one to the afterlife, or that the mind is just an extension of biological reality and therefore people do not truly make choices or have ethical responsibility for those choices—de Beauvoir thinks this kind of thought is dishonest, because it neglects the reality that ambiguity is a basic element of the perspective from which everyone must choose to make

decisions. When she talks about "assum[ing] our fundamental responsibility," she is both declaring the starting point of her philosophy and gesturing to what she thinks ethical action must require: assuming (acknowledging and embracing) the ambiguity of human life.

> Man, Sartre tells us, is "a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that there might be* being."

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 10

**Explanation and Analysis**

This complicated quote from Sartre plays a central role in de Beauvoir's explanation of human action and freedom. Sartre uses the word "being" in differing, sometimes contradictory senses throughout this sentence. A person is *a being* in the sense that they exist in the world; but a person makes him- or herself "a lack of being" by projecting themselves toward some goal. By setting one's mind to something, a person defines him- or herself as a lack—in the present, a person is not what he or she will be in the future. For instance, by deciding to write a book, a man comes to think of his present self as the version of himself that has not yet written the book, that currently *lacks* the identity that he projects—which is *being* in the sense of a single, coherent concept of identity (rather than de Beauvoir's dynamic, changing picture of identity as the free movement of *existence*). However, this process of setting a goal or making a projection, then defining oneself as a lack of that projection, is aimed precisely towards fulfilling that projection—therefore, one makes oneself a lack "*in order that there might be* being."

However, Sartre and de Beauvoir do not think this ultimate "being" can ever be fulfilled; rather, people are constantly striving for a fantasy they can never entirely achieve, because the world sets limits on their will. When people do complete their goals, they do not achieve a single, stable, fulfilled identity, but rather come up with a new goal and set about pursuing a new project. In this sense, the lack is a constant feature of the human condition, as well as one way of expressing human ambiguity: people desire a fulfillment they also know they will never achieve.

> My contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy. I can not appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph, not as a defeat. This means that man, in his vain attempt to be God, makes himself exist as man, and if he is satisfied with this existence, he coincides exactly with himself. It is not granted him to exist without tending toward this being which he will never be. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), Sartre, Hegel

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11

**Explanation and Analysis**

De Beauvoir uses the example of wanting to merge with the natural environment to illustrate what it means to *assume* ambiguity rather than struggle against it. In contemplating a landscape or enjoying an activity like sliding on snow, people express their will to merge with the environment or activity, to extend their joy permanently and make it an inalienable part of their being. Of course, this is completely impossible, and expecting it to happen means opening oneself up to unnecessary despair.

Instead of viewing the impossibility of merging with one's projection or fantasy as proof of one's defeat, de Beauvoir suggests that people should see how this impossible desire for fulfillment is actually a necessary condition of possibility for success: it is only by aiming high that people get anywhere. They will never exactly hit their mark, but they will always progress past where they started. This is the sense in which "man, in his vain attempt to be God, makes himself exist as man." Inevitably, people both will be possessed of this desire for perfection and will fail to fully achieve it. By recognizing this pair of conditions—this dimension of human ambiguity—people can learn to strive freely without expecting success and "take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession." For de Beauvoir, this is the hallmark of a proper moral attitude.

> For existentialism, it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself. How could men, originally separated, get together?

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), Hegel, Kant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 17

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, de Beauvoir emphasizes that philosophy should start from the perspective of the individual human being making concrete decisions in his or her life, rather than with an abstract concept of "impersonal universal man" that every individual can be assumed to fit. This does not preclude de Beauvoir and Sartre from generalizing about humanity, but merely switches the direction in which they generalize: out from the individual, not in from the collective. It also leads them to put freedom at the center of their picture, since different people live in different circumstances and with different commitments; no individual is capable of predicting exactly what will come of their actions, so decisions are always uncertain gambles based on imperfect information and freely chosen personal goals. (This is what de Beauvoir means when she says that people live in "situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself.") Since people live as individuals—they are "originally separated"—it makes no sense to theorize them as a homogenous whole. However, it is also necessary to think in terms of the collective—which de Beauvoir thinks of as a "plurality"—because people's actions implicate one another. This challenge of thinking in terms of a collective of individuals is the focus of the last part of de Beauvoir's book.

❝ We think that the meaning of the situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of a passive subject, that it surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), Marx

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 19

**Explanation and Analysis**

In elaborating the relationship between her ethical system and Marxism, de Beauvoir agrees with Marxism's "notion of situation"—that people live in constant pursuit of something they do not have—but offers this suggestion about "the meaning of the situation" to differentiate her thought from that of Marxists. Marxists think a particular situation—specifically, the situation of a class struggle, in which oppressed people must overcome the class of people that oppress them in order to achieve freedom—necessarily creates a certain kind of attitude in people and inevitably leads them to a certain, predictable outcome (revolution). In contrast, existentialists believe that no matter how strong outside pressures are, people are still ultimately free to choose what to do in their circumstances. Situations (gaps between the present and the future) do not pressure people into action; rather, people interpret their situation by acting, which means they reveal (or disclose) the meaning of their situation—what they are, and what they will become—in and through their actions. In other words, whereas Marxists see people as objects acted upon by historical pressures, existentialists see even the most oppressed people as subjects freely acting to create history.

❝ The characteristic feature of all ethics is to consider human life as a game that can be won or lost and to teach man the means of winning. Now, we have seen that the original scheme of man is ambiguous: he wants to be, and to the extent that he coincides with this wish, he fails. All the plans in which this will to be is actualized are condemned; and the ends circumscribed by these plans remain mirages. Human transcendence is vainly engulfed in those miscarried attempts. But man also wills himself to be a disclosure of being, and if he coincides with this wish, he wins, for the fact is that the world becomes present by his presence in it. But the disclosure implies a perpetual tension to keep being at a certain distance, to tear oneself from the world, and to assert oneself as a freedom. To wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as freedom are one and the same movement. Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 23

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this section, de Beauvoir explains what kind of desire is necessary to achieve genuine freedom in and through one's ambiguity (to "win" at ethics from an existentialist perspective). This allows her to close the circle, showing that freedom is the basic condition, ultimate end, and very

means of human action. Because, as she has already established, it is necessarily impossible that one completely fulfills their dreams ("coincides with [their] wish"); by intending to do so, one loses sight of the progress he or she *does* make and makes "human transcendence" impossible—by continuing to strive for the same, impossible goal, people lose sight of their power to set new goals, take on new projects, and transcend themselves (improve) in new ways.

De Beauvoir's solution might seem slightly paradoxical at first: a person must recognize their fantasies as such, but also recognize that fantasies are inevitable; instead of desiring that one fulfills their fantasies, one must instead desire "to be a disclosure of being." This, of course, is another complicated concept. De Beauvoir thinks that everyone's actions necessarily disclose their being—what they are at a particular moment, rather than the idealized "being" they hope to become—by revealing their desires, abilities, commitments, and so on. If all action discloses being, then if a person wishes that their action discloses their being, that person will always succeed. Accordingly, de Beauvoir thinks that this is the way to fulfill oneself through action (rather than desiring the fulfillment of one's idealized fantasy).

There is one final ingredient to de Beauvoir's picture: the sense in which "to wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as freedom are one and the same movement." Because one's actions in the world are freely undertaken, part of what those actions disclose is the fact of one's freedom (and the fact of freedom's fundamental place in the world). Accordingly, to successfully disclose oneself and the world through action is to show that one is free ("assert oneself as freedom"). De Beauvoir has already established that people have a fundamental freedom over their actions—but now she also shows that one should pursue the disclosure of one's freedom in action, meaning that act freely is also to act *in order to* be free or, in de Beauvoir's primary formulation, to *will oneself free*.

> To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 25

**Explanation and Analysis**

In order to explain how people can both be born with freedom and need to "will [themselves] free" in order to achieve a genuine moral attitude, de Beauvoir differentiates two registers of freedom: *natural* and *moral* freedom. *Natural* freedom refers simply to the sense in which human beings (and all living things) spontaneously move and act. Everyone has this from the moment of their birth, and de Beauvoir refers to it here as "the original upsurge of our existence." In contrast, *moral* freedom requires directing one's natural freedom toward particular projects and ends, or in other words "establishing a genuine freedom" by "will[ing] oneself free" in order to "effect the transition from nature to morality." Although she has shown that willing oneself free involves taking the disclosure of one's freedom as the goal of one's actions, de Beauvoir has not yet explored what this means in concrete circumstances, or what it takes to do this.

> The goal toward which I surpass myself must appear to me as a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing. Thus, a creative freedom develops happily without ever congealing into unjustified facticity. The creator leans upon anterior creations in order to create the possibility of new creations. His present project embraces the past and places confidence in the freedom to come, a confidence which is never disappointed. It discloses being at the end of a further disclosure. At each moment freedom is confirmed through all creation.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 27-28

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, de Beauvoir explains the relationship between willing oneself free and transcending one's self and present goals. She conceives genuine freedom as a constant process of transcendence, in which people never conceive of any point in their lives as the end of their personal growth, but instead couple their goals with a recognition that all goals are temporary and, upon their fulfillment or exhaustion (meaning the point after which people can make no more meaningful progress), they are inevitably replaced with other goals. In other words, striving is not a temporary state that people inhabit in the process of achieving what

they desire; rather, it is the permanent condition of all human life and the very condition in virtue of which human life is valuable. By accepting both the immutability of the past and the freedom of the future, one can "create the possibility of new creations" and continue to grow, making each past action logical in terms of the present and each present and future action meaningfully extend the past. This is what a genuinely moral life looks like: one freely pursues projects without losing sight of one's commitments, circumstances, and history.

❝ Not only do we assert that the existentialist doctrine permits the elaboration of an ethics, but it even appears to us as the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place. For, in a metaphysics of transcendence, in the classical sense of the term, evil is reduced to error; and in humanistic philosophies it is impossible to account for it, man being defined as complete in a complete world. Existentialism alone gives—like religions—a real role to evil, and it is this, perhaps, which make its judgments so gloomy.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 34

**Explanation and Analysis**

After spending the first part of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* making a complex philosophical argument for the moral necessity of "willing oneself free" and outlining the practical consequences and requirements of this attitude, de Beauvoir declares that she has answered the question she set out to solve: whether the existentialist picture of the human condition could be the basis for a theory of ethics. In doing so she answers the existentialism's critics, who thought this impossible (and insisted that the impossibility of an existentialist ethics would disqualify the system from being taken seriously).

However, de Beauvoir clearly also takes her argument one step further: she thinks that the existentialist picture of ethics is so distinctive that it forces people to reconsider the validity of all other ethics. She sees the accusation that existentialism is incompatible with ethics as really reflecting the doctrine's uniquely realistic picture of good and evil. Most comparable philosophies see evil as merely a failure to reach the good, but this is a problem for two reasons: first, according to existentialists, it is always impossible to fully reach the good; secondly, this implies that nobody actively perpetuates evil, but de Beauvoir thinks that it is essential to account for evil as a product of genuine human will, rather than of accident. She provides existentialism's account of evil in the second part of her book.

## Part 2 Quotes

❝ Every man casts himself into the world by making himself a lack of being; he thereby contributes to reinvesting it with human signification. He discloses it. And in this movement even the most outcast sometimes feel the joy of existing. They then manifest existence as a happiness and the world as a source of joy. But it is up to each one to make himself a lack of more or less various, profound, and rich aspects of being.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Child

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 44

**Explanation and Analysis**

In de Beauvoir's discussion of human moral development, she argues that the transition from childhood to maturity begins when people learn that the ostensibly serious world of adult values is, in fact, relative. This is the process of "making [one]self a lack of being," peeling back the illusions of absolute morality that make childhood feel both secure and inconsequential. To do this is to recognize one's responsibility—for the consequences of one's actions, for one's commitments to others and particular projects, and for the values that these actions and commitments express—but also one's freedom. By giving up the illusion that the world is legibly organized around absolute values, people move from believing in *being* to truly experiencing their *existence*, or their condition of free striving and "finiteness which is open on the infinite." And yet they also choose which elements of being they would like to fulfill (even though they never can)—and, in doing so, come to express a "more or less various, profound, and rich" picture of what they (and the world) should be like.

Ethics is the triumph of freedom over facticity, and the sub-man feels only the facticity of his existence. Instead of aggrandizing the reign of the human, he opposes his inert resistance to the projects of other men. No project has meaning in the world disclosed by such an existence. Man is defined as a wild flight. The world about him is bare and incoherent. Nothing ever happens; nothing merits desire or effort. The sub-man makes his way across a world deprived of meaning toward a death which merely confirms his long negation of himself. The only thing revealed in this experience is the absurd facticity of an existence which remains forever unjustified if it has not known how to justify itself.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Sub-Man

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 48

**Explanation and Analysis**

The first and lowest kind of person in de Beauvoir's taxonomy of moral attitudes is the "sub-man," who does nothing at all with his freedom. Because he fears the responsibility that comes with this freedom, he turns against it and seeks facticity—the quality of being an object, merely existing and never acting in a coherent way. This is a kind of failed attempt to return to childhood's security: to avert all moral responsibility by refusing to act. Of course, like everyone in the world, the sub-man remains morally responsible for his actions, which is precisely why he is morally reprehensible. He never translates his natural freedom—his capacity to act and not merely be moved around by external forces—into any meaningful or coherent moral project. Although he is defined most of all by passivity, his will to *not* understand or grasp his freedom still makes him an actively evil character.

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 being able to lose himself in it. it. So much so, that the movement toward 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 is, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one's freedom in its empty and absurd form of freedom of indifference.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Serious Man

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 50-51

**Explanation and Analysis**

The serious man in de Beauvoir's taxonomy chooses to believe that his values are absolute and certain. Unlike the sub-man, he *has* values; but like the sub-man, his moral attitude is a way of denying his freedom. Good examples are religiously or politically orthodox people, who place loyalty above free thought, or those who value moral purity so highly that they shun anything less (rather than striving for improvement and contributing to collective freedom).

For de Beauvoir, the serious man's attachment to his idol is all about attachment and not at all about the idol itself: people do not become serious because of their genuine interest in any particular goal or value, but rather because they want to erase their moral responsibility and let someone else take care of justifying their actions. According to de Beauvoir, this is a concretely evil will because it involves choosing ignorance. However, it is not as evil as the sub-man because it at least involves pursuing a more or less coherent worldview (and a concordance between acts and goals, even if they are someone else's goals).

