

*AUTHENTICITÉ*, AMBIGUITY AND FREEDOM:  
RECUPERATING THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE  
DE BEAUVOIR FOR A CONTEMPORARY  
ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

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*Authenticité, Ambiguity and Freedom: Recuperating the  
Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir for a  
Contemporary Ethics of Ambiguity*

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*For Tom and James*

## ABSTRACT

### ***Authenticité, Ambiguity and Freedom: Recuperating the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir for a Contemporary Ethics of Ambiguity***

The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir has been criticised for being a “miserablism”; for throwing us into an absurd universe with no meaning; and for giving an account of freedom which concludes that each can do ‘as one pleases’ without regard for others due to an inherent lack of meaning in the world. It has been argued that, due to its insistence on an irreducible, ‘radical’ freedom, it is not possible to develop an ethics based on existentialism and, therefore, that it is of little use in providing any grounds for an ethics today.

In this thesis, I argue against such a reading of de Beauvoir’s existentialism, and for a recuperation of the existential notion of *authenticité* for a contemporary ethics.

In order to demonstrate the importance of the concept of *authenticité*, I make an explicit distinction between two conceptions of the ‘authentic’ self. The more common understanding is of the decontextualised, autonomous and disembodied individual/subject evident in traditional philosophical accounts of the ‘authentic’ self. The second is what I identify as the *authentique* self described by de Beauvoir, understood as embodied, situated and contextualised – the self as related ambiguously to others and the world. A primary aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the important interconnections between the concepts of ambiguity and *authenticité*, and to reveal that the more common notion of ‘authenticity’ is based (often implicitly) upon a denial of our ambiguous freedom.

Taking up the more recent reclamation of the unique philosophical importance of de Beauvoir’s account of ambiguity and freedom, which has strong affinities with the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I apply de Beauvoir’s account of *authenticité*, based on ambiguous freedom, to the examination of limits within feminist theory and within the debate over Aboriginal identity in the Tasmanian context. I argue that both of these debates have been limited by their

understandings of 'authenticity' and that both would find within de Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguous freedom a way to move beyond, or at least question, this understanding.

I conclude that, by taking seriously the account of ambiguous freedom described throughout de Beauvoir's texts, we are provided with an ethics that allows for openness and joy in our relations with others and which offers a powerful descriptive and explanatory account of some complex contemporary social and political situations.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The bibliography at the end of this thesis gives full details of the works cited below. Primary texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre are referenced in-text using the following abbreviations, with full bibliographic details in footnotes.

BN     *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (Sartre)

EE     *An Eye for an Eye*

EPW   *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom*

FC     *Force of Circumstance*

LM     *Literature and Metaphysics*

PC     *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*

PL     *Prime of Life*

PP     *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty)

RPP   *Review of the Phenomenology of Perception*

TEA   *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

TSS   *The Second Sex*

WIE   *What is Existentialism?*

## INTRODUCTION

Since its conception in the late 1930s the French existentialism associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir has been criticised for failing to provide contemporary society with an ethics; for focusing too narrowly on the individual and on 'radical freedom'; and for 'pulling the rug out' from beneath us without providing a means to move forward.<sup>1</sup> Herbert Marcuse, for example, wrote of Sartre's existential theory that, in questioning the meaning of existence, it reveals the *Cogito* as the foundation for human existence and that this *Cogito* is "...thrown into an 'absurd' world in which the brute fact of death and the irretrievable process of Time deny all meaning".<sup>2</sup> Despite many philosophers being inspired and influenced by the various manifestations of existentialism, views like Marcuse's have endured over time with one contemporary philosopher recently arguing that:

...after breaking the spell of the life-denying doctrines that dominated modernity, existentialism could offer post-modern thinking nothing to hold on to. For, if we rigorously deny that there is no human nature at all, then all the possible grounds for processes of enlightenment in law, politics and ethics are fatally undermined. Once this Humpty Dumpty has been toppled,

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<sup>1</sup> Critiques of the (particularly Sartrean) existential view of freedom abound. See, for example, Adorno, Theodore, *Negative Dialectics*, (trans E.B. Ashton), Continuum: New York, 1992; Marcuse, Herbert, "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 8, No. 3. March, 1948, pp. 309-336; Grossmann, Reinhold, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Routledge: London, 1984; Follesdal, Dagfinn, "Sartre on Freedom," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Arthur Schlipp (ed), LaSalle: Open Court, 1981, pp. 392-407; Campbell, Gerald T., "Sartre's Absolute Freedom," *Laval Theologique Philosophique*, February 1977, pp 61-91; Kruks, Sonia, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom", in Simons, Margaret, (ed) *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Marcuse, Herbert, "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 8, No. 3. March, 1948, p 309.

not even the entire population of sovereign individuals, exercising their free wills, could put him together again.<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis, however, I argue against this interpretation and show that Simone de Beauvoir's particular development of existential philosophy is able to overcome the criticism that it has nothing to offer in the contemporary socio-political setting.

This thesis will demonstrate that de Beauvoir's existential philosophy of ambiguity provides a foundation for a contemporary ethics in the following ways. It is a philosophy to be 'lived' rather than an abstract theory or system; it emphasises the importance of the self-other relation to being and our responsibility to others; it acknowledges our embodiment and our facticity, as well as our capacity for transcendence; it promises (or at least offers) us joy in our relations with others; and, finally, it insists upon continued effort and engagement with the world. As will become clear, the influence of Hegel's so called 'master-slave dialectic' is also evident in de Beauvoir's analysis of the self-other relation, although her appropriation and re-configuration of this dialectic has been largely ignored in translations of her work, as Toril Moi and Nancy Bauer both argue.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that de Beauvoir's work, which takes up and re-thinks the importance of the self-other relation to ethics, is able to address what I will identify as a problematic understanding of the "authentic" in social and political philosophy (and the socio-political realm more generally). Moreover, I argue that her focus on ambiguity allows for (though does not necessitate) joy in our relations with others and our appreciation of the world. A key point will be the reclamation and reconnection of the themes of ambiguity and *authenticité* in de Beauvoir's existentialism; themes which were traditionally overlooked by aligning her more with (a particular reading

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<sup>3</sup> Levin, David Michael, 'Existentialism at the end of Modernity: Questioning the I's Eyes', *Philosophy Today*: Spring 1990; 34, 1, p91.

<sup>4</sup> See Toril Moi, 'While we wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Summer 2002, Vol 27, no. 4. and Bauer, Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001. This aspect of de Beauvoir's work will be discussed further throughout this thesis.



of) Sartre than with other existentialist-phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl.<sup>5</sup> If we draw out the concepts of ambiguity and freedom in her work and focus on the importance of others to understanding subjectivity (or intersubjectivity) for ethics, we can derive an ethics of *authenticité* that offers much to contemporary debates. In this thesis I take up the more recent focus on the importance of ambiguity to de Beauvoir's ethics and argue that we must also acknowledge the implications of what de Beauvoir understands by this term when it comes to thinking about how one can act with *authenticité*.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see, the concept of authenticity as it is usually understood, both philosophically and socially, differs significantly from the particularly existential account of *authenticité* I wish to examine here. Moreover, this latter account in fact has something to offer as a corrective to the more problematic understanding. The problematic understanding of authenticity - which posits a 'self' that negates or fails to recognise the importance of the other - is a recurring theme in this thesis and I return to it in later chapters to illustrate how it impacts upon everyday, lived situations: situations which are influenced (though often implicitly) by philosophical understandings of the relation between 'self' and 'other'.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that I am arguing against an interpretation of de Beauvoir as being aligned with a *particular* reading of Sartre. It is not my aim in this thesis to argue in depth either for or against this reading of Sartre, although I acknowledge that many theorists argue for a recuperation of his work. De Beauvoir herself believed that many critical interpretations of Sartre were mistaken (including Merleau-Ponty's) and much of her work aims at further applying or explaining the existentialism she saw him to be propounding. A future work may involve recuperating Sartre through de Beauvoir, however, that will not be the intention of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> More recent interpretations have been concerned with analysing the importance of ambiguity to de Beauvoir's work. For example the work of Gail Weiss, 'Ambiguity', in *Merleau-Ponty, Key Concepts*, Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (eds), Acuman Publishing: Chesam, 2008; Monika Langer, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity' in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed), Cambridge University Press, 2003 and Debra Bergoffen, 'Between the Ethical and Political: The Difference of Ambiguity' in *The Existential Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, O'Brien and Embree (eds), Kluwer Academic Publishers: Netherlands, 2001 explicitly examine the implications of de Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity to her ethics. This focus on the significance of ambiguity is, however, a more recent one and its connection with the concept of *authenticité* for ethics has not been a focus of either traditional or more recent examination.

## AUTHENTICITÉ, AMBIGUITY AND FREEDOM

Crucial to de Beauvoir's account of *authenticité* is the relationship between the concepts of ambiguity and freedom, a relationship which is examined throughout this thesis. We will see that *authenticité*, on de Beauvoir's account, is not based on individualism or a denial of the importance of the other (which is a major criticism of Sartre's philosophy) but, when read correctly, in fact *depends* upon recognition of our intersubjectivity and, with this, our *connection* to others. Rather than the more common understanding of the 'authentic' as that which is 'genuine', 'true' or 'real', I examine the way in which de Beauvoir links *ambiguity* to *authenticité*, so that *authenticité* is seen as a *willing assumption* or an *affirmation* of our ambiguous nature and the tension that this implies. It is important to note here that this affirmation goes beyond a reflective intellectual activity and involves engaging with freedom *in the world*.

To briefly summarise a point that will be further examined throughout this thesis, in de Beauvoir's work the concept of 'ambiguity' is used to describe the ontological nature of human existence, which is characterised by an irreducible tension and irrevocable connection between our ontological freedom (our transcendence) and our 'embeddedness' in the world (our *facticité*). What this means is that, whilst being ultimately 'free' from any fixed or inherent 'nature' that might exhaustively define us, we are *at the same time* situated and embodied beings whose materiality is significant to (and affected by) our experience of the world (our history, social location, age, sex, class etc) and the others with whom we share this world.

Encapsulated in the term 'ambiguity' is our existence as *both* 'self and 'other', 'subject' and object', a life that is dying from the moment of conception, and de Beauvoir attempts to describe the constant play and tension between what are usually seen as mutually exclusive facets of our being. This aspect of her work has led to what is often seen as a contradiction in her account of freedom and existence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis, a number of de Beauvoir scholars have made a point of the 'notorious contradictions' in her work. For example see: Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics*, Open Court: Chicago, 2001;

This is because she argues that we are always ontologically free (we have no essential essence that determines us) but *at the same time* we are always situated – always historically, physically, temporally and psychologically located in the world with others, which impacts upon our practical freedom and our capacity to act. De Beauvoir does not want us to try to ‘overcome’ this tension, however, but to *accept* it in order to live *authentically*.

We have seen that this recourse to the serious is a lie; it entails the sacrifice of man to the Thing, of freedom to the Cause. In order for the return to the positive to be genuine it must involve negativity, it must not conceal the antinomies between means and end, present and future; they must be lived in permanent tension; one must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to the same thing, assume it lightly (TEA, p 133.)

De Beauvoir argues that what she terms the “existential conversion” is closer to the phenomenological reduction than the Hegelian synthesis, so that the tension between self and other, wanting to be and lacking being, are taken up (assumed) rather than *overcome*. She writes of this ambiguity and tension:

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 actualised 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...but the disclosure implies a perpetual tension to keep being at a certain distance, to

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Deutscher, Penelope, ‘The Notorious Contradictions of Simone de Beauvoir’ in *Yielding Gender: Feminism, deconstruction and the history of philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1997; Gatens, Moira, (particularly in) *Feminism and Philosophy. Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 1991; Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990 and Moi, Toril, ‘While we wait: The English Translation of The Second Sex’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Summer 2002, Vol 27, no. 4.

tear oneself from the world, and to assert oneself as a freedom (TEA, pp 23-24).

In contrast to those who see this aspect of existentialism to be demonstrative of a 'miserablism' or a negativity, we will see that this perpetual tension and disclosure is a key point in her account of positive self-other relations. Moreover, rather than viewing this account of freedom and ambiguity as contradictory (in terms of trying to bring together terms which are mutually exclusive), there is a *requirement* for recognition and a willing acceptance of the fundamental ambiguity described by de Beauvoir for ethics. We must recognise and assume (take-up) the tension between the ambiguous aspects of our lives, which means accepting a connection between terms that can neither be reconciled nor synthesised, once and for all.

As becomes apparent with a closer reading of de Beauvoir's work, the limits and opportunities of *situation* are crucial to existential freedom and, therefore, a 'radical freedom' or "an entire population of sovereign individuals" (described above by Levin) would be impossible. Ethical action, according to this account, entails acceptance of both the boundaries *and* the potential implied by the complex conditions of each life. 'Situation' for de Beauvoir explains the way in which subjectivity develops in relation to the world. As Sonia Kruks summarises it, to be '*in situation*' means that human being (existence) involves "a relation of mutual permeability between subjectivity and its surrounding world".<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, the concept of being *in-situation* enables a conception of existence that overcomes binary accounts that assert *either* autonomous (isolated) subjectivity *or* Universalist accounts that subsume the individual under the rubric of 'mankind'. Whilst acknowledging the 'dual' aspect of existence (one is both subject *and* object, immanence *and* transcendence, self *and* other), this existential account gives equal weight to each and, rather than denying it, attempts to recognise and maintain the tension entailed in this ambiguity. We will see, also, that urging for an 'acceptance' or 'taking up' of our tension and ambiguity is not about a 'tolerance' or a 'bearing'

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<sup>8</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990, p11.

of something that is negative but a *positive* assumption. De Beauvoir shows us that ambiguity and *authenticité* allow for joy in our engagement with the world and with others. The self-other relation, though always in tension, can be one of love and respect and, indeed, an *authentique* relationship requires that we acknowledge the tension and play between self and other.

The first section of this thesis involves repositioning de Beauvoir more closely with Merleau-Ponty (and also, to a lesser extent, with Heidegger and Husserl) than Sartre in order to explicate the concepts just described. This requires examining the philosophical and socio-political concepts of authenticity/*authenticité* and ambiguity, as well as providing a fuller account of ambiguity and human freedom as understood by de Beauvoir. This analysis also involves examining other important influences on de Beauvoir, and particularly her rendering of the master-slave dialectic.<sup>9</sup>

As de Beauvoir argues, philosophy is not (or should not be) an abstract theory but is a part of life, “every living step is a philosophical choice” for her and another aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how ‘real life’ situations can be engaged with using de Beauvoir’s arguments for ambiguity. Using the concepts of *authenticité*, ambiguity, and freedom examined in the first part of this thesis the second part then provides an analysis of a number of contemporary socio-political situations in order to demonstrate the importance of recognising and taking up freedom in *everyday* circumstances. These examples highlight the potential for an ethics based on ambiguity and *authenticité* today. The concepts of *authenticité*, freedom and ambiguity play an important role in each of the situations examined, and we will see that a misconceived understanding of these terms is evident in contemporary debate over identity politics and ethics. As a suggestion for overcoming this misconception, I argue that an appropriate understanding of what is ‘*authentique*’ requires a positive, active, *acceptance* of ambiguity and freedom, rather than the

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<sup>9</sup> My interpretation of de Beauvoir’s account of the self-other relation is based to a large extent on Nancy Bauer’s recent examination. See, Bauer, Nancy, ‘The Truth of Self-Certainty: A Rendering of Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic’ in *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001.

denial of the importance of these terms that characterises much contemporary debate.

In summary, chapter four argues that feminist theory and praxis (like philosophy more generally) has not made adequate use of the concept of ambiguity (as expressed in de Beauvoir's work) and has, therefore, missed an ally in its aims to better understand the relationships between women and men. Taking up some of the key aspects in contemporary 'third wave' approaches to questions of sexual difference that strive to understand identity, I argue that those feminisms that have (implicitly) denied freedom and situation by advocating *either* essential difference *or* essential equality between men and women have each grasped a partial truth. However, in excluding their 'opposite', they do not give enough attention to ambiguity and, thus, cannot be genuinely ethical (*authentique*) in de Beauvoir's terms. Such feminisms are *inauthentic* as they either reify sexual difference, as if it were inherent, or deny the obvious differences that characterise humans in the world and presume a 'blank state'. That is, both ignore the *ambiguity* of our situation, which positions us as both immanence *and* transcendence, and always in relation. I assert that, in order to have relevance today and to have significance for men *and* women, feminism would do well to embrace ambiguity and the freedom entailed by this concept. As a number of contemporary scholars argue, feminist philosophy should now go beyond a focus on 'woman' and 'women's' issues in order to be of relevance to broader social and political issues, including intimate relationships between subjects. I argue that ambiguity provides a means to do this, without denying the importance of feminism's history and its successes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this thesis does not purport to give a full analysis of the many and varied aspects of the history of feminism and its current manifestations. Feminism has made significant contributions to various areas of theory and practice, including post-colonial theory, examinations of globalisation, environmental philosophy, philosophy of health care and education to name but a few. A further research project may be to examine in more detail how these various applications of feminist thought make use of, or might be enhanced by, the concepts of ambiguity and *authenticité*. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to do so however, and I focus on those aspects of socio-political feminism that deal more explicitly with the self-other relation, identity, and relationships between the sexes.

Another 'real world' example that demonstrates the applicability of an ethics of ambiguity is the current debate over what is seen as the authenticity (or the opposing *inauthenticity*) of Aboriginal identity within the Australian context. Like feminisms that argue for equality *or* difference, these debates are also limited by a failure to fully recognise and embrace ambiguity. This failure has the potential to limit political action to essentialist discourse that is hindered by the dichotomous thinking characteristic of colonialism (particularly the distinction between colonised and coloniser in constructions of identity). Chapter five argues that, by reclaiming ambiguity, and with this the concept of *authenticité* as described by de Beauvoir, debates over identity can be opened up and the concept of *authenticité* can provide for the experience of those whose identities are torn or 'ambiguous'. Ultimately, I wish to explore an account with which one can maintain a sense of belonging to a particular group by acknowledging the importance of particular differences and ways of being but also acknowledge the way in which this group identity has come to be *in situation*. We shall see that, by recognising and affirming one's ambiguity, one can thus be *authentique* and avoid the tyranny of essentialism.

In contrast to those who see existentialism as a 'miserablism' that leaves us in a state of despair by removing all meaning and value from the world, this thesis concludes with the argument that an attitude of wonder and generosity is evident within de Beauvoir's work and that such an attitude can be cultivated in order to allow for *celebration* of ambiguity and to allow for a positive existential ethics. The final chapter examines how a 'taking up' of freedom and ambiguity, with an emphasis on generosity and a sense of wonder, provides a foundation for *authentique* political and ethical relations. As de Beauvoir writes, "most [people] spend their life crushed by the weight of clichés that smother them. [Whereas] if they resolved to acquire a clear awareness of their situation in the world, then only would they find themselves in harmony with themselves and reality" (EPW, p215).

As will become clear, a focus on wonder and generosity does not deny that conflict and violence are possible, and a crucial point of this thesis is to demonstrate that we cannot 'do away' with or reconcile the tension involved in the ambiguous self-other

relation but, rather, that there is always the option to strive for positive relations with others by remaining aware of this irrevocable tension.



## **SECTION I: RECLAIMING AMBIGUITY AND *AUTHENTICITÉ* IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S EXISTENTIALISM**

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... Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us 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.

(*TEA*, p9)

## CHAPTER ONE: OVERCOMING INDIVIDUALISM - REUNITING AMBIGUITY AND AUTHENTICITÉ

But I, detached from them and everything, what am I myself?

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, p1)

...I am, I exist, here and now, I am myself.

(Beauvoir, *POL*, pp 272-73)

I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest.

(Merleau-Ponty, *PP*)

There exists no privileged spot in the world about which he can safely say 'this is me'...He is himself only through relationships with something other than himself.

(Beauvoir, *PC*, pp97-98)

French existentialism has, undeniably, done much to successfully question and overturn problematic understandings of human existence evident in modernity: problems such as mind/body dualisms, belief in absolute truth and value, universalism and essentialisms. However, it has been argued that, in doing this, it has failed to provide us with a means to move forward or with a foundation upon which to base an ethics that is of any use today.<sup>11</sup> As far as providing instruction on how one should act ethically, existentialism has been seen as lacking. For example, one contemporary critic has recently argued that, in her attempt to develop an ethics of ambiguity that reconceptualises freedom, "[Simone de] Beauvoir does not provide any kind of measure for substantively discerning the content of freedom and oppression". Moreover, he argues that, "...she substitutes her abstraction of freedom for other ideological abstractions and thereby does not gain much ground

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<sup>11</sup> For two recent arguments against the potential for an existential ethics today see Braddock, Matthew, 'A Critique of Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics', in *Philosophy Today*; Fall 2007; Vol 51, Issue 3, pp303-311 and Levin, David Michael, 'Existentialism at the end of Modernity: Questioning the I's Eyes', in *Philosophy Today*; Spring 1990; Vol 34, Issue 1.

over her opponents".<sup>12</sup> This critic concludes that, whilst "philosophers still wrestle with the question of whether a strong existentialist ethics is possible" the work of Simone de Beauvoir gives him "no reason to answer in the affirmative".<sup>13</sup>

Although more recent scholarship has focused on de Beauvoir's contribution to the field, French existentialism is often seen to be synonymous with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*<sup>14</sup>, which is viewed by many as the "iconic and defining work of the [existentialist] tradition".<sup>15</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, de Beauvoir has for decades been read as merely "following" Sartre or to be applying his philosophy to her own work. This interpretation has been due, largely, to the close personal and working relationship they shared and, also, to de Beauvoir's often-stated claim that she was not a philosopher and that philosophy was Sartre's domain. As we will see, rather than being taken as a reason to deny the validity of de Beauvoir's contribution to philosophy, her claims reflect a particular approach to philosophical methodology, which are more in keeping with a 'lived' philosophy of embodiment than an abstract, universal principle.<sup>16</sup>

This thesis focuses on some of the main criticisms levelled at existentialism, particularly the existentialism associated with Sartre, which many associate with de Beauvoir, and argues that a retrieval of the concept of *authenticité* – understood as inextricably connected to the concept of ambiguity developed in de Beauvoir's work

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<sup>12</sup> Braddock, Matthew, 'A Critique of Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics', in *Philosophy Today*, Fall 2007; Vol 51, Issue 3, pp306 and 307.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p310.

<sup>14</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, H. Barnes (trans). London: Routledge, 1994. First published in French in 1943.

<sup>15</sup> See Jack Reynolds, *Understanding Existentialism*, Acumen: Chesam, 2006 or David Cooper, *Existentialism*, Basil Blackwell, 1990 for a discussion of the history of the term 'existentialism'. As David Cooper notes, the term 'existentialism' was not developed by Sartre and de Beauvoir but was applied to them by their colleague Gabriel Marcel, and, according to de Beauvoir they took on this label 'for their own purposes' only after an "initial irritation". The label 'existentialist' has also been applied in retrospect to Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and even to Marcel himself.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Bauer makes this claim in her examination of the relationship between de Beauvoir, Sartre and philosophy. Bauer, Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001.

– enables many of these criticisms to be addressed. Moreover, an examination of her account reveals an existentialism that overcomes Sartre's more individualistic account of human being.

As a means to further understand the importance of the concept of *authenticité*, this chapter examines conceptions of 'self' in philosophy and more broadly in the socio-political realm. In particular, I make an explicit distinction between two conceptions of the 'authentic' self. The first is the more common understanding of the decontextualised individual – the autonomous and rational self described (in different ways) by philosophers such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke and John Stuart Mill (amongst others). In contrast to the rational disembodied self that underpins problematic understandings of authenticity, the *authentique* self described by de Beauvoir, is a self understood as embodied, situated and contextualised – the ambiguous self that is related and connected to others and the world yet, ultimately 'free'.

With the aim of reinforcing the distinction between these two understandings, I will use the English terms 'authentic' and 'authenticity' to designate the (more problematic) former understanding and the French terms *authenticité* and *authentique* (as used by de Beauvoir) to designate the latter (more positive) understanding.

As we will see *authenticité*, when reunited with ambiguity (as developed in de Beauvoir's work), provides a means of relating ethically to others and overcomes the criticisms of radical freedom and individualism that have been levelled at Sartre's philosophy and which have been taken to characterise French existentialism. The *authentique* self, under this account, is not a radically free self, but a situated self that is, at the same time, free from an inherent 'essence' and *also* interdependent and embodied (ambiguous).

*Authenticité* in existential terms involves living in 'good faith' – with recognition of the fact that one is fundamentally *free* from any essence, and acknowledging that the same is true for others. To be in good faith, however, one must *also* recognise the

significance of one's situation and comprehend that our material conditions form part of who we are. To live in bad faith (*inauthentically*), therefore, can involve the denial of one's freedom and the freedom of others by asserting *either* that one has an essential essence *or* by denying the existence of any sense of self or meaning at all.

De Beauvoir's account of the self attempts to surpass this 'either/or' distinction, which she argues results from a failure to recognise ambiguity in its proper sense. She argues that different doctrines have attempted to overcome or deny the connection between *facticité* and transcendence by either celebrating an 'inner self' that is distinct from arbitrary external events, or by giving more weight to the external so that humans become objective 'things'. For example, she argues that Christianity and Marxism can be seen to take up one aspect of the ambiguous human condition and to ignore the other:

Pascal summarized the ambiguity of the relationship between Universe and man in a famous and striking expression when he called man a thinking reed. From this definition, Christianity retains *essentially* the aspect of *interiority*: in the secret of his heart, by the purity of his intentions, and by the individual accomplishment of the ethics dictated by his conscience, man will attain his salvation in this world. On the contrary, Marxism emphasizes that man is a reed, *a thing among things*, definable by his relationship with the *objective reality* of the world (WIE, p325).

De Beauvoir's account of existentialism, on the contrary, wants to overturn this view of the oppositional aspects of existence in that it "...strives to hold both ends of the chain at the same time, surpassing the interior-exterior, subjective-objective opposition" (Ibid). De Beauvoir's position is not a denial of *either* interior *or* exterior, but a recognition of the way in which both these aspects are lived 'ambiguously'.

Regarding the attempts of philosophers to attempt to deny ambiguity by denying either the internal or the external worlds, de Beauvoir writes:

Hegel, with more ingenuity, tried to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to reconcile them all. According to his system, the moment is preserved in the development of time; Nature asserts itself in the face of *The Spirit* which denies it while assuming it; the individual is again found in the collectivity within which he is lost; and each man's death is fulfilled by being cancelled out in the Life of Mankind. One can thus repose in a marvellous optimism where even the bloody wars simply express the fertile restlessness of the spirit (TEA, p8).

However, de Beauvoir expresses disillusion with this system in which the individual is lost to the universal and she says that "it was by *affirming* the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel" (TEA, p9).

For Hegel, problematically in de Beauvoir's opinion, "particularity appears only as a moment in the totality in which it must surpass itself" whereas, for existentialism, in contrast to this, "impersonal universal man" is "not the source of values" (p 17). On her account, existentialism is "opposed to dialectical materialism" and she argues that existentialists "think that the meaning of the situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of the passive subject, that it surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project" (TEA, p20).

The existential account does not attempt to 'surpass' this ambiguity, but '*assumes*' it because, as we saw above, the task of humanity in attaining truth is to accept ambiguity (TEA, p13). In order to be *authentique*, we must take up and willingly assert our ambiguity, and it is this willing assertion that allows for positive, even joyful, relations with others.

#### AN IMPORTANT MATTER OF TRANSLATION

It is important to point out that Toril Moi and Margaret Simons have both argued that the cuts, omissions and mistranslations in the current English translation of *The Second Sex* lead to an inadequate representation of de Beauvoir's overall argument

and to apparent contradictions in her philosophical account. Moi argues that problematic translation makes much of *The Second Sex* appear to be de Beauvoir's personal opinion and that crucial philosophical terms and passages are confused by the translator, zoologist H.M. Parshley, particularly those relating to Hegel and to specific existential terminology.<sup>17</sup>

Moi sees four main points on which Parshley has failed to consider the philosophical implications of de Beauvoir's work and terminology. She argues that Parshley confuses the term for "existence" with the term for "essence"; he mistakes "subjectivity" as meaning "not objective"; he does not identify de Beauvoir's many references to Hegel; and he fails to understand de Beauvoir's use of 'alienation' is a philosophical term that comes from Hegel and Lacan.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly for this thesis, another mistranslated term is '*authentique*', which has particular connotations in existential philosophy that are linked to the concept of *bad faith* and to the recognition of one's freedom. A correct understanding of the term *authentique*, as used by de Beauvoir in a particularly existential way, is crucial to her philosophical investigation of the situation of women. However, as Moi points out, Parshley's mistranslation of the term as 'genuine', 'real' or 'true' is based on colloquial understandings and he misses altogether the recognition of *responsibility* that comes with the term for de Beauvoir.<sup>19</sup> Although the existential term *authentique* is crucial to de Beauvoir's analysis of women's situation in *The Second Sex*, Moi argues that "when Parshley freely transforms Beauvoir's *authentique* into "real", "genuine" and "true", he turns her questions about women's freedom into

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<sup>17</sup> Moi, Toril, 'While we wait: The English translation of *The Second Sex*, *Signs*, Summer, 2002; Vol. 27, no 4, pp 1005-1035. At the time of writing this thesis, Random House (Knopf), the publishers holding the rights to *The Second Sex* have commissioned a new English translation of *The Second Sex* (see Glazer, Sarah, 'A Second Sex', *Artforum*, New York, April/May 2007, Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp34-37). As Toril Moi states, "let's hope they do justice to Beauvoir's masterpiece", Moi, Toril, 'It Changed My Life', in *The Guardian*, United Kingdom, January 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp 1014-1015.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p 1014.

moralizing sentimentality”.<sup>20</sup> In fact, although Parshley acknowledges the ‘influence’ of existentialism on de Beauvoir’s work, he argues in the translator’s preface that “...the serious reader will find... *occasionally* recurring passages of existentialist thought [in *The Second Sex*]...” (Parshley, TSS, p8, my emphasis). He goes on to argue that these existentialist concepts could be “...expressed more or less adequately in quite other terms” (Ibid). Parshley, it is quite apparent, did not take seriously the strong philosophical connection between de Beauvoir’s analysis in *The Second Sex* and existential phenomenology, preferring to see her work as a book on ‘women’, not on philosophy.

The mistranslation of such a significant term is a crucial point because the colloquial understanding of ‘authentic’ is so problematic and so different to the existential meaning of the term *authentique*. The common term is based upon an idea of the ‘given’ and demonstrates the tendency to see something as genuine or true only if it is ‘fixed’ (or has an essential nature). The ‘authentic’ in these terms is diametrically opposed to the idea of *authenticité*, in that it demands clarity and solidity rather than recognition and acceptance of ambiguity, which grounds de Beauvoir’s ethics. *Authenticité* is a key component of both Sartre and de Beauvoir’s existential philosophy and relates to a subject’s understanding of their ontological existence, which cannot be reduced to objectivity or to idealism. The tension and play between multiple aspects of human being, which is captured in the concept of ambiguity, underlies *authenticité*.

De Beauvoir is not alone in using the term in this way, and although Parshley does not point us to this either, there are strong connections between Martin Heidegger’s thought and the way in which de Beauvoir develops her account of existentialism.<sup>21</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that both *authenticité* (*Eigentlichkeit* in German) and inauthenticity are necessary to existence and that humans continually move

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Eva Gothlin examines in more detail the relationship and differences between de Beauvoir’s and Heidegger’s accounts of *authenticité* in “Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger” in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, pp 59-63.



between these two basic modes of being.<sup>22</sup> For Heidegger, *authenticité* relates to recognition of wholeness “because it assumes, rather than flees from the finitude and groundlessness of *Dasein*’s existence”.<sup>23</sup> *Authenticité* is distinct from inauthenticity in that it is grounded predominantly in ‘possibility’, whereas inauthentic existence is grounded in ‘actuality’ (such as when the self is constituted as an object or mere thing). *Authentique* existence, on Heidegger’s account, is aware of the meaning of existence, whereas inauthentic existence is not.<sup>24</sup> That is, the *authentique* subject is able to *reflectively* ‘transcend’ their situation in order to recognise it as being a lack of *Being*. The theme of *authenticité* as it relates to understanding of one’s ambiguous existence is shared by de Beauvoir and, throughout her work, she provides an analysis of the practical implications ‘in-the-world’ of the failure to recognise ambiguity and the resultant *inauthenticité*. Crucially then, the common use of the term ‘authentic’ and de Beauvoir’s existential use of the term are opposed, and this has implications for understanding her analysis of the situation of women in *The Second Sex*.

Another important term that comes from Heidegger’s phenomenology, which is connected to the concept of ambiguity, but which was mistakenly translated in early French texts is *Être la* – “being-there” – which comes from Heidegger’s *Dasein*. This was translated in early French readings of *Being and Time* as *réalité humaine* or “human reality”, “human nature”. De Beauvoir and Sartre also take the term *facticité* from Heidegger’s *Faktizität*, which means “self-understanding as inextricably bound up with the Being of those entities encountered in the world”.<sup>25</sup>

A recurring theme throughout de Beauvoir’s work, which is evident early on in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, is the argument that man cannot renounce the ‘exterior’ world and

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<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, Jack, *Understanding Existentialism*, Acumen: Chesham, 2006, p37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, in *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons, Margaret A, with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (eds) University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2004, p146, fn 61.

cannot 'give up' on others.<sup>26</sup> Here, she refers us to Hegel, whom she says shows us that "reality should never be conceived as an interiority hidden in the depths of appearance" (PC, p97). She argues that the Epicurean '*ataraxia*' and the Stoic renouncement of body demand an attempt to remove oneself from the external, to go within, but that in doing so they deny any possibility of enjoyment. For, in order for us to enjoy, we must be in a situation that also has the potential for painfulness, "but in reality, enjoyment is not a given fixed in the narrow envelope of the instant. Gide tells us that each pleasure envelopes the entire world; the instant implies eternity; God is present in the sensation" (PC, p96). Discussion of the importance of being in the world and embodiment is taken up in the following chapter. For now I raise it to point to the importance of distinguishing de Beauvoir's *authenticité* from a kind of individualism that insists on separation from the world, others, and our materiality for enlightenment or freedom, which is a more common understanding of what is meant by authenticity.