The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Nihilist

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 62

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, de Beauvoir highlights how the nihilist gets halfway to a genuinely free attitude about morality: he sees that all values are constructed and relative, but he wrongly stops there. Believing that morality would only be worth pursuing if it were absolute, he turns against everyone else's moral values and seeks to show the world that there is no absolute good and evil. However, just because values are constructed does not mean their legitimacy is somehow

eroded; as constructions, they depend on the only absolute value, which is freedom itself. In striving to destroy others' values, the nihilist turns freedom against itself and therefore, ironically, undermines the only absolute value in his agony at the world's lack of absolute values.

It is obvious that this choice is very close to a genuinely moral attitude. The adventurer does not propose to be; he deliberately makes himself a lack of being; he aims expressly at existence; though engaged in his undertaking, he is at the same time detached from the goal. Whether he succeeds or fails, he goes right ahead throwing himself into a new enterprise to which he will give himself with the same indifferent ardor. It is not from things that he expects the justification of his choices. Considering such behavior at the moment of its subjectivity, we see that it conforms to the requirements of ethics, and if existentialism were solipsistic, as is generally claimed, it would have to regard the adventurer as its perfect hero.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Adventurer

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 63

**Explanation and Analysis**

Although de Beauvoir considers the adventurer "very close to a genuinely moral attitude," this is only because he has most of the ingredients of this attitude, not because he necessarily acts any more morally than any of the other people in de Beauvoir's taxonomy (indeed, he is quite likely to do more damage than, say, a pathetic sub-man). The problem is that, while the adventurer takes freedom as his own end, he only does so insofar as it is *his* freedom; his moral failure reveals the basic sense in which everyone's freedom depends on everyone else's and allows de Beauvoir to differentiate existentialism as it actually is from her critics' distorted view of it as a solipsistic philosophy (in other words, a philosophy that believes the individual is *all* that matters). A conquistador who gladly does the bidding of authoritarian governments and a seducer who measures his worth by the number of hearts he breaks only fulfill their own freedom by trampling upon that of others, and therefore deny the notion that freedom is valuable *in itself* (all the while affirming only his own freedom).

If a man prefers the land he has discovered to the possession of this land, a painting or a statue to their material presence, it is insofar as they appear to him as possibilities open to other men. 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.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Passionate Man

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72

**Explanation and Analysis**

De Beauvoir sees the passionate man as the flipside of the adventurer. If the adventurer values his freedom but directs this freedom wherever the reward to himself is greatest, the passionate man is so keen on a single goal that he loses sight of his freedom. Both of their oversights ultimately lead them to trample on freedom. This may sound very close to the serious man, but de Beauvoir carefully distinguishes them: the serious man does not truly *choose* his own values and commitments, whereas the passionate man does. Therefore, the serious man tends to join someone else's cause, where the passionate man comes up with his own but refuses to ever let it go. Unable to fulfill his being—to close the gap between what he is and what he fantasizes about becoming—the passionate man refuses to accept anything less than perfection and continues striving, in vain, for the impossible.

In this passage, de Beauvoir explains that genuine freedom requires not a possessive passion for some end, but rather a dedication to that end in itself. A more illustrative example than land is romance: whereas the passionate person wants to possess and control his or her lover, the genuinely free person wants whatever is best for their lover, even if this means they cannot be together. De Beauvoir's last sentence in this passage is characteristically dense, but what she means is that simply pursuing one's own freedom as the ultimate end of action will never suffice; genuine freedom requires acting for the sake of other freedoms as well. To "entrap [the thing at which he aims] in the destiny of the in-itself" means (in Sartre's jargon) to reduce something to the status of an object and refuse to acknowledge its freedom.

If I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. There would be nothing to possess, and I myself would be nothing.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 76

**Explanation and Analysis**

As she transitions from discussing varieties of moral failure to explaining the general principle that every individual's freedom relies on the freedom of everyone else, de Beauvoir explains the error at the heart of the adventurer and passionate man's moral attitudes: like young men not yet aware of others' freedom, they tend to see their freedom as competing with that of others rather than relying on it; as though taking on the perspective of the abstract universal, they refuse to acknowledge that others are freely pursuing their own projects and values at the same time in the world, and they are incapable of empathizing with the people they want to conquer and possess. De Beauvoir argues that the very fact that adventurers, passionate men, and those like them can take freedom from other people is proof enough that people's freedom is interdependent; it would be impossible to strive or achieve anything absent the resistance posed by the world and the freedoms of others.

❝ This truth is found in another form when we say that freedom can not will itself without aiming at an open future. The ends which it gives itself must be unable to be transcended by any reflection, but only the freedom of other men can extend them beyond our life.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 76-7

**Explanation and Analysis**

Freedom wills itself when people act freely for the sake of achieving or expanding freedom in the world—that of themselves and of others. De Beauvoir argues here that this implies an "open future," which is a crucial concept in her picture of human activity: while people are inescapably conditioned by the past (including childhoods and circumstances they did not choose), their freedom gives them the capacity to shape the future, which is not yet set in stone. However, the openness of the future cannot be confused with the infinity of the future—the inevitable fact of people's death makes the future necessarily finite, but never yet defined. There are infinite possibilities for the future, but only a finite set of them can ever be realized.

And yet, while each individual's future is finite, de Beauvoir thinks that freedom—and each individual's freely chosen projects—can be propagated infinitely. Concretely, this could look like the preservation of an artist or thinker's work after their death, the continuation of a political order created by powerful figures, or even the continuation of a family line. Thus the freedom of others is not merely a necessary consideration in the free action of every individual, but also a means of expanding that individual freedom and its contributions to the collective freedom of humanity as a whole.

## Part 3, Section 2 Quotes

❝ We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself. A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 97

**Explanation and Analysis**

As de Beauvoir's discussion turns to the legitimacy of resistance to oppression, she notes how oppressors frequently use the same language as she does, talking about freedom and rights, in an effort to prevent the kind of social change that would deprive them of their unfair advantages. By returning to the notion that true freedom both appeals to and relies on the freedom of all others, she is able to distinguish oppressors' (false) claims to having their freedom violated by liberation struggles from the kinds of freedom that are legitimately worth fighting for. The oppressor claims their license to exploit others and maintain the existing order as a form of "freedom," but this does not count precisely because the people on whose labor they rely would not freely choose to perform that labor.

## Part 3, Section 3 Quotes

❝ The only justification of sacrifice is its utility; but the useful is what serves Man. Thus, in order to serve some men we must do disservice to others. By what principle are we to choose between them?

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 121

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, de Beauvoir both dispels a central rhetorical tool of the oppressor and raises what proves perhaps the most difficult problem for her moral theory as presented in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The rhetorical tool that de Beauvoir demystifies is the concept of "usefulness" or "utility," which is a fundamentally meaningless word and always raises the question: useful for what? Tyrants, serious people, and lazy rulers often appeal to "usefulness," but they are really citing something's role in advancing their own goals, and often using "usefulness" to conceal their disregard for human freedom. To de Beauvoir, the only appropriate way to talk about "usefulness" is to determine whether something aids or hinders the expansion of human freedom, and that is the sense in which she uses the word "useful" here.

The challenge to de Beauvoir's moral theory is the problem of how to decide what to do in situations where different people's freedoms compete. One example she gives is how French resistance fighters during World War II had to hope that anticolonial revolts in British territories failed, since their success would hinder the war effort. And yet it is easy to imagine that someone in the British territories would hope the opposite—that the war would fail, and so hinder colonialism. While de Beauvoir discusses this problem at length in this third and final part of her book, she ultimately gives a straightforward but potentially dissatisfying answer: it depends on the concrete circumstances of one's personal commitments, affiliations, and judgments about a situation. Because a person is always responsible for their own moral decision, it is wrong for that person to throw their hands up and decide at random when it is initially unclear whether an action helps or hurts freedom on balance; there are rare cases when a person must decide this from a completely removed perspective, but more often than not one is in a position to make such a decision because her or she has some personal stake in some of the freedoms in question, and prioritizing these freedoms becomes an imperative.

## Part 3, Section 4 Quotes

❝ Society exists only by means of the existence of particular individuals; likewise, human adventures stand out against the background of time, each finite to each, though they are all open to the infinity of the future and their individual forms thereby imply each other without destroying each other. A conception of this kind does not contradict that of a historical unintelligibility; for it is not true that the mind has to choose between the contingent absurdity of the discontinuous and the rationalistic necessity of the continuous; on the contrary, it is part of its function to make a multiplicity of coherent ensembles stand out against the unique background of the world and, inversely, to comprehend these ensembles in the perspective of an ideal unity of the world.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), Sartre, Hegel

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 131-132

**Explanation and Analysis**

In elaborating on Sartre's complex concept of the "detotalized totality," de Beauvoir offers a picture of what it might look like to think about morality collectively from an existentialist perspective. Whereas most ethical theories begin by profiling humanity in the abstract and use their profiles to come up with moral rules for individuals, de Beauvoir argues throughout *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that existentialism does the opposite, looking at the individual developing a sense of morality and making concrete decisions in order to develop a theory of the human collective.

Accordingly, de Beauvoir takes up Sartre's call to look at history as a "detotalized totality": that is, to see it as a confinable and analyzable whole, but also to remember that the events that make up history are the products of individuals acting freely (and, at best, for the sake of freedom). Thus one can make "human adventures stand out against the background of time" and analyze different figures' distinctive contributions while also seeing patterns and progress in the past; this is also how de Beauvoir thinks people should think about the human species, not as a uniform totality that will necessarily live out certain patterns, but as a collectivity of individuals whose separate actions all bear on the rest. Accordingly, just as assuming one's ambiguity requires seeing oneself as both a subject and an object, analyzing humanity requires seeing people as both individuals and members of a collective, subjects shaping their own futures and objects affected by other

people's pursuits.

## Part 3, Section 5 Quotes

We repudiate all idealisms, mysticisms, etcetera which prefer a Form to man himself.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Tyrant, The Serious Man

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 157

### Explanation and Analysis

Although this argument appears consistently throughout de Beauvoir's book, this passage contains her most concise and incisive formulation of it: ideas cannot be elevated above concrete human freedom, even when those ideas purport to represent human freedom or the collective interest. On a microscopic level, this is a critique of the serious man, who becomes so dedicated to an idea, idol, or collective that he blindly follows its dictates and denies his own freedom of choice, as well as the freedom of others when it conflicts with his ideology. More broadly, de Beauvoir is also critiquing the kinds of political systems she collectively refers to as tyrannies, both authoritarian states in which individuals lose their rights as soon as they disagree with the official viewpoint and—more troublingly—revolutionary efforts that undermine their purported interest in freedom by forcing people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of an idea or shunning anyone who refuses to acknowledge the leadership as sacred. Specifically, de Beauvoir criticizes the Soviet Union, which uses the idea of revolution to justify a wide variety of gratuitous atrocities that have absolutely nothing to do with the revolution (and everything to do with the consolidation of power, which is no longer necessary).

Indeed, on the one hand, it would be absurd to oppose a liberating action with the pretext that it implies crime and tyranny; for without crime and tyranny there could be no liberation of man; one can not escape that dialectic which goes from freedom to freedom through dictatorship and oppression. But, on the other hand, he would be guilty of allowing the liberating movement to harden into a moment which is acceptable only if it passes into its opposite; tyranny and crime must be kept from triumphantly establishing themselves in the world; the conquest of freedom is their only justification, and the assertion of freedom against them must therefore be kept alive.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker), The Tyrant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 167-168

### Explanation and Analysis

De Beauvoir returns to the central question in her last section: insofar as everyone's freedom is interdependent and certain forms of oppression cannot be resolved by appealing to freedom itself, when and how is it acceptable to perpetuate violence for the sake of freedom? This is her final take on this question, although her primary answer to it is that it depends so heavily on circumstances that it is impossible to adjudicate all relevant cases in the abstract. Violence must be necessary and committed for the sake of particular, concrete freedoms, rather than in the name of some abstract idea, or merely gratuitously, to help the revolutionary leadership gain power. If a revolution is to truly pursue freedom, it must not "harden into" an oppressive movement; it can only perpetuate oppression (violate freedom) momentarily "if it passes into its opposite," or opens up freedom as soon as those who stood in freedom's way have been taken care of.

A consequence of this picture is that true revolutions must accept critics, so long as those critics are motivated by the same pursuit of freedom—not only in order to improve the movement by exposing and resolving its weaknesses, but also in order to expose and resolve its abuses, the moments when it falls into unnecessary violence. And, as always, de Beauvoir holds that moral perfection is an unachievable but symbolically important goal, which is important here for three reasons. First, it justifies the acceptance of critics (in both the senses that critics can help). Secondly, it means that violence cannot be rejected in the abstract, for "without crime and tyranny there could be no liberation of man." And third, it suggests that a revolution need not establish a perfect society or moral order in order to be successful; just like individual moral growth, de Beauvoir sees social change as a series of failed revolutions that nevertheless replace the existing order with something better, closer to the ideal of a society in which all are free only because each and every individual is free.

## Conclusion Quotes

❝ Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness 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.

**Related Characters:** Simone de Beauvoir (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 172-173

### Explanation and Analysis

While existentialism's critics often see it as a pessimistic philosophy, de Beauvoir sees it as combining a realism about the world's horrors with a genuine optimism about the human spirit. For de Beauvoir, those who believe that the world's faults will magically disappear are simply delusional, invested in a serious faith that allows them to overlook humans' fundamental, inalienable responsibility for the fate of the human race. The world's problems are genuine and not to be taken lightly, but each individual also fundamentally has nobody to answer to but themselves, no matter what era or conditions they find themselves born into. This means that true moral freedom is possible under all conditions, from those of extreme oppression (in which it can only mean revolt) to those of great means (in which it offers the opportunity to meaningfully change the course of the human species for the better). Accepting the finiteness of human life and power—which is realistic, not pessimistic—is the first step towards making the most of one's freedom, and existentialism's ultimate goal is precisely to help people do this.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART 1: AMBIGUITY AND FREEDOM

Citing the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, de Beauvoir argues that humans are unlike other forms of life because they consciously understand the inevitability of their deaths, or "the non-temporal truth of [their] existence." Because of their consciousness, each person feels like "a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects," but is also an object from everyone else's perspective.

*De Beauvoir opens by explaining the central ambiguity in human life: the fact that people are simultaneously acting subjects and objects acted upon, free to pursue their wills and confined by the circumstances into which the world thrusts them. By realizing that they will die, people come to gain an external (objective) as well as internal (subjective) perspective on themselves. De Beauvoir's book is an attempt to reckon with the ethical implications of this split in the human condition.*

People have recognized this duality throughout history, and philosophers have largely "tried to mask it" by rejecting the distinction between mind and matter, and by arguing that people have an immortal soul or can reach eternal enlightenment. Their ethical thought tries to turn people into "pure inwardness or pure externality," although Hegel tried to supersede this binary. All of this only makes "the paradox of [the human] condition" more obvious. The more people feel like individual agents in charge of their own will and able to shape the world, the more they realize how easily that world overwhelms them. This has never been more apparent than now, and instead of avoiding this paradox, de Beauvoir insists on "look[ing] the truth in the face."

*For de Beauvoir, the impulse to reject ambiguity is just as fundamental to the human condition as ambiguity itself. This desire to reject ambiguity is a will for* being, *meaning an attempt to define oneself in terms of a single, unchanging essence, whether the soul or the body. (The soul, or inwardness, implies that ethics is about one's intentions, motives, and principles, while the body, or externality, means seeing the mind as the product of molecules rather than a genuinely free will, and therefore leaves little space for ethical thinking.) For de Beauvoir, in reality a human being is defined not by either their inwardness (the mind and will) or their externality (the body and one's reactions to outside conditions) but rather the very tension between these two halves.*

This ambiguity is central to all existentialism, which gets attacked for giving people no principles on the basis of which to live. Sartre in particular declares that people inevitably try and fail to synthesize their will with the world. But even "the most optimistic" ethical systems have first focused on humans' inevitable failures; if people did not have room for improvement, there would be no point in ethics. Indeed, acting ethically for self-improvement only makes sense for the kind of subject who "questions himself in his being." And yet Sartre's thought leaves no possibility of someone ethically improving, or "becoming the being that he is not." He only briefly touches on ethics in the last pages of his central work, *Being and Nothingness*, but this does not mean that he totally "condemn[s] man without recourse."

*De Beauvoir gestures to her motive for writing* The Ethics of Ambiguity*: showing that existentialism can create an ethical system despite critics' objections and Sartre's relative disinterest in the issue. Because all ethics must come to terms with people's moral failure, the existentialist principle that people will never be able to make themselves or their worlds conform to their mental images is an argument in favor of theorizing an existentialist ethics rather than a reason why existentialism cannot make space for ethics. In other words, people's inability to be morally perfect is not a reason to avoid thinking about what moral perfection would mean.*

In his words, Sartre sees man as "a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that there might be* being." First, this means that people choose their own passions, which can have "no external justification" but can still justify *themselves*. Indeed, the choice of passion "nullifies being" only in order to "disclose being," to recognize the world's presence (and allow the world to recognize one's own). For instance, by contemplating a landscape a person expresses both a desire to merge with it and a pain at their inability to do so; but they "take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession," which is a success rather than a failure. By trying to be God, in other words, one comes to one's human existence. As "an effort to be," one's impossible attempt to be what one desires serves as "a manifestation of existence." A person exists precisely in virtue of being a lack.

*While de Beauvoir just suggested that Sartre's thought does not let one "becom[e] the being that he is not," she explains here that this actually just means that people cannot achieve definite* being, *meaning that they cannot become the ideal versions of themselves that they imagine. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that someone will change and improve, a process de Beauvoir calls transcendence. Thus, Sartre's description of man as "a being who* makes himself *a lack of being* in order that there might be *being" really means that people are entities who imagine themselves as being one definite thing. When they realize that they are not that thing, they become a lack. However, in realizing that they are a lack, people also set up a goal (being) toward which they can aim.*

Thus, in order for people to become their true selves, they must seek to realize, not overcome, their being's ambiguity. Rather than denying that one transcends oneself, one must "refuse to lose [one]self in" that tendency to transcendence, or continue to recognize the gap between one's being and one's projection of oneself. The "existentialist conversion" must bracket away one's "will to be" for the sake of analysis, looking at one's relationship to one's projection rather than hoping to genuinely achieve that projection.

*De Beauvoir has criticized most philosophy for trying to eliminate ambiguity, or define people solely through their will or their world (their "pure inwardness or pure externality"). In contrast, she proposes seeing ambiguity as the solution and not the problem. Here, she re-explains this in terms of transcendence, which essentially means overcoming one's current self and becoming something new. Viewing human life in terms of internality or will is equivalent to "los[ing one]self in" transcendence, or defining oneself through one's fantasies and not one's realities. Viewing human life in terms of externality means denying transcendence: forgetting about one's capacity for willful change and improvement. The "existentialist conversion" is an allusion to the phenomenological thought of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, but what she essentially means is that ethics is not about whether one* achieves *what one imagines, fantasizes, or projects oneself to be, but rather about what people* do with *their projected imagined versions of themselves when they realize that these are mere fantasies.*

This "existentialist conversion" means that one must, first, reject external standards and recognize that genuinely existing only means "being right in [one's own] eyes." The idea of external values actually denies people's freedom—in fact, people's free existence is what creates values. This is not about optimism or pessimism; existence is a brute fact, with no reasons or justifications for or against it. It "make[s] no sense" to ask whether or not human life is worth it, only *how* to go about living.

*This argument is de Beauvoir's restatement of a basic tenet of existentialism, an argument Sartre famously explained as "existence precedes essence." Rather than trying to pin down human nature or the nature of the absolute Good, existentialists think that people create their own values and shape their own identities through free choices made in circumstances they do not freely choose. This is a central reason why existentialism's critics think it cannot define what is ethical: it lets people choose (and can even defend opposite choices as equally ethical) rather than telling them to follow a set of absolute moral laws or commandments. Such law-based morality, for de Beauvoir, is itself unethical because it tramples on people's fundamental freedom.*

De Beauvoir next asks whether this human freedom implies that people can do whatever they want, that there is no true ethics. But actually, she says, it is the opposite: people are the ultimate measure of their own actions, completely responsible in a moral world they create. They cannot legitimately take recourse to God, or say their life inherently matters or not, because it only matters depending on what they do.

*De Beauvoir is addressing a related, more exaggerated version of the argument against existentialism: that, because it does not provide specific moral commandments, people can do whatever they want without being judged as good or evil. Rather than escaping judgment, she thinks, people should* constantly *reflect on their actions and character from a moral perspective. Ultimately, she sees the impulse to consult external commandments and authorities on moral questions as a sign of people's refusal to accept their responsibility for* determining *(in addition to doing) what is right and wrong.*

Many people accuse existentialism of making morality meaningless and subjective—but it is a universal, objective truth that everyone is a subject unto themselves. Indeed, existentialism continues the tradition of major Western philosophers (like "Kant, Fichte, and Hegel") as well as "all humanism" by arguing that moral laws and individual consciousness are inextricably tied to one another. Yet whereas Kant and Hegel saw this in the fact that each individual expresses a universal human experience, will, or consciousness, existentialists ground morality not in the abstract "impersonal universal man" but rather in "the plurality of concrete, particular men" acting from their own particular contexts. De Beauvoir wonders how "men, originally separated, [got] together" in these other ethical systems, which see them as all the same.

*De Beauvoir agrees that existentialism makes morality subjective, but she does not think this is a problem. The critics' implicit argument is that morality must be founded on an objective principle or truth, but for de Beauvoir, subjective freedom is precisely this principle. By citing previous philosophers, she shows that existentialism is not an anomaly but rather another step in a long-term trend toward grounding morality in people themselves rather than abstract laws. She simply does not see how one set of rules could be expected to apply to all human beings across history, living with such a diverse range of circumstances, problems, abilities, and technologies.*

De Beauvoir insists that "we are coming to the real situation of the problem" at the center of her book. Given the notion that "there is an ethics only if there is a problem to solve," or that ethics is about improving an imperfect reality, other ethical systems have jumped the gun by assuming that people are bound to the same moral laws rather than recognizing that, initially, they are separate, and that universal moral laws are an idealized abstraction of what perfected individual morality would look like. Conversely, "an ethics of ambiguity" must leave open the possibility that "separate extants can […] be bound to each other" and each individually "forge valid laws for all" through their freedom.

*De Beauvoir suggests that existentialism can conceive of a shared morality even though that is not its starting point, as well as introducing the questions of collective good and political action ("valid laws for all") on which the last part of her book focuses. Because morality is created by living, breathing people, a universally valid morality is the impossible perfection toward which individual moral actors should strive, but most philosophers are wrong to flip the equation and think that there really* is *a universal morality that can be applied to particular individuals. In doing so, in fact, they hold the whole world to their own impossible individual projection.*

De Beauvoir notes that Marxism shares existentialism's "notion of situation" and the "recognition of separation which it implies." Marxism is founded on the concrete needs of the class struggle, not an abstract concept of the just or good. It requires a revolutionary movement founded on this class struggle, which "an intellectual or a bourgeois" can only appreciate in the abstract (because it does not emerge from "the very impulse of his life"). And yet, whereas Marxism thinks that the individual will is the mere product of "objective [economic] conditions," existentialism thinks it is fundamentally free. Indeed, the proletariat (working class) can adopt various attitudes to class, and Marxism does emphasize freedom in so far as it is necessary for revolutionary action (which is the whole point of revolutionaries' moralizing political speeches).

*Existentialism's relationship with Marxism is complex and often ambiguous; de Beauvoir and Sartre both advocated and rejected various kinds of Marxism at various points in their lives. The "notion of situation" modeled on "separation" refers to the sense in which people act in an attempt to overcome the gap between the present and the desired future: for existentialists, the actual and the projected self, and for Marxists, the inequalities of the present and the projection of an egalitarian communist society. But while existentialists and Marxists agree that philosophy should be about concrete actions, Marxism insists that there is a single action—revolution—in relation to which every other action can be seen as more or less "correct" or "useful."*

So Marxism ends up with contradictory beliefs in both determination and freedom. And yet Marxists, like many Christians, often insist that acting freely means "giv[ing] up justifying one's acts" and therefore "betray[ing] the cause." While they insist on moral action, they also reject abstract morality and insist on absolute loyalty to the Party, or "having-to-be at the same time as being."

*Marxists end up fearing and repressing freedom, even though freedom is the ultimate purpose of their revolution. Abstractly, too, de Beauvoir is pointing to the contradictory character of insisting that people freely choose an option but only considering one option correct.*

De Beauvoir reminds the reader that existentialists "believe in freedom" and wonders whether this freedom means that people are "prohibited from wishing for anything." Instead, she declares, whereas most ethics is about teaching people how to "win" at life, existentialism shows that people will always fail to be what they want to be, but always succeed to disclose their being, and therefore "win" when their wish is "to be a disclosure of being." This makes one present in the world, but also implies a gap between oneself and the world (namely, freedom). And so freedom is its own, original moral justification, the foundation of all other values, which means it can never deny itself.

*While the objection de Beauvoir addresses here might initially seem illogical, she is thinking about the sense in which desiring something means allowing that goal to determine one's action (just as a Marxist acts so as to advance the revolution and therefore sacrifices their freedom to pursue other values). The solution is not to bind oneself to some impossible external goal, but rather to desire precisely freedom itself, the only ideal that action can truly achieve.*

De Beauvoir next asks whether "natural freedom contradict[s] the notion of ethical freedom" because we are born free, and so it makes no sense "*to will oneself* free." She decides that this objection fails because freedom is not "a thing or quality" that people have but rather intrinsic to "the very movement of [...] existence." Existence requires precisely "making itself be" through continuous free action. Therefore, "will[ing] oneself free" can be understood as meaning turning natural into moral freedom.

*It would not make sense for people to* will *their own freedom if they always have freedom from the start. But because human existence is meaningless without free action, people do not "have" freedom or simply get to hold on to it; they must rather continuously affirm their existence through free actions in order to keep their freedom. There are ways of acting that affirm and deny one's own freedom (the subject of Part Two), and by distinguishing natural from moral freedom, de Beauvoir shows how people can* be *free without* willing themselves free *(or affirming their freedom).*

The natural freedom with which people are born is random, spontaneous, and always directed toward something, but never founded on a reflective principle or project. Through "laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, [and] impatience," some continue living out this freedom and choose *not* to will themselves (morally) free (even though it is still impossible to affirmatively will oneself *unfree*). Conversely, by reflecting on one's actions and their utility in bringing one toward one's goal or object, one takes legitimately morally free actions. But this is a constant process—one's project constantly "founds itself," even though so many people try to hide in fantasy or serious dogmatism.

*The distinction between natural and moral freedom shows how freedom can both be a fundamental condition of all human existence and a generalizable metric of moral good and evil. Acting with moral freedom is good; acting without it (with mere natural freedom) is evil. However, because it is impossible for people to ever completely become their mental projections, moral freedom is a continuous project that requires vigilant reflection on every act's probable consequences and relationship to one's goals.*

Having looked at freedom's "subjective and formal aspect," de Beauvoir now wonders whether there is any way to "will oneself free." First, this requires gradually building a will over time, by developing a picture of one's life in the past and future. And every act of willing implicates past actions' relevance to one's project and future acts' continuation of it. This is a continual, limitless process: whenever one becomes what they wish to become, this self becomes a "point of departure" for the next goal, embracing the continuity of freedom.

*As she has shown that it is possible to transform from natural to moral freedom, now de Beauvoir must show what it means to take that transformation itself as one's moral project. In the barest of terms, what she argues is that people must constantly push towards improvement and see their goals as stepping stones along a continuous path of development that has no ultimate destination.*

In Descartes's words, however, "the freedom of man is infinite, but his power is limited" because the world resists people's actions. De Beauvoir asks what one should do about this; stubbornness makes no sense when success is impossible, but resignation is sad and dishonest, making people see genuine possibilities as mere past fantasies. And Stoic indifference simply leads people to give up on their own power to change and achieve things. Better, free action should aim at "precisely the free movement of existence." A good example is how injured or outcast people can "renew [their] engagement in the world," directing their energy to new projects and experiencing "both heartbreak and joy." This shows that freedom is fundamentally about "plan[ning] new possibilities" and so "disclos[ing] being," not trying to determine a particular future and "trap[ping] being." This also means going "from being to existence."

*This dilemma is a version of de Beauvoir's initial portrait of ambiguity: people feel that their own wills and imaginations are limitless but yet run up against the limits posed by concrete circumstance. Assuming the tension of ambiguity (as part of the process of achieving moral freedom) requires seeing* effort *as more important than* achievement*: one should do everything possible to achieve one's goals, but recognize that this is valuable because it means acting freely and authentically, rather than because one's goals are inherently valuable (or achievable, for the world can always block them). The example of injured or outcast people shows how a will to freedom must be built up over time, but that in doing so the substance of one's goals is much less important than the way one pursues them.*


De Beauvoir argues that this "salvation" requires that people continue to see new, fruitful possibilities in the future—this is why the most "obnoxious" form of punishment is requiring people to do senseless work they do not understand (like a student copying down the same line of text over and over). Similarly, life imprisonment is horrible because it absolutely constrains people's freedom, and freedom naturally rejects all such constraints on it, whether by resolving them (like illness), revolting against them (like a prison or unjust social system), or committing **suicide**, when there is no other option.