#### CRITICISMS OF (SARTRE'S) EXISTENTIALISM

Being in the world with others is a crucial component of de Beauvoir's account of *authenticité*, and a point at which her work is distinct from the individualism critics see in *Being and Nothingness*. One of the major criticisms made against Sartre has been that he focuses too narrowly on the individual, and on consciousness in describing existence.<sup>27</sup> On this reading, Sartre's account is seen to propose a radical individual freedom, which fails to adequately examine and account for the sociability of humans. Because of this radical freedom and focus on the individual, his account is viewed as being unable to respond to problems that have arisen in

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<sup>26</sup> Bergoffen notes that, in her later works, de Beauvoir moves away from the 'inner' and 'outer' split one can read in *Pyrrhus et Cineas* and this account of the different aspects of our existence become more nuanced.

<sup>27</sup> For discussion of the criticisms of Sartre see Sherman, David, 'Sartre, critical theory and the Paradox of Freedom' in *Philosophy Today*, Celina, Summer 2006, Vol. 50, Issue 2, pp198-213.

contemporary society, problems related to how we must respond to others.<sup>28</sup> David Levin, for example, argues that:

Since the philosophical discourse of modernity was ignoring the singularity of individual existence [with its insistence on a universal subject and on objectivity], existentialism properly assumed a compensatory function in this discourse. But its conception of the individual is...fatally wrong. For the way in which it is wrong is such as to make it impossible for existentialism to be responsive to some of the most serious questions and problems now facing us, in late modernity... it took us [to the threshold of a post modern world] without being in a position to serve as our guide once we crossed the threshold.<sup>29</sup>

As well as being condemned for a perceived individualism and for proposing an account of freedom that negates connections with others, existentialism has also been the target of criticism which identifies it with a 'negativity' and a failure to go beyond the *destruction* of value and meaning, thus inviting the prospect of moral and epistemological relativism. As de Beauvoir notes in her autobiography, at the time she and Sartre were writing, "existentialism was being treated as nihilist philosophy, wilfully pessimistic, frivolous, licentious, despairing and ignoble...".<sup>30</sup> De Beauvoir also notes in *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom* that existentialism has (wrongly) been accused of being a "miserablism".<sup>31</sup> Herbert Marcuse's comments provide an example of such criticism. He wrote in 1948 that, within existentialism "...the subject itself has become absurd and its world void of purpose and hope"

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<sup>28</sup> Levin, David Michael, 'Existentialism at the end of Modernity: Questioning the I's Eyes, *Philosophy Today*: Spring 1990; 34, 1; p91.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p91.

<sup>30</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. R. Howard, Andre Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York, 1965, p67.

<sup>31</sup> *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom*, in Simons, Margaret A., with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (eds) *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2004, p203 (hereafter referenced in parentheses as EPW).

and, he argued that, in Sartre's work, "...Man seeks his freedom and happiness in a world where there is no hope, sense, progress or morrow".<sup>32</sup>

Marcuse was by no means alone in holding this view of existentialism, and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, writing in 1949, was also critical of what he saw to be a negative and morbid philosophy. Lacan argued that:

Existentialism must be judged by the explanations it gives of the subjective impasses that have resulted from it; a freedom that is never more authentic than when it is in the walls of a prison; a demand for commitment, expressing the impotence of pure consciousness to master any situation; a voyeuristic-sadistic idealisation of the sexual relation; a personality that realises itself only in suicide; a consciousness of the other that can be satisfied only by Hegelian murder.<sup>33</sup>

Against such criticisms, de Beauvoir's explicit aim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and other works was to describe how existentialism could, in fact, propose an ethics which was not purely negative and which celebrated the importance of others to existence. At the same time, de Beauvoir also sought to demonstrate that we can have a positive ethics and relations with others whilst maintaining the tension implied in the self-other relation described in the Hegelian dialectic. It can be argued that, in attempting to explain how Sartre's philosophy of ambiguity in *Being and Nothingness* provided the basis for an ethics, de Beauvoir develops a more nuanced and socially located account of subjectivity and self-other relations. She did not, however, explicitly aim to undermine Sartre's work but, rather, was expounding what she believed was implicit (and had been misinterpreted by others) within his existentialist account.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Marcuse, Herbert, 'Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 8, No. 3. (Mar, 1948), p 309-310.

<sup>33</sup> Lacan, Jacques, *Jacques Lacan: Ecrites, A Selection*, trans Allen Sheridan, W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London, 1977, p6.

<sup>34</sup> For discussion of de Beauvoir's interpretation of Sartre's work see for example: Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990; Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia

## REUNITING AUTHENTICITÉ AND AMBIGUITY: BEYOND INDIVIDUAL AND RADICAL FREEDOM

This thesis will demonstrate that, with of her focus on the importance of others and the body to existence, de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity and freedom, particularly in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, is able to overcome the criticism that existentialism has little or nothing to offer an ethical theory of relevance to contemporary issues. De Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity, and the ethics she develops from this, can in fact offer a great deal to contemporary social and ethical debates with its insistence on irreducible freedom and, at the same time, acknowledgment of the undeniable significance of *situation*. Most importantly, de Beauvoir escapes the negative individualism and "Hegelian mastery" that Lacan accuses Sartre of perpetuating while maintaining the ambiguity of the self-other/subject-object relation. By insisting upon the crucial importance of our connection to others she eloquently reveals that we can affirm our existence with passion and joy when we recognise our co-existence and our *situatedness* amongst others and in the world:

Most men spend their life crushed by the weight of clichés that smother them. If they resolved to acquire a clear awareness of their situation in the world, then only would they find themselves in harmony with themselves and reality (EPW, p215).

Understanding the importance and potential in our relations with others and developing an accurate understanding of the existence of the 'self' was an important task for de Beauvoir, which is evident in her novels, autobiographies and philosophical texts. De Beauvoir argues that (rather than attempting to understand or explain our existence through abstract systems or universal truths) by looking to one's situation, to one's location in a particular context we can gain insight into what it means to be a particular (interconnected) self. She writes of her own

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University Press: New York, 2001 and Margaret Simons, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1995, amongst other recent feminist works. This topic is taken up in further detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

experience in trying to find a methodology and philosophy that reflected her experience of the world:

The flight to the universal was only a passing episode in the personal adventure of my life. I went back [from Hegel] to Kierkegaard, which I had been reading with passion; the truth that he asserted defied doubt as victoriously as the Cartesian evidence. Neither System, nor History could, any more than the Malicious Demon, cancel the living certainty of "I am, I exist, at this place and this moment, me" (POL, p 537).

Against the claim of a reductive individualism that denies the centrality of others to self-identity, my central argument is that understanding our ambiguity (our irreducible ontological freedom and - at the same time - the very real practical limitations we encounter and our irreducible inter-subjectivity) is key to developing *authentique* ethical relations with others in the world. In short, we will see that without recognising, understanding and *taking up* our own and other's ambiguity, we cannot be *authentique*. This argument is supported by a re-reading of de Beauvoir, for whom *authenticité* is, ultimately, understood as "disclosing the world *with* and *for* others".<sup>35</sup> In addition, as de Beauvoir concludes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, others are *crucial* to a viable existential ethics. She writes of the importance of the other to my understanding of my own freedom:

... since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can only be achieved through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him (TEA, p156).

As de Beauvoir had earlier argued in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, the abstract universal philosophy of those such as Hegel had not satisfied her because of its failure to

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<sup>35</sup> Gothlin, Eva, 'Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger', in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed), Cambridge University Press, 2003 p62, emphasis added.

account for individual and particular experience. She wrote of this apparent lack of care for real, concrete, existences: "if we are floating in the Hegelian ether, neither the life nor the death of these particular men seems important to us" (PC, p112). On such an account, all are subsumed to the universal and "my own self is abolished... Spread out to infinity, my place in the world is erased just as if I had succeeded in containing it in one dimensional point" (PC, p101). De Beauvoir shows us, through her philosophical examination of 'in the world' experiences (such as what it means to be a woman in a particular situation), that concrete experiences are important and that, rather than attempting to abstract oneself from these in an attempt to gain an objective set of moral principles, we should begin our ethical questioning *in the world*. Questions about ethics and about how to engage with others and the world must consider *both* the transcendent *and* the immanent aspects of our existence. After all, both aspects are indivisible from what it means to be human.

As the following chapter will demonstrate in more detail, there are important similarities between de Beauvoir's account of self and other and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's. In a passage that challenges the 'authentic inner self' critiqued above, Merleau-Ponty argues:

Truth does not 'inhabit' only the 'inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and *only in the world does he know himself*. When I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, *but a subject destined to the world* (PP, xii *emphasis added*).

Merleau-Ponty argued that phenomenology, in 'returning to the things themselves' and returning to "a world that precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*" (PP, ix-x) overcomes the detachment of the subject from the world and the body, a detachment that he argued philosophers such as Kant and Descartes were guilty of perpetuating in their rationalist discourse:

Descartes and particularly Kant detached the subject, or consciousness, by showing that I could not possibly apprehend anything as existing unless I

first of all experienced myself as existing in the act of apprehending it. They presented consciousness, the absolute certainty of my existence for myself, as the condition of there being anything at all; and the act of relating as the basis of relatedness...but [in reality] the relations between subject and world are not strictly bilateral..." (PP, px).

In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, de Beauvoir also examines the importance of others to my freedom. There she says:

However long I look at myself in a mirror and tell myself my own history, I never grasp myself as a solid object. I feel within me that void which is myself; I feel that I *am* not. And that is why any cult of the self is truly impossible; I cannot destine myself to myself...Humanity never realizes itself. But the other is there, before me, closed upon himself, open onto infinity (PC, p116).

For de Beauvoir, others are crucial to our understanding of self and any philosophy or ethics that attempts to deny this, or that is implicitly committed to this denial, is flawed.

#### AUTHENTICITÉ AND AMBIGUITY AS KEY (CONNECTED) CONCEPTS

Demonstrating the connection between *authenticité* and ambiguity is a primary aim of this work. As noted above, an important part of demonstrating this connection involves an examination of the significant differences between the concepts of '*authenticité*' (in terms of the explicitly existential term) and the more traditional understanding of the term 'authenticity', which is demonstrated in 'everyday' encounters.

The (common) concept of 'authenticity', which posits an 'inner-self' that exists in separation from the external world and others, is based upon the misunderstood notion of self and freedom that de Beauvoir (with Sartre) terms a "state of seriousness". De Beauvoir argues in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that a 'spirit of seriousness' considers "values as ready-made things" (TEA, p35) and one who



displays such a spirit claims that particular ends (which have actually been set up by humans) are “absolute” (TEA, p46). In this case, the problem is the idea of being true to a ‘ready-made’ self, a self that is the *essence* of who one is.

The attitude of seriousness, in which values and meanings (and ultimately the self) are viewed as ready-made and externally given, is the attitude of the majority according to de Beauvoir. She argues that it is because we were all once children, whose worlds appeared ready-made but who eventually have our freedom revealed to us and do not know how to act in the face of it, that many hold such an attitude. In order to overcome our uncertainty, and out of nostalgia for our childhood, we attempt to rid ourselves of this freedom “by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned” (TEA, p48). Thus man “makes himself serious”, he “dissimulates his subjectivity under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized by him; he is no longer a man, but a father, a boss, a member of the Christian Church or the Communist Party” (TEA, p48). The serious man, therefore, “imagines that the accession of these values likewise permanently confers value upon *himself*” (TEA, p46, my emphasis). The authentic self, on this understanding, exists inherently, in isolation, the authentic, serious, self “is”.

Although glimpsing freedom, those characterised by a spirit of seriousness see laws as eternally given and certain values as immutable, thus *denying* their freedom. This denial is not necessarily a conscious and deliberate denial, but an unconscious belief, which underlies our everyday actions. De Beauvoir argues that the political fanaticisms that “empty politics of all human content” are based on this view and also the ethical systems of many religions, which appeal to an underlying concept of ‘human nature’ and God-given virtues (TEA, p46). The serious man, according to de Beauvoir, does not question his own existence as being defined by the meaning and values that he views to be absolute and, therefore, he asserts himself against others whose meanings and values contest his own.

Perhaps the most sinister characteristic of this type of person is the tendency to sacrifice others for the values he unquestioningly accepts and the attitude of seriousness is by no means confined to conservative moralists. Both the Left and

Right of the political spectrum can be guilty of seriousness in their assertion of the essentiality of the values they espouse, "...the serious man puts nothing into question... army, highway, revolution, productions becom[e] inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself" (TEA, p49). A radical ecological conservationist can be as guilty of seriousness in claims of the inherent essence of 'the natural' as the forest worker who sees inherent value in jobs and the economy. As de Beauvoir says:

The serious is not defined by the nature of the ends pursued. A frivolous lady of fashion can have this mentality of the serious as well as an engineer. There is the serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims are absolute (TEA, 46).

The serious man thus denies ambiguity in favour of 'the absolute'. For such a person things exist as 'given' in the world and his conception of self and of others is stagnant and fixed. As de Beauvoir argues, the serious man posits absolute ends and absolute values and, in forgoing liberty, takes the easy option. In so doing, he "...avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic [*authentique*] existence" (TSS, p21). The (problematic) conception of the authentic is opposed to the existential concept of *authenticité*, which actually emphasises recognition of our ambiguity and, with this, denies the possibility of an 'essence' that underlies each human existence.

#### AUTHENTICITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL: CAN HAVING A 'SELF' BE ETHICAL? THE PROBLEM OF THE 'AUTHENTIC' INNER SELF (AND INDIVIDUALISM)

This understanding of self, as it relates to an idea of the 'genuine' or 'real', is connected to the modern notion of the individual, which Craig Calhoun equates with "the idea that human beings can be understood in themselves as at least potentially self-sufficient, self-contained and self-moving".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Calhoun, Craig, (ed) *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994, p 315.

Charles Taylor is one contemporary philosopher who analyses the way in which underlying conceptions of self have impacted in the social and political realms. Taylor's work demonstrates that, within a contemporary culture of individualism - which presupposes an 'inner self' - a reductive account of existence works by making 'the other' fit within a particular conception. What this means is that we attempt to 'solidify' the other in order to secure our idea of who *we* are. According to this form of individualism, the 'authentic' self is the autonomous 'inner' self, the self that exists *apart from* or *despite* others.<sup>37</sup>

As de Beauvoir describes it in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, this understanding of self has an important ethical dimension which is evident when humans try to escape from the burden of responsibility for the world or for others by focusing within:

Often during hardship man thus denies all his attachments. He does not want hardship; he looks for a way to flee from it. He looks within himself; he sees an indifferent body, a heart that beats to a steady rhythm. A voice says "I exist". The hardship is not there. It is in the deserted house, on this dead face, in these streets. If I go within myself, I look at those inert streets with astonishment, saying "But what does it matter to me? All is nothing to me" (PC, p92).

By closing off the world, by seeking peace and tranquillity 'within', I attempt to evade the anguish of the other's pain, the responsibility for preventing or easing their hurt, "If I withdraw into myself, the other is also closed for me" (Ibid.). However, de Beauvoir argues that while I may try to remove myself from the world and therefore from all concern, that "I am not first a thing but a spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts" (PC, p93). My embodied ambiguity will not allow me to evade the world, no matter how hard I try to ignore it.

Conceptions of the self as fixed, as separate from others and inherent within an individual, are not by any means new. For example, René Descartes' disengaged

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<sup>37</sup> Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1995.

rationality and the 'responsible self', which he described in the 1640s, provides the foundation for much of the philosophical thought that followed. In his search for the truth about human existence, Descartes (considered by many as the 'father of modern philosophy') famously concluded with the theory, "*Cogito, ergo, sum*", or, "I think, therefore, I am".<sup>38</sup> This conclusion provided the basis for him to argue in the *Discourse* "I am a being whose whole essence or nature is to think, and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing".<sup>39</sup> The Cartesian consciousness is immaterial, defined in separation from the material body which, somehow, 'intermingles' with it.<sup>40</sup> On this account, it is the self within, rather than the embodied self, situated in a particular time and place, that is 'authentic'.

The dominant idea of a source deep within oneself was implicit within modern religious and philosophical notions of the self. This 'source' was seen to possess inherent knowledge that could be accessed by looking within. St Augustine, for example, saw a way to God through 'reflexive awareness of ourselves', arriving at what Merleau-Ponty describes as a "constituting power which has always been identical with the inner self...as yet untouched by being and time" (PP, p xi). Later, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau also saw morality as a 'voice of nature within' and Reason as a faculty endowed by God to help man control his passions:

The Most High has designed to do honour to mankind; has endowed man with boundless passions, together with a law to guide them, so that man may be alike free and self-controlled: though swayed by these passions man is endowed with reason by which to control them.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Descartes, René; Laurence J. Lafleur (trans.) *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, The Liberal Arts Press: New York, 1960.

<sup>39</sup> Descartes, René, as cited in Antony Flew (ed), *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Pan Books: London, 1979, p9.

<sup>40</sup> The problems within Descartes' mind/body dualism are discussed in chapters two and three of this thesis.

<sup>41</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jaques, *Emile: or on education*, (trans) Allan Bloom, Basic Books: New York, 1979, p323.

For these philosophers the passions were seen to muffle or “drown out” the inner voice, and our dependence on others was seen to induce such passions.<sup>42</sup> At this time, the way to have ‘authentic’ moral contact with the ‘self’ was by denying passion and the imposition of external forces. Self-determination was seen as freedom from outside influence and the ability to decide for oneself how, and *who*, one should be.

This focus on the inner self and radical individualism is, for Taylor, an example of a *deviant* form of authenticity, which he argues continues today. He links this to the Kantian notion of freedom as ‘autonomy’ as well as to the Hegelian and Marxian arguments that freedom is self-determination.<sup>43</sup> Taylor is critical of the notion that each has one’s own human way of being, that one can have ‘contact’ with one’s inner nature, with one’s inner (‘genuine’ and unadulterated) ‘self’. He terms this a debased, trivialised, *absurd* form of a culture of authenticity and the idea of the inner ‘original’ self as the background to the problematic modern ideal of authenticity.

Taylor argues that the ‘sentiment of existence’ described in Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*<sup>44</sup> is indicative of a modern “inwardness that develops into the modern ideal of authenticity”.<sup>45</sup> The sentiment of existence Rousseau describes in the *Reveries* has a source which is “nothing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence” (*Reveries*, 89; 1, 1047). This dichotomous understanding of ‘self’ and ‘other’, which attempts to deny the significance of the external world by appealing to an innate self, a self that exists *prior* to the social. As Anthony Appiah argues, this conception of the authentic self assumes that “there is a real self buried in there, the self one has to *dig out* and express”, and which he

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p 27.

<sup>43</sup> Diana Meyers argues that for the Kantian ethical subject “emotional bonds and social conventions imperil objectivity and undermine commitment to duty”. See ‘Feminist Perspectives on the Self’, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/stanford/entries/feminism-self/>, accessed 28 January 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jaques, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, (trans) Peter France, Penguin Books: London, 1979 (Hereafter referenced in text as *Reveries*).

<sup>45</sup> Marks, Jonathon, ‘Misreading One’s Sources: Charles Taylor’s Rousseau’ in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 49, No 1, January 2005, p121.

argues is essentialist.<sup>46</sup> This theme, of an essential authentic inner self, which exists in separation from its situation, will be returned to throughout this thesis, as it is symptomatic of an attempt to evade ambiguity. This evasion entails a denial of one side of a dichotomy (subject/object, mind/body, inner/outer, self/other) and the subsequent reification of the 'opposite' side, often with an over-valuing of one side at the expense of the other.

As a number of feminist philosophers have noted,<sup>47</sup> unacknowledged (value-laden) dichotomies abound in Rousseau's work and, in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that there are "private persons...whose life and freedom are naturally independent of the public person (SC, 61; 111, 373).<sup>48</sup>

We can see, however, that although Rousseau attempts to find his 'authentic self' by cutting himself off from society, in doing so, he actually demonstrates that, alone, he no longer knows who he is, eventually resulting in him asking the profound question, "...without them, what am I?". We see that, when searching for meaning and authenticity within himself, Rousseau finds neither. Ultimately, one must return to the world and accept the tension that this implies. One must be prepared to experience the world – which entails the potential for both positive *and* negative experiences. It is not by removing oneself from society, from the risks entailed in human relationships, that we find *authenticité*. We find it in our engagement with others – in the tension and joy that this relation allows.

In both the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, Rousseau attempts to work through the relationship between the natural and the cultural. He argues in the *Social Contract* that, "Out of a stupid and bounded animal [society] made an intelligent being and a

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<sup>46</sup> Appiah, Anthony K., 'Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction', in *Multiculturalism, Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Amy Gutmann (ed), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp 149-63 (my emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> See for example, Gatens, Moira, 'Rousseau and Wollstonecraft: Nature vs. Reason' in Janna L. Thompson (ed.), *Women and Philosophy: Australian Journal of Philosophy*, supplement to vol. 64, pp 1-15 and Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Routledge: London, 1993.

<sup>48</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jaques, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans, Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997, p373.

man", and on this account society or culture transforms the 'natural' self into 'man'.<sup>49</sup> Whilst he is attempting to give weight to the importance of the public or social world, this argument (for a natural being made human by the social) again represents a presupposition about a pre-given nature. Rousseau sees a separation between the natural and social worlds, the private and the public realms, where one makes a 'transition' from the state of nature to the "civil state". Rousseau fails to see the ambiguous connections between these two aspects of human existence and, instead, propounds an irreconcilable and absolute distinction between them.<sup>50</sup>

In understanding how it is that one may interact with others it is important to acknowledge that whilst our situation and our 'community' are significant to our sense of self, that, as de Beauvoir says, "society exists only by means of particular individuals" (TEA, p 122).

As well as being critical of the idea that identities or values are fixed and immutable, *authenticité* is also opposed to a total denial of current meanings and value, where each can do as one pleases with complete disregard for others. As Taylor argues, modes of contemporary culture "that opt for self-fulfilment without regard to the demands of our ties with others or to demands of any kind emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations are self-defeating...they destroy the conditions for realising authenticity itself".<sup>51</sup>

What we see here is recognition of the external, historical, worldly relations that inform identity and imply that we are not self-contained entities that can 'choose' freely what we are, irrespective of our situation. We are embedded within a socio-

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<sup>49</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Social Contract*, 53; 111, pp 364-65.

<sup>50</sup> In addition, as a number of feminist philosophers have pointed out, Rousseau has a problematic tendency to equate the social and public with the masculine and the private sphere with the feminine, thus denying the capacity for women to develop as social and political beings. For further discussion of this point see, for example Gatens, Moira, 'Rousseau and Wollstonecraft: Nature vs. Reason' in Janna L. Thompson (ed), *Women and Philosophy: Australian Journal of Philosophy*, supplement to vol. 64, pp 1-15 and Lloyd, Genevieve, *The Man of Reason. 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Routledge: London, 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p 35.

historical context, which constitutes our 'horizons of significance' and meaning is developed and interpreted through our situation. Crucial to such a conception of *authenticité*, therefore, is the fundamental role of our relationships with others. Of this relationship, he writes:

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate beyond the self; it supposes such demands.<sup>52</sup>

For Taylor then, as for de Beauvoir, *authenticité* presupposes that selves develop in a social context and that our identities require others and relationships with history and the world. We are formed in dialogue with the world and with others, and this includes recognition of the importance of every day life:

A human being alone is an impossibility, not just *de facto*, but as it were *de jure*. Outside of the continuing conversation of a community...human agency...would be not just impossible but inconceivable.<sup>53</sup>

In an argument that sounds remarkably like de Beauvoir's claims about the importance of others to ethical understandings of action, Taylor has recently written that "It matters to each one of us as we act that the others are there as witness of what we are doing and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of our action".<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp 40-41.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, Charles, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p8.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, Charles, 'Cultures of Democracy and Citizen Efficacy' *Public Culture* 19:1 2007, p144.



This echoes de Beauvoir's thought in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, where she writes: "there exists no privileged spot in the world about which he can safely say 'this is me'...*He is himself only through relationships with something other than himself*" (PC, p97-98, my emphasis). De Beauvoir emphasises the point that we cannot escape the fact that we are embedded in the world, we cannot "...suddenly spring forth into the world in pure *ipseity* (selfness) of [our] being without the world springing forth in front of [us]" (PC, p 98, my emphasis). Others, and the world, are crucial to an appropriate understanding of *authenticité*.

While I have drawn links above with Taylor's concept of *authenticité* and the importance of others to ethics, I do not wish to conflate his and de Beauvoir's work. For example, in a more recent work, 'The Politics of Recognition', Taylor advocates for recognition by the State of particular group identities in order to move away from Universalist assumptions about equal rights and to maintain the differences that define particular groups.<sup>55</sup> The issue with such a politics is, as Lyshaug argues, that "when a state 'recognizes' and promotes a particular group's identity, it invariably enhances the power of that group's leaders to interpret their group's culture and to determine which of its aspects will be safeguarded." In doing this, "a politics of recognition is bound to undermine the liberty and autonomy of group members".<sup>56</sup>

Lyshaug argues that, in allowing groups to institutionalise their identities, "Taylor's politics of recognition would entrench, for members of such groups, what Anthony Appiah calls a 'script' – a set of 'loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the life plans of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities'".<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor, Charles, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, Ajay Heble et al (Eds.), Broadview Press: Canada, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> Lyshaug, Brenda, 'Authenticity and the Politics of Identity: A Critique of Charles Taylor's Politics of Recognition', in *Contemporary Political Theory* Avenel: Dec 2004. Vol 3, Iss. 3, p309.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p 309

What is problematic about such an account of recognition, is that it holds within it an assumption that there are clear and distinct boundaries of communities that are 'recognizable'.<sup>58</sup> Although one can see why Taylor wants to do this, in order to attach political significance to cultural identity rather than accepting the neutralism of procedural liberalism, this move does risk a loss of freedom and does not adequately account for the ambiguity of identity. Taylor wants to be able to accord significance to group politics, to allow for the importance of difference and culturally unique practices but needs to be able to do so in a way that does not undermine his argument for intersubjectivity and authenticity. Lyshaug argues that the problem for Taylor is that his politics of recognition does not honour the "distance" between the self and socially recognised identities.<sup>59</sup>

Using the power of the state to shore up the boundaries of existing cultural communities can undermine the conditions of authentic self-realization...[by] rendering key dimensions of personal identity rigid...in part by creating an incentive for political entrepreneurs to reify cultural identity.<sup>60</sup>

As is evident above, and as others have noted, Taylor's work also involves a strong (although sometimes implicit) theism.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, although she was raised a Catholic, de Beauvoir lost faith in religion as a young adult and she sees a reliance

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p310

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p 318

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p 311

<sup>61</sup> Taylor's early work involves an implicit theism, which he makes explicit in his later work. Taylor received the Marianist Award from the Catholic religious order the Society of Mary in 1996 and presented a lecture in 1999 entitled, 'A Catholic Modernity?', which explored the nature of his religious faith. During this lecture Taylor stated that he had kept his religious views tacit in his earlier work in order to 'persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments' to consider his arguments.<sup>61</sup> Taylor has since published several works which explicitly reveal his theism and he received the Templeton Prize "for Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities" in 2007. See Taylor, Charles, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, edited and introduction by James L. Heft, Oxford University Press, 1999. For discussion of the theism evident in Taylor's work see for example Ian Fraser, "Charles Taylor's Catholicism", *Contemporary Political Theory*, Aug 2005. Vol. 4, Iss. 3; p 231.

on God for ethics as another example of the human failure to recognise ambiguity and to accept responsibility for one's own actions. She argues that "the *authentique* man will not consent to recognize any foreign absolute" (TEA, p14) and this includes God:

When man projects into an ideal heaven that impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself that is called God, it is because he wishes the regard of this existing Being to change his existence into being (TEA, p14).

Although many of the aspects of Taylor's work prove valuable for illustrating the importance of the idea of *authenticité* in the contemporary setting, his later reliance upon theism to articulate an ethics and his advocacy for a politics of recognition that could easily result in strategic political essentialism, do not have as much to offer as de Beauvoir's account of freedom and ambiguity.<sup>62</sup> De Beauvoir does not rely upon God for an explanation of ontology or ethics and does not posit any "absolute" values. As we will see throughout this thesis, this point is important in retaining ambiguity and an open future by recognising ultimate freedom, a freedom that is problematised if we accept God as creator or determiner of being, value and action. It is the thickness of the world, in our embodied state, *in* our ambiguity that a reason to act and to live can found – not in the illusion of Heaven or Nirvana.

As de Beauvoir notes, however, a common response made to existentialist claims is that "if man is free to define for himself the conditions of a life which is valid in his own eyes, can he not choose *whatever* he likes and act *however* he likes?" (TEA, p15, emphasis added). The absence of God in ethics is problematic for those who will ask, 'if there is no God, how can there be value or meaning'? Moreover, many will argue that without God "everything is permitted" (Ibid).

De Beauvoir notes that the existential claims she and Sartre made were condemned by those who argued that, "if the individual were not constrained by the external

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<sup>62</sup> A later research project may involve more closely comparing Taylor and de Beauvoir's work to argue that her account of ambiguity and freedom can overcome the limits within Taylor's work. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to do so however.

world to want this rather than that, there would be nothing to defend him against his whims" (TEA, p22). However, in contrast to those who accuse existentialism of destroying the possibility of ethics by denying universal virtues and morals, for de Beauvoir, it is precisely *because* of the lack of inherent or fixed meaning and value in the world that ethics is even possible. This is because if humans (and human action) were determined, or if value was *inherent* in the world, there would be no need for ethics. De Beauvoir contests the claim that if man is "re-established at the heart of his destiny" all ethics would be repudiated. An existential account of ethics argues that it is *through* man's 'abandonment on earth' that he becomes responsible for his acts. It is up to humankind to determine what is important and what has value, to measure our actions and to assume responsibility for what we make of the world. As de Beauvoir argues, "The source of all values resides in the freedom of [hum]an[ity]" (TEA, p17). She writes, "One does not offer an ethics to a God. It is impossible to propose any to man if one defines him as nature, something given" (TEA, p10). The need for a principle of ethics is the *result* (and a demonstration) of our fundamental ambiguity - and it is the recognition and 'assumption' (in the sense of a taking-up) of this ambiguity that provides the basis for ethical thinking. As de Beauvoir says, "the genuine man will not agree to recognize any foreign absolutes" (TEA, p14).

It is crucial to remember when thinking about 'ethics' in this way that de Beauvoir was not attempting to prescribe universal 'recipes' for action but, rather, a method for questioning *before* action. This method, rather than being a list of virtues and vices, stresses that one must continually remind oneself of the assumptions and expectations one brings to situations. This ethical thinking begins with the *examination* and *continual questioning* of our 'being' in the world and not with *presuppositions* about this being, de Beauvoir writes of this phenomenological methodology that:

...morality resides in the painfulness of an *indefinite questioning*...what distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second *keeps asking himself*: Am I really

working for the liberation of men? ...In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself (TEA, pp 133-134, *emphasis added*).<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The de Beauvoirian conception of *authenticité* can be summarised in the following three key points. Firstly, to live *authentically* one must recognise one's ontological freedom and 'assume', 'affirm' (or take up) rather than attempt to flee this freedom. Such 'fleeing' most often occurs through denial of freedom and the positing of an objective self or absolute value, a self that is a 'thing' (as in the spirit of seriousness). The *authentique* subject, on the other hand, must be prepared to willingly *assert* the fundamental freedom that characterises humanity. Secondly, however, one must *also* (at the same time) recognise one's connections to others and the practical limits and potential of one's situation, therefore acknowledging that the self is 'ambiguous': being at the same time both *ontologically* free and *practically* limited. The self is *neither* a radically free and totally autonomous individual devoid of connections *nor* an objective 'thing'.<sup>64</sup> Thirdly, through understanding ambiguity, the '*authentique*' self is aware of the way in which meaning develops in the world. The *authentique* individual does not posit fixed and immutable values but, rather, endeavours to question presuppositions and unearth assumptions – to 'step back' from the world. The *authentique* subject looks to each situation in making decisions and does not posit a universal morality.<sup>65</sup> As de Beauvoir says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "[t]o attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being, but on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it" (TEA, p13).

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<sup>63</sup> As we shall see in subsequent chapters this 'trick of tyrants' is evident in a number of contemporary political situations.

<sup>64</sup> This point will be further examined in chapter three, with an analysis of the different 'levels' of freedom in de Beauvoir's work.

<sup>65</sup> As we will see in the following chapters, existentialism has been criticised for not providing a normative ethics and for failing to prescribe how one should act.

I have tried to demonstrate above the connections between metaphysical conceptions of 'self' and the way in which we relate to others in the world. Those accounts that privilege an 'inner self' as being the 'authentic', 'genuine' and autonomous are problematic when considered in the light of ambiguity. This relation between 'self' and 'other', which is often seen as being opposing or mutually exclusive, will be further examined throughout the subsequent chapters. The aim here has been to introduce the idea of the connection between the concepts of *authenticité* and ambiguity as a means to begin re-thinking problematic social relations based upon the ideal of the authentic self. De Beauvoir tells us, "I exist as an *authentique* subject, in a constantly renewed upspringing that is opposed to the fixed reality of things" (EPW, p212). Here, "upspringing", *jaillissement*, has the meaning of "gushing, spouting, spurting" and refers to the temporality of my existence and the constant movement that is the world. My self must be constantly re-thought and renewed through my relation with others and the world, which is disclosed to me through my openness, my being in the world.

De Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity, when considered in connection with the ethical ideal of *authenticité*, provides a means to begin to rethink the problem of the 'self-other' relation in such a way as to enable positive relations but without denying the potential for conflict, violence and oppression that are so evident within society. The search for meaning and the search for a true self have been key tasks of philosophy and of religion throughout the ages. However, as Martin Dillon so eloquently puts it, both philosophers and followers of religion have found that, in this search, "Inner worlds have turned out to be as barren as after worlds [and now] it is time to take stock of this world".<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Dillon, Martin, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, Second Edition, 1988, p xix.