*People's ability to will and fulfill their freedom is intimately tied with their capacity to imagine a better future; this argument begins to gesture at the political implications of de Beauvoir's theory of freedom, for it means that people can be so disempowered that it can become impossible for them to live well without overcoming the forces that disempower them. De Beauvoir's examples of illness, revolt, and suicide show how human action in the most extreme circumstances always serves freedom, which attests to its fundamental place in existentialist ethics.*


So freedom always seeks to overcome obstacles to it, or "to realize itself as indefinite movement." And yet there are also always obstacles to freedom, no matter what. Thus freedom is always "a movement of liberation," which (as de Beauvoir will later show) even tries to "surpass death itself" by "prolonging itself through the freedom of others."

*Freedom's character as an "indefinite movement" allows de Beauvoir to connect the revolt of the subjugated and the body's drive to heal itself—responses to the most constrained circumstances—with the morally free person. All are pursuing the same thing: "indefinite movement," the freedom from constraints and freedom to create new things through action. This shows how different people's freedom is connected in a theoretical sense, and the notion that one might pass one's freedom on to others—for instance, through perpetrating one's art.*

De Beauvoir declares that, so far, she has shown "that the words 'to will oneself free' have a positive and concrete meaning." This meaning is "original spontaneity" willing "moral freedom" in relation to particular goals, and thereby becoming that freedom.

*De Beauvoir offers a condensed version of her complex thesis about what right action entails from an existentialist point of view. Essentially, she thinks people must transform their natural freedom into moral freedom by assuming their ambiguity in their actions.*

But this creates a problem: if there is "one and only one way" to affirm freedom, are people ever truly free to choose it? Can they instead choose "a bad willing?" This question pervades ethics, since virtue only makes sense given the possibility of "a bad willing." De Beauvoir cannot accept the classical answer of philosophers like Plato, who think evil is just moral error, because she argues that humans create all morality through their will.

*It would be contradictory to say that people* have to *choose freely, so de Beauvoir must show that people can (freely) choose to deny their freedom. Whereas older philosophers could hold that all people are closer or further from the absolute human Good, de Beauvoir cannot, because she thinks good and evil are human inventions rather than timeless truths built into the universe. Accordingly, she needs a way to show that people can act evilly without defining evil through some value external to the subject who does the willing.*

Like Kant, de Beauvoir thinks that people cannot positively decide not to be free. However, existentialists "do not see man as being essentially a positive will," but rather as foundationally negative, based on the gap between the self and the projection. One can be oneself only by "agreeing never to rejoin" the projection, but indulging the "perpetual playing with the negative" means escaping the self and one's freedom. So existentialism can have an ethics because it leaves room for an evil will, and indeed is the only philosophy that seems to leave this room and create the possibility of ethics, while so many other philosophies equate evil with mere error.

*De Beauvoir also cannot explain evil by saying that people decide to* give up *their freedom, because that is a free decision. However, they can decide to* deny *their freedom by refusing to turn their natural freedom into moral freedom. Such a person is still free, but they live in denial of their freedom, either because they think they really can attain perfection or because they give up on action altogether.*

This might help explain why people think of existentialism as "gloomy": there are real ethical consequences to people's will; people *can* win and lose; nothing is decided in advance. There are many ways to refuse to make oneself "a lack of being so that there might be being." One can hesitate, give up, falsely insist that one is being or nothingness, or choose stubbornness or resignation. Often, people combine these tactics. Now, de Beauvoir will turn to the kinds of willful failures she has just outlined.

*The popular opinion of existentialism as a "gloomy" philosophy stems most of all from existentialists' refusal to embrace traditional (mostly religious) ideas of morality; people imagine that, without commandments telling them what to do, there is no good and evil in the world. Existentialists do not actually think this: they just think that people are in charge of good and evil. The "gloomy" part is not the lack of morals but rather the fact that people must actively take charge of their own moral formation and cannot blame anyone else for their failures.*

## PART 2: PERSONAL FREEDOM AND OTHERS

To children, the world is established, and human creations appear unchangeable, "as inevitable as the sky and the trees." This is a *serious* world, in the sense that values appear as "ready-made things," and the child sets up their own "happily irresponsible" world of freedom through play. They believe in adults' being and the absoluteness of good and evil. And in turn they believe in their own being, while also imagining themselves as grown-up beings ("explorer, brigand, sister of charity") during play time. And the child incurs none of the "risk[s] of existence," including responsibility and "the anguish of freedom." The child "is in a state of security by virtue of his very insignificance."

*De Beauvoir has given a theoretical picture of what genuinely free decision making requires, but she has still not concretely outlined what it looks like to live a genuinely free life. This part of de Beauvoir's book is an attempt to show what moral success and failure—good and evil—entail for existentialists. De Beauvoir conceives of morality as a process of growth that takes place during individuals' lives, so starts from the beginning of that process, with children who fail to see that values are constructed and believe that good and evil are set in stone.*

Many people live their whole lives like children, such as slaves and women who do not understand their oppression, and so respect and confide in their oppressors. Of course, these people have chosen their childishness: they have not chosen their oppression, but there is a dishonest "resignation of freedom" in their refusal to pursue liberation.

*De Beauvoir is not blaming people for their oppression, but is blaming people for embracing their oppression rather than recognizing it as oppression and fighting against it. To live like a child is to forever conceive oneself as incapable of serious moral action and always relegate responsibility to others one conceives of as truly mature.*

But usually, people begin to question the world as they grow up, learning about their own subjectivity and the faults of adults. In adolescence, they realize that they are joining this adult world and that their "acts weigh upon the earth as much as those of other men." This is an empowering change, but also a disillusioning one: people realize they are abandoned in the world, "the prey of a freedom that is no longer chained up by anything." They are then forced to decide what to do with themselves and their freedom. It is possible to reverse one's original decision, but generally the past conditions the future, and people act themselves into "a more and more rigorous circle." Ultimately, people grow up to be nostalgic for childhood, when they did not understand their freedom.

*The moral crises of adolescence—stories of "coming of age" in which people feel both radically free and completely lost—are a perennial theme in literature and art because they reflect people's first confrontation with the inalienable fact of their freedom. From this point onward, people must choose an attitude toward morality, themselves, the future, and their fellow human beings. People's nostalgia for childhood shows how easy it can be to run from one's freedom and take shelter in ignorance, even when one's freedom is the only thing in virtue of which one's life can have value.*

There is "still another aspect" of the misfortune of having been a child: although moral choices are completely free, they are also dependent on what one has been in the past. And children have no awareness that their actions will eventually have consequences by contributing to future moral decision making. Choice and freedom precede reason and reflection; people are predestined by their previous (childhood) selves, although they can always save themselves.

*People's inability to choose their childhoods contributes to the ambiguity of human life: people discover their freedom in the same moment as they also discover the limits of their power. When people realize their capacity for free choice, they are not only already in the world, but they have already been profoundly impacted by the circumstances of their childhoods and the actions they considered unserious and inconsequential during those childhoods.*

In the move from childhood's "contingent spontaneity" to adulthood's moral freedom, people make themselves "a lack of being." They take responsibility for "reinvesting [themselves] with human signification," disclosing the joy of existence through any of a variety of ways of "casting [themselves] into the world," like vitality (which is about "free generosity" with the energies of the body), intelligence (which is about adapting one's actions to one's abilities), and sensitivity (which is about attentiveness to oneself and one's world). These qualities give people goals and "reasons for existing," and also exert influence on others.

*De Beauvoir shows that the move from natural to moral freedom can also be understood as the evolution from childhood to maturity. To trace this process of growth, she turns back to Sartre's picture of a human as "a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being." Making oneself "a lack of being" means recognizing the arbitrariness of adult values, and therefore one's own lack of a definite, singular identity* (being). *To give oneself a new "human signification" is to develop a mental image of what one wants to be and devote oneself to projects that lead one toward that image of the self. Disclosing the joy of existence means revealing the energy one puts into one's free action in the pursuit of those ends—but without attachment to the ends themselves. For de Beauvoir, people choose goals for the sake of the joy they feel in free action, whereas intuitively people tend to think that they only undertake action for the sake of goals they are attached to achieving.*

De Beauvoir suggests "a kind of hierarchy among men." The lowest are those without "living warmth," who spend their energies preventing freedom's movement and withdrawing themselves from the world. They are fundamentally afraid of the world, the responsibilities that come with their freedom, and the passion that is central to human life. Such a "sub-man" sees the world as "insignificant and dull," unable to provoke feeling. He never truly pursues his goals, acting indifferently or without deliberation. He hopes to be a "brute fact," unconscious like trees or rocks, but in fact his lack of responsibility makes him worse still, worthy of contempt and stuck in a cycle of negative emotions, unable to engage in positive projects and frightened of the future. He gladly "take[s] refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world," often jumping from one ideology to another and "do[ing] the actual dirty work" of political repression.

*Beauvoir has already described what moral good looks like (willing one's own freedom), so now she gives a taxonomy of different forms of moral evil. The sub-man is the worst kind of person because he sees his freedom as a curse and does nothing to resolve it—he denies his most distinctive human characteristic by wishing he were not free and did not have to make moral choices and hold himself responsible for those choices. He does nothing with his natural freedom. But the fact that he can easily accept serious values and turn into a serious man (the next figure in de Beauvoir's taxonomy) shows that people are never simply one or another of these figures, but rather often combine their tendencies or move among them throughout their lives—in other words, people are always free to change themselves, and often do, although not always for the better.*

All that the sub-man's existence discloses is the fundamental nothingness of humanity, never humans' ability to justify their existence. He easily becomes "the serious man," denying his freedom by proclaiming his loyalty to absolute values that he believes in turn make him valuable. He invests himself in being, continuing to live as people do in childhood. It does not matter what values he chooses to cling to, only that he can find some values in which "to lose himself." This is his only important act, "believ[ing] for belief's sake," claiming freedom only as the "freedom of indifference."

*Serious men mistakenly believe that morality can be absolutely defined and, more troublingly, that they have stumbled upon the perfect version of it. Crucially, this belief is a free choice, and an immoral one in so far as people freely choose to undermine their moral free choice. In serving an idea rather than humanity, serious people tend to sacrifice the latter for the sake of the former. De Beauvoir clearly thinks that most forms of conventional morality make these same errors.*

While some people are forced to live seriously because they live in oppressive conditions they cannot escape, the serious man has to hide from himself the fact that he actively chooses his servitude to certain values or institutions. He chooses to become unable "to will freedom in an indefinite movement," caring only about what is "*useful*" but never about what it is useful *for*. He also ignores this when it comes to other people, treating them as worthless and denying their freedom because he only cares about what is "useful." In order to make way for his own serious values, he denies others' serious values, or else turns into an indifferent and insensitive sub-man as soon as his values are no longer in question, becoming a "has-been" who cannot see any meaning in life outside of his specific ends.

*Although the serious man freely chooses what values to follow, he simply chooses the path of least resistance precisely because it allows him to simply follow others' orders and never make a free decision again. Unlike the child, the serious man does initially realize that values are relative and does see his actions as consequential; however, he chooses as quickly as possible to forget that values are relative and only thinks of consequences in terms of the value system he clings to. Unlike the sub-man, the serious man does take definite actions—he moves beyond natural freedom by taking a moral stance, but that stance is antithetical to freedom because it is too strict to ever change unless the serious man is forced to give it up.*

The serious man is constantly afraid and anxious, guarding his "idol" because it is outside himself and his control, "constantly upset by the uncontrollable course of events" and disappointed by the world's refusal to "harden into a thing." He "wills himself to be a god" despite knowing that he cannot be, often turning into a nihilist when forced to confront the limits of his power and the arbitrariness of his goals.

*The serious man's anxiety and fear are really about the prospect of having to confront the ambiguity of human morality and his own responsibility for his actions (including his very decision to subjugate himself to someone else's values). Yet de Beauvoir also compares him to "a god" because he thinks that his values apply to everyone and cannot admit that there is any other equally valid way to see the world.*

The nihilist is one who actively decides and strives to become nothing, the opposite of being. Nihilists tend to be adolescents overwhelmed with "the lack which is in [their] heart[s]" or older people who fail to become the being they wanted to be. Unlike the sub-man, nihilists initially embrace their existence before giving up on it. Some are *demoniacal* men, who maintain their serious values only so that they can ridicule and reject them. Some go further, actively sabotaging projects and "following a strict injunction to commit disorder and anarchy." Nihilism requires "contradict[ing] constantly the movement of existence" through every action, for the very act of negation shows the truth of existence and freedom.

*Nihilists combine the sub-man's despair at the world's lack of definite values with the serious man's relentless commitment to a particular set of values. Nihilists seriously think that values are supposed to be absolute, and decide once they realize that there are no absolute values in the world that everyone else's values are falsehoods (and, often, must be publicly revealed as such). In actuality, however, the subjective nature of people's values does not make them any less valuable.*

Some nihilists commit **suicide**, and others give up and turn to different attitudes, which de Beauvoir illustrates by cataloguing the fates of surrealist artists. Nihilism must annihilate not only the self, but "all mankind," so as to avoid confirming his own existence. This means it is a will to destruction, which requires a taste for power (de Beauvoir gives Nazism and the French fascist writer Drieu la Rochelle, who committed suicide, as examples).

*The nihilist's attitude is even more unstable than the sub-man or serious man's; the only logical conclusion of negating life and its freedoms is to completely destroy it. But this betrays a secret belief in power and destruction behind the scenes, proving that the nihilist is never free of values, but rather takes far too seriously the notion that values should not exist unless they are absolute.*

The nihilist, de Beauvoir insists, is correct to see "the ambiguity of the human condition." But nihilism does *not* see that people are responsible for defining themselves and building their own lives; it rejects and tries to destroy the world, including people's freedom within it. Fundamentally, the nihilist fails to see "the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is."

*While the sub-man does not even adopt values and the serious man erroneously thinks his values are the only real ones, the nihilist is closer to the truth, but fails to see the positive side of ambiguity: people's freedom to construct their own lives and act as they wish.*

It is also possible to "take delight in living" despite not understanding freedom, using things one does not accept or believe in as "a pretext […] for a gratuitous display of activity." A person who does this is an adventurer: one who takes on projects energetically and zealously, but cares more about conquest and "action for its own sake" than actually achieving any particular end. Like the nihilist, he scorns the serious world, yet he sees nothingness and ambiguity as a positive potential rather than a negative lack.