**CHAPTER TWO:  
INTERPRETATIONS OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR -  
RE-THINKING THE IMPORTANCE OF AMBIGUITY FOR  
AUTHENTICITÉ**

Mlle de Beauvoir's book is, after all, on woman, not on *philosophy*

(HM Parshley, Translator's Preface to *The Second Sex*)

**SITUATING DE BEAUVOIR**

Since its publication in 1949, *The Second Sex* has received both celebration and condemnation for its contribution to the feminist debate. Some interpreters have argued that de Beauvoir is an essentialist who grounds 'woman' in her biology, which she is seen to denigrate.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, others have seen her as a social constructivist and the mother of the sex/gender distinction, whose account allows (and encourages) woman to move beyond or 'transcend' her biology.<sup>68</sup> Many argue that, by retaining the existential valorisation of transcendence, she tacitly presupposes a 'masculine' ideal as that towards which women should aim and that she distances herself from her own situation as a woman through her criticisms of child-birth and motherhood. Genevieve Lloyd, for example, writes that:

...in repudiating one kind of exclusion, de Beauvoir's mode of response can help reinforce another. For it seems implicitly to accept the downgrading of the excluded character traits traditionally associated with femininity, and to endorse the assumption that the only human excellences and virtues which

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<sup>67</sup> For example see Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir: a Re-reading*, London: Virago, 1986, pp 89-99. Moira Gatens, in her earlier work, also accuses de Beauvoir of taking up Sartre's account of the female body and its relation to immanence (see 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles without Answers', 1991, p17).

<sup>68</sup> Celine Leon provides an example of the social constructivist reading, arguing that for de Beauvoir "[t]he difference between men and women is purely cultural. Woman's Otherness is fabricated, imposed by culture, not biology" (Leon, Celine, in Simons, Margaret A., (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995 p139).

deserve to be taken seriously are those exemplified in the range of activities and concerns that have been associated with maleness.<sup>69</sup>

Still others have argued that her work is inherently contradictory due to her attempts to apply Sartre's existential account to an examination of women, thus (albeit 'accidentally') revealing the limitations of the Sartrean account.<sup>70</sup> Recently, however, de Beauvoir's work has been the focus of a renewed critical appraisal, with particular emphasis on her *philosophical* importance in the areas of ethical relations and ontology. As Sarah Heinämaa tells us, "it is only recently that scholars have approached Beauvoir's texts without assuming that they are applications of Sartre's ontological doctrines"<sup>71</sup> and Nancy Holland argues, "it may be time to reconsider the plausibility of a feminism that draws on the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir and her philosophical allies".<sup>72</sup>

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s especially there has been an explicit focus on the philosophical implications of *The Second Sex* and a number of commentators are re-examining and re-thinking de Beauvoir's contribution to feminist philosophy as well as to broader social and philosophical questions.<sup>73</sup> Her earlier works,

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<sup>69</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, London: Methuen, 1984, p104. Tina Chanter also argues that de Beauvoir is advocating such a position and she writes that "Beauvoir's final message is that sexual difference should be eradicated and women must become like men" (Chanter, Tina, *Ethics of Eros. Irigaray's rewriting of the Philosophers*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p 76).

<sup>70</sup> Deutscher, Penelope, 'The Notorious Contradictions of Simone de Beauvoir', in *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>71</sup> Heinämaa, Sara, introduction to the *Review of the Phenomenology of Perception*, in *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons, Margaret A, with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (eds), University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Holland, Nancy, 'Feminist Politics and The Human Situation: A Re-Reading of Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophy Today*; 2000; 49, 5; p100.

<sup>73</sup> Philosophers such as Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990; Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, Althone Press: London 1996; Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir. The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Blackwell: Oxford, 1994; Margaret Simons, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1995 and Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion, The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996 all began re-thinking the



particularly *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, are also again being engaged with, as are her novels and political and philosophical essays. For example, Cambridge University Press in 2003 published a 'companion to Simone de Beauvoir' as part of their series of companions to major philosophers, and a group of de Beauvoir scholars are now translating previously untranslated texts to English with the aim of "a transformation of Beauvoir's place in the canon".<sup>74</sup> In an introduction to one of these newly translated works, Debra Bergoffen argues that these translations are being undertaken at what she terms "an auspicious moment in Beauvoir studies":

... a moment when Beauvoir's refusal to identify herself as a philosopher in her own right is itself being refused; a moment when her work is being studied for its unique insights and contributions to philosophical and feminist thought; a moment when the questions of violence and justice...are pressing political and ethical concern.<sup>75</sup>

Significantly then, her work is now being read and examined for its *unique* philosophical implications and not just as the work of 'Sartre's companion'.<sup>76</sup> Edward Fullbrook, for example, argues that although "Beauvoir the philosopher had been erased from existence", that recent translations of her work demonstrate her philosophical importance and originality.<sup>77</sup>

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philosophical importance of de Beauvoir in the early 1990s and since this time others have taken up this task, see bibliography for further details.

<sup>74</sup> Simons, Margaret et al (eds), *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, "Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cineas*" in *Simone de Beauvoir. Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds) Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p80.

<sup>76</sup> The relationship between Sartre and de Beauvoir and between de Beauvoir and other philosophers will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Fullbrook, Edward, "Introduction to Two Unpublished Chapters from *She Came to Stay*", in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds) Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p34.

So, in contrast to those who have read de Beauvoir's work as an example of the 'Heloise complex' described by Michelle Le Deouff in *Hipparchia's Choice*<sup>78</sup> (or as an attack on women's embodiment and on biological 'facticity' in general) recent scholars argue that we can find in her work a critique of traditional philosophy and a means to begin re-thinking the many ways in which philosophy has failed to address the questions raised by the experience of particular and situated individuals in the world.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, I argue that her insistence upon the acknowledgement of our ambiguous situation, and the recognition of the particular context of individuals that challenges the adequacy of the ideal of a 'universal human norm', is a successful way to negotiate problematic assumptions about identity and ethics within contemporary political debates. As Linnell Secomb has argued, the contradictory responses to de Beauvoir, which have seen her as being interpreted as both a biological determinist and a social constructivist, "may become more explicable through a reading of her work that utilises and values its ambiguities and complexities".<sup>80</sup>

This chapter aims to continue with this 'reclamation' of Simone de Beauvoir, and her account of ambiguous embodiment, by arguing that she is *neither* a cultural constructivist *nor* an essentialist with respect to the body and its relation to identity (as various historical interpretations have claimed). I argue against the claim that de Beauvoir essentialises and denigrates the (female) body or, conversely, that she denies the importance of the body altogether by privileging transcendence. Alternatively, with a focus on ambiguity, one can find in her work a recognition of the importance of the 'facts' of biology as well as an insistence on an irreducible

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<sup>78</sup> Le Deouff describes the Heloise Complex as the situation in which women become interested in and admitted into the world of philosophy only through being the admirer and proponent of a male's philosophy and are not considered to be philosophers in their own right but rather 'followers' of a particular male philosopher. *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* trans. Trista Selous, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 1991 p 59-60.

<sup>79</sup> See Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism*: Columbia, 2003, Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 1997 and Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990.

<sup>80</sup> See Linnell Secomb, 'Beauvoir's Minoritarian Philosophy', *Hypatia*, Volume 14 (4), 1999.

freedom from essence. De Beauvoir recognises that bodies are important, that they matter and affect our grasp upon the world and our interactions with others yet, at the same time, she insists that the ways in which the 'facts' of biology are *lived* and *understood* are dependent upon the varying social meanings in which they are situated. For de Beauvoir, femininity is "neither an essence nor a nature: [but rather] it is a situation created by civilizations from certain physiological givens".<sup>81</sup> This understanding of ambiguity has very real implications for identity politics.

De Beauvoir's understanding of the ambiguous body can be seen, for example, in her discussion of biology in *The Second Sex*. There she argues that philosophers and scientists have interpreted male and female biology in a particular way in order to justify their already existing biases; biases which see woman more closely aligned with nature and imprisoned in her sex. De Beauvoir writes, "legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (TSS, p22) and she argues that this kind of interpretation has arisen because, "[the scientist or philosopher] wishes to find in biology a justification for this sentiment" (TSS, p34). De Beauvoir claims, against such interpretations, that "[t]o be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is *at once* a material thing in the world *and* a point of view towards this world: but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure..." (TSS, p 39, emphasis added).

De Beauvoir's account of an ambiguously positioned body has lead to varied interpretations of her work and this chapter examines what have become known as the 'notorious contradictions' of de Beauvoir, as well as what a closer look at these apparent contradictions can reveal. I conclude by arguing that, in reading de Beauvoir's work alongside that of Merleau-Ponty, with an emphasis on the key themes of ambiguity, intersubjectivity and the importance of others, one can overcome the criticism of an inherent "Sartreanism" in her work and understand the complexity of her arguments about freedom and situation. Importantly, this allows us to place an emphasis on joy in being-with-others that is not evident in the

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<sup>81</sup> Beauvoir, Simone, de, *La force de l'age*, Gallimard: Paris, 1960.

Sartrean account of subjectivity and which is crucial to her account of *authenticité*. I will return to these themes in subsequent chapters to further elaborate the irreducible connection between the concepts of freedom, ambiguity and *authenticité* in de Beauvoir's ethics and ontology.

## HISTORICAL LOCATION

Simone de Beauvoir received her *Agrégée de Philosophie* in 1929 (the youngest person to have done so at that time), after attending lectures at the *École Normale Supérieure*, where she met and befriended Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as well as Raymond Aron and Claude Levi-Strauss (amongst others). Although she did not claim to be a philosopher (and much has been written about her statements that Sartre was the philosopher and she was the novelist) her many published novels also contain a great deal of philosophical thought and questioning.<sup>82</sup> De Beauvoir's idea of philosophy and its purpose is that it should be able to be 'lived' and not simply an abstract system of thought devoid of real meaning for real people. A quote from "*What is Existentialism?*" (an article written by de Beauvoir for French-English newspaper *France-Amérique* in 1947) illustrates well her view on philosophy and the way in which it can reach a broader population:

The fact that non-specialists, regardless of their incompetence, are interested in existentialism must have an explanation. Symbolic logic, for example, never incited such passionate disputes. The reason, in fact, is that although existentialism claims to rest on the most serious theoretical bases, it also claims to be a *practical and living attitude toward the problems posed by the world today*. It is a philosophy yet does not want to stay enclosed in books and

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<sup>82</sup> For example Margaret Simons argues that de Beauvoir's 1927 diaries reveal "her passionate commitment to doing philosophy, [and that]...her literary methodology for doing philosophy acknowledges early philosophical influences and defines major themes of her own later philosophy and that of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*" (Simons, Margaret, 'An appeal to re-open the question of influence', *Philosophy Today*, 1998. Vol. 42, pp 17-25).

Kate and Edward Fullbrook also argue that de Beauvoir first developed the ideas later to be found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and that he developed these after reading the second draft of de Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay*, (Fullbrook & Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend*, London: Harvester, 1993.)

schools; it intends to revive the great tradition of ancient wisdom that also involved difficult physics and logic, yet proposed a concrete attitude to all men. That is why it is not expressed solely in theoretical and abstract treatises but also strives to reach a larger public through novels and plays (WIE, p324, my emphasis).

De Beauvoir contends that "...philosophy...particularly in France, has never appeared as a singular discipline but as a global vision of the world and of man that must embrace the totality of the human domain" (Ibid). For de Beauvoir, there was a difference in the way she and Sartre 'did' philosophy that reflects this focus on the lived-world. In her autobiographical work, *Prime of Life*, she wrote of this difference, "if a theory convinced me, it did not remain exterior to me, it changed my relation to the world, coloured my experience....for me *philosophy was a living reality*" (PL, p254, *emphasis added*).

Although much of her existential analysis of the human situation occurs more implicitly in her novels and plays, de Beauvoir also published a number of explicitly philosophical texts throughout her career. Examples of these include *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944), *Moral Idealism and Political Realism* (1945), *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom* (1945), *Literature and Metaphysics* (1946), *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and *The Second Sex* in 1949. Similar themes pervade these texts, most notably her focus on freedom, situation, the ambiguous nature of self-other relations and the importance of recognising this for ethics. These themes will recur throughout this thesis.

De Beauvoir was also involved in the founding of the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, which she both edited and contributed to, along with Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Aron and others. This political journal provided the opportunity for French intellectuals to comment on political situations both in France and in other areas of Europe, demonstrating de Beauvoir's interest in the political and social issues of her time.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> For biographical information on de Beauvoir see Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, Vintage: Great Britain, 1991.

Again, this is evidence of de Beauvoir's belief that philosophy should not be a practice abstracted from the everyday lives of people but is "a living reality". This belief is reiterated in "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom", where de Beauvoir writes that "every living step is a philosophical choice and the ambition of a philosophy worthy of the name is to be a way of life that brings its justification with itself" (EPW, p218).

#### INFLUENCES ON DE BEAUVOIR

There is much debate in de Beauvoir scholarship over who the major philosophical influences upon her were, and a cursory glance at the 'contents' section of *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* gives an example of these varied influences.<sup>84</sup> Sartre, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, Malebranche, Wright, Marx and Hegel are all mentioned as influencing her work in some way; whether she is seen to be espousing either similar or contrasting arguments. De Beauvoir herself makes reference in her work to many of these philosophers, as well as to others such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, Descartes, Levinas, Rousseau, Aristotle and Plato. As we saw in the previous chapter, a number of scholars have also argued that the importance of past philosophers, such as Hegel, to her work have been obscured by poor translations.

Whilst I do draw some explicit parallels between her work and that of Merleau-Ponty, as well as acknowledging her own continued assertion about the closeness of her work to Sartre's, and the influence of Hegel's master-slave dialectic on her understanding of the self-other relation, I argue that de Beauvoir, like every philosopher before and after her, is indebted in at least some way to the thought that has come before.<sup>85</sup> Focusing on one key influence risks losing the complexity of

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<sup>84</sup> Margaret Simons argues that, conversely, "Sartre's philosophical debt to de Beauvoir may have been...considerable" (Simons, M., 'An appeal to re-open the question of influence', *Philosophy Today*, Celina: 1998, Vol. 42, pp 17-25).

<sup>85</sup> Bergoffen notes in her introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* that "Beauvoir herself is a reliable guide [to her intellectual situation]. She refers us to Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Descartes amongst others, as she situates herself among those influencing her thinking" (See introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, in Simons, Margaret A., with Marybeth

her own particular philosophy. As one de Beauvoir scholar has recently stated, “what emerges from the study of Beauvoir’s early influences is how heterogeneous her philosophical background was with respect to genre and style”.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, as de Beauvoir herself argues, we are all part of a cultural and historical context in which ideas, beliefs, imaginings and assumptions are continually being taken up and developed, in denial or in affirmation, and our work develops in response to the situation in which we are embedded;

A philosophical theory, like a physics or mathematical theory, is accessible only to the initiated. Indeed, it is indispensable to be familiar with the long tradition upon which it rests if one wants to grasp the foundations and the originality of the new doctrine (*WIE*, p324).

In support of this claim, Martin Dillon argues that “the history of Western Philosophy... manifests in retrospect an eidetic necessity in the manner of its unfolding...present thought is conditioned by past thought” and that, therefore, “one understands a philosopher’s thought better if one interprets it within its historical context, specifically within the contexts of its philosophical antecedents”.<sup>87</sup>

Ultimately, however, this thesis aims to “extricate” de Beauvoir from a particular reading of Sartreanism and to align her more closely with Merleau-Ponty, particularly in terms of her account of intersubjectivity and the body and the purpose of philosophical analysis, for, as Sara Heinämaa argues:

... if we let go of the assumption that Beauvoir’s philosophical position adheres to the commitments of her private life, then it becomes possible to pose the scholarly questions of interpretation. We can ask if Beauvoir’s

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Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (Eds.), *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2004, p81).

<sup>86</sup> Altman, Meryl, ‘Beauvoir, Hegel, War’, in *Hypatia*, Vol. 22, no. 3, Summer 2007, p 68.

<sup>87</sup> Dillon, Martin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, Northwestern University Press: Illinois, 1997 (Second Edition), p xvii.

discussion of subjectivity really is similar to that of Sartre or perhaps nearer to that of Merleau-Ponty or Heidegger.<sup>88</sup>

#### OVERCOMING SARTREANISM. DE BEAUVOIR AND MERLEAU-PONTY: UNINTENTIONAL ALLIES?

As noted above, in mainstream European philosophy, de Beauvoir's name is most often associated with that of her long time partner Jean-Paul Sartre. There has been debate in both mainstream and feminist philosophy as to how important the influence of Sartre was on de Beauvoir and, for some time, it was commonly held that *The Second Sex*, was 'simply' an application or extension of Sartre's existentialist theory to the situation of women.<sup>89</sup> As noted above, however, the reception of de Beauvoir's work has recently changed, and a number of scholars argue that her work in fact provides an implicit critique of Sartre's social philosophy, and that we can find in it a richer and more complex account of subjectivity that has pertinence for political theory today.<sup>90</sup> Sonia Kruks, for example, argues that in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir "begins from within Sartre's framework, but ends by offering us an analysis which bursts out of the confines of Sartreanism".<sup>91</sup> Kruks in fact, argues that, contrary to de Beauvoir inheriting Sartre's views, "the case can be made that at certain points in Sartre's development it is Beauvoir's intellectual history that

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<sup>88</sup> Heinämaa, Sara, introduction to *Review of the Phenomenology of Perception*, in *Simone De Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons, Margaret A, with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (eds), University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2004, p 157.

<sup>89</sup> Moira Gatens, in her earlier work, argues that de Beauvoir is limited by Sartre's existentialism and the male biases inherent within it. She also argues that de Beauvoir is influenced by Sartre's negative view of the female body (*Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp 48, 54, 55, 59).

H.M. Parshley, in his introduction to the English translation of *The Second Sex*, wrote of de Beauvoir that "her philosophy is focused in the Existentialism of Sartre" (Preface to TSS, p8).

Margaret Simons argues, conversely, that "Sartre's philosophical debt to de Beauvoir may have been ...considerable" (Simons, M., 'An appeal to re-open the question of influence', *Philosophy Today*, Celina: 1998, Vol. 42, pp 17-25).

<sup>90</sup> See Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990 and Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001 for examples of this argument.

<sup>91</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p 99.



becomes his. This is particularly so with regard to Sartre's struggle...to develop a social philosophy".<sup>92</sup>

Despite the fact that many now argue that it is not the case, de Beauvoir herself consistently argued that she was working within a 'Sartrean' account of existentialism. She argued that the problems raised against existentialism were due to the fact that Sartre's work was misunderstood by many of his critics and that she took up many of the themes of his work in order to address this misunderstanding.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* for example, de Beauvoir makes the overt claim to develop an existential ethic, which critics argued was not possible with the existentialism Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness*. De Beauvoir writes of this criticism:

[I]t is ...true that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre has insisted above all on the abortive aspect of the human adventure. It is only in the last pages that he opens up the perspective of an ethics. However, if we reflect upon his descriptions of existence, we perceive that they are far from condemning man without recourse. The failure described in *Being and Nothingness* is definitive, but it is also ambiguous (TEA, p11).

It should also be noted that, on the other hand, de Beauvoir made few explicit claims to support the work of Merleau-Ponty and, in 1955, when he publicly criticised Sartre in the *Adventures of the Dialectic*, de Beauvoir responded in *Les temps Modernes* with an article entitled "Merleau-Ponty and the Pseudo Sartreanism".<sup>93</sup> In this article de Beauvoir was critical of Merleau-Ponty for deliberately misrepresenting Sartre's work, arguing that he had misinterpreted Sartre on all his

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<sup>92</sup> Kruks, Sonia, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom", in Simons, Margaret, (Ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1995

<sup>93</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de, "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo Sartreanism", trans. Veronique Zaytzeff with the assistance of Frederick Morrison, *International Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 21, 3, 1980 reprinted in *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Jon Stewart (Ed.), Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1998, pp 448-491.

major themes, and that basically, he “had got it wrong”.<sup>94</sup> De Beauvoir does admit here that Merleau-Ponty could be praised for “creating a philosophy that surpasses the difficulties of Sartreanism” (PS, p 489), however, although their friendship had preceded de Beauvoir’s relationship with Sartre, their relationship did not have anywhere near the closeness or intensity that she shared with Sartre. She wrote in her memoirs “I saw quickly that in spite of our affinities there was a good deal of distance between Pradelle [Merleau-Ponty] and I. In his purely cerebral inquietude, I did not recognise my inner anguishing” (*The Prime of Life*).<sup>95</sup>

Margaret Whitford supports de Beauvoir’s claim that Merleau-Ponty misinterprets Sartre and that he overemphasises the differences between himself and Sartre in order to develop his argument more emphatically. She asserts that the major difference between the two, who were both nevertheless interested in the world and how it is experienced by humans, was that “for Sartre man is free” whilst for Merleau-Ponty “man is historical”<sup>96</sup>. De Beauvoir elaborates this distinction in her review of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, first emphasizes the opposition of the “for-itself” and the “in-itself” and the nihilating power of the mind in the face of being, and the absolute freedom of the mind, Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, concentrates on describing the concrete character of the subject that is never, according to him, a pure for-itself. Actually, he thinks that our existence never grasps itself in its nakedness but is expressed by our body. And this body is not enclosed in the instant but implies an entire history, and even a prehistory. (RoPP, p 163).

Although de Beauvoir argues that Merleau-Ponty “got Sartre wrong”, with his criticisms of the dualistic ontology he saw to be operating in *Being and Nothingness*, a

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<sup>94</sup> See Whitford, Margaret, *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Sartre’s Philosophy*, French Forum Publishers, Lexington, Kentucky, 1982, p 10 and Stewart, Jon, (ed) *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Northwestern University Press, 1998 for further discussion of this point.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Jon Stewart (Ed.), Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1998.

<sup>96</sup> Whitford, Margaret, *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Sartre’s Philosophy*, p14.

number of recent scholars argue that de Beauvoir's account of the subject is much closer to that of Merleau-Ponty than Sartre.<sup>97</sup> Gail Weiss, for example, argues that Merleau-Ponty's 'philosophy of the ambiguous' is a direct influence on de Beauvoir's argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and, with a growing number of others, she reads de Beauvoir as being more closely aligned with Merleau-Ponty (with respect to her existential ethics) than with Sartre.<sup>98</sup> Rosalyn Diprose also acknowledges de Beauvoir's claim to be a follower of Sartre but argues that:

To the extent that she does point to a generosity of flesh, this indicates an ontology that departs from Sartre's individualism and from a Hegelian ideal of unity and that moves beyond the anti-body logic of both. Insofar as she has a different understanding of alienation and of the role of the body in sexuality and other relations, Beauvoir does not so much betray a debt to Lacanian psychoanalysis, as Toril Moi argues, but has some common ground with Merleau-Ponty.<sup>99</sup>

It is with the emphasis on embodied history and situation that links can be drawn between de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty because, for both, historical location is crucial to understanding the current situation and how one has come to be as they are. De Beauvoir describes this point in her review of Merleau-Ponty's work:

Merleau-Ponty shows us that the phenomenological attitude allows man to access the world, and to find himself there: it is in giving myself to the world that I realize myself, and it is in assuming myself that I have a hold on the world (RoPP, p 160).

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<sup>97</sup> See Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990, p 30; Langer, Monika, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on ambiguity in the Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir', Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp87-106, and Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001.

<sup>98</sup> Weiss, Gail, "Ambiguity", in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Eds.), Acumen Publishing, 2008, p9.

<sup>99</sup> Diprose, Rosalyn, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*, State University of New York Press: Albany, 2002.

De Beauvoir is here reviewing the way in which, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'failure' of the phenomenological reduction helps us to learn something about ourselves, that is, about our inextricable ties to the world. These ties are revealed by the *impossibility* of separating ourselves from the world in an attempt to better understand it.

For both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, it is the body *in* its historical situation that provides the basis for understanding existence and, as we shall see below; our existential freedom is *intertwined* with this situated embodiment. The "absolute freedom of the mind" described by Sartre, is (for Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir) grounded or tethered to the world through our bodies and, therefore, a subject is always connected to others through this body and this world.

Heinämaa also argues that de Beauvoir's work is not simply an extension or application of Sartrean existentialism and that she should be read with Merleau-Ponty (and Husserl) in mind. She argues that it is a particular understanding of the philosopher's *task* and *practice* that de Beauvoir shares with Merleau-Ponty, which follows on from Husserl.<sup>100</sup> Heinämaa argues that the *Review of Phenomenology of Perception* given by de Beauvoir:

demonstrates Beauvoir's commitment to phenomenology [and] it also shows that Beauvoir clearly saw the difference between Merleau-Ponty's and Sartre's interpretations of Husserl's work and that she considered Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic modification more promising on account of its ethical implications.<sup>101</sup>

Heinämaa argues that de Beauvoir's account of embodiment in *The Second Sex* is heavily influenced by the account of embodied subjectivity developed by Merleau-

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<sup>100</sup> Heinämaa, Sara, 'Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenology of sexual difference', *Hypatia*, Bloomington: Fall 1999, Vol. 14, Iss 4, pp 114-133.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p118.

Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and that, through Merleau-Ponty's account, she was introduced to Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>102</sup>

Although she obviously shares many connections with Sartre's work and explicitly supports it, it can be argued that de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty share an interest in a number of themes which are not supported by Sartre's account. Kruks argues that these themes include "the interdependence of freedoms, or *Mitsein*, immanence, social institution, the generality of situations and of the body" and she concludes that, "what we might call a philosophy of the socially situated subject can be better anchored in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology" than in Sartre's.<sup>103</sup>

A key theme of this thesis is to demonstrate that the relationship between self and other is crucial to de Beauvoir's ethical account and her insistence that this relation is always in a state of tension is developed in a positive way, enabling the possibility for loving and compassionate relations between individuals (as well as for hostile and oppressive relationships). Kruks argues that both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, unlike Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, emphasise the importance and the possibility of *harmonious* intersubjective relations. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is "consciousness engorged with the sensible" and in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir's subject is "never pure for-itself" but rather an embodied consciousness, a socially situated and conditioned freedom".<sup>104</sup> Merleau-Ponty, in divergence from the Hegelian-Sartrean 'subject-in-conflict' of the master-slave dialectic, argues that

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<sup>102</sup> Heinamaa, Sara, "The body as instrument and as expression", in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p66.

Kristana Arp argues that de Beauvoir takes the Husserlian account of intentionality and the existential-phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty further than either were able to with her recognition of the always sexed and gendered subject and she writes that "Beauvoir's description of intentionality as a site of contesting desires [the desire to be being and the desire to disclose being] may be read as a critique of the blind spots in Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologies: for according to Beauvoir, our relationship to the otherness of Being cannot be adequately described as wholly reciprocal or wholly contesting and appropriative. It is both, and it is in being both that the ambiguity of our condition lies". Arp, Kristana, 'Gendering the Perceiving Subject' in *Feminist Phenomenology*, Fisher and Embree (Eds.), Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston/London: 2000.

<sup>103</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p115.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p33.

although there is always the *possibility* for conflict in human relations, that there is *also* the possibility for harmonious intersubjective relations. Kruks writes, "Indeed, [Merleau-Ponty] may be best read as presenting human existence as a dialectic of communication and conflict, in which, although the former is always possible, *it is never assured*".<sup>105</sup>

Nancy Bauer also explores the aspect of self-other relations in her examination of de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty's ontologies, and she claims that de Beauvoir gives a re-reading of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic that, although always in tension, is not *inherently* conflictual.<sup>106</sup> Crucially, de Beauvoir writes that the reciprocal relation between self and other will be held "sometimes in enmity, sometimes in amity, *always in a state of tension*" (TSS, p93, *emphasis added*). Unlike de Beauvoir and Sartre, however, Merleau-Ponty does not give as central a role to the master-slave dialectic in his examination of self-other relations.

#### CARTESIANISM AND THE MIND-BODY RELATION

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is complex, and time does not permit a thorough analysis here. However, a brief account of some of his key themes will be required in order to explicate how his philosophy can support de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity.

Merleau-Ponty, like other existential philosophers of his time, was critical of the oppositional dualisms he saw to be operating in traditional philosophical accounts of perception. In these traditional accounts the mind was privileged over the body (in intellectualism) or the reverse (in empiricism) and, in both cases, a separation was maintained between the mind and body as distinct but interacting entities almost 'accidentally' situated in the world. Like de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty was critical of this Cartesian belief that saw the mind 'telling' the body what to do and as

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, (Kristana Arp also discusses this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's work and its parallels with de Beauvoir's work in Arp, K, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics*, Open Court: Chicago, 2001).

<sup>106</sup> Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001.

being responsible for meaning.<sup>107</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, we should not be seeking understanding of a Cartesian consciousness that locates itself via the “I think that” but rather we must see our relationship with the world as the possibilities and limits associated with “I can” (PP, p159). In this way, we see that our *body* is in fact our anchorage in the world, that our ‘mind’ is incarnated, and that it is our body that provides the possibility for relation and understanding. The world and the things around us acquire significance through the ways we inhabit them bodily, via our particular situation, and Merleau-Ponty describes this as an ‘intentional arc’ “which is the unity of consciousness, embodiment and the world made manifest through embodied experience”.<sup>108</sup>

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty criticises both empiricism and intellectualism (two enduring tendencies in modern thought since Descartes) for their failure to identify, or acknowledge, the relationship between consciousness and body, or perception and bodily motility and experience. He rejects the dualistic viewpoints that see the objects of perception as being purely exterior to ‘consciousness’ and determination of it, and also, the possibility of a ‘pure interiority’ – a perceiving subject that constructs the world. Moreover, both empiricism and intellectualism entail a search for certainty about how we can ‘know’ anything about the world. Both are looking for an absolute ground for knowledge.

For the empiricist, the search for truth and knowledge is based on the theory that all knowledge originates in experience and this is confined to perceptual experience

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<sup>107</sup> Discussion about this problematic dualistic understanding of mind and body had arisen some time before Merleau-Ponty, and the questioning of the particular Cartesian dualism is demonstrated in Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia’s criticism of René Descartes. In her letters to Descartes, Elisabeth questioned how the ‘mind’ could possibly move the material body if it has no driving force itself and exists outside, or in separation from, the material. Although this may seem like an obvious criticism, the dualistic understanding that Elisabeth questioned is evident in many philosophical accounts of mind/body relations and, in popular discourse, this dualism is often used to describe the relation between body and mind (Tollefsen, Debra, ‘Princess Elisabeth and the problem of mind-body interaction, *Hypatia*, Bloomington: Summer, 1999, Vol. 13. Issue 3, pp 59-79).

<sup>108</sup> Cerbone, David, *Understanding Phenomenology*, Acumen: Chesham, 2006, p110.

that is understood as involving raw sense data or impressions (for example in Locke and Hume). On this account, the mind is passive and 'cognises' the sensations given to it through/by the body, from the world. The mind *combines* sensations rather than creating them – it is the passive spectator in perception. Things are real if we can trace them back to events in the world that the intellect has not 'altered'. Empiricists ground knowledge and truth *in* the world and argue that imagination can 'distort' what is given to us by the world. According to the empiricist there is an 'objective' world, which can be separated and understood *aside from* the subject who perceives it.

A major criticism Merleau-Ponty made of the empiricist argument was against the idea of separate and distinct faculties, where each of the senses was seen to receive its respective stimuli in separation from the other senses (the ear receives a sound, the eye light and colour, the tongue taste and the skin touch). On this argument, it is the mind that aggregates these separate events into the perception or understanding of something which exists *in* the world. The empiricist argument maintains a separation between the perceiver and the world, where the mind does the organising by combining sensed datum that is 'given' to it by the faculties. For the empiricist, perception (ultimately) is equivalent to the reception and combination of basic units of experience. Merleau-Ponty describes it thus:

...whereas sight, touch and hearing are so many ways of gaining access to the object, these structures found themselves transformed [by empiricism] into compact qualities derived from the local distinction between the organs used. Thus the relationship between stimulus and perception could remain clear and objective, and the psycho-physical event was of the same kind as the causal relations obtaining 'in the world' (PP, pp84-85).

Merleau-Ponty argued against the empiricist's passive and receptive consciousness (the 'receiving mind') which imagined the body as the conveyer of stimuli through separate senses or faculties that the mind subsequently 'orders' or arranges into concepts. The passivity entailed in this account leaves us 'out' of the world, in separation from it and poses a consciousness that is separate from our body.



Intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty's term which seems to amount to a curious mixture of what has traditionally been called idealism or rationalism, on the other hand, sees consciousness or the mind as the *determiner* of meaning, so that there is no meaning separate from the consciousness that perceives it. Intellectualism wants to ground knowledge in the "de-personalised knowing subject" where relations between things are in our thoughts rather than in the world, so that all relations are produced by the mind: they do not exist in the world in separation from consciousness.

Meaning, therefore, is either *outside* of consciousness or all meaning *depends* upon consciousness.<sup>109</sup> Merleau-Ponty argued against the dichotomous logic of the debate that:

In the first case [empiricism] consciousness is too poor, in the second [intellectualism] too rich for any phenomenon to appeal compellingly to it. Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching. They are in agreement in that neither can grasp consciousness in the act of learning, and that neither attaches due importance to that circumscribed ignorance, that still 'empty' but already determinate intention which is attention itself (PP, p 32).

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty criticises both empiricism and intellectualism for not having an appreciation of the "embodied" nature of the experience of perception, arguing that what they failed to see was the 'integrity of bodily self-experience'.<sup>110</sup> For both intellectualism and empiricism then, the separation between consciousness and world is maintained and the mind/body dualism carried on. Both of these traditional accounts negate the ambiguous relation between the body-subject and the world.

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<sup>109</sup> See Dillon, Martin, "The Cartesian Origins of Empiricism and Intellectualism" in *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Northwestern University Press: Illinois, 1997 (Second Edition).

<sup>110</sup> Cerbone, David, *Understanding Phenomenology*, Acumen: Chesham, 2006, p100.

## THE BODY-SUBJECT

Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that past accounts of the subject and the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'world' in philosophy, psychology and in science, are flawed as they do not give weight to the central importance of the body in perception and experience. Instead, they maintain a separation between consciousness and world that privileges an 'inner self', a *Cogito*, or that sees the body as causally determined by its surroundings in an objectivist manner. He, on the other hand, argues for a body-subject that is firmly embedded with others in the world and he criticises traditional accounts of the subject for not recognising the importance of the body to experience and for maintaining too radical a distinction between body and mind, self and other and self and world:

Analytical reflection believes that it can trace back the course followed by a prior constituting act and arrive, in the 'inner man' – to use St Augustine's expression – at a constituting power which has always been identical with that inner self. Thus reflection is carried off by itself and installs itself in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time. But this is very ingenuous, or at least it is an incomplete form of reflection which loses sight of its own beginning...The real has to be described, not constructed or formed...The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement... (PP, xi).

Merleau-Ponty's project was to describe the world as it is perceived and experienced and, as such, the living human body is central to his exploration. Rather than rationality, the *Cogito* or a disembodied mind, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the lived-body, the body-subject which is not mere material 'flesh' but which is our means of responding to the world. He writes that "I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as *I am a body which rises towards the world*" (PP, 87 *emphasis added*). De Beauvoir summarises this point in her review of his work, which she says demonstrates the way that our body is not an object or a 'thing' in the same way as other things in the world, because it is our way of being in and "having" a world:

Our body is not first posited in the world the way a tree or a rock is. It lives in the world; it is our general way of having a world, it expresses our existence, which signifies not that is an exterior accompaniment of our existence, but that our existence realizes itself in it (RoPP, p161)

This point, that we do not experience our bodies as objects in the world is an important one for both de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty and it demonstrates their links to Husserl's phenomenology. Like Sartre and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty was interested to examine what phenomenology could do to overturn the prevalent rationalist discourse evident in philosophy, and he sought to bring philosophy 'back to the world' and to lived experience using (a re-thought) Husserlian phenomenology.

A key point of Husserl's account of lived-experience, which Merleau-Ponty took up, is the distinction made between the two different ways in which we experience material bodies; these being the lived bodies of other people and other creatures (*Leib*) and those of inert objects in the world (*Korper*), such as rocks, objects constructed by humans and metals – or 'mere things'. The concept of the lived-body is based on the German *Leib*, by which Husserl describes the 'living body' or 'the body-as-lived'. This is distinct from the term *Korper*, which is associated with the material or physical object and is linked to the English 'corpse'.<sup>111</sup> As David Cerbone argues, this distinction is important for Husserl, in that it demonstrates his aim to dissociate the idea of the body from the material, from the object that carries, supports (or hinders) the mind or soul in Cartesian thought. I understand myself through all the relations I have with the world, both spatio-temporal and conceptual, and I understand the world – at the same time – through its relations with me. I am *in* the world and *of* the world, and I must understand myself *through* this world and it is my body which I *am* that enables this experience. As Merleau-Ponty argues, we must abandon "the [idea of the] body as object, *partes extra partes*, and [go] back to the *body which I experience at this moment*" (PP, 87, emphasis added). The body should not be understood as an object or thing with reducible and

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<sup>111</sup> Cerbone, David, *Understanding Phenomenology*, p85.

separate parts which have no interdependence and which exist alongside, beyond and exterior to each other. The body is lived in the world as a whole, within a horizon and in relation to other objects and other bodies.<sup>112</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a “permanent presence” in perceptual experience but it is distinct from the “defacto permanence of certain objects” and is not an “organ compared to a tool which is always available” (PP, p91). This is an important point, that the body should not be viewed as a ‘tool’ that a separate (inner) entity that is ‘me’ drives or uses, rather, I *am* my body and my body is me. It is the means by which I can interact with and experience the world but is in no way distinct from an underlying or overarching ‘me’. As Merleau-Ponty argues; “[t]he body is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there. If it is permanent, the permanence is absolute and is the ground for the relative permanence of disappearing objects, real objects” (PP, p92). As de Beauvoir describes it, “thus, perception is not a relationship between a subject and an object foreign to one another; it ties us to the world as to our homeland, it is communication and communion” (RoPP, p162).

We must not forget that the *particular* body we have makes possible or limits the kinds of things and objects we can experience. A male body cannot experience the sensations of childbirth; an ‘able’ body does not experience what it is like to continually negotiate the world with a disability; and a ‘black’ body will be lived differently within a context of racism and oppression than will a body of the dominant race (whether it be a body with a disability, a sexed body or a chronically ill body).

Both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir have been criticised for failing to adequately account for differences such as these in their philosophies and I acknowledge the lack of explicit analysis of such bodily differences in their work. However, the philosophies of ambiguity that both develop do allow for an analysis of the

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<sup>112</sup> Sara Heinamaa argues that Simone de Beauvoir’s existential-phenomenological account of the lived and sexed body is also influenced by Husserl, through Merleau-Ponty’s account of the lived-body in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

importance of differences and particularity. For example, within Merleau-Ponty's account is the acknowledgement that we cannot 'know' the other's experience in the same way that they do, or experience the world in exactly the same way and he writes that:

... my human gaze never posits more than one facet of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others. It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language (PP, 80).

A body is informed by its history, its relations to others and its intentionality. The body, therefore, is not just 'immanence', but also contains within itself and its relationship with the world the potential for transcendence. Here "[t]he body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be *involved* in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them" (PP, p94, *emphasis added*).

The interconnection between the social and biological is also crucial to de Beauvoir's account of human existence and it is important to note that social as well as physical *situatedness* contributes to the formation of one's sense of self and subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's work. For him, a key factor in this sense of self is the role of the body's motility (its capacity to move itself and to move itself over its own parts), which gives the body its early sense of its boundaries, limits and integrity via feelings. This is the key to the idea of the body-subject for Merleau-Ponty – the capacity for motility, feeling and perception. However, it must also be recognised that these capacities develop in *social situation*. We become subjects through bodily relations with our sense of self, others and objects in the world - in a society. Situation involves time, place, others, self, history and the socio-political order and understanding is therefore interpretative, for as de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "On their own, these facts have no significance". In her review of *Phenomenology of Perception* de Beauvoir describes it thus:

If I exist as a subject, it's because I am capable of tying together a past, a present and a future; it's because I make time...Perceiving space, perceiving the object, is unfolding time around me, but the perceptual synthesis always remains incomplete because the temporal synthesis is never completed (*Review of PP*, p163).

Like de Beauvoir's analysis of 'woman' in *The Second Sex*, Merleau-Ponty's account of the body-subject requires recognition of our inability to 'do without' our body. The absence of our body is inconceivable and the body cannot be seen in the same way as another object (as it is in much science, religion and philosophy). This is because an object "is an object only insofar as it can be moved away from me...Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence. Now the permanence of my body is entirely different in kind" (PP, 90). Although this also means that the other's body can be seen as an object as it can be moved away from me, applying the account of ambiguity to self-other relations also entails a reciprocity, where we recognise that 'I', like the other, is always both self *and* other in a continued state of tension and never reducible to either. This ambiguous nature of human existence and experience is foundational to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and he argues that "what enables us to centre our existence is also what prevents us from centering it completely, and the anonymity of our body is inseparably both *freedom and servitude*" (cf PP, p346, my emphasis). This quote resonates with de Beauvoir's argument about our ambiguous and paradoxical nature in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where she writes:

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... (TEA, p9, *emphasis added*).

This understanding of the ambiguous body-in-situation (which is always seeking but never finding equilibrium) is further examined when Merleau-Ponty discusses the breaking down of the distinction between inner self and outer world, between public and private. In this sense, subjectivity is no longer sought in the private

domain of the 'mental' but is revealed in the interaction or relation between these realms - where we understand 'realms' as neither discrete from, nor identical with, each other.<sup>113</sup>

In summary then, there are many links which can be drawn between the work of de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty that further assist my aim of rethinking *authenticité* with ambiguity. This is not to say that the work of either should be *equated* with the other, but to reposition de Beauvoir away from many of the particularly Sartrean connotations that have influenced readings of her work. The relationships and differences between the philosophies of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty are further examined below and in subsequent chapters but for now, let us return to de Beauvoir (with Merleau-Ponty in mind).

#### RETURNING TO SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A FEMINIST RE-READING

How ever-many parallels and similarities can be drawn between de Beauvoir's work and that of other (male) philosophers, there is no point in attempting to deny the importance of the relationship between Sartre and de Beauvoir, and the impact it had upon both their lives and their work. It is important to take note of de Beauvoir's insistence that what she was doing was something different to Sartre's philosophical work but nonetheless greatly influenced by the existentialism Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness*. She did not want to produce what she saw as a purely philosophical method or account of existence, but rather wanted to explore the implications of existential philosophy in everyday circumstances – both in her novels and in her analyses of the human condition in her more explicitly philosophical works. All of these genres reveal the usefulness of de Beauvoir's existential account of lived existence and, what I want to take up in this thesis, is the manner in which this philosophy offers a powerful descriptive and explanatory account of some complex contemporary social and political situations. Her account

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<sup>113</sup> Reynolds, Jack, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty', *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, (eds), last accessed 11 June 2008, URL <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/merleau.htm>

of ambiguity and *authenticité* also provides a foundation for responsible ethico-political decision-making today.

As mentioned above, a number of social and political feminist philosophers have advocated a 'return to de Beauvoir' as a means for moving beyond many of the problems that have plagued feminist, social and political philosophy. Most specifically, feminists such as Sonia Kruks and Nancy Bauer claim to find in de Beauvoir's work a way beyond the problems inherent in the equality/difference debate that limits feminist theory.<sup>114</sup> As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four, the assumptions underlying this equality/difference debate, far from being confined to feminist philosophy, have been implicit in most philosophical theory throughout Western history and have manifested in the mind/body debate, the subject/object divide and in arguments over biology 'versus' culture, or 'nature' versus 'nurture'. What underlies these arguments is an implicit assumption about the metaphysical or ontological status of what come to be seen as dichotomous terms. The reductive metaphysic that underlies both the arguments for (essential) difference and arguments for (essential) equality sees binaries as given, as existing *a priori* in the world, and each term is viewed as inherently separate and opposing, as mutually exclusive.

As Kruks argues, in feminist theory in particular, and in identity politics in general, a key underlying issue in debates over equality and difference is a concern with 'how to theorise the subject' or, how to understand the 'self'. I argue that this understanding of self and subjectivity is the *first step* in ethical questioning, and that the recognition of our fundamental ambiguity provides the foundation for ethical action. Only with an *authentique* realisation of how each subject exists in relation to a total situation (including biology; psychology; other people; the spaces inhabited and the social structure in which the subject lives) can we begin to develop ethical

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<sup>114</sup> Others such as Karen Vintges, Debra Bergoffen, Margaret Simons, Barbara Andrew, Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, Toril Moi, Eleanor Holveck, Gail Weiss and Penelope Deutscher have advocated for a re-reading of de Beauvoir for her philosophical importance and originality as well as for her particular contributions to feminist theory. See bibliography for full textual references for these authors.



relations with others. By recognising that we, and those around us, are thoroughly situated and that the meanings and values we have come to see in the world are likewise situated, we have the beginnings of an ethical foundation. Without this recognition, we can fall prey to the trap of believing that value and meaning are created *ex nihilo* or are static, inherent, or that they should not or *cannot* be changed.

#### THE (IN)FAMOUS DE BEAUVOIRIAN INCONSISTENCIES: WHAT DID SHE REALLY MEAN?

The paradoxes and inconsistencies that are seen by many to arise in de Beauvoir's philosophy have often resulted in a condemnation of her work. For example, Celine Leon has written of de Beauvoir that she "does not speak with a single voice. Either she wishes to have it both ways, or she takes with one hand that which she gives with the other"<sup>115</sup> and Penelope Deutscher asks in her examination of 'the notorious contradictions of Simone de Beauvoir'; "[i]s any feminist philosopher of the twentieth century better known for her contradictory arguments than Simone de Beauvoir?". Deutscher examines how we should understand the tensions that are so evident in de Beauvoir's work and argues that the account of freedom expressed in *The Second Sex* is contradictory. She argues that whilst women are (existentially) free, at the same time, de Beauvoir also describes their oppression and, in her description of female bodies and sexuality, appears to be arguing that women *are* in fact limited by their biology.<sup>116</sup>

As we have seen, some commentators have argued that this 'paradoxical' tendency is evidence of a tension between de Beauvoir's own position and her attempt to remain true to Sartrean categories.<sup>117</sup> Along these lines, Sonia Kruks argues that: "many of the inconsistencies in *The Second Sex* reflect the tension between her formal

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<sup>115</sup> Leon, Celine, cited in Deutscher, Penelope, *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1997, p 169.

<sup>116</sup> Deutscher, Penelope, *Yielding Gender*, p 169.

<sup>117</sup> Moira Gatens makes this claim in *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

adherence to Sartrean categories and the fact that the philosophical implications of the work are in large measure incompatible with Sartreanism".<sup>118</sup>

As we will see in subsequent chapters of this thesis, the apparent contradictions in de Beauvoir can be better understood – although the tension implied never overcome – by taking seriously the different *levels* of freedom that operate in her philosophy. In addition, these contradictions can be re-thought by taking seriously her insistence that whilst we are all ontologically free, we are also always *situated* and our facticity, therefore, places limits upon our capacity to engage with our freedom.

#### MORE THAN A MISINTERPRETATION?

As we saw in the previous chapter, Toril Moi argues that many of the apparent contradictions in de Beauvoir's work arise due to problems with the translation of the original French text into English by Zoologist H.M. Parshley and the many omissions and philosophical misinterpretations that resulted from this (mis)translation. Moi calls for a re-translation of *The Second Sex* in order to recoup what is missing from the Parshley edition (as well as a number of the French editions) and she argues that generations of feminists have been misled by Parshley's translation. Moi names Penelope Deutscher as being one of those who reads contradictions into de Beauvoir's work because of Parshley's lack of philosophical knowledge and his 'elementary' mistranslations from French to English.<sup>119</sup>

Although Moi's arguments are pertinent, and it is well past time for a new translation of *The Second Sex*, Parshley's mistranslation - on its own - cannot 'explain away' all the apparent inconsistencies and paradoxes in de Beauvoir's work. Moreover, importantly, de Beauvoir would not *want* them to be explained away.

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<sup>118</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*, Unwin Hyman: London, 1990, p99.

<sup>119</sup> Moi, Toril, 'While we wait: The English translation of *The Second Sex*', *Signs*, Summer 2002; Vol.27, no 4, pp1005-1035.

To a large extent, the divergent readings of de Beauvoir are the result of a persistent misunderstanding of her account of freedom and her arguments concerning the importance of ambiguity in understanding existence. Her claims - that both immanence *and* transcendence are integral to existence; that freedom and the limits of situation are inextricably connected; that one can be fundamentally 'free' and yet oppressed; and that subjects are always also *at the same time* objects - are read as 'contradictory' in a context in which the terms proposed are seen to be mutually exclusive. For de Beauvoir, however, these ambiguities, paradoxes, or 'contradictions' are part of our human experience, and she wants us to maintain the tension implied by this ambiguity in order to be *authentique*. Whilst readers are now recognising the importance of such a tension in de Beauvoir's work, many (as we have seen above) have criticised her for her contradictory accounts, particularly in her descriptions of the lives of women.

#### RE-READING SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR WITH MOIRA GATENS: CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS

In order to illustrate how a misunderstanding of the importance of ambiguity and paradox in de Beauvoir's work results in a typical misreading, I will now examine the changing ways in which Australian feminist philosopher Moira Gatens has read de Beauvoir. Gatens is, in my opinion, a productive and influential social, political and feminist philosopher, who has made significant contributions to feminist debate. However, Gatens has made a number of explicit examinations of the legacy of de Beauvoir on feminism and, over time, has read her in a number of different ways. She has interpreted her as being limited by the masculine biases of Sartre's existential theory, perpetuating a dualism that sees woman's inferiority located in her biology; she has read de Beauvoir as an existential theorist who only 'accidentally' overcomes the limits of Sartre's theory; and, most recently, has re-read her as a feminist and social philosopher who provides a radical and productive account of sexual difference that is *neither* essentialist *nor* constructivist. Although Gatens shares similar aims with de Beauvoir with respect to acknowledging the significance of the role of the body in human experience, she has only recently made these shared aims explicit in her 'second look' at de Beauvoir's account of biology. These

different readings, by the same philosopher, provide a good illustration of the complexity of de Beauvoir's work.

The most quoted line from *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", has been famously taken up by those arguing for a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' and de Beauvoir has historically been claimed as the 'mother' of this (social constructivist) distinction. Gatens is well-known for her arguments against this claim, however, seeing de Beauvoir's account as more complex than the clear-cut binary assumed in the sex/gender distinction allows.<sup>120</sup> In a re-thinking of her earlier work, Gatens has recently taken up de Beauvoir's interest in biology and the importance it plays in 'becoming' a woman, examining the focus in *The Second Sex* on the complex interaction between the material, social and psychological elements of human life. Gatens is amongst a number of theorists advocating a re-examination of de Beauvoir with contemporary 'third wave' feminist aims in mind and her changing interpretation illustrates the ways in which de Beauvoir's work can be interpreted and critiqued from both constructivist *and* essentialist viewpoints. As Gatens now argues, however, *neither* interpretation (constructivist nor essentialist) on its own is an appropriate reading of de Beauvoir's work.

#### DE BEAUVOIR LIMITED BY MALE-BIASED (SARTREAN) PHILOSOPHY

In two articles written in the early 1990s, Gatens argued that Simone de Beauvoir represented a prime example (along with others such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Juliet Mitchell) of a feminist guilty of taking up male-biased philosophy and attempting to apply – or extend it – to questions of women's identity and existence.<sup>121</sup> Gatens there argued that this feminist approach to philosophy, which is characterised by a mode of uncritical extension, entails "the adoption of a particular

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<sup>120</sup> Gatens, Moira, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction', in *Beyond Marxism? Interventions after Marx*, Allen, J. and Patton, Paul. (eds.), Intervention Publications: Sydney, 1983.

<sup>121</sup> Gatens, Moira, 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles without Answers', in C. Pateman and E. Gross, eds, *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, Allen and Unwin, 1991, pp 13-29 and Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

philosophical theory (for example liberalism, existentialism, Marxism), as a method of analysis which then takes 'woman' as its object, as its (philosophical) problem". Gatens writes that this is what "Wollstonecraft attempts, vis-à-vis egalitarianism...what de Beauvoir attempts, vis-à-vis existentialism... and what Mitchell attempts, vis-à-vis both psychoanalysis and Marxism".<sup>122</sup> She argues that "[a]s is well known, the particular form of existentialism employed by Beauvoir is that developed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*".<sup>123</sup> Existentialism, rather than being a theory which can bring 'clarity' to the question 'what is a woman?' is seen as being hindered by its biases against women and "its presuppositions are such that women, their traditional activities, their bodies, and their subjectivities are rendered problematical relative to men, their pursuits and their bodies".<sup>124</sup> De Beauvoir, according to this reading, does not escape these inherent problems and her use of the immanence/transcendence distinction is seen to be male-biased, with female biology associated with 'immanence' and males associated with activities such as freely chosen, 'transcendent' projects.

Like many other feminists, Gatens is (or was at this stage) critical of Sartre's existential account of lived experience. She argued that his account is problematic as it is applicable only to "free and equal subjectivities that encounter each other in a situation of struggle for mastery" and that this "is a description that is inappropriate for some men in some situations, and [she argues] for all women in some situations".<sup>125</sup> At this stage of her writing, Gatens aligned de Beauvoir's account of subjectivity with Sartre's and saw her to be limited by his 'masculine' view of existence, which was far from universal in its application. Importantly Gatens argued that it is not only the *content* of Sartre's account that is sexist, but that the

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<sup>122</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p 17.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p48.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p48.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, pp19-20 It is important to note that Gatens is here also criticising Sartre for developing a theory that fails to encompass *all* male experience, as well as female experience. His account of the 'Look' is seen to be problematic in its presumed neutrality and universality, which is in actual fact based on the *particular* experience of a *particular* kind of man.

very framework of existentialism is biased toward a particular (masculine) view of humanity, which it attempts to 'sell' as a universal account of human existence. She argued that existentialism was not sex-neutral and that the sexism of *Being and Nothingness* was by no means limited to Sartre's use of misogynistic metaphors and sex-blind examples.<sup>126</sup> Gatens argued that "metaphysics, theories of human nature and epistemology..." are not sex-neutral and that they actually "provide the theoretical underpinnings for the biases which become visible at the socio-political level".<sup>127</sup> A prime example of this is the position of women in society, which has historically seen women connected to the private realm of the home and, thus, excluded from the public realm in which political decisions are made for 'mankind'.

Gatens cites de Beauvoir as a feminist caught up in the phallogentric discourse that presumes a neutral human subject, yet which aligns this 'universal' subject with 'masculine' values and characteristics. She argues that "...*The Second Sex*...entertain[s] a philosophical dualism of the most orthodox kind that predisposes [de Beauvoir's] work toward locating the source of women's inferior status in female biology".<sup>128</sup> De Beauvoir is accused of uncritically accepting mind/body and nature/culture distinctions and of "treating them as being given rather than as social constructions that embody historical and cultural values".<sup>129</sup> She goes on to argue that de Beauvoir "condemns the maternal role" and "posits the necessity to transcend the female body and its reproductive capacities without questioning the ways in which the significance of the female body is socially constructed and its possibilities socially limited".<sup>130</sup>

#### DE BEAUVOIR ON MOTHERHOOD AND THE FEMALE BODY

One of the key arguments consistently made against de Beauvoir is that she denigrates the female body. As with other aspects of her work, there have been

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p18.

<sup>127</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p2.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p3.

contradictory interpretations of her view of the body, with critics arguing that she sees it *either* as an inherent limit to women's transcendence (which woman cannot escape), *or* as something which can (and must) be overcome in order to achieve transcendence. That is, woman's body is *either* an essential and inescapable limit to her transcendence (so that woman *is* immanence, she *is* her body) or her 'feminine' body is seen as a socially constructed limit that must be overcome – in this case it does not have real or true meaning or significance to her being (a being which is characterised by transcendence). At this earlier stage of writing, Gatens saw in de Beauvoir's work a negative view of feminine embodiment, reminiscent of (what she considered to be) Sartre's account and which she believed resulted in a contradiction with the existential claim that 'existence precedes essence'. Gatens argued that de Beauvoir was implicitly committed to Sartre's view, which in some of the concluding chapters of *Being and Nothingness* associates the female body and immanence, pointing to the suggestion that women could not transcend their bodies in order to be as free as men. Gatens cites the following passage from *The Second Sex* as being representative of the limitations evident in an uncritical adaptation of the existential framework:

[It] is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self justification through transcendence – the very submission of women is proof of that statement. What they demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality. *An existentialist perspective has enabled us, then, to understand how the biological and economic condition of the primitive horde must have led to male supremacy.* The female, to the greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species... in maternity woman remains closely bound to her body, like an animal (TSS, p97).<sup>131</sup>

Given such claims as that just quoted, it is perhaps not surprising that de Beauvoir has been continually criticised for holding a negative view of maternity, motherhood and female bodies which, it is argued, she believes cannot be a project

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<sup>131</sup> Also cited in Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p17.

of transcendence but are a mere 'function of the species'.<sup>132</sup> Whilst Gatens acknowledges that de Beauvoir's existential framework insists that biology *cannot* determine woman's situation nor have *a priori* significance because it must always be interpreted, she also argues that for de Beauvoir, "...woman emerges from her study as biologically disadvantaged".<sup>133</sup> There appears to be a contradiction in de Beauvoir's analysis then, between the ultimately 'free' existential human subject and the embodied woman trapped by her biology. Gatens also argues that, according to de Beauvoir, motherhood is not a genuinely transcendent project and that their reproductive capacities limit women to a far greater extent than men:

[in de Beauvoir's account] reproduction and childrearing cannot constitute *projects* for women. De Beauvoir assumes that in order for woman to take up a project, that is to assume the position of a transcendent subject, she must first transcend the female body.<sup>134</sup>

As would be clear, this account is problematic because, for de Beauvoir, the body is crucial to one's situation and cannot be "transcended". However, she does argue that the body is lived in-situation so that a particular *understanding* or *interpretation* of the body *can* be overcome. Gatens' later work offers an answer to how we should interpret the apparent contradiction of such a seemingly negative account of women's bodies by a woman who has been hailed as a leader and key founder of the feminist movement.

#### DE BEAUVOIR AS INTRODUCING A SOCIAL STRUCTURE TO EXISTENTIALISM

Gatens' early interpretation of de Beauvoir is not altogether negative and she also claims that de Beauvoir provides a social structure to existentialism and includes oppression as another possible manifestation of human experience – something

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<sup>132</sup> It should also be noted that, again, the mistranslation of terms by Parshley has led to misunderstandings such as this when he obscures important distinctions made by de Beauvoir about engaging with the world in maternity dependent upon one's situation. See Scarth, Fredrika, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, Roman and Littlefield: Lanham, 2004

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p52

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p53



which Sartre had failed to do with his account of 'radical freedom'. Whilst crediting de Beauvoir with introducing this social aspect to existentialism, Gatens argues that this "gives rise to several confusions and inconsistencies in [de Beauvoir's] account of woman's being".<sup>135</sup>

As noted above, the 'notorious contradictions' of de Beauvoir's work have drawn much attention and, as Penelope Deutscher has discussed in a more recent work, it can be fruitful to pay attention to the tensions in the work of past philosophers in order to uncover the potential within them and to do justice to historical and critical appraisals of past feminists.<sup>136</sup> Gatens was interested to examine what the limitations were for de Beauvoir with her adoption of the existential method, especially with regard to what this method allowed her to say about women. In this examination, she credits de Beauvoir with developing an account of oppression in *The Second Sex* that was not evident in *Being and Nothingness* and argues that Sartre himself acknowledges de Beauvoir's role in his later development of an account of the subject to such an extent that, without de Beauvoir's contribution to existentialism, Sartre would not have been able to offer the more subtle and nuanced view of freedom found in his 1964 biography of Genet.<sup>137</sup> At the same time, however, Gatens also questions whether or not the "existentialism of de Beauvoir" is the same as the "existentialism of Sartre" and argues that de Beauvoir makes her own contribution to existential theory 'invisible' by talking of Sartre's theory and by not explicitly critiquing its faults.<sup>138</sup>

#### DE BEAUVOIR (ACCIDENTALLY) REVEALING THE LIMITS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Gatens argues that, although she does not explicitly critique Sartre's account, de Beauvoir *implicitly* (or almost 'accidentally') reveals the problems of existentialism in her attempt to apply it to the situation of woman. She claims that "it is by taking

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p50

<sup>136</sup> Deutscher, Penelope, 'Enemies and Reciprocities', *MLN*, September 2004;119,4, p 656.

<sup>137</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Saint Genet: Actor or Martyr*, (trans) Bernard Frechtman, 1964.

<sup>138</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p20.

seriously its own claims to be a universally applicable theory of human being, that she, albeit inadvertently, exposes its masculine bias and limitations".<sup>139</sup>

This is another of the common claims made against de Beauvoir. However, I maintain that claims of a masculine bias fall short of the mark by not taking into account ambiguity and its importance throughout de Beauvoir's work. What is revealed in a re-reading of de Beauvoir is that within her account of existentialism woman is, like man, an 'ambiguous becoming', an 'openness to the future', possessing no 'changeless essence', a being which is at once *both* subject *and* object, immanence *and* transcendence. For de Beauvoir, the universal condition of humanity is characterised by ambiguity, freedom and change. We all share this ontological status and any attempt to define a human 'way of being' that fails to account for this ambiguity will result in nihilism or essentialism (seriousness). De Beauvoir argues that, historically, ethics has been based upon an attempt to deny this ambiguity. Ethical theories have, therefore, attempted to eliminate "ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness *or* pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world *or* being engulfed by it, by yielding to eternity *or* enclosing oneself in the pure moment" as de Beauvoir herself says (TEA, p8, *emphasis added*). On de Beauvoir's account, the problematic social structure that leads to oppression is a result of both bad faith and ignorance. It is the *denial* of ambiguity that can be seen in the attempt to make women 'women' and men 'men'.

#### RE-THINKING THE BODY WITH DE BEAUVOIR'S SITUATION IN MIND

In her later work, Gatens recognises her own mistake in not paying heed to de Beauvoir's insistence that one should understand the proviso "in the present state of affairs" as being attached to almost every sentence in *The Second Sex*. She argues that de Beauvoir could not, within her own existential frame-work, suggest that any current state of affairs is *ontologically* prior to the historical situation in which it came to be. This applies to conceptions of masculinity, femininity, race, class, ethnicity,

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p151.

value, meaning and belief. All are interdependent, contingent and yet still *very real* in their context, but – crucially – none are ‘given’ outside or *prior to* their situation.

This is the fundamental point of de Beauvoir’s work and, although her style of writing may sometimes appear to suggest otherwise, she does not advocate a wholesale denigration or denial of the importance and potential worth of mothering, child-birth or women’s bodies. Her critique is of mothering, child-birth and the view of women’s bodies in a *patriarchal social order* in which hierarchies based on sexual difference undermine the possibility for choice and freedom for particular members of that order. As she says ‘...woman cannot actually be forced to bear children, all one can do is enclose her in situations where maternity is the only way out for her’ (TSS, p542). In de Beauvoir’s work, maternity and childrearing are not seen to possess an inherent value (either negative or positive) but are interpreted by different individuals who are intimately connected to particular situations. She writes, “[t]he significance of pregnancy being thus ambiguous, it is natural that woman should assume an ambivalent attitude towards it...” (TSS: p515). De Beauvoir argues that women’s responses to maternity and child-rearing are divergent and that there is not one *authentic* way in which either should be experienced:

For some women childbirth is martyrdom. Some women on the contrary, consider the ordeal a relatively easy one to bear. A few find sensual pleasure in it. There are some women who say that childbirth gives them a sense of creative power; they have really accomplished a voluntary and productive task. Many, at the other extreme, have felt themselves passive – suffering and tortured instruments (TSS: p522).

Linda Zerilli argues that de Beauvoir’s own situation in post-war France was crucial to her views on motherhood and maternity and that at the time de Beauvoir was writing, government policy in France “aggressively promoted” motherhood in what

de Beauvoir termed an “enforced maternity”.<sup>140</sup> At the same time as promoting motherhood as a virtue, legislation forbade abortion and contraception, so that women were left with little choice about when and how they chose to become mothers. Zerilli argues that one can see an element of irony in de Beauvoir’s writing on feminine embodiment, and an attempt to break down the supposedly ‘natural’ links between women, their capacity to bear children and the *necessity* of doing so. The often almost grotesque account of maternity described in *The Second Sex* is taken up as a “subversive appropriation”, threatening the dominant discourse that associates ‘woman’ with ‘natural’ maternity. Ambiguity, according to Zerilli, is the “definitive characteristic of Beauvoir’s rewriting of the drama of maternity”<sup>141</sup> and this ambiguity demands a re-thinking of maternity-in-context and the social structures that surround it.

De Beauvoir was a strong advocate for legal abortion and for contraception, and the following quote from *The Second Sex* illustrates the point that, for her, situation is crucial to the way in which one lives one’s body:

The bondage of woman to the species is more or less rigorous according to the number of births demanded by society and the degree of hygienic care provided for pregnancy and childbirth...in the human species individual “possibilities” depend upon the economic and social situation (TSS, p67).

The instances of what have been read as de Beauvoir’s denigration of the female body are, when placed fully in the context of her work, actually illustrative examples of the ways in which science, society and philosophy have come to view the bodies of men and women. For example, de Beauvoir writes, that the “fatiguing task” of gestation has “no individual benefit to woman [and] on the contrary

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<sup>140</sup> Zerilli, Linda, M.G., ‘A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity’ *Signs*, Autumn, 1992; 18, 1.

See also Scarth, Fredrika, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, Roman and Littlefield, 2004 for a full discussion of de Beauvoir’s views on maternity, particularly the difference between enforced maternity and what she termed “*maternité libre*”.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p 123.

demands heavy sacrifice" (TSS, p62). However, in a footnote she clarifies this point by saying that "I am taking here an exclusively physiological point of view. It is evident that maternity can be very advantageous psychologically for a woman, just as it can be a disaster" (TSS, p62, fn 11). "As a matter of fact", de Beauvoir writes, "... it is on account of [their] social function that the physiological differences take on all their signification" (TSS, p 397). Her point that the differences in which one experiences one's body and sexuality is impacted by one's social situation is further illustrated with her comment that "... the environment, the climate, in which feminine sexuality awakens is thus quite different from that which surrounds the adolescent male" (Ibid.)

Understandably, for an avowedly existential theorist, negative connotations are associated with anything that appears to take the 'choice' of transcendent action and projects away from women. In a patriarchal society where labour, productivity and success are judged in the public, independent realm of the 'masculine', then childbirth and parenting *will* be seen not as a project but as a *function*. Today however (in many countries), with birth control, child-care facilities and social expectations changed markedly from those of 1940s France, childbirth and parenting can be seen as important freely chosen projects, which both men and women can successfully participate in (or not as they chose). At the same time, however, parenting and maternity under de Beauvoir's account still do not retain an *inherent* value, and have the capacity to be experienced in diverse ways by various couples and individuals. Ambiguity is still the foundational aspect and an *authentique* response requires recognition of this. As de Beauvoir writes, "the close bond between the mother and the child will be for her a source of dignity or indignity according to the value placed on the child...according to the presumptions of the society concerned" (TSS, p69). Moreover, in her discussion of the married woman she notes that the concept of marriage has begun to change because "...Woman is no longer limited to the reproductive function which has lost in part its character as natural servitude and has come to be regarded as a function to be voluntarily assumed" (TSS, p425).

The 'transcendent subject', on my interpretation of de Beauvoir, is one who can freely choose her projects based on an acknowledgement of her own and other's freedom and who is not limited by an insistence on biology-as-destiny. At the same time, however, an *authentique* subject would also recognise the many and varied 'limits' on her situation implied by her *facticity* (which includes biological capacities) but would not give up aiming toward the future by being bound *only* to current or traditional understandings of these limits. It would be inauthentic for *anyone* to insist that their biological circumstances were the only important aspect of their subjectivity. To give up the future to a particular perception of female embodiment would be an example of 'bad faith' because "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming" (TSS, p66). Resisting the idea of the permanence of the present situation is an important part of de Beauvoir's work, as for her, our Being includes our past, present and our undefined future.

Australian philosopher Max Deutscher supports this argument and he maintains that de Beauvoir's description of female embodiment in *The Second Sex* is misinterpreted, although he acknowledges that de Beauvoir's description of a woman's body as being "mysterious", "mucous" and "humid" has resonations with Sartre's feminine 'in-itself'. De Beauvoir writes of woman's body that "...it bleeds each month, it is often sullied with bodily fluids, it has a secret and perilous life of its own." (TSS, p407). Deutscher however, views this as an example of what he terms an 'operative phenomenology' where, rather than 'cementing' things as they are, he argues that "Beauvoir... works away from within the world as one finds it, eroding not only the 'facts' and generally received wisdom, but also one's intimate awareness of these things".<sup>142</sup> He argues that de Beauvoir's descriptions of the 'neat' phallus opposed to the 'mysterious' female genitalia, are almost *satiric*. One can read her descriptions of masculine and feminine experience as 'setting up' (to an extreme level) traditional views in order to reveal the inherent problems in such accounts. De Beauvoir's descriptions of both male and female embodiment are *ironic* when read alongside her existential assertion of meaning and value being so

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<sup>142</sup> Deutscher, Max, *Genre and Void: Looking back at Sartre and Beauvoir*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p23.

intertwined with situation. "... one speaks of 'nocturnal pollution' because natural ends are not served: but because coffee will stain a light-coloured dress, one does not call it filth that will soil the stomach" (TSS, p396). Here she notes that it is often also said that women 'pollute' men with her 'dirty discharges' but that such descriptions rely upon the context in which they are understood.