*The adventurer is the flipside of the nihilist in that he sees* only *the positive side of ambiguity; whereas the sub-man and the nihilist are generally opposed to action, the adventurer is just as devoted to action as the serious man, but shares the nihilist's taste for power and domination. Willing to lie, cheat, and steal for the sake of a good time, the adventurer fails to understand the responsibility that accompanies his freedom.*

The adventurer is "very close to a genuinely moral attitude," choosing to become "a lack of being" in order to "aim expressly at existence," having a clear goal but not being too seriously attached to it. "If existentialism were solipsistic," like its critics insist, then it would love the adventurer. However, the adventurer often has a serious underlying goal ("for example, fortune or glory," or in the case of seducers the "taste for possession").

*The figure of the adventurer helps de Beauvoir distinguish her philosophy from the image of it assumed by its critics. The adventurer makes himself "a lack of being" by scorning serious values and refusing to pin himself down to one thing. He "aim[s] expressly at existence" in the sense that he acts freely precisely because he enjoys his own freedom, except when he secretly has a serious goal; again, de Beauvoir's characters are archetypes that, in reality, spill into one another, like the adventurer with a serious attachment to glory.*

A more significant problem for the adventurer is that he has to deal with other people who confront him along his path. He may start respecting others' freedom and working for "the liberation of himself and others," which would make him no longer an adventurer, but rather "a genuinely free man."

*This is the missing feature in the adventurer's moral character: a concern for others and sense of responsibility. It becomes clear that a genuinely free person must combine the adventurer's refusal to take received values too seriously with a willingness to take their own actions, responsibility for those actions, and effects on the world very seriously.*

But the characteristic adventurer simply ignores his impact on other people, who (like the nihilist) he sees as instruments for his own power. To get power, he ends up supporting whoever will give it to him (usually the most authoritarian government around), and in fact "fortune, leisure, and enjoyment" become serious ends for him. His "abstract independence" actually "turns into servitude" toward those in power—and if he gets political power himself, he becomes a dictator or tyrant. He believes so strongly in his own independence that he refuses to acknowledge that he will have to give up his existence to others (through his reputation and legacy) when he dies. And, in refusing to acknowledge his dependence on others (as allies or as enemies), he turns his own independence into a serious goal he can never achieve.

*While de Beauvoir still thinks the adventurer is "close to a genuinely moral attitude," this section makes it clear that close is no good and paves the way for her consideration of the collective good in the final section of her book. Truly understanding freedom means not only understanding* one's own *freedom from determinate values, but also the relationship between one's freedom and everyone else's. Because he views the world as a more or less zero-sum game—the more he tramples on other people's freedoms, the more he enjoys his own—the adventurer embodies the danger of mistaking existentialism for solipsism (wrongly thinking that existentialists see* individual *freedom as the only thing worth pursuing).*

The opposite of the adventurer is the passionate man. The adventurer achieves subjective freedom, but without directing himself to the right content, while the passionate man has the content, but not the subjectivity. The passionate man is like the serious man, but takes his absolute goal not "as a thing detached from itself" (as the serious man) but rather "as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity," like passionate love, which is meaningless without the self's subjective involvement (although seriousness and passion can certainly turn into one another).

*If the adventurer exercises his freedom so zealously that he forgets to focus on morally meaningful projects, the passionate man is so fixated on a specific meaningful project that he loses his freedom because he forgets that he could choose to pursue other meaningful projects as well. The difference between passion and seriousness is that the passionate man focuses on a project while the serious man focuses on a value system (although, of course, the serious man also adopts projects prescribed by that value system). The passionate man's project has a meaningful relationship with himself (like romance or a work of art, which would not be the same if* this person *specifically were not involved), whereas the serious person simply adopts someone else's values and projects (which would look exactly the same if another person were carrying them out). In other words, the passionate man's commitments depend specifically on his particular place in the world (and are hence "disclosed by his subjectivity"), whereas the serious man's commitments are arbitrary, and he is only a pawn in relation to them.*


There is maniacal passion, in which the impassioned person wants to possess the object of his passion in order to "attain being." Everything else ceases to matter, and he becomes completely dependent on the idea of fulfilling his passion (which is, of course, impossible). The maniacally passionate man is admirable (because he so definitively choses a goal) and horrifying (because he cuts himself off from the rest of the world besides his object of desire). He, too, can become a tyrant, treating other people as instruments and things in his path toward fulfilling his passion.

*Maniacal passion violates freedom in two ways. First, by making the passionate man direct himself completely toward one goal, it violates his own freedom of choice and action: he acts out of compulsive desire, rather than out of reflection and deliberation. Secondly, like the adventurer, the serious man, and the nihilist, the passionate man elevates his particular goal so high that everything else in the world suddenly appears meaningless, which means he will gladly trample on others' freedom in order to achieve his goal.*


There is also a way out of maniacal passion, however. This involves embracing the inevitable distance between the self and the object of desire. One famous writer of love letters insisted that she loved her unhappiness, that she loves her inability to possess the person she loves. By opening up to others' freedom (the freedom of the person one loves to refuse one's love, and the freedom of others to love that person, as well), de Beauvoir argues, one can turn their passion into genuine freedom. In fact, not only must the passionate person open up to others in order to achieve freedom, but all freedom requires acknowledging that one's existence depends on others' existence.

*This solution—appreciating one's passion precisely because it can never be consummated—is a version of de Beauvoir's main theory of how to achieve genuine freedom: assuming rather than rejecting ambiguity, struggling with it rather than struggling against it. In recognizing that passion's limit must be its effect on others, the passionate person can become genuinely free, just as the adventurer can transition to genuine freedom who begins to pursue collective liberation instead of just glory. Ultimately, then, the adventurer and the passionate man's errors are one and the same: their solipsistic disrespect for others' freedom.*

Some intellectuals try to avoid their dependence on others by working in a separate creative or critical world cut off from people. While seriousness often turns to nihilism, critical thought inevitably turns from the negative rejection of other thought to the positive elevation of a universal truth, even though no critic can ever find such objective truth removed from their subjective experience and position in the world. While for the most part "the artist and the writer [...] do not propose to attain being," their work is still an attempt try to make existence absolute, and many do end up seeking to pin down being and locking themselves "in the universe of the serious" through their work.

*De Beauvoir heavily implies that existentialism's critics—those who advocate other moral theories and call existentialism too subjective—are doing so out of a fantasy of having a universal perspective that can get them to an absolute truth. Instead, de Beauvoir thinks writing must be engaged with others and the world, attuned to meaningful particular truths rather than trying to reach timeless, absolute ones.*

It is impossible for people to escape the world, de Beauvoir writes, but it is also possible for people to achieve a moral attitude here in the world. Freedom aims toward its own ends without either letting any goal completely overtake it or losing sight of any goal whatsoever. Subjects must "desire that there *be* being," which is the same thing as willing one's *freedom*, but *not* the same as willing *oneself* to *be*. And this moral will requires a "bond" between individuals and all other humans. People do not always recognize this bond—young people often get caught up in egoism, seeing others' excellence as a challenge to their own potential. But they must also realize that their will and projects only make sense in relation to all other wills and projects. Another way of expressing the same truth is to say that "freedom can not will itself without aiming at an open future."

*De Beauvoir returns to the definition of genuine freedom that she elaborated in the first part of her book, but now in relation to the forms of moral unfreedom she has explained in Part Two. Her complex statement that people must "desire that there* be *being," without willing themselves to be, means that, in order to assume ambiguity, people must seriously engage serious values: they must have concrete pictures of what they want themselves and the world to become (hence, must "desire that there* be *being"). At the same time, however, because it is impossible for any individual to completely reshape the world in their image, they must also recognize that their desire for perfect fulfillment (being) is impossible to realize and, therefore, refuse to hold themselves to this standard (which is not willing themselves* to be*). The limit of any individual will, as de Beauvoir explains it here, is closely connected to the individual's interdependence on others. Even though existentialism starts with the human individual as the critical moral agent, it also insists that it is impossible to change the world alone, and indeed to even survive as a human being without relationships to other humans and their own freely chosen values and life projects.*

This "open future" shows why existentialism is not solipsistic: pursuing one's own freedom requires engaging others' freedom too. In fact, existentialism sees "passion, pride, and the spirit of adventure" as vices precisely because they involve imposing one's own will on everyone else. In reality, the individual expresses his subjectivity through the indefinite movement of freedom, which ultimately surpasses the subject who initiated it; subjectivity requires other people to eventually carry it forward. Like any ethics, existentialism concerns what the individual can and should do, but this does not make it solipsistic, for it takes "the me-others relationship" as central and inevitable.

*De Beauvoir explains what it truly means to respect others' freedom while pursuing one's own. She has already explained why "passion, pride, and the spirit of adventure" elevate the individual's freedom at the expense of everyone else's, but she adds a new argument here, one that she briefly touched upon in the first section: in order for any individual's projects to succeed, other people need to take them up and propagate them. This can mean others choosing to give an artist their attention or a politician their energies, for instance, or carrying on someone's work after their death, which is the ultimate limit to the individual subjectivity.*

This also addresses the other main criticism of existentialism: that it cannot tell people how to engage their freedom. Clearly, people must do this concretely, depending on their individual places and relationships with others. And yet people's relations to others pose ethical problems, which are the subject of de Beauvoir's third and final section.

*De Beauvoir thinks this final criticism makes no sense for the same reason she does not think that morality can be universal: people live in different circumstances, where the same actions mean different things and have different implications. Freedom means precisely that one ought not be told what actions to take from the outset. It is impossible to tell the artist and the politician to live the same lives; and yet they must still follow the same principles of freedom and respect for others.*

## PART 3: THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF AMBIGUITY, SECTION 1: THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE

De Beauvoir summarizes her argument thus far. People create the meaning in the world by exercising their freedom, which takes on "concrete content" when people direct it toward particular goals and affirm its own inherent value as continuous movement. But each individual must also support the freedom of others, on whom their existence necessarily relies.

*The two halves of de Beauvoir's argument show how deeply embedded ambiguity must be in a genuinely free life—one must both pursue one's own will and honor others' freedom, which means giving up one's own will when it conflicts with that of others.*

De Beauvoir asks how people can will themselves (and others) free if they (and others) are *born* free. Similarly, if people everywhere are constantly disclosing being in various ways, why can people not merely take pleasure in "its different transformations" and consider any "reasons for acting" sufficient? This is the aesthetic attitude, in which a person tries to think from a perspective outside of history and humanity, without any individual preferences. Many try to see the present's turmoil as the future's history, attempting to withdraw from the necessity of action and their power to shape the future. There is no "purely contemplative" project, though; even art and literature have practical implications, and people are fundamentally actors in the world, not contemplators outside of it.

*De Beauvoir's discussion of the aesthetic attitude is closely related to her discussion of the critical attitude in the last section of her book. Like artists and critics who try to speak for all of humanity instead of expressing a finite truth, people who see themselves as contemplating (rather than participating in) the world forget that they can only see the world from a viewpoint inside it. De Beauvoir's argument implies that there is no such thing as disinterested analysis, and that aesthetic pleasure cannot be a sufficient reason to engage with art, literature, and history.*

De Beauvoir asks specifically what this means for artists. For instance, many are inspired by suffering or injustice to create beautiful art, and this very beauty might undermine the goal of calling attention to the issue in question. But the past is past, de Beauvoir insists, and "all that we can do is to reveal it" and give it form through art. The world happens, then gets assigned meaning; artists experience, then create art. But freedom is "at the heart of [the artist's] existence," like that of everyone else.

*True art, for de Beauvoir, cannot always merely be about beauty, since turning the ugly into the beautiful can often mean refusing to take the horrors of the ugly—and humankind's responsibilities in relation to them—into account. Art is part of the inevitable process of making sense of things that have already happened—it is a means to deepen people's understanding of the world and therefore a contribution to the collective struggle for freedom.*

## PART 3: THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF AMBIGUITY, SECTION 2: FREEDOM AND LIBERATION

De Beauvoir addresses the objection that "to will freedom" is a meaningless phrase with "no concrete content for action." But the very meaning of *freedom* requires taking definite action in the world. Willing freedom, de Beauvoir reiterates, is the same thing as willing "to disclose being," although every time being comes into existence, it is "constantly surpassed." Perfection—a complete and absolute disclosure of being—is impossible. Rather, incremental success in disclosing being reveals new frontiers to be tackled: "with each step forward the horizon recedes a step."

*De Beauvoir dismisses this objection because it is impossible to achieve freedom without action, but also impossible to consider people free after telling them exactly what actions to take. The complex concept of disclosure, originally from Heidegger, refers to the way one's actions reveal one's underlying motives, commitments, and abilities. So each action discloses each person's being in so far as they have specific traits at the present moment, a being that people immediately overcome, as everyone is always progressing toward new goals and improving their current selves (which is why de Beauvoir says being is "constantly surpassed"). But this incremental disclosure of being can never be confused with the desire to become and disclose a single, absolute, unchanging, perfect being.*

Similarly, it is wrong to think of science as a way of capturing the serious, whole truth about anything; rather, it is about "the possibility of new discoveries," which is to say the achievement of freedom through inquiry. Technology's goal is discovery itself, not improving human life (which it seldom actually does). It only tries to improve life by making things easier, by helping people live less, when what they need is to live wholly. Art, likewise, "should reveal existence as a reason for existing" rather than trying to grasp absolutes.

*De Beauvoir's theories of art and science plant both firmly in history, seeing them as reflections and engines of the times, rather than a repository for universal truths. They appear as models for human action and striving in general, which is about neither pinning down truth nor streamlining life, but rather helping people undertake the difficult and dedicated work required to fully embrace their free existence.*

While "it is permissible" to hope that at some point in the future people will learn to take full advantage of their freedom, in the present many "can justify their life only by a negative action," transcending themselves but not moving themselves closer to their goals. This is because they are oppressed, and oppression is always imposed by other people (never by things, which can be obstacles, but never truly limit people's freedom). This is because of people's interdependence; one needs others to keep the future open. But they often fail, denying people the resources they need to truly pursue their freedom, turning others' lives into mere strenuous labor, forcing them "to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity." The only solution to oppression is to seize one's freedom through revolt, substituting one's own vision of a future for the oppressor's.

*De Beauvoir shows that sometimes people lack any means to translate their natural freedom into moral freedom because of others' power over them; in such a condition, the only way to pursue one's moral freedom is to reject oppression, a situation analogous to an ill person needing to heal before being able to pursue their own projects. The fact of oppression is still another reason why people's freedom depends on the freedom of others. In turn, de Beauvoir implies that people oppress others because of the inadequate moral attitudes she elaborated in the second part of her book, each of which can lead people to trample upon others' freedom, treating them as mere instruments for one's own benefit.*

So, de Beauvoir summarizes, there are "two ways of surpassing the given": one that incorporates it (innovation, art), and one that rejects it (revolution). In his optimism, she argues, Hegel failed to properly distinguish these and did not see that, in reality, "revolt is not integrated into the harmonious development of the world," but rather develops the world through disharmony and rupture. Marx understood this (which is why the class struggle is primarily a struggle *against* class oppression and inequality), just as he understood the way oppressed people can be "mystified" into not understanding their condition.

*De Beauvoir's discussion of Hegel and Marx (who adapted Hegel's philosophy to the situation of the modern capitalist economy) is a means of showing that political struggle has meaningful consequences. For Hegel, revolt was part of the inevitable progress of history, and so did not change history's course—which means that the free will of the oppressed does not come to bear on the structure of society as a whole and the freedom of all society's members. Marx showed that class struggle is part of a drive for freedom, and de Beauvoir seems to agree with this part of the Marxist picture of social change (but she still disagrees that revolution is a* necessary *product of people's objective social conditions—instead, she thinks it is something they must choose to do).*

The solution is, of course, to give the oppressed and enslaved a means to revolt and understand their condition. This is distinct from charity, which involves deciding what is best for someone else from the outside; rather, it is about opening up mutual freedom out of a more fundamental interest in others' existence. External action can show the oppressed a possibility of freedom, but never choose it for them. The oppressed person can easily "flee from his freedom" like anyone else—and those from the oppressor's class can pursue their own freedom in conjunction with that of the oppressed, although there is still hearty debate about the usefulness of imagining a post-revolutionary utopia. Ultimately, the oppressed are most involved in the struggle for liberation, but this struggle morally involves everyone.

*De Beauvoir's distinction between charity and political support is a crucial and underappreciated one for people of privileged backgrounds hoping to advance humanity's collective struggle for liberation. It is possible to model freedom and support the free choice of oppressed peoples, but never decide what they should do. Notably, despite the restrictions on their freedom, the oppressed person is not excluded from the realm of ethics: it is still completely possible for them to act evilly (by supporting or accepting their oppression). Not only does everyone's freedom depend on the freedom of others in an abstract sense and in the sense of people's particular social relationships, but de Beauvoir takes it a step further by saying that oppressed people's struggle for liberation implicates* everyone *in the world.*

There are also questions of political tactics in liberation struggles, like how groups oppressed by multiple forces or oppressed groups pitted against one another should act. This depends on individual circumstances, but the ultimate goal should always be freedom. The oppressor might claim that the oppressed is trying to invert the situation and deny their (the oppressor's) freedom, but in fact the "freedom" the oppressor is talking about is "quite plainly [...] the freedom of exploiting the working class." This freedom denies others' freedom, violating genuine freedom's indefinite movement, and therefore it must itself be denied.

*Oppressors' propensity to adopt the language of freedom and rights is a crucial reminder that morality is primarily a function of action and concrete commitments, and not of ideas and abstract values. De Beauvoir makes it clear that the term "freedom" should be restricted to those kinds of liberties that are compatible with the freedom of everyone else. In turn, this implies that the kind of freedoms sought by serious, nihilistic, passionate, and adventurous men—in addition, of course, to those sought by the oppressor—do not count as freedom at all.*

More often, oppressors see themselves as defending things like "civilization," "institutions," "monuments," or "virtues" in the name of holding on to what they can be certain about from the past. While change does always require sacrifice, the past always vanishes eventually, although many revolutionaries too eagerly dismiss it as entirely irrelevant, which suggests an inadequate recognition of past people's humanity and potential to offer us insight.

*"Civilization," "institutions,' "monuments," and "virtues" are all serious values that have no meaning in themselves, but are only important if and when they support human freedom.*

Yet conservatives often choose "the Thing" from the past over the people of the present. An illustrative example is Portugal under the dictator António Salazar, where people are forced to re-enact old cultural rituals whose value is precisely "that men attempted through them to escape from coercion." Even the most historically-minded know that artefacts are valuable because of "the civilization which they represent," not in themselves.

*The past is another kind of serious value often idolized by oppressors but ultimately meaningless except for in its relation to freedom; in fact, by replacing an emphasis on the past's lessons about freedom with a valorization of the past for its own sake, conservatives like Salazar mystify the conditions of oppression, diverting people away from seeing a model for their liberation.*

Accordingly, de Beauvoir argues, the oppressor's idols—virtue, civilization, history—do not justify oppression. Instead, these are "hardened and mummified forms" of the past, which was really "an appeal toward the future," an appeal of the same sort that one should make in the present. This means assuming, not valorizing or rejecting, the past.

*De Beauvoir sees the past as a motion toward the present, not as a set of symbols and cultural forms to which one can look for meaning—because their meaning is precisely people's attempt to make a better future. One must assume the past, as the set of unchangeable circumstances that made the present possible, just as one must assume the unchangeable fact of ambiguity (which includes the fact that people do not choose their life circumstances).*

In fact, de Beauvoir notes, often oppressors *do* appeal to the future—for instance, by claiming that capitalist production is the most useful. But usefulness is always a question of usefulness for particular people and particular human ends. Last of all, de Beauvoir suggests that the oppressor does show how difficult it is to respect everyone's freedom—but this does not make it any less imperative to try: everyone "must reject oppression at any cost."

*The oppressor wants a closed future—a future in which others work for his own personal interest—rather than the kind of open future de Beauvoir advocates, one in which human freedom is constantly expanding. In other words, the oppressor's government tries to define the future for people rather than giving them the means to define their own futures. Just as it is impossible to achieve one's perfected mental image, it is impossible to completely respect others' freedom all the time, but de Beauvoir refuses to make the perfect the enemy of the good: rather, one should try to get as close as possible to fully respecting others' freedom, and the impossibility of perfection is simply a reason why people must always continue striving to honor the freedom of all humanity.*

## PART 3: THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF AMBIGUITY, SECTION 3: THE ANTINOMIES OF ACTION

De Beauvoir suggests that, although oppressors are reluctant to acknowledge the freedom of those they oppress, this is necessary for true moral liberation and the "reconciliation of all freedoms." This is an impossible ideal, however—instead, the fight against oppression should fight for "the triumph of freedom over facticity," the latter of which the oppressors exemplify. As they are "enem[ies] of man," oppressors must in turn be treated as things in order to be defeated. This means that achieving freedom requires perpetrating evil against one's oppressors. De Beauvoir even suggests that the oppressor's "freedom which is occupied in denying freedom" is "outrageous" enough to easily justify this response.

*Because the freedom of all human beings is inherently connected for de Beauvoir, oppressors do not merely trample upon the freedom of the people they oppress; rather, they are enemies to humankind as a whole. Since oppressors have power over the people they oppress and do not respect freedom, it is impossible to appeal to them on moral grounds, and the only solution is to disrespect their freedom in turn. In this way, evil perpetuates evil, but evil can also be necessary in order to open up a free future.*

Similarly, people can be *responsible* but not *guilty* for perpetuating repression if they do so out of obligation and ignorance. Unfortunately, it can necessary to "destroy not only the oppressor but also those who serve him." Likewise, one cannot take up every cause at once—sometimes, pursuing one "valid cause" requires opposing another, or even killing its adherents (like when anti-fascists during the Second World War found themselves forced to hope that anticolonial revolts failed). Further, violence can require people to sacrifice "those who are fighting on our side, and even ourselves," because treating the enemy as a thing is in turn treating the self as a thing. Every war and revolution sacrifices a whole generation of innocents in this way.

*Evil against the oppressor is not the only kind of evil that can be necessary in order to win freedom; revolutionaries must also sacrifice the innocent, and although in theory purely respecting human freedom would entail respecting everyone's freedom, in practice oppression and disrespect for freedom is so widespread that the relevant calculation must be how to support freedom on balance. De Beauvoir's example—that some hoped that the justified revolts against British colonialism failed so that this would not weaken the British and allow the Nazis to overtake Europe—shows how, in practical circumstances, it is not always possible to choose everyone's freedom, and people must make difficult and uncertain calculations about the best course of action.*

De Beauvoir shows that she has reached a universally accepted paradox: "no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men." But most "doctrine[s] of action" find this idea "so bitter," because it means that ethical failure is inevitable, that they simply refuse to see what they are giving up as valuable. Both oppressor and oppressed end up willing to sacrifice individuals for the sake of an imagined common cause. It is easy to see individuals as meaningless, thingified, just like anyone else. Because "zero multiplied by any finite number remains zero," this can easily turn into an absolute indifference to human life, especially when one encounters death or severe suffering. Throughout history, oppressors have consistently used the disillusionment and degradation of the oppressed to justify spreading animosity toward them.

*This paradox is commonly accepted in ethics because of the notion that committing a moral violation against an individual is also violating the moral order of humanity as a collectivity. Accordingly, revolutionaries fighting for freedom must violate morality (humankind's common freedom) in order to win that freedom. And yet this creates a troubling moral equivalence between the oppressor and revolutionary, which becomes manifest in the despair of the oppressed.*

But De Beauvoir notes the resilience of hope in such circumstances—a child's smile, for instance, shows that "the living affirmation of human transcendence" can persist despite tyrants' attempts to reduce people to mere facticity. In losing their "zest for life and the readiness to risk it," the oppressed also lose their tendency to struggle for liberation.

*De Beauvoir thinks people must recognize that transformation and transcendence goes in both directions: it is always possible for people to reassert their freedom in the face of oppression, but it is also easy for the oppressed to gradually lose this taste for freedom and come to resemble their oppressors.*

Tyrants also give their followers (whom they also consider as instrumental objects) an opposite message, emphasizing—much like Marxists—"that the value of the individual is asserted only in his surpassing," or that their only value is their ability to subordinate themselves and their sense of purpose to the collective political project. The tyrant insists that people's lives are valuable only because of their willingness to die for the cause.

*Tyrants lack any consistent ethical attitude, but instead preach the value of individual human action when convenient, but despise the free action of those revolting against them, while consistently refusing to respect human freedom. They do not merely treat their enemies with an immoral disrespect, but actually take this attitude toward everyone, because of their investment in the serious goal of their own power.*

This is "self-contesting," however, which de Beauvoir explains with reference to Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, individuals subordinate themselves to an idea of the universal by recognizing their identity with others. But this cannot continue infinitely: it is impossible to "sacrifice each generation to the following one" without end. And yet Hegel also cannot clearly show what kind of subject the ultimate goal of all this sacrifice—"the absolute mind"—will be, precisely because subjectivity implies separation from an object (and so cannot be absolute, and indeed suggests that those who have been surpassed are objects, not subjects).

*De Beauvoir's parallel critiques of Hegel, Marx, and tyranny reaffirm her commitment to theorizing morality in terms of individual action (and its relationship to humankind as a whole), rather than allowing a theory of humankind to define the moral status of each individual. Although Hegel believed that generations of sacrifice would ultimately be worth it, he could not show how those sacrifices might lead to human unity, a principle he seemed to accept out of blind faith and optimism. For de Beauvoir, this is the epitome of dangerous, serious thinking, which elevates one's faith over others' freedom.*

Hegel even realizes that change and struggle are inevitable, which means his vision of the future is as "an indefinite state of war." But if people recognize that absolute unity and totality are impossible, why would they sacrifice themselves in an endless war? Hegel gets stuck with the same problem: "if the individual is nothing, society can not be something." This shows how "only the subject can justify his own existence"—no external agent can ever do it for them.

*Hegel is right to see "an indefinite state of war" in the human future, but only because a perfect society is impossible, and human freedom can always be expanded. Again, de Beauvoir insists that individuals make up the collective, which means philosophy must start with the individual.*

Like "nihilistic pessimism," the "rationalistic optimism" of thinking like Hegel's ends up undermining itself. There is no point in sacrificing oneself to heal the world, because the world is only valuable insofar as people can pursue their individual freedom. This is the value of democracy: "the sense of the dignity of each man." This is also precisely why sacrifice is meaningful in the first place, and what makes people heroes: they sacrifice themselves for fulfillment in a future where they will not be present.

*De Beauvoir's belief in claiming freedom through action in the present rather than deferring it to the future through sacrifice both supports and problematizes her theory of revolt and revolution: it supports the value of acting immediately for the sake of change but also reinforces the danger of sacrificing freedom in the present for the sake of a better world—and yet this is sometimes necessary. De Beauvoir is gesturing to the political question that takes up this last section of her book: what does a democratic revolution look like?*

In a collectivist world, on the other hand, people are seen as identical to one another, and (since this reduction of individuality to facticity is the basis of all violence) violence inevitably tramples on the innocent. Unwilling to admit that violence inevitably causes arbitrary suffering, leaders prefer to justify their violence as necessary or, better yet, historically inevitable (which is why certain varieties of Marxist historical materialism are so persuasive).

*Here, de Beauvoir's critique of the tyrant has merged with her critique of the revolutionary. While collective thinking often starts from an attempt (whether genuine or feigned) to improve the world for all, the collective is only the sum of individuals, and it is a contradiction to abuse the people for their own sake.*

The tyrant and soldier alike must prevent themselves from individually reflecting on their actions, which is why authoritarianism sees free thought as a crime: indeed, free thought is what leads people to see crimes as crimes. Even when a regime's opponents are obviously wrong, their dissent still shows "that there is a place in this world for error and subjectivity." So the regime must violently repress thought in order to ensure that the people it charges with executing violence do not realize or exercise their own freedom.

*No matter how powerful authoritarianism can grow, de Beauvoir sees that it can never be complete: there is always space for dissent, which creates a constant, if usually unequal, struggle between the regime and its opponents. She stops short of saying that freedom inevitably wins out—since that would be recasting free choice as necessity—but does insist that it will always continue pursuing its own expansion through people's freedom-oriented movements.*

Most commonly, tyrants excuse violence by citing its usefulness: the ends are worth the means, they insist. But, of course, "*useful*" is still not an absolutely meaningful word in itself, and this really reflects the regime taking their goals as supremely valuable, worth any conceivable sacrifice. To convince people to carry out its ends, an authoritarian must first convince them that its ends are *useful* for them too, that "the cause of Man [is] that of each man." This is false: while everyone's freedom is *interdependent*, it is not all the same. All sacrifice serves some people at others' expense; but how should one decide who to prioritize?