Thus, as de Beauvoir argues in the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, "Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself" (TSS, p734). Thus, it is the *interpretation* of a woman's embodied experience within a *particular* historical situation that allows for female embodiment to be denigrated in contrast to 'masculine' transcendence. She writes "I have already pointed out how much easier the transformation of puberty would be if she looked beyond it, like the boys, towards a free adult future: menstruation horrifies her *only* because it is an abrupt descent into femininity" (TSS, p735). Her practice as a novelist leads her to develop detailed and explicit metaphorical descriptions of the very worst possible experiences of what happens when women are tied to this femininity. In so doing, she highlights the way in which masculine and feminine lives and bodies have come to represent such distinctly opposite existences. One should not forget her cautionary words in *The Second Sex*,

[W]hen I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I obviously refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand the phrase 'in the present state of education and custom' after most of my statements (TSS, p31).

As we saw above, in her early work Gatens does recognise the importance de Beauvoir places upon the ways in which social values and expectations affect our lived experience of our bodies. However, she continues to argue that in some instances de Beauvoir sees woman's reproductive role as limiting or 'binding' her to the species rather than providing the possibility for transcendent action. She argues that "[p]erhaps even more crucially, such suggestions throw doubt on the very

possibility of affirming the female body as the ground of free action".<sup>143</sup> As we have seen, however, *situation* (which includes material, social, psychological and economic experiences) is crucial to de Beauvoir's account. In recognition of this importance Gatens writes, "[de Beauvoir] stresses that biology can have no hold on an individual transcendence. The form and capacities of the female body cannot alone hold woman back from the formation of transcendent projects" and "if the biological condition of woman does constitute a handicap, it is because of her general *situation*".<sup>144</sup> However, at this time Gatens still believed that de Beauvoir's account of female embodiment was limiting and that, contrary to her above acknowledgment of the import of situation that "it does not alter the fact that for de Beauvoir female biology, considered *in isolation*, is in conflict with the individual subject".<sup>145</sup>

It is here, I believe, that the problem in Gatens' earlier interpretation is revealed, in her claim that female biology could be considered 'in isolation' in de Beauvoir's work. As Gatens herself will later argue, de Beauvoir does not believe that biology can, *ultimately*, be considered in isolation from the total situation in which that biology is *lived*. As she argues in *The Second Sex*, "on their own, these [bodily] facts have no significance..." and, in her analysis of sexual relations between men and women she writes, "It is the *total* sex situation that justifies the separate elements... when body and behaviour are analysed into *separate* and *meaningless* elements, these elements become indecent, obscene (TSS, p408, my emphasis). 'Female' biology, in the same way as 'male' biology, is experienced, lived, played-out in a complex, worldly situation and 'isolating' biology in order to find its value, its meaning or its 'cause', risks a reductivism. Biology is one among many of the important but also *interdependent* factors of a whole life. On its own, it cannot tell us what it means to be a 'man' or 'woman', and this is the thrust of de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* when she says that "biology is not enough to give an answer to the

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<sup>143</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p53, my emphasis.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p54.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



question...why is woman the *Other*?" (TSS, p69). The problem of patriarchy is that it has denied the becoming (the ambiguity) of man and woman and replaced it with absolute being.

In her early interpretation of de Beauvoir, Gatens wrote "de Beauvoir, in a fashion reminiscent of J.S. Mill and Taylor, concludes that in order to achieve authenticity, woman must overcome or transcend her biology and her role in natural life" and that, "man's material existence [on the other hand] presents no such problem".<sup>146</sup> In a later work published in 1996, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Gatens argues that modern understandings saw the physical body as 'raw' nature and that these understandings reinforced a binary or oppositional split between culture and nature, the body and the mind.<sup>147</sup> Here she argues that "...de Beauvoir...entertained a clear nature/culture, body/social split, where both nature and the body were conceived as outside culture and outside history"<sup>148</sup> and that,

One response to the differential powers and capacities of women and men in the context of public life is to claim that women just are biologically disadvantaged relative to men...on this view, social reform can only achieve so much, leaving the rectification of the remaining determinations of women's situation to the increase in control over nature, that is, biology. Simone de Beauvoir retains the doubtful privilege of being the clearest exponent of this view....[ de Beauvoir] assumed that the specificity of the reproductive body must be overcome if sexual equality is to be realised.<sup>149</sup>

De Beauvoir, however, explicitly argues that it is only through recognising and embracing *all* aspects of our situation; our history, our finitude, our materiality, our capacity for transcendence, our thoughts, our emotions, our reason, our relations with others, our openness to the future and our freedom, that we can have a truly

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<sup>146</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p54.

<sup>147</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge: London and New York, 1996.

<sup>148</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Imaginary Bodies*, p51.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p68.

*authentique* existence. To deny the importance of *any* of these factors is inauthenticity. As de Beauvoir writes, "I exist as authentic subject, in a constantly René wed upbringing that is opposed to the fixed reality of things" (EPW, p200). Gatens argues that in the work of de Beauvoir and Sartre *bad faith* is seen as a moral fault, resulting from a failure to seek out and maintain transcendence. However, as can be seen above, de Beauvoir is explicit in her insistence that it is *also* an act of bad faith to negate one's immanence. One is in bad faith if one negates *either* immanence *or* transcendence because the nature of humanity is to be both *at once* and the constant struggle entailed in this ambiguity is what necessitates the need for an ethics. De Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that "...if the body isn't a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp of the world and a sketch [outline] of our projects" (DS, 1:73).<sup>150</sup> She adds:

These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation. Throughout our further discussion we shall always bear them in mind. For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever (TSS, p65).

For de Beauvoir then, both material *and* cultural situation are fundamental to understanding particular subjectivities and to deny the importance of either is to fail to fully appreciate the complexity of human being and to live *inauthentically*, in bad faith. She writes, "it is in bad faith to give static value [to being] when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'" (TSS, p24). Furthermore, "it is not a mysterious essence that compels men and women to act in good or in bad faith, it is

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<sup>150</sup> translated by Toril Moi in 'While We Wait: the English Translation of *The Second Sex*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2002, vol. 27, no. 4, p 1023.

their situation that inclines them more or less towards the search for truth" (TSS, p27).

#### DE BEAUVOIR, FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

In 1991, Gatens wrote *Feminism and Philosophy* in order to begin addressing problems she saw to be evident in both feminism and philosophy; to re-assess the relationship between the two and to begin thinking about the ethical, social and political implications of binary thought and about possibilities for change. Gatens' project was, and still is, an extremely important one for feminism, for philosophy, for social theory and for ethics. However, Gatens initially missed an 'ally' in this project when she included de Beauvoir's account in theory that she saw to be 'tainted' and limited by masculine ideals and binary accounts of sexual difference. What we can see now is that an incorporation of de Beauvoir's theory and analysis proves fruitful for Gatens' contemporary concerns with the often problematic interactions between metaphysical theories of self and the social, political and ethical world. De Beauvoir's concerns with understanding human 'being' and its inherent ambiguity provide an appropriate methodological tool for critiquing dominant conceptions of both masculinity and femininity and their connections to the broader socio-political realm.

De Beauvoir argues that the common basis of human experience is *ambiguity in-situation*, and what is problematic is that traditional ethics fails to recognise this ambiguity and, instead, continues the vain and problematic search for 'eternal verities' or universal truths. For de Beauvoir, however, "the human species is for ever in a state of change, forever becoming" (TSS, p65). De Beauvoir is dealing with a subject-matter and putting forward an argument that is *dependent* upon the notions of ambiguity and freedom. These terms have been difficult to interpret partly because of de Beauvoir's occasional imprecision and partly because of the situation of most interpreters within a discourse that is based upon a logic of dichotomy, a logic that attempts to deny the *interactions* between what are seen to be opposing (or mutually exclusive) terms. Unlike traditional philosophers, de Beauvoir *emphasizes* the ways in which human 'being' is a paradoxical and

ambiguous being and, rather than attempting to deny or 'overcome' this tension, she argues that we must learn to 'assume' it. As she suggests in the more specific context of love-relations between the sexes:

Instead of living out the ambiguities of their situation, each tries to make the other bear the abjection and tries to reserve the honour for the self. If, however, both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity (TSS, p737).

#### *SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND BIOLOGY: A SECOND LOOK*

In her more recent essay 'Beauvoir and biology: a second look' Gatens significantly re-thinks her earlier criticisms of de Beauvoir and argues against her own previous interpretation of the French author/philosopher as denigrating female biology and advocating a transcendence of female bodily conditions. In this work she writes, "...despite the ever-increasing amount of commentary on Beauvoir and biology, many critics continue to overlook vital elements in her account of the role played by biology in being, or, as she insists, 'becoming' a woman".<sup>151</sup>

Gatens' changing interpretation is illustrative of the different ways in which de Beauvoir has been read, due in large part to misunderstandings of her account of freedom and ambiguity and the role of the body in subjectivity. Indeed, in her later work, Gatens explicitly acknowledges the seemingly contradictory ways in which de Beauvoir can be understood, using the same material to argue for a reading as a social constructivist, or alternatively, as a radical biologist who finds female biology somehow abhorrent. Moreover, Gatens' earlier claim, that feminism must work within philosophical, social and political arenas and her call for an alternative way of engaging with feminist questions that avoids having to remain entrenched within the 'either'/'or' camps of equality or difference, is, we can now see, supported by de Beauvoir.

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<sup>151</sup> Gatens, Moira, 'Beauvoir and biology: a second look', in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003, p 267.

It appears that, all along, Gatens had an ally in de Beauvoir, who would provide an answer to the problems she saw in socio-political and philosophical discourse, and her development of a means to re-think ethics is supported by the earlier work of de Beauvoir. Gatens' more recent analysis demonstrates how the precise quotes from *The Second Sex* that she had earlier used to argue that de Beauvoir was a (masculine-biased) biological determinist can actually be used to argue that de Beauvoir escapes the either/or dichotomy that a number of contemporary theorists see to be limiting feminist debates. Gatens 're-thinks' de Beauvoir's account of subjectivity, arguing that her views on biology "...may yield a more radical view of the human subject than feminists have hitherto supposed her to have held"<sup>152</sup> and she acknowledges that one must always take into account all aspects of history, temporality and biology - together - in order to explain the life of a subject. De Beauvoir would, of course, deny 'human nature' in the sense of biological determinism and/or a spiritual essence. She would, however, argue that the nature or condition of humanity *is* ambiguity. For de Beauvoir, it is not 'nothingness' that characterises human experience but lived embodied experience and *situation*, which are at the same time underpinned or founded upon our fundamental ontological freedom, or ambiguity.

Gatens argues that the apparent tensions in de Beauvoir's work lead to the argument that she is 'either' a social constructionist 'or' an essentialist, which results in feminists tending to over-emphasise one or the other and that "[t]he unclarity of Beauvoir's thought invites these kinds of unsatisfactory 'either/or' feminist readings".<sup>153</sup> On my reading, which is compatible with Gatens second look, de Beauvoir is *neither* a social constructionist *nor* an essentialist but, instead, provides an alternative option to these two extremes, where the body matters, where social and environmental influences are important and where situation is vital to understanding any subject. The following quote from *The Second Sex* summarises well de Beauvoir's views on biology and situation:

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p 267.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p272.

Doubtless, every one casts himself into [the world] on the basis of his physiological possibilities, but the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world, and that is why it is an object of sympathy or repulsion. And, on the other hand, it determines no behaviour (TSS, p41).

Readings of de Beauvoir that are limited to trying to understand whether 'biology' or 'culture' is the most important aspect of 'being' will continue to miss her crucial point. A point at which my reading diverges from Gatens however, is with her claim that in de Beauvoir's work "it is through the attitudes she forms, and the manner of exercising her freedom, that woman will decide how her body is lived"<sup>154</sup>. This appears too close to the isolated subject Sartre is accused of describing, in that it is not just one's own attitude but the attitude and actions of *others* that can so deeply affect how one lives one's body. The strength of de Beauvoir's work lies in her illustration of the significant impact one's total situation has on one's existence and her insistence on the inseparability of an individual from their situation. The impact of the decisions, attitudes and expectations of others can be so huge that practical choice is extremely limited (but, ontological freedom remains).

As we will see in the following chapter, de Beauvoir's subject is necessarily 'inter-subjective' and must, therefore, be examined and understood in relation to others. The amount of time de Beauvoir dedicates in *The Second Sex* to examining 'woman' from the biological, historical, social and psychoanalytic perspectives enables her to illustrate how significant the views of others are in maintaining the myth of the feminine.

Ultimately, Gatens discovers in de Beauvoir a fellow philosopher concerned with what a thorough analysis of the situation of woman has to say about philosophy and about the human subject. De Beauvoir, like Gatens, is concerned with questions of sexual difference but not to the extent that she cannot see the applicability of her theory to other questions of difference, such as how class, race and religion impact

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p271.

upon one's lived experience. There is no insistence in de Beauvoir's work on 'feminine solidarity' or a need to separate from 'men' or the 'masculine' as an evil that must be overcome. Her account of intersubjective relations and the ethics that develops from this, once thought through and consistently applied, recognises the current conceptions of masculinity and 'man' to be the result of the same problematic metaphysics that underlies the situation of woman:

In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it, they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence (TSS; p737).

De Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex* that the existence of woman is something on which we can never close the book, and this recognition of the continually changing situation of (both men and) women is crucial if feminist arguments are to be relevant and applicable to contemporary situations. She writes:

Thus we must view the facts of biology in the light of an ontological, economic, social and psychological context...the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But the body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society...Our task is to discover how the nature of woman has been affected throughout the course of history; we are concerned to find out what humanity has made of the human female (TSS, p69).

As will be argued throughout this thesis, it should *also* be a major concern in the contemporary setting to examine what humanity has made of the human male, and feminism and philosophy must search for the foundational conditions that impact upon multiple and varied subjectivities in order to provide an adequate account of social existence and ethical relations. Just as previous philosophical accounts of

humanity that assumed a universal male subject fail to account for all humans, so to do feminisms that retain the notion of a universal male and ignore the diversity of male experience with a narrow focus on 'man' and 'woman'. We must examine the ways in which misconceptions about ontology have had a continued and powerful affect on numerous particular, situated individuals, not just upon 'women'.

#### A USEFUL CONTRADICTION?

As we can see, de Beauvoir's sustained focus on irreducible ambiguity has led to varied (and opposing) interpretations of her work. What the reading of de Beauvoir with Gatens' 'second look' illustrates, however, is that de Beauvoir's existential-phenomenological account of women's experience reveals that she was neither a social constructivist nor an essentialist. Rather, she was arguing for recognition of the importance of *both* immanence and transcendence in accounts of human existence. The key point of the above analysis is that her philosophy does not impose an *opposition* between mutually exclusive 'material' and 'ideal' worlds, but argues for recognition of the intertwining of *both* aspects in human becoming. What are often seen as mutually exclusive aspects of being are, for de Beauvoir, ambiguously interconnected.

Here again we see her desire to overcome the subject/object dichotomy, which she argues that phenomenology is able to overcome, "one of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of the subject and the object" (*RoPP*, p161). Here, she indicates the importance of this elimination of the subject/object dichotomy for ethics and argues that, "it is only in taking it as a basis will one succeed in building an ethics to which man can totally and sincerely adhere" (*ibid*). *Authenticité*, for de Beauvoir requires an elimination of the oppositional self-other dichotomy.

As an alternative to the reductive dualism she saw to underlie much social, scientific and philosophical thought, de Beauvoir proposes a 'middle-way' account, which privileges neither biology nor consciousness as that which defines human being. The body is important and crucial to relations with others. As Merleau-Ponty



argues, "it is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'" (PP, p216). One's body does not exist in isolation, but is part of a complex world – in which others help to define one's 'self'. As Sonia Kruks argues:

to exist is to be one's body; and to be one's body is to be a body-subject, a unity which precedes the dichotomies of mind and body, subject and object, being for-itself and being in-itself...the concept of the body-subject involves... a paradoxical and ambiguous relationship in which consciousness and materiality, subjectivity and the world of 'things' are co-extensive.<sup>155</sup>

Although Beauvoir does not at any stage explicitly disagree with Sartre and take up Merleau-Ponty's account of subjectivity, it can be argued that her subjects share more with Merleau-Ponty's account of situated embodiment than with Sartre's free consciousness.<sup>156</sup> The ambiguity of the body and the importance of others to the experience of one's body and self-understanding (or self-perception) are key themes for de Beauvoir, themes which she shares with Merleau-Ponty. As we have seen above, many feminists have been critical of de Beauvoir's perceived connection to Sartre, arguing that her account of the body is dualistic and, therefore, that she cannot overcome the immanence/transcendence problem inherent in his account of existentialism.

As we have seen, Sartre's view of the self is often criticised for being an isolated one – where the subject alone is the source of meaning and action, whereas Merleau-Ponty is seen to return the subject 'to the world' by placing it in a particular

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<sup>155</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p116.

<sup>156</sup> A number of Sartre scholars agree with de Beauvoir that Sartre's work was misread and that his account was in fact more nuanced than many argue. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre also attempts to address criticisms against existentialism and his later works, including the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, are seen to be far more applicable to social theory. See Max Deutscher (2003) and Sonia Kruks (1990) for discussion of this point.

situation in which it both gives *and* receives meaning.<sup>157</sup> The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate that although we should not deny the importance of Sartre's work to de Beauvoir's account of embodiment, that her philosophy of ambiguity is also influenced by the rich descriptions of intersubjectivity she found in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and (crucially) by her own experience. De Beauvoir was neither a social constructivist, nor a biological essentialist. Her aim was to explore how it is that women (and men) come to experience their bodies (and develop their sense of 'self') within a particular social milieu and she argues that to live with *authenticité* we must accept both our *facticité* and our capacity for transcendence – that is, we must live our ambiguity.

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<sup>157</sup> Stewart, Jon, (ed) *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1998, p xxxii.

### CHAPTER THREE: AN AMBIGUOUS FREEDOM

I know myself only insofar as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know  
myself only in my ambiguity

(Merleau-Ponty, PP, p345)

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...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 reason for acting

(Beauvoir, TEA, p9)

#### THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

Written in 1947, prior to *The Second Sex* and after Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was not historically accorded a significant place amongst existential or feminist texts. Her attempt to develop an existential ethics based upon recognition of the ambiguous nature of humanity (in which we are at the same time transcendent *and* immanent creatures, thoroughly situated *yet* destined to an open future) was largely ignored or criticized in mainstream philosophy and, historically, feminists tended to celebrate *The Second Sex* as her major contribution to feminism. Toril Moi, for example, wrote of de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that "there is no point in dwelling on the details of Beauvoir's rather torturous efforts to explain how ethical action consists precisely in the lucid acceptance of this paradox"<sup>158</sup> and de Beauvoir's biographer, Deidre Bair, argued

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<sup>158</sup> Moi, Toril, in *Simone de Beauvoir: The making of an intellectual woman*, Blackwell: Oxford, 1994, p 150.

that it was “one of her least popular writings”.<sup>159</sup> De Beauvoir herself argued that *The Ethics* was “a frivolous, insignificant thing, not worthy of attention” and that it irritated her most of all her books because she failed to think “objectively” whilst she was writing it and was instead “thinking too much of herself”.<sup>160</sup>

Although it took some time for de Beauvoir to be taken seriously as a philosopher, more recent scholarship has recognised the importance of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and particularly the account of freedom given therein, to her later work and for contemporary social philosophy and ethics.<sup>161</sup> A common claim is that, in this work, de Beauvoir overcomes the limits of Sartreanism (although implicitly) and Barbara Andrew argues that, by the time she wrote this text, de Beauvoir had “changed her idea of freedom from the radical freedom of Sartre’s in *Being and Nothingness*” to a freedom that is situated in the world.<sup>162</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, a number of scholars argue that de Beauvoir introduces a social element to freedom in an attempt to explain how it is that oppression is possible and to assert the importance of others to our freedom, thus overcoming many of the criticisms levelled against Sartre.<sup>163</sup>

Taking up the current concern with understanding de Beauvoir’s account of freedom and its ability to overcome the limits of Sartrean existentialism, this section argues that *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, when grasped in its complexity, provides the basis for a contemporary ethics, which allows for celebration of our *situated* freedom by reuniting the concepts of *authenticité* and ambiguity. The above-quoted passage,

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<sup>159</sup> Bair, Deidre, *Simone de Beauvoir: a Biography*, Vintage: London, 1991, p 321.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Karen Vintges, for example, argues that we need to understand this earlier work in order to fully appreciate de Beauvoir’s later arguments in *The Second Sex*, ‘Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker of Our Times’, *Hypatia*, Vol 14, no 4, Fall 1999. Kristana Arp argues that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is the most important of de Beauvoir’s philosophical essays prior to *The Second Sex*, see Arp’s *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir’s Existential Ethics*, Open Court: Chicago, 2001, p 1.

<sup>162</sup> Andrew, Barbara, S, ‘Beauvoir’s place in philosophical thought’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Claudia Card, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p 32.

<sup>163</sup> See for example, Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, 1990.

from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, sums up de Beauvoir's argument well. There she argues that, no matter how we try to deny it, the truth of our fundamental freedom and ambiguity arises continuously and cannot be overcome. Human life is characterized by an ambiguous freedom, where each is at once fundamentally free (on an ontological level) *and* situated or limited (on a 'practical' or 'effective' level). This ambiguous existence is experienced "at every moment" and, rather than denying this ambiguity as traditional ethics has sought to do, de Beauvoir argues that we should accept it and draw from it our strength to live and our reason to act. Importantly for her this entails a 'willing *assertion*' of our freedom, as well as the freedom of others, and this assertion of our ambiguous freedom is vital for *authenticité*.

De Beauvoir's ethics depends on an *ontological* ambiguity. Our ethics derives from our ontology and the way in which we understand the world will significantly impact upon the decisions we make about how to act *in* the world. Ambiguity, as we will see, relates to an ongoing tension between our ontological freedom (transcendence) and our practical freedom (immanence) as well as to the ongoing tensions between our thirst for life and our mortality, between 'self' and 'other', between our individuality and our undeniable connection with the world. On this understanding, our ethical actions will be based not only upon recognition of our ambiguous existence, but on a willingness to *engage* with this ambiguity, to maintain the tension that ambiguity implies, and to ensure others also have the opportunity to engage with their freedom by refusing to see them as a 'thing'. The maintenance of this tension is crucial to de Beauvoir's ethics and she argues that it needs to be preserved rather than collapsed in a theoretical account of ethics and in our practical relation to the world. Neither the transcendent nor the immanent aspect of human existence should be privileged and interdependence is, therefore, a key concept for de Beauvoir. As we shall see, interdependence relates also to the way in which our projects intersect with others and to the way that meaning and values arise, with others, in a shared world.

## RE-DEFINING AMBIGUITY

As we saw in chapter one, the common or 'everyday' understanding of the concept of authenticity differs substantially from the existential understanding of *authenticité*. I have argued that this is because the 'authentic' has come to be associated with the 'genuine' 'real' and 'true' and with the idea of a true or genuine self or "essence". This interpretation of what is authentic is troubling because it is connected to a metaphysics that privileges distinction and certainty and because the related account of autonomy does not adequately account for the importance of others to identity.

Likewise, the concept of ambiguity has also come to represent certain ways of being that have different connotations to those put forward in existential and phenomenological accounts of existence, the implications of which are significantly different to the understanding of ambiguity that this thesis wants to celebrate. Although there is not such a clear distinction between the way in which ambiguity is understood by de Beauvoir and the 'everyday' understanding, it is in the valuing of this concept that an important difference emerges.

The term ambiguous comes from the Latin *ambiguus*, meaning doubtful or shifting and which is based on the word *ambigere*, meaning to 'go round'. The Latin *ambi* has the meaning 'on both sides', or 'both ways', and the *ous* comes from Latin *osus*, 'having many or much, characterized by or of the nature of'. So, if something is ambiguous, it has the *character* or *nature* of being 'on both sides' or 'both ways'.

According to the commonly held definition, 'ambiguity' entails: hesitation, doubt, or uncertainty as to one's course; it is the ability to be understood in more than one way; it represents an uncertainty; or is an instance of double meaning, or an expression having more than one meaning.<sup>164</sup> Whilst this understanding is not in

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<sup>164</sup> *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, Fifth edition, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2002, p 66.

itself problematic, it is commonly held that, if something is ambiguous, it is obscure, it is doubtful regarding classification and, most significantly, it is *unreliable*.<sup>165</sup>

Contrast these definitions of ambiguity with the commonly used term 'authentic'; where the adjective defines something as being 'real, actual, genuine or original; *reliable* and trustworthy'.<sup>166</sup> One can see that there is an apparently great distance, perhaps even an inherent opposition, between something that is 'genuine, true, real and reliable' and something that is 'equivocal, doubtful, obscure, indistinct and *unreliable*'. On their usual understanding then, these two terms would appear to be opposing, rather than intertwined as I wish to argue. As we saw earlier, however, '*authentique*' in the particularly French existential understanding put forward by Sartre and de Beauvoir (which has its roots in Heidegger's understanding of *Eigentlichkeit*), has a meaning connected to the concept of 'good faith', that is, to the recognition of fundamental freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. Good faith (being '*authentique*' in existentialist terms) in fact *requires* that one recognise the uncertainty, the double meaning, the 'being both ways', the ambiguity of the world and of the meaning that has sprung forth within it (and which is intimately connected to us). *Authenticité* requires acknowledging the continual tension and relation between our existence as both subject and object, both immanence and transcendence, both self and other, and it denies a privileging of either aspect of our being.

The *problematic* contemporary understanding of authenticity as it relates to identity, and which is implicit in the debates explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis (over race, class, religion, value and sex - or combinations thereof), denies ambiguity and, I argue, can be equated with the state of 'seriousness' identified by de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as the most common response of humans to their fundamental freedom. That is, the subject creates a rigid (essentialist) identity for his or her self, for the world, and for others, in order to deny the fundamental freedom that appears 'like a black hole' at their feet. The common understanding or

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, Fifth edition, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2002, p 153.

use of 'authentic' equates authenticity with the 'genuine' and 'real' by forgetting or denying the ambiguity of phenomena. This has a psychological aspect because, as Diprose comments, "*any ambiguity in the other's difference threatens the security of our own identity*".<sup>167</sup>

In this thesis, however, *authenticité* will become intimately and inextricably *re-connected* to ambiguity, in opposition to much contemporary ethical thought and political action, where currently the 'authentic' and the ambiguous are seen to be incompatible. Recuperating the concept of ambiguity, in order to reunite it with *authenticité* in (de Beauvoir's) existentialist terms, means that the indeterminacy and lack of clarity that ambiguous phenomena are traditionally condemned for become characteristics that are celebrated in an ethics that has its foundations in the acknowledgement of paradox and tension.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that, "we must recognise the indeterminate as a positive phenomena" (PP, p7) and, for him, ambiguity can be seen as constructive and affirmative, able to be lived as an 'openness' to the world. He argues that philosophy (and science) should not cut-off the world in vain attempts to reduce or determine objects or subjects and that, "[t]he determinate quality by which empiricism tried to define sensation ...conceals rather than reveals subjectivity" (PP, p7). What this means is that, by trying to reduce perception down to the reception of separate 'primary' sensations that exist in separation from our perception of them (rather than recognising the connections between intentionality and the world of sensation) subjectivity is hidden behind what appear to be 'causal', external phenomena, and the simultaneously passive-active character of perception is concealed.

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<sup>167</sup> Diprose, Rosalyn, *Corporeal Generosity: on giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, State University of New York Press: Albany, 2002 (emphasis added).

It should be noted, however, that although it is a common response to freedom, a spirit of seriousness is not necessarily a *conscious* response, but an unconscious reaction to our lack of being.



Merleau-Ponty uses two different terms in his work which can be translated as “ambiguity” but which have different meanings. The first is “*equivoque*” which is translated as “the essence of human existence and [means that] everything we live or think has always several meanings” (PP, p169). The second is *ambiguïté*, which implies tension, dialectic or paradox – and this is the term I wish to make use of. Sonia Kruks argues that, for de Beauvoir too, ambiguity “refers to a paradoxical reality, in which each of two aspects of a single existent carries equal weight” and that;

...human existence is ambiguous because ...factilities appear in her account to be of equal weight with consciousness: man *is* thing, body, as well as consciousness. He is object as well as subject, and he lives a continual tension between these equal and contradictory aspects of his existence.<sup>168</sup>

As I have argued above, I dispute the reading of these aspects as contradictory in terms of a *mutual exclusion*, and argue that rather than being seen as such, we should view them as being related-in-tension. A key point is that de Beauvoir does not want to ‘reconcile’ these ‘contradictions’ but to maintain them in what she calls an ‘existential conversion’, an idea that will be examined later in the thesis.

This chapter, therefore, provides a definition of ambiguity as tension and play, rather than contradiction, and suggests that this understanding of ambiguity allows for an ethics that is not reduced to *absurdity*.

Because of her insistence that there is no one thing (such as Nature or God) to guide or define us, de Beauvoir has been criticised for proposing an ‘absurd’ account of existence (as Marcuse argued), which denies any hope or meaning in the world. Matthew Braddock, for example, has also recently argued that for Sartre and de Beauvoir, “we live in an absurd universe where people lack fixed natures and are free to create their natures by their own choices”.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, pp91-92.

<sup>169</sup> Braddock, Matthew, ‘A Critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s Existential Ethics’, *Philosophy Today*; Fall 2007; Vol. 51, 3, p 304.

Although the denial of any inherent or *fixed* meaning or value is undeniably a strong theme in her work, de Beauvoir makes explicit the distinction between concepts of *absurdity* and ambiguity, arguing that the two should not be confused:

The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is *ambiguous* is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won (TEA, p 129, *emphasis added*).

As Monika Langer argues, “for Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, ambiguity is not ambivalence, equivocation, dualism or absurdity. Ambiguity characterizes our existence and involves an irreducible indeterminacy, and multiple, inseparable significations and aspects”.<sup>170</sup> Meaning is not something to be denied by de Beauvoir, but something to be correctly understood in order to act *authentically*. *Authenticité* requires understanding that we cannot ‘make’ ourselves in isolation from our bodies or the world, but that in our projects, in our transcendence, we are necessarily *in* the world and limited by the very real practical aspects of our being. On this understanding ambiguity is not “vagueness” or indeterminacy, nor is it contradiction (in terms of two terms being mutually exclusive). As we saw above, the term ‘ambi’ means an “encompassing of both”, or, being both ways. This relates to the idea of the body being both inner *and* outer, humans being both subject *and* object, self *and* other, for-itself *and* in-itself, transcendence *and* immanence. It refers to the active/passive nature of the body, to a tension and *interplay*; it is a dialogical relation and describes one’s capacity to shape and flex in *response* to the world. What a closer look at ambiguity shows us is that we are *neither* determined by our body, by laws, or by values, *nor* are we free from our body, from laws, from values or from meaning. We live the tension of both aspects of our existence, our immanence and our transcendence, in a constant struggle for balance and must choose to willingly assume this in order to be ethical.

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<sup>170</sup> Langer, Monika, ‘Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on ambiguity’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed), Cambridge University Press, 2003, p 90.

Importantly then, an ethics based on ambiguity does not simply mean that the value of a particular event (the abuse or killing of another living creature for example) can be *viewed* or interpreted in 'various ways' as we saw in the dictionary definition. Rather, it is an ontological claim. Ambiguity in this sense does not mean that one can look at an ethical dilemma and say, "the answer is ambiguous" (so, one might ask, why bother even dwelling on it?); rather, what is ambiguous is the very *being* of those questioning and answering and the world they are deliberating about. Ambiguity does not simply equate to relativism or subjectivism. This ambiguous *ontology* is pre-reflective, it is *prior* to cognition. The human *condition* and the world which we interpret is *characterised* by ambiguity. To be *authentique*, however, we must be able to reflect on, and *assume*, this condition when making decisions about how to act in the world and we must recognise that there are no absolutes in terms of laws that can always dictate how one should act. The key recognition that will make possible a (recuperated) *authentique* ethical action is that, whilst our existence is characterised by absolute freedom in existential terms, we exist in a worldly situation in which particular values and meanings have developed and have significance.

Ambiguity, understood on these terms, does not entail a denial of all values or meaning and is not an absurdity or relativism. For de Beauvoir and for Merleau-Ponty, because *situation* must always be taken into account when acting ethically, we cannot deny the importance of current values and meanings or the reality of current ways of being. However, we must recognise these values and meanings as being dependent upon particular *situations* for their significance (and, ultimately, for their very existence). Understanding ambiguity provides us with the basis for an ethics, with a foundation from which to formulate principles for action. As Merleau-Ponty argues:

The study of perception could only teach us a "bad ambiguity", a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a "good ambiguity" in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when observed only the

separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.<sup>171</sup>

So, ambiguity does not apply just to determining whether or not an act is 'good' or 'bad', but refers also to the ontological status of the world in which ethical questions can even be asked. Ambiguity is the *state* of the world, and of our existence within it; *authenticité* refers to the way in which we take up this ambiguity and incorporate it, deliberately, in our lives.

De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty are concerned with refuting and overturning the ideals and aims of traditional European philosophy, which considered the task of philosophy to be the production of objective principles of knowledge that would be *universally true and certain*.<sup>172</sup> Both saw the methods and ideals of science as being inadequate for philosophy, and also to be inadequate for the quest to understand human existence and, I argue, for understanding everyday experience, which is influenced by both philosophy and scientific discourse. De Beauvoir writes on this point that, "... science condemns itself to failure when, yielding to the infatuation of the serious, it aspires to attain being, to contain it, and to possess it" (TEA, p79). She writes of science and philosophy, which aim to deny ambiguity:

At the present time there still exist many doctrines which choose to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too complex situation. But their attempt to lie to us is in vain. Cowardice doesn't pay. Those reasonable metaphysics, those consoling ethics with which they would entice us only accentuate the disorder from which we suffer (TEA, p 8).

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<sup>171</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, William Cobb (trans.), James M. Edie (ed), Northwestern University Press, 1964.

<sup>172</sup> Note the connection here to the problematic understanding of 'authenticity' I wish to critique, which is aligned with this search for clarity and certainty.