*The word "useful" is meaningless except in relation to some goal seen as valuable—nothing is good because it is "useful," but only ever because the thing it is* useful for *is good. The only true kind of usefulness, then, is that which is useful for the sake of freedom. While the tyrant can easily shift the terms of debate by insisting that his concept of "useful" should be the same for everyone else's, de Beauvoir's task is more difficult, because she must define what is useful for the sake of freedom without assuming that helping someone's freedom means helping* everyone's *freedom (which comes from her distinction between freedom being* interdependent *and* identical*).*

To determine the answer to this question, de Beauvoir starts again with freedom's status as "the supreme end" of all human action. The real problem of choosing whose interests to prioritize comes when weighing one person's freedom against another. De Beauvoir asks whether, since all action implies constraining the world in some way, it is "absurd in every case" to act. In some situations, people have to treat others as both instruments and ends, like if forced to choose between one person's death and ten thousand people's—they are both completely horrible, but it is still logical to save more people. Yet questions seldom look like this, since people have different roles in the world: party members will save each other because they see themselves as more "useful," for instance.

*The danger of de Beauvoir's elevation of freedom is the possibility that people might refuse to take any political action at all, because virtually every such act negatively affects someone's freedom. Her solution—to reluctantly treat people as instruments while recognizing their freedom as an end—is another formulation of the problem of ambiguity: insofar as the absolute respect for all freedom is only possible in theory, in practice people must pursue this ideal while recognizing that they will often be forced to fall short of it.*

De Beauvoir notes that, in this section, she seems to have come nowhere: she started and ended by relying on the notion of usefulness. But she did learn that "the complement of the word *useful* is the word *man*; but it is also the word *future*." People are meaningful only in their pursuit of projects and surpassing of the self; and so "this justification [for an individual's existence] is always to come." Action requires "sovereign affirmation of the future," but de Beauvoir first has to explain what, precisely, the future is.

*De Beauvoir's circular conception of "usefulness" relates to her attempts to explain why revolution is worthwhile—why it can be acceptable to trample on some freedoms now for the sake of greater freedoms, even though this is the same way tyrants justify oppression in the first place. She has consistently criticized most instances of the term "useful" for being ideological attempts to elevate serious values, but she sees that, in order to come up with a true definition of what is useful to humankind's future freedom, she must understand what it means to act for the sake of the future in the first place.*

## PART 3: THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF AMBIGUITY, SECTION 4: THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

The future, de Beauvoir begins, "has two meanings corresponding to [...] both being and existence." First, considering the future means imagining completing current projects and moving on to new ones; the future appears as an extension of the present and existence. Secondly, people imagine an idealized future in which they achieve "Glory, Happiness, or Justice"; this future has no connection to the present and expresses a belief in being. Initially, this dream was about religious salvation; later, it became about scientific and technological progress creating a new kind of society.

*De Beauvoir sees people's view of the future as another reflection of humanity's fundamental ambiguity: people both want the future to extend the current trajectory that constitutes their existence and have an irrational faith that the world will suddenly turn perfect, resolving all familiar problems and ceasing to change or evolve. People seem to know that the former (existence) is the truth, but also remain hopelessly caught up in the desire for the latter (being).*

When the future became conceived in scientific and political rather than religious terms, it fused the existential impulse to transcendence with the hope for an absolute, final being. This appears as a unified and/or socialist world, a "fullness, happiness" so absolute that people are willing to sacrifice anything (including any number of lives) to achieve it. The present becomes a negative of the future, an instrument to be "disposed of" in order to achieve the future. So the crimes of the present, too, come to look irrelevant so long as the future brings liberation. Those who believe in this kind of future "submerge their freedom in it [and] find the tranquility of the serious."

*The promise of scientific and political humanism—the widespread acceptance of the idea that humans, rather than gods, controlled human destiny—allowed people to see a clear path to the perfect future, but in recognizing their freedom to shape the future, leaders quickly turned adventurous or passionate (and their followers serious), actually undermining the goal of a free future. Of course, de Beauvoir thinks people are in charge of their own destinies, but that because humans are merely human, they must refuse to confuse the resilient fantasy of perfection with a possible reality.*

Even Hegel and Marx were skeptical of letting themselves conceive the future as static, and de Beauvoir insists that the idea of people "fulfill[ing] themselves as a pure positivity" in the future is impossible "since man is originally a negativity." Nothing can resolve people's fundamental lack; "positive existence" means embracing, not eliminating, this lack. People are nothing without "this particular movement which thrusts him toward the future," so no static future can be possible. And people's transcendences—the goals for which they strive in the present—are concrete and competing; each person conceives their own vision of the world as a whole, and competing visions cannot be reconciled into one reality.

*The notion that the world will become perfect, and then stop evolving because there is nowhere for it to improve, is completely at odds with the basic fact of human freedom; in any conceivable utopian society, people will continue striving, improving themselves and the world, and feeling their "negativity," or the gap between their selves and their projections. De Beauvoir's argument that each individual imagines not only a future for themselves, but also for humanity as a whole, results from the fact that people's freedoms and destinies are linked—and that anyone interested in truly expanding freedom must aim to improve freedom for the others with whom they share the world.*

Since people's struggle for freedom is constant and unending, politicians are correct to identify the world as at war but dishonest to promise that their way offers a peaceful future, because "the world has always been at war and always will be." People's "hold on the future is limited," and their attempts to build it are all that constitute it. Once people's horizons stop, so does the future, and the best way forward is to affirm "a human future, a finite future."

*Instead of thinking that people can predict and shape the future, de Beauvoir thinks people should see the future in terms of the striving that creates it. Just as she thinks people are defined by their existence (their actions, their commitments, the motion of their freedom) rather than by the absolute ideal (being) they want to achieve, she thinks the human collective must view itself as producing an uncertain future rather than fulfilling a determined one.*

People easily lose this finite perspective, though. Even though people continue to view their lives on the order of days and years, they imagine the world on the order of centuries and try to "act upon everything and by knowing everything." Yet this dream of totality is meaningless, for in "act[ing] upon the totality of the Universe [...] the meaning of all action [would] vanish." By focusing on infinitely large scales and denying "the concrete thickness of the here and now," one therefore "misses with Hegel the truth of the world."

*By fantasizing about a perfect future rather than living their finite lives in the present, people lose the human perspective that they inhabit in reality. They end up split, living out an individual life that looks meaningless in relation to the promised future or the world as viewed from the universal perspective. Selling out the present to the future is actually hindering the future, because improving the world simply requires individuals to take charge of their own, finite freedom.*

Like the universe, history should not be seen as a "rational totality" but as, in Sartre's words, a "detotalized totalit[y]." This means it should be taken as a distinct and separable phenomenon (totality), but still related to other phenomena like the struggles of individuals (detotalized). Similarly, people's individual struggles imply one another's freedom, and the mind must see both order and chaos (like totality and relation) in the world and in history, rather than resigning itself to either continuity or discontinuity. People act based on imperfect knowledge to build history, and their continuous doubt is what makes their choices free—they must take on the risks and responsibilities that come with uncertainty.

*The complex notion of a "detotalized totality" allows de Beauvoir to bridge the individual and collectivity—she can show how individuals implicate the collective without reducing them to mere parts of it. She sees history as at once a distinctive thing that can be studied on the level of social collectivities and as irreconcilably tied to the free will of individuals. This shows how existentialism avoids both solipsism and the reduction of the individual to the collectivity (which denies individuals' freedom).*

Even Marxists accept that "it is subjectively possible for them to be mistaken." Yet, because they believe they are working in the service of History, they do not justify their individual acts, whereas existentialists must constantly justify their individual acts, which the future will not justify for them. Both those who see the world in unitary terms and those who focus on its "distinct ensembles" have to admit that the other exists, too; there is no choice between the collectivity and the individual as such, but only between a collectivity that subsumes all individuality and "a collectivity of individuals each existing for himself." The same can be said for "time and its moments." By negating individuals or moments, one actually destroys the collectivity or future that one sacrificed for in the first place (like "a madman who runs after his shadow").

*Marxists' insistence on viewing their actions in collective terms—as part of the progression of history, rather than individual actions conferring individual responsibility, responding to individual circumstances and collective injustices—leads them to constantly sacrifice the present for the future and the individual for the collective. But both the collective and the future are ideas, whereas the present and the individual are concrete realities—in reality, the present actually creates the future, and individuals comprise the collectivity.*

For example, England justifies atrocities abroad by appealing to "civilization and the values of democracy," but destroys those values in its very attempt to save them through such extraordinary means. In fact, when the imagined end disappears in the murky future, it becomes a mere justification for the purported means, which becomes revealed as the true end goal of action.

*In colonialism, the actual goal of a free society becomes an alibi for producing the opposite; this again shows the paramount importance of building small-scale freedom up to large-scale freedom, rather than trying to realize an imagined concept of collective freedom. This leads agents like the British Empire to impose "freedom" (meaning oppression) from the top down on people who are already free.*

While people try to "seek in the future a guarantee of their success," at the same time they also "feel the need of denying the indefinite flight of time and of holding their present between their hands." Take, for instance, festivals like the one thrown after Paris's liberation from German occupation, which celebrate existence through consumption, by eating and drinking, spending money and breaking things, all for nothing except the sake of celebration itself. And then one proceeds to the future, empty-handed "because one can never possess the present." Art attempts to fill these empty hands by providing a work with an absolute beginning and end, and yet at the end of such a work people realize the absolute truth of death—but also, hopefully, "that every movement toward death is life." People must assert both their absoluteness and finitude, "regard[ing their] undertakings as finite and will[ing] them absolutely."

*Both of these desires—the one for refuge in the future and the one to capture the present—are ways of denying that human life is about motion and change, not perfection and stasis. The liberation festival is an example of rightly prioritizing the motion of freedom itself, above the achievement of particular ends—putting the journey before the destination, as the saying goes. It is also significant that this festival was a celebration of the* freedom *that the French achieved (but, of course, not necessary to bring this liberation about). The example of art shows that all valuable human efforts inevitably end and give way to a new lack—this is the sense in which, for de Beauvoir, people are constantly transcending themselves and always take on new projects as soon as they complete their current ones. A finite present is impossible (because the present constantly becomes part of the past) even though life is necessarily finite (because of death).*

Finitude does not mean reducing one's perspective to a moment—some projects, like political struggles, "have a concrete hold on one or two or several centuries." Those who undertake this kind of struggle must recognize that they must pass it on to others and will likely not live to see its fruits, if it even has any. The end of their struggle must be themselves, "not in a mythical Historical end."

*De Beauvoir's distinction between two forms of finitude—the absolute finitude of a moment (which is impossible to grasp) and the bounded finitude that characterizes all lives and projects—also implies a subtle differentiation between two kinds of infinity: the impossible infinity of a universal perspective that she criticizes throughout the book, and the infiniteness of freedom's continual motion.*

But de Beauvoir's reconsideration of the future has done nothing to change "the antimony of action," the fact that "present sacrifices and failures no longer seem compensated for in any point of time." She still has to show why action is not "criminal and absurd," especially since the existentialists are "condemning man to action."

*De Beauvoir has clarified what people's attitudes toward the future must be when they undertake actions for the sake of collective freedom. They must recognize their projects as finite, uncertain, and valuable for the sake of freedom, which must be built into the action itself, rather than a vague promise in a distant future. And yet this is not enough to answer the question she opened in the last section of Part Three: what does ethical political action looks like, given that responding to oppression can actually require trampling on freedom?*

## PART 3: THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF AMBIGUITY, SECTION 5: AMBIGUITY

Saying that life is ambiguous (that its meaning is unfixed), de Beauvoir begins, is not the same as saying it is absurd (that it can never have any meaning at all). With absurdity or "the finished rationalization of the real," ethics is impossible; in reality, ethics is a function of ambiguity, man's attempt "to save his existence." While this always fails, failure is relative and subjective; it is actually the means through which art and science can succeed, which provides an interesting parallel to human life more generally. For instance, artists never think of themselves as working towards an absolute "Art," but in retrospect scholars inevitably look at them this way; science has never thought of itself as incomplete, but rather tries over and over to be total and ends up in crisis precisely because its gestures to totality fail.

*De Beauvoir argues that ethics stems from ambiguity precisely because she thinks of it as a human creation: people create ethics in order to make sense of their freedom and give themselves direction in a universe that does not appear to have any clear instructions for them. By striving and failing to "save [one's] existence," a person creates him- or herself in the first place, just as art progresses through new ways of failing to represent everything and science through new ways of failing to explain everything. The successful artist gives their full energy to their work, beginning with an idea but never holding themselves to executing it perfectly, and ultimately creating something that is interesting precisely because it is a delimited, not absolute or universal, representation.*

For de Beauvoir, these conditions of art and science reflect how humans must pursue their own freedom: while recognizing their finiteness, in every moment of action people must treat their existence as absolute—and ultimately genuine freedom is achievable only "in the very fact of aiming at itself." This means considering actions as self-justifying unions of various moments, so as to eliminate any "sharp separation between present and future, between means and ends."

*Moral freedom requires replicating the conditions of ambiguity through action: pursuing the most perfect fulfillment of one's will while knowing that one's attempt will fail, and therefore taking the measure of one's actions as free action in itself. This melds the present and future because one conceives both as defined by the will to freedom (rather than thinking about a moment of fulfillment in the future), and means and ends because one seeks freedom by acting freely.*

The different moments of action cannot be contradictory, so at times "there will be no other issue for man than rejection," namely rejecting that which denies one's existence. In many ways, this rejection is easier than pursuing positive goals, for in rejection "means and ends meet; freedom immediately sets itself up as its own goal and fulfills itself by so doing." In positive action, however, people must cope with the variety of means available to them and apparent counterproductivity of some in relation to their ends. It is easy to get so caught up in revolt's purity that, without something to revolt against, people end up "seek[ing] refuge in the values of seriousness."