According to de Beauvoir's understanding of existentialism, objective, universal, and *absolute* knowledge is an unattainable ideal, the search for which has blinded philosophers to the basic features of human existence. This quest for universality fails because it denies (or ignores) the possibility of ambiguity, from the very outset, by defining its search as being a quest for objective truth about the world and our relationship to it. The aim (according to philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir) should not be to attempt to grasp the *ultimate nature* or reality of the world in abstract systems of thought but, instead, what becomes important is an investigation of human being, *situated 'in the world'*. This is not a wholesale dismissal of scientific investigation or of the desire to further understand the world, and, as de Beauvoir writes, "... [science] finds its truth if it considers itself a free engagement of thought in the given, aiming, at each discovery, not at fusion with the thing, but at the possibility of new discoveries" (TEA, p79).

As discussed previously, the phenomenological method underpins de Beauvoir's work and the focus on *being-in-the-world* is particularly important for her, demonstrating particular links to the concept of being-in-the-world as defined by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. What this concept meant for existential phenomenologists is that we are 'in the world' and cannot be separated from it in the way that philosophies based on the Cartesian method of radical doubt would suggest. Science and traditional philosophy have tried to demonstrate our 'objectivity' and 'detachment' from the world we observe in order to prove its truthfulness. *Being-in-the-world*, in contrast, is about our embeddedness, our situatedness, our connections to our world and all that surrounds us and is concerned with trying to describe these relations and connections rather than trying to understand ourselves 'in spite of' them. It is about how we relate to our projects, our contexts, our historical location, in a way that is not abstract, or objective but is related to and involved with us. If we are to make ethical decisions that affect ourselves, our environment and others, we must have an account that considers our 'worldliness' – our belonging to and being part of the world itself – an account that recognises the impossibility of separating or excluding parts of our world or ourselves to get a better view of what 'lies beneath' (to uncover inherent moral

values for example). Rather than trying to achieve a final understanding through scientific objectivity and distance, we must understand things we experience in the world practically. As Heidegger puts it “the less we just stare at the hammer-thing and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become” (BT, §15).<sup>173</sup> It is important to note here that I am not advocating that the primacy of practical engagement with the world is sufficient for an ethics, but am stressing that reflective awareness of ambiguity is also required for *authenticité*. As I mentioned above, however, intellectual reflection, in itself is not sufficient for an ethics and both reflection and action are required on this account. As de Beauvoir says, “this living confirmation can not be merely contemplative or verbal. It is carried out in an act” (TEA, p27).

An ethics that bases itself in ambiguity will recognise the mutual imbrications of self, other, meaning and world and bring this recognition to ethical questioning and action. As Merleau-Ponty argues, it is with our experience of and in the world (and with others in this world) that we must begin our questioning, not in attempts at gaining a falsely detached objective distance. He writes:

I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as *directly experienced*, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we

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<sup>173</sup> Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, (trans.) John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishing: London, 1962, p 98.

must begin by *reawakening the basic experience of the world* ... (PP, ix, *emphasis added*).

This returning to the world (or to 'the things themselves' as Husserl urges) is not common in moral theory, however, and de Beauvoir argues in her review of Merleau-Ponty's work that traditional ethics attempts to educate children by *removing* their subjectivity and by convincing the child that he is:

... subjected, like the others, to *universal laws written in an anonymous heaven*. Science enjoins him to escape out of his own consciousness, to turn away from the living and meaningful world that this consciousness disclosed to him, and for which science tries to substitute a *universe of frozen objects*, independent of all gaze and all thought (RoPP, p 159, *emphasis added*).

Characteristically, she argues, people respond in two ways to their freedom, "some throw themselves resolutely toward the foreign things and strive to forget that they are losing themselves; [whereas] others choose a turning inward toward oneself, but it then seems to them that the rest of the universe escapes them" (RoPP, p 160). De Beauvoir argues, conversely, that ethics can *only* be based on the elimination of the subject/object opposition and that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is able to provide the means for this elimination and, therefore, provide the base for an ethics.

Her argument is that it *is* possible to develop an existential ethics that *celebrates* our ambiguity. One cannot find 'oneself' within (in isolation from others or the world), nor can one lose oneself in appeals to the universal (by equating oneself with mankind for example), because as de Beauvoir points out "if he dreams of expanding himself to infinity, he immediately loses himself" (PC, p113). The most important point is that, no matter how he may try to deny it, man does not stop *being-there*.

## FREEDOM

As we have noted, a major aim for de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is to correct misunderstandings of the existential account of freedom explicitly developed by Sartre, which had been condemned for enclosing humanity “in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity” and for failing to provide us with “any principle for making choices” (TEA, p10). Rather than viewing it as negative, as critics of existentialism had done, de Beauvoir saw recognition of ambiguity to be the means by which to elaborate upon the existential task of revealing our fundamental freedom and the possibility for ethical relations entailed in such a revelation. She writes that:

[f]rom the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity. It was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre, in *Being & Nothingness*, fundamentally defined man, that being whose being is not to be, that subjectivity which realizes itself only as a presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others (TEA, p10).

According to de Beauvoir, rather than denying the possibility of ethics with recognition of freedom, “an ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (TEA, p18). Proving that an existential account of freedom does not inevitably lead to a denial of the possibility of *any* ethics is thus a major aim of her work.

## THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM

One of Sartre’s main claims in *Being and Nothingness* is that we cannot give-up our fundamental freedom – although most of us continually seek to do so, in *bad faith* (*mauvais foi*). For him, and for de Beauvoir, the condition of human being *is* freedom and he writes that:



Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of "human reality". Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being free... (BN, p 25).

Sartre argues that our situation provides the 'context' for our experience of freedom, and that we can never be reduced to the 'facts' of our existence because of our capacity to interpret and 'negate', or 'nihilate', these facts. What this means for Sartre is that we must take *absolute* responsibility for our lives because there is no external justification for our acts. He argues that the common act of denying freedom, by living as though determined or without choice, results in 'bad faith'. For example, if we identify ourselves with our possessions, with our class, position in society, or with our job, we are in bad faith because we are according *absolute* value to these things and equating this value with our own being. Equally, although Sartre does not pay sustained attention to this aspect of bad faith, those who associate only with the transcendent aspect of their existence by denying their 'facticity' (arguing that their material situation has *no* meaning at all) are also living in bad faith. For Sartre, the paradox of freedom entails that "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom" (BN, 598-99).

#### THE PROBLEM OF RADICAL FREEDOM

Although Sartre attempted to account for the importance of situation in his description of this paradox (and later in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and elsewhere), a sustained point of attack has been on the account of 'radical freedom' developed in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre famously argued there that "the slave in chains is as free as his master" (BN, p 550) and he has been heavily criticised for this statement, as it fails to account for the oppression and social circumstances of varied individuals who are, quite obviously, not 'free'. David Levin, for example, in his analysis of the limits and potential of existentialism to provide us with an ethics today, argues that:

... existentialism is so blinded by its passionate concern for the existence of the individual, and so committed to the affirmation of individual freedoms, that it has, for the most part, with Merleau-Ponty the exception, neglected the individual's sociability: questions and problems related, for example, to our historicity, our belonging within tradition, our socialization, and the roots of social and moral life in the nature of the individual.<sup>174</sup>

Existentialism has been criticised for its failure to account for the *social* situation of subjects due to the claim that we are all as 'free' as each other. Sonia Kruks, for example, argues that, although Sartre was attempting to critique Cartesianism and the idea of the 'thinking subject' in *Being and Nothingness*, he "ends by reconfirming the Cartesian identity of consciousness and freedom, and by asserting the absolute autonomy of individual autonomy" and, thus, he fails to adequately address the "relation of subject to social structure".<sup>175</sup> In the face of a history defined by the oppression of so many groups and individuals the obvious question is "how we can be free *and* enslaved at the same time?"

In response to this question, a number of recent scholars have argued that de Beauvoir's account of the limits of freedom in situations of oppression is socially mitigated, whereas Sartre's account of selfhood is considered by many to be 'distinctly masculine'.<sup>176</sup> Nancy Hartsock, for one, calls Sartre's account of the subject a 'walled city' account, in which the subject is both radically separate from

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<sup>174</sup> Levin, David Michael, 'Existentialism at the end of Modernity: Questioning the I's Eyes', *Philosophy Today*: Spring 1990; 34, 1, p90.

<sup>175</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p15.

Although she does see that Sartre's account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness* was individualistic and failed to adequately account for socially located subjects, Kruks argues that his later work developed into an argument that attempted to account for shared or social existence "where freedom admits of degree and is socially mediated" and she argues that this more nuanced version of freedom is resolved in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p30).

<sup>176</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p31.

and inherently hostile toward others.<sup>177</sup> Levin has argued that “Sartre makes the psycho-social pathology of everyday vision – an eye whose gaze is predatory, aggressive and sadistic, violent – into the normal case, without even so much as a passing acknowledgement of any other existential possibilities”.<sup>178</sup> Kerry Whiteside describes Sartre’s inability to account for the social location of subjects so that it would appear that, no matter one’s circumstance, one can ‘be’ whatever one wants simply through *reinterpretation*: “Sartre’s notion of freedom...cripples social theory by making it seem that individuals can overcome all physical and social obstacles simply by reinterpreting their meaning”.<sup>179</sup>

What is evident in these criticisms of Sartre’s early account of freedom is a perceived failure to recognise the importance of self-other-world relations and the importance of one’s facticity or one’s situation to one’s experience of freedom. The importance of such relations, however, is addressed by de Beauvoir in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* (as well as in her novels and various articles), where she attempts to account for the limits of freedom and explain the possibility for oppression even when humans are still seen to be ultimately (ontologically) free. As Kruks argues, de Beauvoir “pushed the early Sartrean notion of the subject as absolute freedom to its limits and beyond” with her exploration of oppression.<sup>180</sup>

#### A CONTRADICTION IN FREEDOM?

We can see then that there are many who criticise Sartre’s existentialism and Margaret Whitford argues that Sartre’s account of freedom “has given rise to perhaps more misunderstanding than any other aspect of his philosophy... [with] the majority of his early critics being unanimous in condemning the doctrine as self-

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<sup>177</sup> Gatens also discusses this aspect of Sartre’s work in *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, Ch 3, p50.

<sup>178</sup> Levin, David Michael, ‘Existentialism at the end of Modernity: Questioning the I’s Eyes’, p91.

<sup>179</sup> Whiteside, Kerry, H, Review of *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity, and Society*, by Sonia Kruks, in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 53. No. 3. Summer, 1991, p574.

<sup>180</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p17.

contradictory and self-defeating".<sup>181</sup> Whitford argues, however, that different concepts of freedom are referred to in different circumstances within Sartre's work because freedom has more than one meaning for him. She argues that the distinction he makes is between an *irreducible* ontological freedom and a 'freedom in situation', which is limited:

The argument that there is a contradiction in Sartre between the conception of freedom as total (ontological freedom) and the conception of freedom as limited (freedom in situation) arises because of the confusion Sartre creates by being insufficiently careful in his use of the term freedom. The contradiction is only apparent, in fact, because ontological freedom is the condition and the prerequisite of freedom in situation.<sup>182</sup>

De Beauvoir herself acknowledges the potential for the existential account of freedom to be read as contradictory and she asks in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "...whatever the case may be, we believe in freedom. Is it true that this belief must lead us to despair? Must we grant this paradox: that from the moment a man recognises himself as free, he is prohibited from wishing for anything" (TEA, p23). There she also asks if the positing of an ontological freedom contradicts the existential assertion that one must 'take up' this freedom and engage with it in order to be *authentique*:

...Does not this presence of a so to speak natural freedom contradict the notion of ethical freedom? What meaning can there be in the words *to will oneself free*, since at the beginning we *are* free? It is contradictory to set freedom up as something conquered if at first it is something given (TEA, p24).

As with her discussion of female biology (which was examined in the previous chapter), the apparently contradictory nature of de Beauvoir's argument for freedom and oppression has come under scrutiny by her readers and quite different

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<sup>181</sup> Whitford, Margaret, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy*, p56.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p57.

interpretations have emerged. Barbara Andrew argues that the reason “the complexity of Beauvoir’s idea of freedom is only now being taken up by feminists” is to a large extent “...because her analysis of situation and ambiguity and how they lead to a new idea of freedom are only now being fully understood”.<sup>183</sup>

Andrew argues that, whilst Sartre was “impeded by his notion of radical freedom”, de Beauvoir “was able to develop a social philosophy early on”.<sup>184</sup> In addition, Kruks, Langer, and Eva Gothlin all see closer links between Merleau-Ponty’s notion of freedom than with Sartre’s.<sup>185</sup> Many philosophers influenced by de Beauvoir agree that what she offers is an account of freedom that acknowledges the impact of social situation and, thus, implicitly overcomes the limits of Sartre’s account. Penelope Deutscher, for example, writes that, unlike Sartre, who ‘evades’ an account of freedom that allows for differences in the lived experience of one’s body, “Beauvoir’s concern was with the social change that could increase the possibilities for ethical freedom of all subjects and allow a qualitatively improved relationship to the anticipation of one’s future”.<sup>186</sup>

Even as these interpretations acknowledge de Beauvoir’s ability to move beyond the limits of Sartre’s work, a number argue that in de Beauvoir’s account there is a potential for ontological freedom to be impaired or reduced in certain situations. Penelope Deutscher, for example, argues that in de Beauvoir’s later work on ageing that ontological freedom, not just practical freedom to engage in activities, is limited as one’s future becomes shorter.<sup>187</sup> Kruks also makes a similar claim, arguing that in de Beauvoir’s earlier work, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, the lack of an open future for

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<sup>183</sup> Andrew, Barbara, S, ‘Beauvoir’s place in philosophical thought’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003, p39.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p32.

<sup>185</sup> As we saw in chapter two, a number of scholars argue that de Beauvoir influenced Sartre’s account of freedom rather than the other way around. (For example, Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook and Margaret Simons).

<sup>186</sup> Deutscher, Penelope, ‘Beauvoir’s Old Age’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, p298.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

particular human beings, which is the result of oppression, “implies a modification of the for-itself, of ontological freedom” and that the distinction between ontological and effective freedom in de Beauvoir’s work begins to break down.<sup>188</sup> Below I argue that, although practical and effective freedom *can* be limited on her account, that ontological freedom *cannot* be reduced and that oppression is the result of one’s capacity to engage with one’s ontological freedom being severely limited by other people. As we will see, the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘liberty’ – which are conceptualised as different levels of freedom – allow for an explanation of the possibility for oppression without conceding that one’s ontological freedom can be diminished. As de Beauvoir argues, human existence is characterised by this ambiguous freedom and, she says, “In the servitude of the serious, the original spontaneity strives to deny itself. *It strives in vain*, and meanwhile it then fails to fulfil itself as moral freedom” (TEA, p26, emphasis added). Here, we see that “the original spontaneity”, our fundamental freedom, is rejected by those who want to secure themselves as given; however, as they strive to solidify themselves in the serious, they deny their capacity for *authenticité* in “moral freedom”. Ultimately, those who attempt to deny our fundamental freedom are unable to do so; they strive “in vain” because this freedom cannot be denied.

#### LEVELS OF FREEDOM IN DE BEAUVOIR’S WORK

There is some debate over what both Sartre and de Beauvoir mean when they talk of our irreducible freedom and Kristina Arp argues that what is most significant and useful in de Beauvoir’s attempts at addressing the criticisms against existential theory is the distinction between different levels of freedom that she develops. De Beauvoir’s task is to address the apparent contradiction that, whilst we are all ‘free’ and are responsible for defining ourselves, that others can (and do) impact upon us in very real and significant ways, such that we are not all equally free to engage in projects.

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<sup>188</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p91.

In her essay on morality, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* written in 1943, as well as later in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir (like Sartre) argues that there are different modes or levels of freedom in human existence. She argues that “this is what Descartes expressed when he said that the freedom [*liberté*] of man is infinite, but his power [*puissance*] is limited” and she asks, “how can the presence of these limits be reconciled with the idea of a freedom confirming itself as a unity and an indefinite movement?” (TEA, p28). How, in other words, can we reconcile our fundamental freedom with our *facticity*?

Kruks notes that de Beauvoir had expressed doubts in her autobiographical work about Sartre’s claim that all are as free as others and she used this distinction between freedom (*liberté*) and power (*puissance*) to attempt to reconcile her belief that situations can be ‘graded’ or differ in the extent to which they impact upon one’s freedom.<sup>189</sup> In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, de Beauvoir also attempted to address the problem of reconciling fundamental freedom with the limits of situation when she argued that:

... his power [*puissance*] is finite, and one can increase it or restrict it from the outside. One can throw a man in prison, get him out, cut off his arm, lend him wings, but his freedom [*liberté*] remains infinite in all cases (PC, p124).

What *can* be limited is one’s opportunity to *engage* with one’s freedom in order to carry out projects in the world. In such cases, our ontological freedom is still ‘there’ and cannot *not* be there, however, in some circumstances, some people are unable to recognise and engage with this level of freedom and are, therefore, prevented from ‘taking it up’ *authentically*. In other situations, people can have their *puissance* limited, even to the point of being thrown into prison, but still recognise their freedom and live with *authenticité* within their very limited situation.

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<sup>189</sup> Kruks notes that de Beauvoir comments on the problems she saw in Sartre’s account of absolute freedom in her autobiography *Force of Circumstance*. See *Situation and Human Existence*, p90. (Beauvoir, Simone de. *Force of circumstance*. (trans.) Richard Howard. UK: Andre Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965.)

As we saw above, according to this distinction, *liberté* is infinite whereas *puissance* can be affected externally by other people. Both levels of freedom, however, are connected and the importance of neither aspect can be overcome or denied. De Beauvoir asserts, “a man is freedom *and* facticity *at the same time*. He is free, but not with that abstract freedom posited by the Stoics; he is free *in situation*” (PC, p124, emphasis added).

Kruks argues that de Beauvoir is unable to sustain this distinction consistently, however, and that a reduction in ontological freedom *is* made possible in situations of oppression:

... it is the lack of an ‘open’ future which begins, in Beauvoir’s account, to imply that there is a qualitative modification of transcendence itself; this is to say also that the lack of an open future implies a modification of the for-itself, of ontological freedom.<sup>190</sup>

I disagree with the analysis that there is a possibility for the diminishment of ontological freedom itself. For de Beauvoir we *always* retain our ontological freedom (it is infinite), this is what makes us human and this freedom *cannot* be reduced or limited. We would not be human if we were not ontologically free. Our *liberté* is our freedom from essence, our lack of being, our transcendence or our ‘emptiness’ – it is the freedom from the given and the lack of determination, the indeterminacy, that lies at the heart of our existence and, to suggest that this could be altered or reduced, is to suggest that we could be determined or fixed. Our ontological freedom (our *liberté*) remains *infinite*; it cannot be touched or altered without making us into ‘things’. However, our capacity to *recognise* and *engage* with this freedom (our *puissance*) can be limited, as can our capacity to act on our situation, and, as Andrew argues, “for Beauvoir, everyone is equally *metaphysically* capable of

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<sup>190</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p91.



freedom. However, [some] are situated in ways that make it less likely that they can *act on their freedom*".<sup>191</sup>

Arp also disagrees with Kruk's interpretation of the potential for ontological freedom to be reduced, and her position is that "... even the most severely oppressed, always retain their ontological freedom" and it is this freedom that makes us human.<sup>192</sup> De Beauvoir maintains the irreducibility of freedom that Sartre argues for when he says that 'the slave in chains is as free as his master', however, she overcomes the obvious faults with this claim with her account of power (*puissance*) and moral freedom (*authenticité*). Arp argues that, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir introduces the new concept of 'moral freedom' into existentialism, which is distinct from ontological (or 'natural') freedom and from 'power' or practical freedom.<sup>193</sup> She argues that the introduction of moral freedom - the "conscious affirmation of one's ontological freedom" - is able to overcome the problem posed for existential ethics by the concept of radical ontological freedom. De Beauvoir's analysis of this level of freedom provides a means to answer the criticisms that, without inherent value, there can be no basis for ethics and Arp argues that, in her examination of freedom, de Beauvoir "comes to the rescue" of existential ethics.<sup>194</sup>

### OPPRESSION

That which can be either diminished or enhanced, depending upon our situation, then, is our '*puissance*', our power, or our *effective* freedom and our capacity to recognise our ontological freedom. Crucially, this freedom can be so impacted upon that some people become oppressed. In situations of oppression, other people treat the oppressed like a 'thing' and try to deny them their ontological freedom. Because they cannot, ultimately, make the other into a thing by *removing* their ontological

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<sup>191</sup> Andrew, Barbara, 'Beauvoir's place in philosophical thought', *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card (ed.), Cambridge University Press: 2003, emphasis added.

<sup>192</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics*, Open Court: Chicago, 2001, p7.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, pp 1-3.

freedom, the way that tyrants oppress is by limiting the other's *puissance* and by denying them the capacity to *engage* with or to *affirm* their freedom. In this way, the future of the oppressed person is 'cut off', it is limited and they are unable to make decisions to affect their future.

De Beauvoir argues that what is evil about this kind of treatment is the denial of the other's freedom, the denial of their existence as a free and ambiguous being, a being that is at once subject and object:

Neither death nor suffering nor captivity are abominable in themselves. An abomination arises only at the moment that man treats fellow men like objects, when by torture, humiliation, servitude, assassination, one denies them their existence as men (*EFE*, p 248).

An important point that de Beauvoir elaborates on in her essay *An Eye for An Eye* (which she wrote to explain the reasons that she did not sign a petition by other intellectuals to pardon Robert Brasillach for his collaborationist acts during the war) is that it is other *people* who oppress. When a person deliberately tries to make another into a 'thing' a situation occurs in which "hatred grasps at another's freedom in so far as it is used to realize the *absolute evil* that is the degradation of a man into a thing" (*Ibid*).

Our capacity to develop and exercise our practical freedom is influenced from the outside (by other people) and our 'situation' is crucial to our ability to even begin to recognise our existence as fundamentally free. De Beauvoir argues that situations which result in oppression are not due to "natural" occurrences, and it is not 'things' that oppose men but "other men". Freedom is not denied by the obstacles we encounter in terms of the 'resistance of things' – in fact, in facing such obstacles the world is disclosed to us. Material obstacles such as earthquakes, floods, disease and drought can, and do, prevent us from doing and achieving certain things (practically) but, crucially, such circumstances cannot take away our meaning. It is "only man [who] can ...rob [us] of the meaning of [our] acts and [our] life because it also belongs only to him alone to confirm it in its existence, to recognize it in actual

fact as a freedom" (TEA, p82). Oppression then, is the result of other people denying us our transcendence and our ambiguous freedom, "certainly man is wretched, scattered, mired in the given, but he is also a free being" and it is when this freedom is denied that oppression occurs (EFE, p257).

The examination of what makes oppression possible is a recurring theme throughout many of de Beauvoir's texts and, in *The Second Sex*, she defines oppression as being 'immanence *inflicted* on another'. There she says that it is a 'moral fault' if the subject *consents* to being reduced to immanence, but that it results in frustration and oppression if it is *inflicted* upon him. In both cases, however, she sees reduction to immanence as an *absolute evil* (TSS, p xxxiii).

As we saw in chapter one, a spirit of seriousness is linked to a desire for solid values and de Beauvoir argues that oppression exists because people experience nostalgia for childhood; a nostalgia for a time where freedom was not recognised and absolute values confirmed our place and meaning in the world. She writes, "the misfortune which comes to man as a result of the fact that he was a child is that his freedom was first concealed from him and that all his life he will be nostalgic for the time when he did not know his exigencies" (TEA, p40). Others take care of us as children and we follow the rules set by parents and other adults, rules which seem to us to be fixed. Children are, of course, ontologically free (as we all are), but they are not *accountable* for their actions nor for their failure to recognise their freedom because their situation is such that it is not yet revealed to them.<sup>195</sup> As de Beauvoir writes:

Childhood is a particular sort of situation: it is a natural situation whose limits are not created by other men and which is thereby not comparable to a situation of oppression; it is a situation which is common to all men and which is temporary for all; therefore, it does not represent a limit which cuts off the individual from his possibilities, but, on the contrary, the moment of

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<sup>195</sup> See also, Langer, Monika, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p97.

a development in which new possibilities are won. The child is ignorant because he has not yet had the time to acquire knowledge, not because this time has been refused him (TEA, p141).

With adolescence, however, comes the discovery of freedom and responsibility; each must begin to *choose* how to live one's newly discovered freedom and "the individual must at last assume his subjectivity" (TEA, p39). The response of the adolescent can either be a retreat from or an embracing of freedom and the responsibility that comes with it (and will most often be a movement between these two responses). De Beauvoir acknowledges that this is a confusing and often difficult time for most and she describes it thus:

Whatever the joy of this liberation may be; it is not without great confusion that the adolescent finds himself cast into a world which is no longer ready-made; he is abandoned, unjustified, the prey of freedom that is no longer chained up by anything (TEA, p39).

Because subjects experience this confusion and nostalgia for a time when they were not held responsible for their actions, many seek to find rules and values to replace those they have lost. Religion, social norms, moral rules and values provide the safety of escape from freedom and, when the contingency of such values is denied and they are held as absolutes, oppression becomes possible. To secure the self, as we have seen, requires that we also secure the other in the place that we are comfortable with. Securing the 'self' and the moral values and rules that provide safety requires that we deny our ambiguity in favour of absolutes.

#### *THE IMPACT OF OTHERS*

Oppression, then, is a situation in which a person is limited in terms of their capacity to engage with their freedom, by other people or by institutions established and maintained by others. A person who has a physical disability, for example, is not 'oppressed' by the disability, as this is part of their complex, worldly situation. As long as they are still free to choose how they respond to this situation they can still have practical freedom and their ontological freedom can be lived with

*authenticité*. Likewise, a woman is not 'oppressed' by her body or by her maternity. Oppression occurs when other people maintain institutions and belief systems that disallow certain others to have an open future in which they can 'take-up' their fully recognised ontological freedom. Oppression occurs when people are treated as though determined wholly by external forces, which limits their capacity for free choice. As de Beauvoir argues in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "freedom realises itself only by engaging itself in the world" (TEA, p29) and this interaction with the world gives a 'content' to freedom. For de Beauvoir "life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation" (TEA, p83). The oppressed are "those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity" for whom life is "a pure repetition of mechanical gestures" (TEA, p82-83). As de Beauvoir notes, a favoured task of political oppression has been to condemn subordinates to performing meaningless tasks in order to undermine their humanity and crush their spirits:

There is no more obnoxious way to punish a man than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him, as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely, when one makes soldiers who are being punished march up and down, or when one forces a schoolboy to copy lines (TEA, 30-31).

Arp argues that oppression consists in "denying one the ability to develop moral freedom by creating a future of one's own in joint projects with others" and that this can be done by "curtailing a person's power or ability to interact with the material world".<sup>196</sup> This means that the appropriate definition of oppression consists not in the purely material circumstances of an individual. It lies also in their capacity to determine their own future and, importantly, in their capacity to see their own *ontological* freedom and to *take this up* in an ethical relation with the world.

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<sup>196</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p124.

Our practical or effective freedom (our capacity to act in the world) is affected by our history, our social location, and our cultural and economic situation. Together, all of these factors impact upon our capacity to 'take up' our ontological freedom. Our *situation* affects the way in which we are able to define our future and our engagement with the world and with others. For example, as we saw earlier in this thesis, the experience of childbirth and mothering in France in the 1940s impacted upon women's freedom due to the social expectation that the majority of women would devote their lives to having babies and being mothers and wives. This, as well as legislation governing abortion and contraception, limited the choice of many women to decide for themselves how to live their lives and how to experience their bodies. The external pressures of society were internalized so that many women came to think that their only option was to be married, have children and take care of the home. This was not seen as a choice, but as destiny.<sup>197</sup> Their ontological freedom remained unchanged (they still remained free of an 'essence' that defined them or determined their being) but they were cut off from realising it. Therefore, women were not able to fully *engage* with their ontological freedom because society determined them as material beings and their futures were limited practically by the institutions with which they must interact. These women were, therefore, oppressed.

De Beauvoir argues that, conversely, men have traditionally been able to live their freedom more than women due to the social and institutional limits imposed upon women because of the particular bodies they have. She argues that man "has many more concrete opportunities to project his freedom in the world" due to the social circumstances in which he exists (TSS, p638).<sup>198</sup> It is important to note here that these

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<sup>197</sup> Fredrika Scarth discusses the distinction de Beauvoir makes between 'enforced maternity' and "*maternite libre*". The latter term describes maternity carried out 'in freedom', which can occur if legislation and social circumstances are such that women can freely chose to conceive a child and give birth, rather than having this forced upon her by her situation. Scarth, Fredrika, 'The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir, *Hypatia*, Summer 2006, Vol. 21, Issue 3, pp 217-223.

<sup>198</sup> Although I agree with de Beauvoir's underlying point here about institutions limiting the capacity of certain groups and individuals to take up their freedom, I would argue that many men have also been limited because social expectation has also defined masculinity in

are 'concrete' opportunities and she is not referring to a reduction of ontological freedom but, rather, to how this freedom is engaged with or 'practiced', to the opportunity to freely engage in chosen projects. She is not arguing that it is women's *bodies* that oppress them, but the way in which their bodies are inscribed with social meanings in particular situations. As Gatens describes it, oppression is a situation in which social values impact upon the material well-being of an individual such that their life-chances are limited to a greater extent than others.<sup>199</sup> We saw in the previous chapter that women have, traditionally, had their life-chances limited because of the way in which their bodies have been interpreted within patriarchy.

De Beauvoir is not arguing that women should be more like men – or that all humans should live a particular way – but that some men have been in a position that enables them to live their freedom more 'freely' than women because of their social location and the way their bodies are interpreted. An important point to note is that all those men who do not recognise their own ambiguity, and who deny the ambiguity of women, have been living *inauthentically* because they have not willingly 'taken up' their freedom. Moreover, it should be noted that the concept of masculinity described in *The Second Sex* is also problematic for many men, as well as for women, because it is a conception of masculinity based upon a denial of freedom and a solidification of value.

Here then, we see that *authenticité*, which is the 'moral' element of freedom, is not so much another 'level' of freedom as Arp suggests, but a recognition of our ambiguous freedom and a willing assertion of this. *Authenticité* requires action on our part; it requires reflection *and* effort. It is not enough for one to be ontologically free and practically free, to be *authentique* a person must recognise their ambiguity and willingly assume it.

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a particular and limited way and has denied the ambiguity of their situation. The equation of man with rationality and reason is just as problematic as the equation of women with emotion and the body – as both deny the ambiguity of the human condition.

<sup>199</sup> Gatens, Moira, 'Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look', in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card, (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2003.

## MYSTIFICATION

Although she is critical of those who fail to take up their freedom once they become aware of it, de Beauvoir also acknowledges the possibility of an existence which does not recognise its own freedom at all due to its situation. She writes of such a situation:

...certain adults can live in the universe of the serious in all honesty, for example, those who are denied all instruments of escape, those who are enslaved or who are mystified. The less economic and social circumstances allow an individual to act upon the world, the more his world appears to him as given (TEA, pp47-48).

Those who exist in such a state of mystification are oppressed and their practical freedom is severely limited by their economic and social circumstances and, also, they are unable to 'assume' or 'affirm' their ontological freedom because they have not been able to recognise it. De Beauvoir argues that "ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls" and that there are some who "have no instrument to attack the civilization which oppresses them". Therefore, their behaviour "can be judged only in this situation" (TEA, p38). Their capacity to recognise and express their ontological ambiguity is diminished and in such circumstances it becomes the task of the "enlightened" to reveal their freedom to them.

Langer argues that, for de Beauvoir, the acknowledgement that people can remain in a child-like state of mystification means that it is possible for a person to "have their freedom destroyed".<sup>200</sup> However, whilst I agree that one's effective freedom or power can be limited, I assert that on de Beauvoir's account one's ontological freedom is never 'destroyed', even if one is oblivious to it because, as she says, our *liberté* is infinite. It is *impossible* for this freedom to be destroyed, for this would require a person to have fixed meaning and value, to have an 'essence' or inherent existence that preceded their being in the world and that was independent of their situation – if one 'lost' their ontological freedom they would become a 'thing'.

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<sup>200</sup> Langer, Monika, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity', p99.



Oppression and mystification are possible because people can have their ontological and practical freedom denied and hidden from them – so that they remain in a position where they are unable to *engage with* and *respond to* their ontological freedom. People cannot, however, *lose* their ontological freedom.

Whilst she sees much that is worthwhile in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Arp argues that de Beauvoir's theory of freedom still "comes up short" with regard to her ability to account for the moral status of the oppressed.<sup>201</sup> She argues that, for de Beauvoir, those who are oppressed have a lesser moral status than those who are free to assume and take up their ontological freedom in practical ways. Arp interprets this as meaning that, for de Beauvoir, those in such a situation have less capacity to develop moral freedom and that their moral status is somehow affected.<sup>202</sup>

I argue that the point de Beauvoir aims to make here is that, like many of the women she describes in *The Second Sex*, those who are so oppressed that they cannot even see their ontological freedom (those who are mystified) are not guilty of a moral *fault* but are victims of circumstances which deny them the ability to act *authentically*. If one is raised to believe that a higher being or a higher power (such as God or Nature) has determined their lives, and this belief is instilled from birth through every social institution and expectation encountered, then they can hardly be held accountable for believing this. As we saw above, "ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls" and de Beauvoir recognises that there are some (including slaves of the eighteenth century and some women of the harem) who "have no instrument to attack the civilization which oppresses them". She states that the behaviour of such people "*can be judged only in this situation*" (TEA, p38, my emphasis) and that "certain adults live in the universe of the serious *in all honesty*" (TEA, p47-48).

There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of

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<sup>201</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p119.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p123.

breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. Like the child, they can exercise freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them (TEA, p37).

It is only when one *recognises* the possibility of freedom and resignedly *denies* it that a moral *culpability* is implied (Ibid). It is when one *consents* to one's infantilisation or oppression that one is considered morally culpable. If one *does* recognise one's freedom, one can either persist in 'the vain desire to be' or one can 'actively make oneself a lack of being'. The key is that one must *first* be in a position to be able to recognise one's ambiguous freedom.

It could be argued that, if we are to grant that some people cannot be held accountable for their beliefs if they exist in a situation of mystification, that such an account could excuse Nazism. De Beauvoir deals with this question in *An Eye for an Eye*, where she says that "one cannot hate those youthful 16 year old followers of Hitler in whom Nazism affirmed itself with such savage violence, but who never had the possibility of criticizing it" (EFE, p256). In this work, de Beauvoir examines the point of view of what she calls charity, where it can be argued that to judge the actions of another "one would have to bring...his entire past - the totality of his engagement in the world - into account" to understand his conduct. There she says that, from the point of view of charity, "one could explain even Hitler's conduct if one knew him well enough" (EFE, p255). De Beauvoir grants that in instances of petty crime in particular it is wise to consider the totality of the 'criminal's' circumstances to make a decision on whether or not to punish or to seek rehabilitation. However, she argues that there are cases "in which no redemption appears possible, because the evil that one runs up against is an absolute evil. Here [she says] we reject the point of view of charity" (EFE, p257). Such situations in which charity should be rejected are those in which "a man deliberately tries to degrade man by reducing him to a thing" and in such cases "nothing can compensate for the abomination he causes to erupt on earth" because it is there that "the sole sin against man" resides (EFE, p257). In these cases, the perpetrator does not recognise the other as a subject but as a *thing*.

Because existentialism denies the possibility of a supreme punishment by God, de Beauvoir acknowledges that it is up to us to effect punishment for such evil, to hold the perpetrator responsible for his acts. She explains that it is for this reason that she did not sign the petition to try to save Brasillach. However, she tells us that she considered the evidence in coming to her decision; how his actions fitted with his life and other political views and that she did not wish for him to die but could not excuse his behaviour because he could have decided to do other than he did. He freely chose to act in a way that lead to the deaths of others, his decision was a choice and he demonstrated an assumption of his freedom and, therefore, 'owned up' to his punishment (Ibid).

There are various situations and various ways in which people respond to their freedom, if they are aware of it, and de Beauvoir does grant that some are positioned such that they are not aware in *any* way of their freedom. As described above, however, de Beauvoir sees the progression from childhood (where the child is free from responsibility and his world appears to be truly given) to adolescence (where freedom begins to reveal itself and responsibility emerges) to be a natural one, so that the majority of people – unless severely oppressed – would, at least in some way, begin to experience their existential freedom. What she tells us in *An Eye for an Eye* is that in all circumstances we must consider the overall situation in our assessment of the 'guilt' of the perpetrator and consider whether or not their actions resulted in another being treated as a 'thing'. How we are to make decisions upon what stage of recognition one is at will not, of course, be a simple matter and, as with de Beauvoir's theory more generally, we are not provided with simple answers about 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'bad' but advised to consider actions within their complex situations.

#### OVERCOMING INDIVIDUALISM – THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS

As we can see in the above discussion of the different levels of freedom, the ambiguity of our condition means that we are both free and dependent at the same time. We are born without an 'essence' and our being is not determined, but we are situated in a 'collectivity' in which we depend on others and on which meaning

depends. We must, therefore, recognise our own and others freedom in a reciprocal relation, because, if we (as human) are ontologically free, then so are the others around us.

De Beauvoir argues that “only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity” (TEA, p71). What she means by this is that we must define our projects and understand value and meaning in relation to others with whom we share the world. On their own our projects do not have a full meaning, this meaning is given by others and maintained or dissolved in the future by others. De Beauvoir’s insistence that each subject is both free (transcendent) and dependent (immanent) means that she cannot be accused of accepting a ‘radical freedom’, because such a freedom denies dependence. For de Beauvoir, value comes from freedom but meaning develops in context, with others. The other gives meaning to my projects and I need others to “attest to [my] finite presence” (PC, p113.)

Ontological freedom is, throughout de Beauvoir’s work, distinct from (though intimately connected to) our capacity to act ‘freely’ in the world. As Debra Bergoffen maintains:

When Beauvoir identifies us with freedom, she is not using the term to designate the process by which we decide to do one thing rather than another. She is using it to designate the transcending nature of our being. As human I am perpetually transcending myself toward a yet to be defined future in which I seek to establish myself in my concrete particularity.<sup>203</sup>

Bergoffen argues that de Beauvoir’s development of the concept of situated freedom allows her to answer the question “how can I, a radically free being who is existentially severed from all other human freedoms, transcend the isolations of freedom to create a community of allies?”<sup>204</sup> Our *situation* impacts upon the way in

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<sup>203</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, 'Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cineas*' in *Simone de Beauvoir Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds.), University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 2004, p83.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p85.

which we experience our freedom and, whilst this is the case for all of us, certain social institutions allow some to live their freedom more 'freely' than others.

In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, de Beauvoir notes that my actions are continually defining and re-defining my future and my presence in the world and that "we never act except by creating limits for ourselves" (PC, p121). As she says, "Immobile or in action, we always weigh upon the earth. Every refusal is a choice, every silence has a voice. Our very passivity is willed; in order to not choose, we still must choose. It is impossible to escape" (PC, p 126). Whilst these comments do appear rather Sartrean in tone (we cannot *escape* our responsibility, we are *condemned* to be free) and she does not here account for the limits of oppression and mystification, in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir addresses this with a more nuanced account of freedom and our capacity to choose our actions. Her point here is two-fold, however. Firstly, everything I do has an impact on the world (no matter how insignificant) and upon others and, secondly, I am not *determined* to be any particular way. If I choose not to act, that is still an 'action' in the sense that I must decide *not* to move and because I could have decided to do something else.

#### AN OPEN FUTURE

This theme, of the importance of the other to my sense of self, is taken up again in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. There de Beauvoir writes, "To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (TEA, p91, emphasis added). She links 'individual' freedom with that of others, arguing that without them, my future would be closed, "...my freedom, in order to fulfil itself, requires that it emerges into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me; it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future" (TEA, p82). Equally, I define and open the future for others. To limit or close off this opening is unethical, as it denies ontological freedom and assigns future possibilities as though they were determined from 'elsewhere'.

It could be argued that *whatever* I do closes off some possibilities for the future as much as it opens them and this was de Beauvoir's point when she said "we never act except by creating limits for ourselves". Our choices foreclose certain possibilities as they open up others. Closing off the other's future is more than just the closing off that occurs when I choose to act in one way however (in choosing one potential employee over another for example). It involves denying the other the ability to engage with their freedom by making them into a 'thing' and treating them as collateral or as means to an end. Closing off the other's future entails denying their ambiguity, seeing them as an object and treating them as such. As Arp argues the "meaning bestowed by the future on my actions comes from other free subjects who in concert with or in opposition to me create the future in the present through their projects and plans".<sup>205</sup> Oppression, therefore, becomes possible, as one can deny this open-ended future and instead limit and restrict others from freely choosing to move toward an open future. For example, when institutionalised racism and sexism severely limit the capacity of people of a particular 'race' and people of a particular sex from choosing their futures. When laws and social institutions operate such that, according to them, certain individuals and groups are seen to exist only in terms of their race or their sex, then these individuals are denied an open future and thus the freedom to transcend their immanence.

De Beauvoir argues that in the case of such mystification, where someone has no access to even conceive of, let alone begin to change, then "it is necessary to bring the seed of his liberation to him from the outside; his submission is not enough to justify the tyranny which is imposed upon him" (TEA, p85). A person's own judgement of whether or not they are oppressed is not enough to determine if oppression actually exists in their case. Her claim is that it *can* be determined by someone else from the 'outside', even though removing them from their situation may well be against the explicit wishes of the oppressed. For example, feminists may view the situation of a woman living in a harem to be a situation of oppression, while the women of the harem may not consider themselves to be oppressed. In

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<sup>205</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p71.

such a case, the decision to intervene is made from 'the outside' without a call for help from the "oppressed".

One has to tread very carefully here, as it is easy to see how quickly the 'protection' and 'liberation' of others from tyranny can be used as an excuse for acts of violence against the 'oppressor'. In an acknowledgement of this point de Beauvoir writes:

Certainly it is not a question of throwing men in spite of themselves, under the pretext of liberation, into a new world, one which they have not chosen, on which they have no grip...these false liberations overwhelm those who are their victims as if they were a new blow of blind fate (TEA, p85-86).

We must, according to de Beauvoir, put the oppressed 'in the presence' of their freedom and then leave it up to them to attain liberation. We cannot *force* people to be free and we must respect the other's decision as to whether or not they should attain liberation. As *authentique* subjects, we have a responsibility to ensure that others have the possibility to attain practical freedom and to develop *authenticité* by engaging with their freedom. However, we cannot force them to take up either aspect of their existence. If someone *chooses* to deny their ontological freedom and to live without practical freedom, they are choosing to live in bad faith and, although we should work towards helping them to see the possibilities of an *authentique* acceptance of ambiguity, we cannot *make* them live this *authenticité*. All we can do is to encourage them to choose to embrace it.

## COMPLICITY

De Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* that:

In truth...the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change (TSS 19)

Whilst she does argue that many women are placed in a situation which prevents them from fully engaging with their freedom, and that some live in a state of

mystification, de Beauvoir argues that, for others, it is far easier to remain in *bad faith* than to accept responsibility for one's own future:

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be party to the deal - this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the *metaphysical risk of a liberty* in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance (TSS, p21, emphasis added).

In this sense, women are no different from men in terms of the various ways in which they can choose to respond to their freedom, once they recognise it. Many women have happily sought to maintain the status quo in order to evade facing freedom and the effort this would entail. This does not mean that women are in any way *more* culpable, but that they are situated (metaphysically) in the same way as the men with whom they share the world. That is, they are ontologically free and practically situated.

#### RESPONDING TO OPPRESSION

Of course, when one denies universal value and ethics, the question can be raised as to how we decide, if there are no universal values and laws, when is it ethical to intervene in the situation of others? The question can be asked - under what circumstances should I act to bring about changes in a situation that I believe is impinging on the freedom of another? According to Arp, de Beauvoir's key to determining whether or not it is moral to intervene on behalf of another, or to intervene in their decisions, is to ascertain "whether or not an act works to open up a future for the person involved".<sup>206</sup> De Beauvoir illustrates this point in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*:

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<sup>206</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p107.



An individual lives in a situation of falsehood; the falsehood is violence, tyranny: shall I tell the truth in order to free the victim? It would first be necessary to create a situation of such a kind that the truth might be bearable and that, though losing his illusions, the deluded individual might again find about him reasons for hoping (TEA, p143).

It is not enough to alter the situation of the oppressed (by removing the perpetrator or the victim for example) without first ensuring that the new situation is one in which the victim will have the possibility to act freely to determine his or her own future. To remove someone from a situation in which he or she lacks freedom, and to place that victim into *another* situation in which they lack freedom is not liberation. As de Beauvoir says, "To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other... as a freedom so that his end may be freedom; in using this conducting wire one will have to incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution" (TEA, p142). This also reflects her emphasis that there is no 'one size fits all' answer when it comes to ethics, and that we must continually question our assumptions and our ends when deciding how to act.

As discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters of this thesis, there are countless examples of what we would now term 'cultural imperialism' in colonial encounters, where colonisers justified interfering in indigenous people's customs and lives for the 'benefit' of the indigenous women and children in that society. Historically, the policies that lead to the removal of indigenous children from their families in Australia is an example of an attempt by many at 'beneficence' which, one can see with hindsight, resulted in huge problems for indigenous families that still have repercussions today.<sup>207</sup> De Beauvoir acknowledges the potential for such

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<sup>207</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, tabled in Australian Federal Parliament, 26 May 1997. The Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families examined the past laws, practices and policies that resulted in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and the effects of those laws, practices and policies. The inquiry also made recommendations on the appropriateness of current laws, policies and practices relating to the placement and care of Aboriginal children in Australia.

problems and warns against taking an attitude of the “enlightened elite” who decide for others that they should be “freed from the burden of backwardness” (TEA, p138).

#### AVOIDING PATERNALISM

While we should all work towards ensuring that others are free to engage with their futures, it is still the case that one cannot be *forced* to be free and de Beauvoir argues strongly against paternalism. She says:

We [existentialists] object to the inquisitors who want to create faith and virtue from without; we object to all forms of fascism which seek to fashion the happiness of man from without; and also the paternalism which thinks that it has done something for man by prohibiting him from certain possibilities of temptation, whereas what is necessary is to give him reasons for resisting it (TEA, p138)

The aim when making decisions about how to interact with others is to avoid paternalism, where we assume that our way of life and knowledge is superior to others and that we can ‘fix’ their problems for them from the outside. As we will see in the following chapter, this paternalistic attitude has been characteristic of colonisation processes and, also, is evident in feminisms which fail to recognise differences amongst women.

Paternalism rests on the assumption that the ends and values I aspire to are absolute and universal and that, therefore, all should aspire to these in order to live a good life. Paternalism is, therefore, another manifestation of a spirit of seriousness and reflects a failure to *authentically* engage with freedom. This can be the case even when one believes that one’s actions are morally sound and virtuous.

#### AN ETHICS BASED UPON AMBIGUOUS FREEDOM

We have seen that, although fundamental ambiguity is the universal condition of humanity, de Beauvoir argues that philosophers have traditionally tried to mask this aspect of the human situation. Rather than celebrating ambiguity as ‘possibility’

they have *denied* it by creating and maintaining dualisms which privilege one aspect of the duality over the other. This masking has been characterised by a striving “to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance” (TEA, p7), and, according to de Beauvoir, those philosophers who have accepted the ‘dualism’:

... have established a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot be saved. They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or again they have denied life, considering it as a veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of Nirvana (TEA, pp 7-8).

As we have seen, her aim is to reveal how an ethics is possible *without* absolute meaning and inherent value and her focus is on examining the possibility of developing an ethics for the situated individual based on freedom, not for prescribing overarching universal morals. She writes in a criticism of Universalist prescriptive ethics, “... [t]he Stoics impugned the ties of family, friendship and nationality so that they recognised only the universal form of man. But man is man only through *situations* whose particularity is *precisely* a universal fact” (TEA, p144, emphasis added).

Much like Merleau-Ponty, in his critique of empiricism and intellectualism’s failure to account for fundamental features of bodily experience (including motility and perception), de Beauvoir argues that traditional ethics have failed due to the underlying desire of those prescribing ethical principles to escape their fundamental ambiguity. She writes:

...the ethics which [philosophers] have proposed to their disciples has always pursued the same goal. It has been a matter of eliminating the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness *or* pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world *or* by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity *or* enclosing oneself in the pure moment (TEA, p8, *emphasis added*).

De Beauvoir is here illustrating a tendency toward bifurcation in traditional philosophical thought, which is exemplified by dualisms that *deny* our fundamentally ambiguous freedom. As Monika Langer argues, both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir were arguing for ambiguity in a situation where Cartesian philosophy had sought to eliminate it, “because it considers uncertainty and indistinctness to be highly undesirable epistemologically and ethically”.<sup>208</sup>

When a subject experiences their irreducible freedom (and the responsibility that comes with this) they have a tendency to feel fear and anxiety in the face of it and to attempt to ‘flee’ their freedom by creating the illusion of absolute meanings and values for themselves and for others. By denying their own freedom and the freedom of others they aim to ‘overcome’ this *Angst* and to dispel the weight of responsibility that comes with it. Importantly, this denial can take the form of reifying the material *or* the ‘mental’ – and those who deny *either* aspect of the human condition are seen to be living in bad faith.

Although traditional philosophical accounts have tended to refuse to acknowledge the ambiguous condition of human existence, de Beauvoir argues that it is with the fundamental ambiguity that lies at the heart of all existence, that we must *begin* in order to develop an appropriate ethics. She argues that we cannot locate a reason for acting or the strength to live in abstract universal principles, nor in reductive accounts of ‘self’ that seek to find an essence to explain existence. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she attempts to demonstrate that existentialism *can* provide for an ethics that entails a responsibility towards and a connection with others and she argues that in such an ethics:

...freedom realises itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man’s project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behaviour...To will freedom and to will to disclose being are one and the same thing (TEA, p78).

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<sup>208</sup> Langer, Monika, ‘Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card, (ed), Cambridge University Press, 2003, p89.

I will return to this theme in the final chapter of this thesis, where I examine in more detail the ways in which de Beauvoir puts forward a life-affirming philosophy whilst remaining true to the existential conviction that the world is devoid of inherent value. There I examine further how we can balance our irreducible ontological freedom with our need for, and our responsibility to, others.

## SUMMARY

The first section of this thesis has been concerned with examining the concepts of ambiguity, freedom and *authenticité* and with how these concepts intersect to form the basis for a sophisticated and plausible contemporary ethics. The purpose of examining these concepts is to demonstrate that an existential ethics, as developed by de Beauvoir, has something to offer us in contemporary society. Following de Beauvoir's method of analysing the way in which philosophy and the 'everyday' are interconnected, the next section will look at the ways in which philosophical understandings of ambiguity impact upon the everyday lives of people *in the world*. As Debra Bergoffen argues, de Beauvoir begins with concrete, situated individuals and expands out to analyse the human condition, which includes examination of subjectivity, our relations and relatedness with others and our embeddedness in the world.<sup>209</sup> For de Beauvoir, philosophy is lived, it colours and shapes our world and our relations with others and it is not an 'abstract theoretical system' developed in isolation from the world.

De Beauvoir's focus on the importance of the other is an example of her attempt to reveal the potential for joy in existence – in contrast to the miserablism that Sartre was criticised for. Bergoffen notes that the theme of joy in our relations with others, which contrasts with Sartrean conception that 'hell is other people', is evident in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and is taken up and further developed in *The Second Sex*. She writes that de Beauvoir's ethic "is permeated by a mood foreign to Sartre's

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<sup>209</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, "Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cineas*" in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds.) Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p80.

writings..." that is, the mood of "joy".<sup>210</sup> Bergoffen argues that *The Second Sex* should be read with the following question in mind "what are the communicative possibilities of the human situation?". I do not wish to dwell specifically on the notion of the erotic here, but on what Bergoffen rightly acknowledges as a key component of de Beauvoir's ethics, that is, her analysis of the possibility of joy in our relation with others – a joy that is possible even with acceptance of the fundamental freedom that underpins existence. Existentialism, for de Beauvoir, does not entail a denial of meaning, relationships and joy but on the contrary, allows for these to occur by recognising that tensions that is implied in ambiguity. We will see in the final chapter that this joy can be further developed as a sense of wonder – as a disclosure of the world.

Some of the key themes taken up thus far include: the need for an unearthing of implicit metaphysical assumptions within both feminism and philosophy; a rethinking of the importance of the body to understandings of self; a rethinking of self-other relations that are not (necessarily) based upon conflict; and the idea of self as ambiguous and relational.

The following chapters will demonstrate that, far from being a philosophical abstraction, an ontological misunderstanding of the self-other relation can be revealed in sexism, racism, homophobia, oppression and political tyranny. The misunderstanding of the connections between ambiguity, *authenticité* and freedom is what supports religious and political persecution and prejudice. To reiterate my earlier arguments: the problem that we are addressing is the failure to recognise our ambiguous freedom and to instead posit an 'authentic' (inherent) 'self' and - against (or in opposition to) this self – to posit a reified 'other' or 'others' whose authenticity is measured in relation to particular values and characteristics.

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<sup>210</sup> Bergoffen, Debra 'Out from Under: Beauvoir's Philosophy of the Erotic' in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, Simons, Margaret, (ed.), The Pennsylvania University Press: Pennsylvania, 1995, p185.

**SECTION TWO:  
EXPLORING THE CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION  
OF AN ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY**

If a theory convinced me, it did not remain exterior to me, it changed my relation to the world, coloured my experience....for me *philosophy was a living reality*

(Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, p254)

## CHAPTER FOUR: RECLAIMING AMBIGUITY FOR A FEMINIST *AUTHENTICITÉ*

[p]erhaps it is now time to stand back from that familiar content [of issues concerning 'women'] in order to get a clearer idea of what might have emerged as distinctive about the practice of feminist philosophy, and to ask whether that practice might appropriately be broadened to take account of other pressing issues of contemporary societies

(Genevieve Lloyd)<sup>211</sup>

[Through an engagement between feminist philosophy and other areas] entrenched assumptions on both sides will be opened to new challenges, their adequacy will be tested and they will be enriched by alternative perspectives

(Alison Jagger and Iris Marion Young)<sup>212</sup>

In this chapter I argue that feminist philosophy has not been immune to the problematic assumptions about self-other relations discussed in the first part of this thesis, and that the current aim of feminist philosophy must be to examine how such understandings affect our social and political lives. I touched on this subject in chapter two, with my examination of the receptions of de Beauvoir's work and the different interpretations given by Moira Gatens of de Beauvoir's existential account of the body. Building on this previous analysis, the major thrust of my argument in this current chapter is that contemporary social philosophy and feminism needs to reclaim the concept of an ambiguous freedom in order to develop an *authentique* way in which to speak about the experience of men and women within particular contexts.

As has been examined in the first section of this thesis, de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity provides a valuable framework for re-thinking self-other relations and

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<sup>211</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve, 'No-One's Land: Australia and the Philosophical Imagination', *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000, p26.

<sup>212</sup> Jagger, Alison, and Young, Iris Marion, *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing: London, 2000.



the way in which ethical action depends upon an appropriate understanding of this relation. De Beauvoir wrote, in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*:

My relationships with things are not given, are not fixed; I create them minute by minute. Some die, some are born and others are revived. They are constantly changing ... Thus our relationship with the world is not decided from the onset; it is we who decide. But we do not arbitrarily decide just anything. What I surpass is always my past and the object such as it exists within that past. My future envelopes that past; the former cannot build itself without the latter (PC, p94).

As we saw above, de Beauvoir's examination of the way in which a subject is temporally, materially and historically situated in the world allows for a philosophy that can explain oppression whilst maintaining freedom. Her ambiguously embodied subject is *in* and *of* the world but is always more than this because of the subject's capacity to transcend into to an open future, in which there is always the potential for situations to be lived and interpreted differently. It is this recognition that allows for recognition of the significant differences that define subjects in the world, without resulting in reification of this difference.

#### GOING BEYOND THE 'WOMAN' QUESTION: A WORLD OF COMPLEX RELATIONS

This chapter affirms, as others such as Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens have argued, that feminism ought to go beyond an explicit focus on 'women' in order to have relevance to contemporary socio-political situations. In this context, feminist strategies of questioning assumptions (about female identity and social relations) can (and should) be applied to broader questions about human being-in-the-world and our relations with others.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> See for example Genevieve Lloyd's, 'No-One's Land: Australia and the Philosophical Imagination', *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000, pp 26-39 and Mary Walsh's interview with Gatens, 'Twenty years since "a critique of the sex/gender distinction": a conversation with Moira Gatens', in *Australian Feminist Studies*, Volume 19, Number 44, July 2004, pp 213-224.

Although there is an explicit focus on women in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir's work is an attempt to examine more broadly how humans make and understand meaning in an ambiguous world and how we should respond to each other based on recognition of this ambiguity. As we see in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the responsibility of each person to the others with whom we share this world is a strong theme for de Beauvoir and our *authenticité* depends upon accepting the responsibility that comes with our fundamental freedom. There she writes:

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 (TEA, p9).

The foundational points of de Beauvoir's philosophy, as outlined in the preceding chapters, can be utilised to support the contemporary feminist call for an unearthing and rethinking of the assumptions that are implicit within traditional Western philosophy. Ambiguity allows us to examine how, as women, we exist in this particular society, in this particular age and what our female bodies mean for us now. In addition, importantly, it *also* allows us to think about what our bodies might mean for us in an open future because, as de Beauvoir says, "when we have to do with a being whose nature is transcendent action, we can never close the books" (TSS, p66).

#### WHAT IS FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY?

Alison Jagger and Iris Marion Young define feminist philosophy as "a body of scholarship which began in the early 1970s as one branch of women's studies... [with an initial goal of] ending the invisibility of women in much disciplinary knowledge".<sup>214</sup> Jagger and Young maintain that feminist philosophy has "helped transform basic philosophical paradigms in many subfields", with feminists initially

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<sup>214</sup> Jagger, Alison, M, and Young, Iris Marion, (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing:London, 2000, p 1.

using the existing tools and techniques of philosophy to address issues of specific concern to women.<sup>215</sup>

It is contestable, however, that feminist philosophy began in the 1970s, and feminist thought has certainly had a much longer history than thirty or forty years. Within Australia (as with the United States and the United Kingdom) feminist theory has developed through many stages. Feminist arguments are evident in the early claims for liberal equality between the sexes made by Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriett Taylor in the eighteenth century, in the suffrage movement of the nineteenth century, and the Women's Liberation movement that gained such momentum in the 1970s.<sup>216</sup>

It is difficult to define what feminism, feminist theory or feminist philosophy is and perhaps we should be content to say, as Moira Gatens has noted, "There is not *a* feminist theory but feminist *theories*."<sup>217</sup> For the purposes of this chapter I will define feminist philosophy broadly as a philosophy concerned with examining particular questions about women and their relationship to the world, in terms of their physical, epistemological and ontological existence. Feminist philosophy examines how social, political, and philosophical thought has impacted on what it *means* to be a woman and how this impacts, practically, on the lives of women in the world.

What is of concern to feminist philosophy and feminist theory is the question of how one should understand 'sexed being'. Most often, the focus of feminist thought has been on such questions as what it means to be *female*, to be a *woman*, or to have a woman's body and history in a particular social milieu. The answers to these questions differ markedly, however, and, as we saw in chapter two, Gatens has been critical of many feminist theorists for limiting themselves by *extending* existing philosophical theories to try to explain the social condition of women. The result of

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> For a historical account of the developments and divergences in Australian Feminism see Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: A History of Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin: New South Wales, 1999.

<sup>217</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Equality and Difference*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p1.

the method of extension has been a tendency within feminism to remain caught within an 'equality' or 'difference' debate when it comes to understanding women's experience. What Gatens and other contemporary feminists seek to explore is a way beyond this rift, so that women's experience can be understood outside of this binary, which (as de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty have both helped us see) has its roots in deeply held philosophical dichotomies. Gatens' main criticism of feminist theory has been that it does not delve deeply enough in its engagement with philosophy and does not question the metaphysics and epistemologies it takes up, which are presumed to be 'sex neutral'.<sup>218</sup>

While a thorough analysis of the development of feminist philosophy over time is not necessary here, I will briefly examine some of the key differences in feminist thought and the conceptions of existence that underpin them. I also want to look at the way in which these conceptions are important to the either/or debate evident in feminism and to demonstrate that de Beauvoir's ambiguous freedom provides a means to move beyond it.

#### LIBERAL FEMINISM

Liberal feminism has its historical foundations in the late eighteenth century (with Wollstonecraft, Taylor and Mill) and is based on two primary principles. Firstly, that one can (and should) extend the liberal conception of the individual to include women; and, secondly that women should be accepted on equal terms with men in the *public* realm. Liberal feminists argue that sex should be 'irrelevant in the public sphere' and instead seek equal treatment for all individuals *regardless* of their sex.<sup>219</sup> Put simply, this strand of feminism seeks equality for all persons based on the conception of an underlying universal reason and rationality that is seen to be common to humankind.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, p2.

<sup>219</sup> See Tapper, Marion, 'Can a Feminist be a Liberal?' in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement to Vol. 64; June 1986, pp37-38 for discussion of liberal feminism.

Although its aim is to overcome prejudice, traditional liberal theory has been criticised by feminist and other social and political philosophers for failing to account for positive difference and particularity, and for presupposing an 'autonomous' and rational subject that seems to be problematised by the evident variety of experiences and associated 'subjects'. The three main aims of John Rawls' liberal theory of justice for example, in which he introduces the idea of making ethical decisions from behind a 'veil of ignorance', are: to respect the moral equality of all persons; to 'mitigate the *arbitrariness* of natural and social contingencies'; and for all rational persons to accept responsibility for their choices.<sup>220</sup>

Liberal or 'equality' feminists have also been criticised for erasing difference in order for women to compete *equally* with 'man' in what is seen by others as a masculine world. Mary Wollstonecraft (perhaps the earliest liberal feminist) argued that both men and women had equal powers of reason and that, with equal access to education, both sexes would prove to be capable of using this reason. According to Wollstonecraft, women's emotional disposition was the result of social forces, not of nature, and she argued that improved education would overcome the limits associated with women's situation.<sup>221</sup> This argument was also taken up in the 1960s, with feminists arguing for equality in the economic and social realm.<sup>222</sup>

The classical liberal feminist aim has been to *erase* gender roles and to do away with biased gendered laws and policies in order for women to compete equally with men. On this account, 'gender' is seen to be socially constructed and related only arbitrarily to one's sex. Other liberal feminists have argued that not only should these laws and policies be changed to include women but, also, that women should be compensated for past injustices and affirmative action taken to ensure equal representation in future. For example through designated positions for women in

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<sup>220</sup> Kymlicka, Will, *Contemporary Political Philosophy An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002 (2nd Edition).

<sup>221</sup> Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Norton, 1967.

<sup>222</sup> The appeal to equality has been used by various groups, including the suffragettes and other women's groups in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

the police forces, politics, education, universities and various other public institutions.

A core component of liberal democratic theory (which is included in the United States constitution) is that “all men are created equal”. However, what is left off the end of this statement is that not all ‘men’ are created *the same*. Feminists such as bell hooks have been critical of liberal feminism (and liberal theories of the subject more broadly) for not taking into account the life experiences of non-white and poor women. Moreover, many have been critical of liberal feminism more generally for trying to extend what they see to be an already biased theory to include women, thus perpetuating the idea of a ‘rational’, sex-neutral subject and denying the significance of one’s physicality.<sup>223</sup>

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE UNIVERSAL, SEX-NEUTRAL SUBJECT

Perhaps the most problematic assumption within traditional philosophy, and that which has been unwittingly perpetuated by many feminist theorists, is that the human subject, as described and investigated by philosophical inquiry, is a *sex-neutral* or universal subject. As Marion Tapper argues:

...the problem is that, despite the *purported* sexual neutrality of those principles and values, the public is already organised in ways which not only remark sexual differences but do so in a way which privileges men and makes the public a man’s world. This is at least to the extent that it is organised around the needs of men, conceived as people abstracted from the private, domestic world, assumptions about manliness, and the assumption that it is men who occupy the public world.<sup>224</sup>

As we saw in chapter two, due to its implicit assumptions, past philosophy cannot simply be taken up (or taken-over) by feminists and *extended* to include the thus-far

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<sup>223</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*, South End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000, pp 1-2.

<sup>224</sup> Tapper, Marion, ‘Can a Feminist be a Liberal?’ in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement to Vol. 64; June 1986. Tapper rightly notes that this “leaves open the possibility that men may not be satisfied with such roles, ideals and assumptions”.

excluded woman. This is because the discipline itself has been developed within a political situation in which a particular metaphysical viewpoint, particular ideas, biases and assumptions have excluded all that is associated with “woman”, perhaps most notably, the natural, the embodied and the emotional. Therefore, these viewpoints must be brought to light and examined because, otherwise, attempts to change political and ethical relations so that women can be ‘free human subjects’, limit and confine her to following the path of traditional ‘masculinity’ (and just as significantly, limit men to this narrow understanding of the subject also).

The major point of such criticisms is that what constitutes a ‘free human subject’ has been defined within a phallogentric discourse, which assumes the transcendent masculine ideal to be the ideal for humanity. Therefore, what must be re-thought is what influences our understanding about what constitutes a ‘free human subject’. It is not only the concept of ‘femininity’ that must be assessed for its problematic metaphysical assumptions, but also the notion of ‘masculinity’ and the assumption that these two (presumably distinct) ways of being are the natural terms to which we should turn for an analysis of human subjectivity. The idea of the ‘neutral’, universal human subject is equally as inappropriate for those (many) men whose particular experience falls outside that depicted by the ‘masculine’ subject. We can see this illustrated, for example, in Franz Fanon’s description of being seen as “a Negro” on a train in France. He writes, “All I wanted was to be a man among other men. . . I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man”.<sup>225</sup> However, as Gayle Salamon suggests, being seen as *black* precludes Fanon from being viewed as a man. “Indeed”, she writes, “normative manhood is characterized by a certain anonymity, a social designation confirmed by the company of other men, an ability to meld into the throng of other men”.<sup>226</sup> Fanon’s blackness, in this situation, separates him from the other men on the train – he stands out as distinct from them, thus unable to meld into the ideal of universal man.

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<sup>225</sup> Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, 1986, pp 112–13.

<sup>226</sup> Salamon, Gayle, ‘The Place Where Life Hides Away’: Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and the Location of Bodily Being’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Volume 17, Number 2, 2006, p109.

In her examination of the relationship between feminist thought and philosophy, Gatens demonstrates that philosophy has not been a neutral system “infected” by the personal prejudices of particular philosophers. Her claim is that philosophical methodology *itself* must be questioned. As she points out, the questions asked by philosophy are “foreclosed by the method”, and the method employed will determine “what can and cannot be said about woman [and man] within the terms of particular philosophical theories”.<sup>227</sup>

Thus, the history of philosophy is identified as being “the history of man defining man as having a particular relation to some essential faculty or power”.<sup>228</sup> This power can take the form of rationality, transcendence or productive labour, and the crucial factor within philosophy is that the relation of ‘man’ to this power is seen as a fundamental aspect of his subjectivity. Problematic in the feminist aim of extending past philosophy to include women then, is the assumption that this power is sex-neutral, that it does not relate to one’s bodily-subjectivity, and that it is universally applicable to all *human* subjects.<sup>229</sup> Therefore, instead of questioning the ways in which these conceptions of power, rationality and transcendence have been constructed within philosophical discourse, the strategy of extension involves attempting to take-up and claim them as *essentially human* faculties and powers. Simply aligning ‘man’ with such definitions has neglected to account for all those (like Fanon) who have been historically excluded from active political participation due to their difference from the ‘universal human norm’; whether this difference is based upon race, age, sexuality, social position, physical ability, psychology or a conglomeration of many of these factors. The universal, ‘neutral’ human not only fails to account for many women’s experiences but fails to account for ‘difference’ at all. bell hooks articulates this point well when she asks the pertinent question:

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<sup>227</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p20.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.



“Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, *which* men do women want to be equal to?”<sup>230</sup>

As Lloyd and Gatens have posited, what is ignored in the assumption that rationality, (a particular conception of) transcendence and productive labour are universal and essentially sex-neutral attributes of human subjectivity, is that these concepts have been constructed within a dichotomous metaphysical discourse. This discourse has seen the world as being carved up into categories of opposition, with attributes such as reason, transcendence, intellect, strength and culture associated with a particular *kind* of man (namely the kind who have historically had the opportunity to become philosophers). The *opposite* of these attributes, i.e. emotion or passion, immanence, embodiment, weakness and nature have been associated with woman or the feminine.<sup>231</sup> Historically, men of a different class or racial/ethnic background have also been denied the universality of reason and rationality and have also been aligned more closely with nature and passion.