*De Beauvoir returns to the question of how the oppressed can affirm their freedom, and she reiterates the notion that they have no option but to act in the only way that can lead them to greater freedom in the future: revolt. This is analogous to adolescence's revolt against childhood's belief in serious values, since both are merely the first step toward the creation of a moral attitude. The danger that successful revolt turns into seriousness is precisely the danger of the oppressed becoming the oppressor, or the tendency that de Beauvoir has identified in Marxism and other movements that conceive themselves as the saviors of humanity or executors of human destiny, and therefore elevate loyalty above freedom.*

As de Beauvoir has already established, "this recourse to the serious is a lie." Genuine positivity requires negativity first—because it requires confronting "the antinomies between means and end, present and future." For instance, one must both be outraged at violence and willing to commit it, and one must constantly ask if one is truly "working for the liberation of men" by questioning both whether one's ends serve freedom and one's means get in its way. De Beauvoir argues that it is impossible to ask "what must be done, practically?" because this depends on everyone's individual situation. Accordingly, "ethics [...] can merely propose methods" and people must apply the process of questioning in their concrete decisions depending on their circumstances.

*De Beauvoir's picture of ethical political activity is starkly opposed to the rigidity and orthodoxy of most revolutionary movements: she thinks every individual must separately and constantly evaluate the motivations behind and likely results of their actions, and that being part of the right "cause" is meaningless because any cause can turn oppressive at any moment. Yet she still leaves open the crucial question that has underlain the third section of her book: when and how can the oppressed legitimately violate freedom in order to win their freedom?*

Nevertheless, de Beauvoir thinks she can still clarify the criteria of such ethical decision-making further. First, "the individual as such" must be the end of actions, rather than "a class, a nation, or a collectivity." This is because of the "concrete bond between freedom and existence"—the fact that improving people's lives does not matter unless they can pursue joy in the first place. Yet politics' preference for the collective, long-term good over the short-term, individual good makes sense insofar as it refuses to "sacrifice the future to the present."

*De Beauvoir summarizes the argument at the center of the previous section of Part Three. She does not reject the possibility of acting for the sake of a better future (since that is the foundation of politics), but rather seems to see respect for the freedom of the present as a litmus test on the legitimacy of claims about the future.*

Moreover, it is impossible "to fulfill the will of every man," and in fact it is rather undesirable when others will evil or deny their freedom. But violence is acceptable only when "it opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save," and committing it confers responsibility for the well-being of others. In their concrete decisions, people are constantly caught between their responsibility to pursue freedom and their responsibility not to trample on others' freedom, including their right to make errors. This means that "oppos[ing] willful acts which one considers perverted" is not a sufficient pretext for violence, and also that powerful people who govern others on the basis of those others' supposed ignorance are violating freedom (because they are acting in ignorance of the nature of others' freedom).

*De Beauvoir returns to the question of competing freedoms, but affirms that this is always an empirical question and that philosophy can neither green-light nor prohibit revolutionary violence. The crucial piece of her argument is her concept of responsibility, which she believes theories like Marxism do away with (by saying that violence is necessary, or that any amount of violence is legitimate for the sake of the revolution). By holding people fully accountable for the violence they commit against even their oppressors, de Beauvoir refuses to make anyone's life disposable and forces actors to constantly strive to minimize the extent to which they violate freedoms in maximizing their contribution to the collective freedom of humankind. The reader might be tempted to ask whether her solution is sufficient—would it be going too far for an existentialist ethics to say when it is acceptable to commit violence, or is this really a means of denying people's own vigilance and eroding their sense of responsibility? On the other hand, is de Beauvoir's talk about concrete circumstances and individual freedom just a way to avoid the contradiction inherent in using violence to fight violence?*

De Beauvoir briefly considers the state of French politics from this perspective: a small group of elites views their role not as representing the people's will, but rather as managing the people to ensure that they live in a way deemed proper. This is why the people have largely grown disillusioned with their so-called democracy. The people of France's overseas colonies are left with neither representation nor the means to genuinely pursue their own interests. They live under "the most consummate and inacceptable form of oppression," one in which the only freedom they can strive for is the negative freedom from suffering imposed by France. The "enlightened elites" accuse colonial subjects of being like children, but de Beauvoir points out that childhood is in fact a stage of growth, "the moment of a development in which new possibilities are won," rather than an absolute limit on ability.

*De Beauvoir's critique of French colonialism recalls her critique of charity, which claims to help people but only by replacing a respect for those people's freedom with a set of serious values, and often ends up undermining the act's purported goal. The "enlightened elites" treat both French "citizens" and French "colonial subjects" as unable to know what is good for them, which shows how tyrants turn both their followers and the people they deem inferior into mere instruments. Instead of seeing colonial subjects as confined to a state of childhood, the "enlightened elites" assume that their childhood is permanent—and the policies that stem from this rhetoric are precisely what prevent colonized people from ever achieving moral freedom (or, in other words, growing out of childhood).*

Through this analysis, de Beauvoir arrives at "point number one: the good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*." In other words, one must act for the sake of the free other's freedom. This means that, for instance, there are certain circumstances when supporting someone's addiction, **suicide**, or delusional beliefs are acceptable, and many in which it is not (depending primarily on the person's likelihood of healthy recovery from their current state). And yet it is never this easy, because "the Other is multiple," which raises questions about acting when different others have competing interests.

*When de Beauvoir says people cannot "decide upon this end [the good of another] a priori," what she means is that this good is completely dependent on circumstances: even suicide, something conventionally seen as morally unambiguous, can both serve and violate freedom in differing circumstances. Because freedom is the central goal of people's actions for others, de Beauvoir thinks it is impossible to know how to act without consulting those others, and this is precisely why she cannot provide formulas about what makes violence justifiable (although she gives plenty of examples of when it is and is not).*

Rather than trying to figure out which others to prioritize in the abstract, de Beauvoir decides that generosity is "more valid the less distinction there is between the other and ourself and the more we fulfill ourself in taking the other as an end." People should fight for causes to which they can relate, but also while asserting "the will for universal solidarity" and without undermining the interests of "the totality of men." But there are still concrete instances where one must choose among various people's freedom.

*De Beauvoir's evaluation of generosity based on the actor's proximity to the person they seek to help is not a way of arguing for moral selfishness (that is, saying that people should only help others when they are also helping themselves). Rather, she sees this proximity as a test of authenticity, and the situations that best fulfill it as the most clear-cut scenarios where one ought to act on others' behalf. But this does not, for instance, justify the actions of the "enlightened elites" in France (who justify oppressing people in French colonies by pointing to how different those "others" are from themselves).*

To answer this problem, de Beauvoir insists that she can "only indicate a method." First, one must make sure one is looking at the genuine human interests behind political ideals like "Nation, Empire, Union, Economy, etc." rather than blindly asserting them. The most prominent example of such a conflict is the question of whether to support the USSR—but most people raise this question dishonestly. It is impossible to "judge the means"—Stalin's crimes and injustices, unparalleled by any other current government—without reference to the end. For instance, lynching is always inexcusable, but suppressing political opposition "may have meaning and a reason." And yet defenders of the Soviets too easily assume that Stalin's crimes are justifiable because of his ends: rather, they would have to show "that the end is unconditioned and [...] the crimes committed in its name were strictly necessary."

*Again, de Beauvoir reiterates the enormous difference between the ideals people claim justify their actions—which are often rhetorical tools that serve nobody's interests except the actor's—and the concrete interests of concrete human beings in concrete freedom from oppression. De Beauvoir takes a middle ground in relation to the USSR, which was a divisive issue for leftist intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s as it became clear that Stalin's government was massively and unnecessarily repressing dissent and abusing human rights, all in the name of the revolution. When she talks about "unconditioned" ends, de Beauvoir is referring specifically to freedom, as opposed to conditioned, or intermediary ends valuable only for the sake of something else—which, ultimately, has to come back to freedom.*

In defending the Soviet Union, many weigh "the whole of the revolution" against any particular crime, which is dishonest: the Soviets believe precisely in a vision of history as necessary, superseding any individual determining factor. A good Marxist sees that no individual action can entirely create a revolution; rather, "it is merely a matter of hastening or retarding [the revolution's] coming." Marxists' end in violence is always finite and uncertain, never the absolute liberation of revolution. But it is still possible for them to justify violent means in the right situations. Yet this must be done with regard to the concrete circumstances of the decision, and it is never possible to absolutely weigh the benefits and costs of any decision: such decisions always involve free—and therefore ethical—choice.

*For de Beauvoir, the fact that some crime(s) may be necessary for the greater good does not justify every crime committed in the name of the greater good, since (as she has shown through examples like the French "enlightened elites," these ideals are usually named as a rhetorical strategy and not because they are people's honest goal). The question in every circumstance is how to open up freedom for an oppressed people while minimizing the violations of freedom committed in the process of doing so; ironically, since Marxists view the revolution as necessary and inevitable, they would never be able to justify violence for the sake of the revolution, only for the sake of particular freedoms in particular circumstances when there is no better option.*

Making this difficult choice about the legitimacy of violence requires "long analysis," and de Beauvoir offers a few examples. For instance, it is worthwhile to kick any traitors out of revolutionary movements and reasonable to sacrifice those who may cause the deaths of many others. But the French Resistance in many ways sought to "create such a state of violence that collaboration would be impossible," and such gratuitous violence, not immediately directed against the oppressor, is more difficult to justify, although it can still make sense in order to build a revolutionary movement. In a novel by John Dos Passos, the protagonist has to choose between helping striking miners (who are clearly in the right) win their trial, or turning the trial into a media firestorm but surely losing. Dos Passos's character rightly picks the former, since the benefit of sacrificing the miners would be dubious at best.

*De Beauvoir's insistence on careful reflection before accepting violence contrasts with many revolutionary movements' use of violence to shock, scare, and bewilder. Many movements, she suggests, resort to violence precisely because it is gratuitous. On the contrary, for de Beauvoir, only premeditated violence is truly justifiable. Dos Passos's book demonstrates that violence, beyond only serving as a last resort, is also only appropriate in situations where its prospective benefit is difficult to deny;* certainty *is as much a criterion for the legitimacy of violence as is* necessity.

In fact, politicians rarely pursue the careful moral analysis they ought to—one might suggest that "hesitation and misgivings only impede victory," and that it is not worth considering the precise costs of failure since *some* failure is inevitable. But this would mean blindly pursuing their ends, and in doing so undermining them. One becomes a dictator, merely desiring one's own victory as an end, no matter the cost; instead of being vigilant, politicians choose "the line of least resistance," taking advantage of "the laziness and brutality of the police" in the name of so-called "political necessity."

*The argument that violence is acceptable because failure is inevitable improperly treats all failure as equivalent (under the assumption that success would be the only thing worth aiming for). In contrast, for de Beauvoir, the inevitable failure of all striving is precisely why actors must constantly interrogate whether their means can be improved (and never expect perfection). Crucially, de Beauvoir thinks of the law—just as morality—not as an abstract code or set of restrictions on behavior, but as a set of concrete practices enforced by concrete individuals acting in morally varied ways.*

Ethics is in fact about making the easy difficult, which is also the purpose of internal criticism, whether of the kind that contests a regime's ends (like "anti-fascism to fascism, of fascism to socialism") or of the kind that agrees with a regime's ends but challenges its means. While "crime and tyranny" are often requirements for achieving freedom, such critics must prevent movements aimed at freedom from simply turning into regimes of "crime and tyranny." Movements aimed at achieving freedom, in other words, must be met by free resistance.

*Ethics makes the easy difficult because it forces those with power to justify their actions even when they have nobody to answer to. The respect for criticism is a high but necessary bar for political movements, both because in practical terms it allows movements to improve and because it indicates a movement's fundamental interest in freedom and refusal to take the easy way out (to consolidate power, crush dissent, and undermine the freedom for which it is supposed to be fighting).*

## CONCLUSION

De Beauvoir asks if her ethics is "individualistic." On the one hand, it puts the individual at the center, as the justifier of their own existence. On the other hand, "it is not solipsistic," for one's freedom depends on others', and one cannot genuinely pursue one's own freedom without also pursuing others'. People are free but there is no "anarchy of the personal whim," for people's freedom gives them a "law." People must assume and pursue their own freedom, building positive projects and negatively rejecting oppression wherever possible. In "taking the given [...] as something willed by man," one turns apparent facticity into genuine free existence. But this is a constant and unending process, inevitably doomed to failure, against which one must continuously struggle.

*De Beauvoir returns to the main criticism of her philosophy—that it is individualistic and solipsistic—in order to offer a complete picture of what makes individual life ethical according to her philosophy. Existentialism's critics have confused an ethics that starts from the perspective of the individual but forces that individual to think about the collective with an ethics that refuses to make people answer to anyone else. This misunderstanding stems from other philosophical systems' tendency to think about ethics only in relation to the universal, collective traits of humanity, and then map the collective picture onto individuals. This leads to viewing people in terms of their facticity—in this case, their membership in the human collective—rather than their distinctive trait: their freedom.*

De Beauvoir asks whether the continuous struggle against failure is genuine progress or merely "turbulent stagnation," a "lying enterprise" that lets people play "a game of illusions" and imagine they are free. Yet this objection relies on opposing such "illusions" to an objective truth that no one can access; people make the truth and bestow things with value, so their "illusions" are the reality of what is valuable. People's lives are their attachment to the world, and they justify themselves by "genuinely justif[ying] the world." This justification bears on the "entire universe through space and time" but is itself finite, since any individual's work must be limited. This is probably why people see existentialism as gloomy—they are used to ethics being considered from a comfortingly inhuman perspective: "the plane of the universal, thus, of the infinite." But in real life, such universal ethical systems (like Hegel's) are useless.

*The second uncomfortable aspect of de Beauvoir's philosophy is that she thinks that morality is impossible to achieve; rather, there are only degrees of failure, and the very fact of human freedom means that it is always possible to improve. Here, she asks if improvement is really improving at all, or if everything is meaningless because values are constructed. But this view is backwards: meaning is constructed, too, and things are meaningful because they are constructed by human freedom. There is no "plane of the universal," and so blaming existentialism for failing to reach it makes no sense.*

Existentialism, on the other hand, refuses to evade the truth of people's finiteness in life but affirms their potential to make a definite contribution and define themselves in the world. By willing their existence in "a finiteness which is open on the infinite," people can claim their absolute freedom. No one needs any "outside guarantee," as goes the saying: "Do what you must, come what may." De Beauvoir interprets this as meaning that "the result is not external to the good will which fulfills itself in aiming at it." If everyone pursued their freedom, there would be no need to dream grand illusions of utopia.

*De Beauvoir closes her book by emphasizing the liberating aspect of existentialism: it does not expect people to fit the same mold or take a certain path in every decision. Rather, it affirms people's right to decide for themselves, their constant ability to improve, and the inalienable character of freedom. Instead of making individuals decide based on an idea of the collective—asking them to wait for ethicists, politicians, or religious leaders to tell them how to act—de Beauvoir thinks people should make their own decisions, which is precisely what can create a better society.*

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