If historical accounts of subjectivity have been based on these assumptions, it is not then a simple task to merely allow woman (or the excluded male or transsexual etc.) to share in all the ‘masculine’ attributes and treat them as an ‘equal’ human being. ‘Equality’ under this guise only results in further denigration of the ‘feminine’ and with women having to make their way in a ‘masculinised’ world by overcoming or denying their difference. As mentioned earlier, the problem of much philosophical theory is the assumption of the *universal applicability* of what past philosophy has made of human nature. As Lloyd argues in *The Man of Reason*, to uncritically accept either side of the male/female dichotomy evident in philosophical thought, is to

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<sup>230</sup> hooks, bell, “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression”, in Phillips, Anne (ed) *Feminism and Equality. Readings in Social and Political Theory*, New York University Press, New York, 1987, p 62 (emphasis added).

Genevieve Lloyd has recently argued that particular groups of women are also in a position to be exclusionary towards other men and women. For example white middle-class women in their encounters with lower classes, or people of different races. In *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir also notes, the tendency of women to align themselves with those of similar race and class, rather than with the same sex.

<sup>231</sup> Tapper, Marion, ‘Can a Feminist be a Liberal?’, p38.

accept a distorted version of what femininity and masculinity are. Moreover, as Marion Tapper argues, the liberal framework forces an unnecessary choice between an outright denial of sexual difference or an admission that women are inherently different and inferior.

This either/or choice is problematic for feminist thought as it negates the ambiguity and tension we have been exploring and, instead, reinforces the perception of a mutual exclusion of the two 'aspects' of a dichotomy. Ann Snitow describes it thus:

Most feminist thought grapples unavoidably with some aspect of the equality-difference problem at both the level of theory and of strategy... Do women want to be equal to men (with the meaning of "equal" hotly contested), or do women see biology as establishing a difference that will always require a strong recognition and that might ultimately define quite separate possibilities inside "the human"?<sup>232</sup>

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir examines the emergence of different claims about women's being and argues that 'anti feminists' were, at most, "willing to grant 'equality in difference' to the other sex" (TSS, p23). However, she argues that the 'equal but separate' formula, whether applied to sex, class, race or caste, results in 'extreme discrimination' because it appeals to essentialism and that, on this account, difference is reduced to the inferior. "The *eternal feminine*", the "black soul" and the "Jewish character" are all examples for de Beauvoir of an acceptance of difference that is ultimately oppressive (TSS, p23, emphasis added). This is because each relies upon the idea of an *absolute* identity (an underlying 'soul', an 'essential' or 'eternal' character) and such absolute identities result in oppression when those seen to possess them are unable to engage fully with their fundamental freedom.

In contrast to those who demand equality in difference, de Beauvoir argues that we must move beyond such reductive and limited accounts of identity and begin anew:

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<sup>232</sup> Snitow, Ann, 'A Gender Diary', in *Conflicts in Feminism*, Marian Hirsch and Evelyn Fox-Keller (eds), Routledge: New York and London, 1990.

People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man...[However] if we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality, which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh (TSS, p27).

However, this does not mean denying, *in toto*, that such differences exist. Starting afresh means looking at how ambiguous subjects 'become' *in situation* and looking at the relationships that exist between them and the world that they share, rather than relying on age-old reductions and distinctions. On this account, starting afresh *also* means willingly affirming the tensions that exist between facets of our being and between ourselves and the others with whom we share the world.

#### DO MEN AND WOMEN ACTUALLY EXIST?

If, as we have seen above, such concepts as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are so loaded with historical significations and appear to be so limited by the binary logic implied in their common use, a difficult question to address is 'why continue to speak in terms of 'man' and 'woman' at all? Should we not employ less loaded and more contemporary terms that avoid such problematic exclusions? Or, would it be more promising to do away with distinctions all together?

Commonly, one is *either* a man or a woman, male *or* female (in fact the first question usually asked of new parents is 'is it a boy or a girl?'). This strict male/female categorisation is of course problematised by transgender people and hermaphrodites, however, as de Beauvoir writes, societies do tend to think in terms of 'the two', and she says:

In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. *What is certain is that they do most obviously exist* (TSS, p14-15, emphasis added).

Could we just stop talking in terms of male/female and speak about *people* instead, in order to overcome the problems of binary thinking? As we saw above, however, the problem of universalism has been a significant one for feminism. The equation of the universal human with traditional *masculine* attributes is criticised by those who argue that maintaining and recognising difference is valuable and that *particularity* rather than universality is important to ethical encounters *between* beings. As we have seen previously, our bodies are a crucial part of our existence as ambiguous subjects-in-the-world. Therefore, denying the importance of our *facticité* would result in *bad-faith* because we would be ignoring part of our ambiguous condition.

There are a number of issues with liberal, or equality, feminism then – not the least of which is how to conceive of bodily difference. However, it should also be remembered that feminism, like other political movements, has had to respond to the particular needs and contexts in which it developed. The project of claiming practical freedom or equality to access the world of men was radical for its time. As Marilyn Lake has argued, liberal feminism was successful in gaining many of the changes it sought because at that time it was believed that “if women were to achieve economic independence they would need to disavow sexual difference and become workers *just like men*”.<sup>233</sup>

#### A RADICAL DIFFERENCE

In response to the argument that the differences between men and women were socially constructed and could, therefore, be overcome a more radical ‘difference’ feminism emerged in the 1970s.<sup>234</sup> This school of thought, which has been termed ‘gynocentric’ feminism, emphasised differences in terms of “the unique situation and characteristics of women”.<sup>235</sup> However, an often criticised problem within

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<sup>233</sup> Lake, Marilyn, *Getting Equal: A History of Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin: NSW, 1999, my emphasis.

<sup>234</sup> See for example Mary Daly’s, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, The Women’s Press, 1978.

<sup>235</sup> Nicholson, Linda, (ed), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Routledge: New York and London, 1997, p3.

feminisms of difference was a tendency to ignore the differences *amongst* women, which led to a homogeneous vision of what it meant to be a woman and to an idea of 'universal womanhood' that is as exclusionary as the idea of a universal man.<sup>236</sup>

Equally as problematic as *denying* the importance of difference, is the assumption that women should revalue and *reify* all that has been associated with the feminine and celebrate particularly *feminine* ways of being. It is, in fact, the idea of the *mutually exclusive* and hierarchical relation between these terms (nature/culture, man/woman, mind/body, sex/gender, reason/passion etc.) that is the problem. This is especially so when the opposing terms are equated with masculinity and femininity and understood as being fundamental to human existence.

Celebrating what have been associated with feminine traits is not, in itself, the problem and this political strategy (like liberal feminist strategies) has been successfully used to lobby for social change. For example, there was a prevailing belief in early Australian feminism that women "shared distinctive values and priorities that, once translated into government policy, would create a different type of state – a welfare state".<sup>237</sup> In the 1930s feminists arguing for representation of women in politics and the public realm based their claims on a female temperance and goodness that would help to bring a more moral and caring aspect to society. Their argument was that:

Woman's point of view is not the same as man's. Her sense of values is different, she places a greater value on human life, human welfare, health and morals...It behoves women to use their power, to the fullest extent possible to bring greater security and happiness into the lives of the whole community.<sup>238</sup>

Despite the fact that appealing to an inherent 'goodness' in women has served as an arguably successful political strategy, it has at the same time reinforced the

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Lake, Marilyn, *Getting Equal*, p51.

<sup>238</sup> The United Associations of NSW, Cited in Lake, M., *Getting Equal*, p52.

reification of such attributes and is, ultimately, based upon a metaphysics that denies ambiguity by solidifying sex and gender roles. Women, on this account are naturally, inherently more caring and compassionate creatures whose role is, thus, to look after the health and wellbeing of others. While such characteristics are by no means negative in themselves, much moral theory has used arguments about the 'natural' roles of man and woman to reinforce 'laws' and codes of conduct that suit the needs or desires of those in power at the time or to maintain a particular social order. Religious values and the laws of nature have been used to argue for the oppression of particular groups or individuals: after all, if something is determined by God or given in nature, who has the right to argue against it?

Traditionally, 'difference' feminists have wanted to acknowledge the importance of women's characteristics and materiality and to assert some sort of collective identity in order to overcome oppression. Nevertheless, as we saw in the previous chapter, if oppression consists in the *denial* of an engagement with freedom, the notion of identity can itself become oppressive. The risk is that the identity that one wants to celebrate becomes solidified, and therefore oppressive, because it denies ontological freedom by determining particular ways of engaging with the world based upon this 'identity'. There is a real risk that identity politics can itself become the 'tyrant' that oppresses by maintaining a spirit of seriousness in which the future of particular subjects is closed-off by social and institutional expectation, which ties the subject to one particular aspect of their existence. For example, if women's identity is linked to maternal instinct, to a special 'intuition', or to an inherent caring and compassionate nature and women and girls are encouraged through social norms to believe that they are defined in such a way (and their freedom to be otherwise is not acknowledged) then they will be oppressed, because their future is closed off to them. In the same way, when masculine identity is equated with a lack of caring or lack of emotion, with reason and rationality or with brute force, then boys and men are also inhibited from engaging fully with their freedom and the many differences that characterise men's lives are ignored. As Kwame Appiah argues, such a politics

fails to see that rather than existing as separate 'selves', "we are already contaminated by each other..."<sup>239</sup>

Cressida Heyes notes in her analysis of contemporary identity politics, that the appeal to an 'authentic' identity can "put pressure on participants to identify [a single] axis as their defining feature, when in fact they may well understand themselves as integrated selves who cannot be represented so selectively or even reductively".<sup>240</sup> Identity politics (in this form) necessarily involves an *exclusion* of 'others' and other ways of being in order to prioritise particular aspects of existence as the most meaningful or fundamental. In this way, it ignores ambiguity and results in a problematic understanding of authenticity.

As we have seen above, however, the liberal attempt to in effect *deny* the importance of differences by asserting that *all* humans have access to the natural and equal powers of reason is also problematic. As Marion Tapper states, "the fact that women and men experience themselves and each other differently needs to be taken into account in understanding our social and political situation".<sup>241</sup> This is not just about surface change, or about revaluing particular traits and roles, but about rethinking the assumptions that support the way identity and being are thought. As Tapper argues:

What is required is not merely arguments and examples to prove that women are not inferior, or laws to prevent discrimination, but to change the significance or meaning of sexual difference, *to change the way in which it is thought*. And this requires changing the conditions and structures in which such meaning is produced.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Appiah, Kwame., cited in Stasulias, Daiva, 'Authentic Voice: Anti-racist politics in Canadian feminist publishing and literary production' in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (eds), Allen and Unwin: Australia, 1993, p55.

<sup>240</sup> Heyes, Cressida, 'Identity Politics', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2007 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed).

<sup>241</sup> Tapper, Marion, 'Can a Feminist be a Liberal?' p43.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

The important task that contemporary feminism grapples with is, consequently, to work out how to account for difference without falling back into essentialism and without undermining the political and social power of collective experience and the significance of cultural identities. It is for this reason that re-thinking *authenticité* through ambiguity can enhance a contemporary feminism of difference, because it allows us to examine the differences between subjects as well as the shared experiences that shape their lives and identities. Ambiguity allows us to acknowledge the importance of embodied existence whilst keeping open the possibilities of the future.

#### WHAT IS WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE? CAN A WOMAN SPEAK FOR WOMEN?

Although it can be both socially and politically useful to speak as a group in order to achieve social change, as we have seen, there are problems inherent in attempting to capture 'the' voice of a group in terms of an inherent group identity. Debra Bergoffen argues that, although de Beauvoir's early work *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* was not an explicitly feminist text, it nevertheless raises a key question that is central to feminism. That is, the question as to "under what conditions, if any, may I speak for/in the name of another?"<sup>243</sup> This important and complex question speaks to contemporary identity and representative politics.

De Beauvoir, it seems, wanted to say that certain people could speak more 'truthfully' for others, dependent upon their situation, and she argues that women are better placed to speak about the experience of femininity than are men. This is because of women's intimate experience of what it means to have a female body, in a particular situation, an experience that men cannot know in the same way:

Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge (TSS 27).

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<sup>243</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, 'Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cineas*' in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds) University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 2004, p80.



De Beauvoir grants that a female-embodied human being has a different experience of the world than a male-embodied human and, therefore, that sexual difference is important and significant.<sup>244</sup>

As Iris Young and Alison Jagger have noted, both Western academic philosophy and feminist philosophy have tended to “neglect or marginalize philosophical and theoretical ideas from Eastern and Southern hemispheres” and Western philosophy of feminism has largely been dominated by US Anglophone philosophy, which has often neglected to recognise its own contextuality.<sup>245</sup> Although de Beauvoir’s overall framework is able to overcome the problem of marginalisation with her notion of ambiguous subjectivity, many of her claims in *The Second Sex* do represent a *particular* type of woman’s experience and this should be acknowledged in the reading of her work.

Vicki Kirby also makes the claim that, at times, “feminism’s ...claim to self-legitimation is enabled by othering” and that feminism is often “built on the othering of some women”.<sup>246</sup> Many feminists, who are explicitly seeking to *overcome* the dichotomous logic of what they see to be traditional and masculinist academic thinking, actually remain within the framework themselves. According to Kirby “this very notion of ‘overcoming’ repeats and reinvests the logic of a Hegelian *Aufhebung* (preservation and transcendence) that systematically denies the very differences that [these feminists] would want to acknowledge”.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> We must remember, however, that although de Beauvoir argues that women experience what it is to be feminine in a different way than do men, she is not arguing that a *particular* feminine experience is *inherent* to those with female bodies. Her claim is that those who have female bodies will have been ‘coded’ feminine through their bodies in a particular social and historical location.

<sup>245</sup> Jagger, Alison and Young, Iris (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Blackwell: Oxford, 2000, p3..

<sup>246</sup> Kirby, Vicki, ‘Feminisms, reading, postmodernisms: Rethinking complicity’, in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (eds), Allen and Unwin: Australia, 1993, p25.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

The inclusion of some women implicitly, but necessarily, implies the exclusion of others, and other differences that can play a large part in defining the position of particular groups of women in society risk being under-examined if sexual difference is prioritised over other differences and particularities.

In an illustration of the criticisms made of 'white academic' feminism, Australian Aboriginal writer Jackie Huggins argues that "...white women cannot be seen as powerless in the face of male power as they are in fact collaborators in the use of white (male) power against Black people".<sup>248</sup> She argues that, for many Aboriginal women, interactions with 'white women' are not necessarily made easier because of a shared sex:

...many [Aboriginal women] say they prefer to deal with white men because they can escape the missionary-style zeal that some feminists employ in their belief that because they are feminists they are experts on all women and that Aboriginal women need 'raising up' to their level of feminist consciousness.<sup>249</sup>

Huggins is correct in her assertion that feminists must be continually careful to avoid setting themselves up as the arbiters of all that defines 'woman' and as holders of ultimate knowledge on women's experience and needs. However, there is also a problem implicit in Huggins' criticism of white feminists, in that she resorts to a reification of both 'black' and 'white' women (and men) in her argument. For example, she argues that Aboriginal women have an understanding of sisterhood which white women have only borrowed from black civil rights movement and which, for white women "is yet to be fully understood" because they still suffer from "the legacy of a patriarchal culture which divides them".<sup>250</sup> In her categorisation of 'white' and 'Aboriginal' women Huggins perpetuates a view of

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<sup>248</sup> Huggins, Jackie, 'A contemporary view of Aboriginal Women's relationship to the White Women's Movement', in *Australian Women Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (eds), Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1994, p74.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p 75.

both which is based on the problematic oppositional metaphysics we have been analysing in previous chapters. One is *either* "white" or one is "Aboriginal".<sup>251</sup>

Another claim made against academic feminists is that they often portray the issues that interest them as being of concern to all women and ignore what may be of real concern to *particular* women in *particular* situations. The demand for equal wages, freedom from housework or cheaper child care for example, would be unlikely to rate as priorities for women living in situation in which scarcity of food, poor sanitation, war and violence define her daily life. For those who struggle daily with famine and disease, the number of female academics in university departments is not going to be a significant concern. Huggins articulates this point when she argues that, people in the Aboriginal community, "...have too many other barramundis to fry which concern [the] whole community and not just half".<sup>252</sup>

Not all 'white' academic feminists fail to recognise their relative privilege and standpoint and, from the perspective of a white academic writing about the history of feminism in Australia, Marilyn Lake concedes that:

White feminists have had to acknowledge the privilege of our whiteness and our advantage, along with that of non-Aboriginal men, as the beneficiaries of Aboriginal dispossession. We have had to come to terms with the fact that feminism might not be the most appropriate or urgent politics for all women; that feminism [as Ien Ang writes] is a 'limited political home'. For different oppressions are differences not necessarily of degree, but of kind.<sup>253</sup>

The question then, becomes, how can women who are concerned about the ways in which other women are portrayed, treated or conceive of themselves, engage in the debate without perpetuating a woman-centric philosophy that denies (or does not

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<sup>251</sup> I will return to this point in the following chapter, where I examine the implications of the notion of 'authenticity' to identity politics.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p78.

<sup>253</sup> Lake, Marion, *Getting Equal*, p15.

recognise) ambiguity? Is there an *authentique* way in which to engage with questions of sexual difference?

#### IS THERE AN AUTHENTIC FEMINIST VOICE?

The question of the relationship between feminism, as a discipline/discourse concerned with women and their rights and place in the world, and other areas in which 'difference' is an issue, has been raised by many working in the areas of feminism and politics.<sup>254</sup> Such questions as to the appropriateness of white, middle-class, female academics speaking on behalf of 'women' as a whole, or of particular groups of Western women speaking on behalf of women in other parts of the world and from diverse backgrounds have troubled many.<sup>255</sup> One of the main concerns has been that 'speaking for' can solidify a way of being such that one voice is deemed as the 'authentic', and others lose their power to articulate difference.

Questions about the extent to which differences such as race, class, social location, sexuality, bodily ability etc. impinge upon or, in fact, may prove to be more important than questions of sexual difference, have been raised repeatedly. For example, post-structuralist theorists Anna Yeatman and Sneja Gunew argue that, for feminism to survive as a movement for social change, it must be able to deal appropriately with difference.<sup>256</sup>

For them, the task of contemporary feminism is to examine the problem of essential identities inherent in politics, philosophy, literary and cultural studies, and to "intervene whenever such 'identities' are being constituted, whether in nationalist or gender or class terms".<sup>257</sup> This means that feminists must "insist on the differences *among* women" rather than adhering to an identity politics that reifies the similarities *between* women. They argue that post-modernism has attempted to address the issue of identity politics by undermining the idea of an autonomous,

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<sup>254</sup> See for example Gunew, S., and Yeatman, A., (eds.) *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*.

<sup>255</sup> See for example Ortega, Mariana, 'Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color', *Hypatia*. Bloomington: Summer 2006. Vol. 21, Issue 3.

<sup>256</sup> Gunew, S., and Yeatman, A., (eds.) *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, p xxiv.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, p11.

individual subject and, instead, talks in terms of multiple and fragmented subjectivities.<sup>258</sup>

In her examination of debates over what constitutes an 'authentic' voice in literature and over who is authorised to write or speak for whom, Gunew raises the issue of what she terms the '*burden of authenticity*'. This burden arises when a person from a minority group (for example a person from an indigenous background) is seen to only be able to speak as part of that group and unable to comment on broader social issues – their contributions are read as linked to the 'universal' particularities of the group.<sup>259</sup> What this means is that the shared differences, by which the group distinguishes itself from those who do not belong to the group, come to be seen as primary to the individual's identity and their capacity to contribute to socially.

The problem with maintaining such fixed accounts of identity is that it results in the absorption of *alterity*. Here again, we see the 'authentic' linked to a static account of identity and the tension and interplay inherent in the development of any subjectivity is denied; the ambiguity of one's *being* is ignored and, in its place, is a notion of authenticity that is based on the serious:

Whenever such thinking prevails, we are merely in the business of juggling with traditional categories, privileging women rather than men, or some women at the expense of others, without changing the power structure behind such constructions. Such logic is homogenizing and universalist, built on the principle of exclusion and tyranny of the familiar.<sup>260</sup>

Gunew and Yeatman attempt to undermine such an account of the authentic, in a bid to 'situate the subject', "defining the intersections and contradictions of

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<sup>258</sup> As Alan Schrift and Sonia Kruks have argued, post-structuralism and post-modernism owe a lot to existentialism and the method of undermining the idea of an autonomous individual is a key example of this (see Schrift, 'Judith Butler: Une Nouvelle existentialiste?' in *Philosophy Today*, Spring 2001, Vol 45, Issue:1, pp 12-23 and Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence*).

<sup>259</sup> Gunew, S, & Yeatman, A, (eds.) *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, Allen & Unwin, 1993, p 12.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p xiii.

competing interest groups".<sup>261</sup> They want to admit difference, to acknowledge incommensurability, to move beyond identity politics and they want to ask what it is that makes a voice or position authentic.<sup>262</sup> They see a problem with those who "project the burden of authenticity onto the minority", resulting in what Daiva Stasiulis describes as an experience of being "*haunted* by the burden of authenticity". This burden results in some being seen to have 'privileged access' to the 'truths' of gender, class, race or ethnicity. For many, this signifies a return to "the essential sovereign subject as guarantor of meaning, putting us back into the realm of truth claims and power structures which regulate the authority to speak".<sup>263</sup>

As we saw above, both strategically and politically, identity politics has worked by asserting *inherent* difference as a means to combat policies of assimilation. By maintaining and celebrating the distinctness of one group from others, de Beauvoir notes that the process of 'othering' is a means by which groups define themselves against others, "Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into 'others'" (TSS, p19). Politically this strategy is used to create a sense of solidarity, however, what often results from this strategy is a binary politics, which does not leave space for other differences than those being strategically engaged with. Identity politics becomes an *oppositional* debate between 'black and white', 'Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal', 'proletariat' and bourgeoisie'. What de Beauvoir noted in the 1940s, however, was that women have lived dispersed amongst men without a sense of 'self' and, therefore, have never been able to assert a collective 'we' – she argues that it is this inability to define or assert a 'we' in contrast to an other that has contributed to the extent of women's oppression (TSS). It would seem then, that what is needed is a means for women to achieve 'solidarity' in order to overcome oppression. However, as this chapter and others have maintained, it is not sufficient to define a sense of 'woman' either through radical difference or opposition to 'man', or through an

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid, pxiii.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, pxiv.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, pxxi.

argument that women are inherently the same as men (that is, rational beings). Attempting to locate the 'authentic woman' in radical biological difference *or* in social construction is not the answer to overcoming women's oppression. Seeing the answer as needing to fall within either of these camps only reinforces the binary between body and culture, rather than recognising important connections. This binary results in a reification of both the feminine and the masculine and, thus, negates ambiguity.

In an examination of the way in which such a binary operates in the cultural domain, Stasiulis provides a critical analysis of what she terms the "essentialist position on authentic voice", a position that arose in the debate over appropriation of 'voice' in Canadian feminist and literary communities. Although she agrees that a person's social location and history, at both individual and group levels, impact upon what one chooses to write about and one's capacity to write "authentically" about them, she points out that "this is not a *determined* and *fixed* relation".<sup>264</sup> The fact that such identities are not fixed is not always recognised, however, and problems of essentialism arise when a person is equated with a particular aspect of their situation and deemed to be an 'authentic' voice or example of the group. In describing this process, Stasiulis identifies what she terms a "credentialism" (of gender, race, class etc.), which is used to prove that one can write or speak with authenticity or credibility. This entails situating and identifying one's 'credentials' to speak about a particular experience by connecting oneself with an identity that can authentically speak on that experience.

Stasiulis, however, argues that "essentialism is inherent in any position that assumes that the race, gender and class of the writer is the *guarantee* of the authenticity of the text".<sup>265</sup> She notes that essentialist notions of authenticity are especially problematic in cultures where immigration and 'inter-marriage' result in bi-cultural or multi-cultural experience because such 'merged' identities struggle for

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<sup>264</sup> Stasiulis, Daiva, "Authentic Voice: Anti-racist politics in Canadian feminist publishing and literary production", in Gunew, S, & Yeatman, A, (eds.) *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, Allen & Unwin, 1993, p36, my emphasis.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p41, my emphasis.

recognition as a genuine or authentic expression of lived experience. As will be further discussed in the following chapter, this idea of authenticity often results in an appropriation of the ideas of the 'prehistoric Aborigine' and the valorisation of traditions by non-Aboriginal people in an attempt to achieve spiritual enlightenment and where, as Stasiulis notes "contemporary [or urban] First Nations people are [seen] ...as deviants, drunks and prostitutes".<sup>266</sup>

This criticism of the idea of an 'essential' voice is not to deny that people can share experiences and identities that are common; experiences based on a particular sexuality, culture, or on racist oppression, for example. However, Stasiulis notes that such an expression of the idea of authenticity is "slippery, limiting and prone to essentialism". As an example she cites a policy developed by the Canada Council that insists that writers must consult and collaborate with 'others' before they can write about them. Such a policy discounts the "hyphenated identities" and "hybrid realities" that constitute the 'other'. Moreover, this policy "problematically assumes that by virtue of their birth or social identities, some individuals are the legitimate 'keepers' of a culture".<sup>267</sup> Discussion of the problems that surround the concept of authenticity in relation to cultural identity will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter. What I wish to point out here is that the concept of what is an 'authentic' experience and an 'authentic' voice is limited by the understanding of humanity and existence that underlies it.

As we can see, the task of contemporary feminism is not an easy one, as it must find a balanced way in which to explore the specificities of sexual difference without ignoring or negating other facets of identity and without resorting to essentialism. Linda Martin Alcoff writes that contemporary feminism is caught within a 'double bind' where it must "... reveal the culturally mediated and changeable character of what have been portrayed as natural formations of identity, of gender and of sexuality" at the same time as critiquing "the conception of philosophy as

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p44.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p55.



independent of corporeal experiences or social agendas".<sup>268</sup> In short, she argues that feminists must repair the mind/body split and acknowledge that bodies really *do* matter but without resorting to biological determinism.

A key point of this thesis has been to demonstrate that de Beauvoir's analysis of the relation between self and other insists upon recognition of the situation and context in which each has come to be. This situation includes one's history and 'social' context, as well as one's materiality – so that one's experience is of a *lived-body*. Whilst de Beauvoir is true to the existential claim that 'existence precedes essence', and that our fundamental freedom from determination underpins our existence, she also acknowledges that one's situation and one's life experience have *significance*. It is possible, on her account, to choose to align oneself with a particular group in *recognition* rather than denial of freedom. It is the acknowledgement of how one becomes aligned with others that allows for an *authentique* politics of solidarity. Her work demonstrates that it is possible to base one's political and/or social affiliations upon what are significant differences from others within the community and to do so without being *inauthentique*, what must be acknowledged in this to avoid a spirit of seriousness, is the ambiguity of difference.

#### NOT JUST A 'WOMAN' QUESTION

Feminist philosophy has undergone substantial change over its history, with many sub-branches emerging and, as with 'mainstream' philosophy, a plethora of philosophical arguments and viewpoints have developed, which I have only skimmed here. Of interest to this section is the current focus of contemporary feminist philosophy on unearthing assumptions within both philosophy and feminism. As Jagger and Young state, feminist philosophy is now "investigating the overt and covert ways in which the devaluation of women may be inherent in the most enduring ideals, the central concepts, and the dominant theories of

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<sup>268</sup> Alcoff, Linda Martin, 'Philosophy Matters: A Review of Recent Work in Feminist Philosophy', *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Spring, 2000, p859.

philosophy”.<sup>269</sup> A large part of this unearthing therefore involves a deconstruction of conceptual dichotomies within philosophy, dichotomies that go beyond the male/female distinction to look at the accounts of freedom, subjectivity and ontology that provide the theoretical foundation for dualisms of various kinds.

Jagger and Young, in their companion to feminist philosophy, argue that large parts of Western philosophy (as we saw in chapter one) have had a “conception of human nature that represents individuals as essentially separate from others, insatiably appetitive and with interests typically in conflict, a conception thought to reflect men’s experience of adversarial market relations”.<sup>270</sup> A problem I also wish to examine here is the reification of ‘men’s experience’, which results in an exclusion of the experience of various males. I imagine that we would all agree, at the very least, that not all men would experience ‘adversarial market relations’ in the same way – and that the many factors of a male’s lived experience, including his age, social and economic position, sexuality, level of education, physical and mental ability and ethnicity would affect how such relations were understood. The idea that there is such a thing as “men’s experience of adversarial market relations” assumes that all men experience the world in the same way. It is important, therefore, that as well as acknowledging that philosophy has historically excluded particular women (and their bodies) with its claims of a universal, neutral human way of being, that feminist philosophy must also acknowledge that both philosophy and feminism have, with many of the same assumptions, excluded the particular experience of many males.

Because of a tendency, to either reify or ignore ‘man’ in feminist approaches, the relationship between the concepts of male and female is not adequately examined nor is the effect of such a binary account on the lived experience of particular males. This is problematic because the ‘masculine other’, which is either vilified or ignored, reinstates the binary that feminists seek to dismantle. The reification of the

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<sup>269</sup> Jagger, Alison, M, and Iris Marion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing, 2000.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, p 2.

masculine undermines the feminist aim of overcoming the binary between 'man' and 'woman'.

De Beauvoir is also guilty, at times, of positing a masculine 'one' (opposed to the feminine Other) and for failing to account for differences between particular men and particular women in *The Second Sex*. For example, she argues that "man thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world" which is arguably not the case for all men and which omits the experience of men with physical disabilities who find their connection with a world designed largely for able-bodied people to be impeded. De Beauvoir has also been accused of not accounting for differences between those of the same sex when she talks about 'women' as distinct from 'the American Negroes', the 'ghetto Jews' and the 'proletariat' as though there are no female American negroes, no female Jews and no women of the working classes (TSS p19).

However, although she does at times appear to ignore the many variables of subjectivity by focusing on sexual difference, de Beauvoir's account does acknowledge that not all men are privileged in society. She writes:

In the economic sphere men and women can almost be said to make up two castes; *other things being equal*, the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages, and have more opportunity for success than their new competitors. In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolize the most important posts. ...they enjoy a traditional prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support, for the present enshrines the past – and in the past all history has been made by men (TSS, p20-21, my emphasis).

Although it is not emphasised, she does say 'other things being equal' in an acknowledgement that not all men have equal access to the social and political power she describes. Although her account does not give sustained attention to the differences of particular men and women, her philosophy of ambiguity does provide a framework for further examining such difference. For example, in her

introduction to the first book of *The Second Sex*, where she alerts us that her use of the terms 'woman' and the 'feminine' refer to 'no changeless archetype', and we can also understand that her denial of 'eternal verities' must apply also to 'man' and the 'masculine'. Moreover, in acknowledgment of the connections between identities, de Beauvoir says, "male and female can be defined only correlatively" (TSS, p35). We must remember that hers is an account of existential phenomenology, where each is free from an inherent essence, but where each is also bound to the situation in which one has become and where each is also open to an undefined future.

The task of feminism, including the aims of de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, has been to a large degree to bring to light the discrepancies in the way that women have been treated due to their existence as 'women'. The feminist aim has been, through various methodologies, to demonstrate that women are deserving of the right to be treated as worthwhile human beings. Genevieve Lloyd argues in *The Man of Reason* that feminists have rightly been concerned with problems facing women in patriarchal social orders and the ways in which these have arisen in response to particularly 'masculine' ideals. Lloyd argues there, however, that masculinity must also come under critique. By examining both femininity and masculinity (and the way these concepts interact with one another and with other aspects of identity), we will be provided with richer alternatives for men *and* women. Lloyd contends that:

The denigration of the 'feminine' is to feminists, understandably, the most salient aspect of the maleness of the philosophical tradition. But the issue is important for men too. The lives of women incorporate the impoverishing restraints of Reason's 'nether world'. But maleness, as we have inherited it, enacts, no less, the impoverishment and vulnerability of 'public' Reason. Understanding the contribution of past thought to 'male' and 'female' consciousnesses, as we now have them, can help make available a diversity of intellectual styles and characters to men and women alike. It need not involve a denial of difference. Contemporary consciousness, male or female, reflects past philosophical ideals as well as past differences in the social organization of the lives of men and women. Such differences do not have

to be taken as norms; and understanding them can be a source of richness and diversity in a human life whose full range of possibilities and experience is freely accessible to both men and women.<sup>271</sup>

It is not just in order to examine and ameliorate the experience of women under patriarchy that ambiguity and *authenticité* should be re-thought, but in order to examine the ways in which subjectivities are formed in situation and how re-thinking these might open up the future by allowing subjects to more *authentically* engage with their freedom. One cannot engage with an examination of femininity without examining the concept of masculinity that has been defined as its opposite. Moreover, as Lloyd argues, the conceptions of masculinity and femininity are 'inherited' from philosophy's past; they are not set in stone.

#### CONTEMPORARY 'THIRD WAVE' FEMINISM

The concept of 'woman' does not exist in isolation, therefore, and Lloyd argues that it is time for feminist philosophy to be revealed as providing a means by which we can address other issues of concern to contemporary societies.<sup>272</sup> In her discussion of the relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and the land, Lloyd argues that the employment of "feminist reading strategies that attend the imaginary open up ways of rethinking processes of inclusion and exclusion", processes that go beyond a male/female divide.<sup>273</sup> She focuses specifically on the issue of the relation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and argues that, within this debate, the feminist strategies of re-reading and critiquing mainstream philosophy can be applied to ideas of race and the way in which these ideas have been developed in political discourse.

In support of the argument that feminist philosophy need not (and should not) be limited to examinations of 'women's issues' Jagger and Young assert that "...

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<sup>271</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, Routledge: London, 1993, p107, emphasis added.

<sup>272</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve, 'No-One's Land: Australia and the Philosophical Imagination', *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000, p 26.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

feminist philosophy has become sufficiently mature and well established that it is time to give ...more direct engagement with philosophical work that is not self-identified as feminist". Feminist philosophy, they argue, "should intervene more regularly and vigorously in the broader philosophical conversation".<sup>274</sup>

Although acknowledging that early feminist challenges included "making visible the excluded feminine", Lloyd sees that one of the key challenges for *contemporary* feminism is to maintain this visibility, but without being limited by insisting too strongly on an identification with "feminist" perspectives:

'We feminist philosophers' are not the bearers of clearly bordered identities occupying stable, though newly won, speaking positions. Feminist philosophy is not insulated from the multiplicity of identity that is a feature of our present. We are not always in the position of the excluded other. We are shifting subjects, taking on multiple identities, multiple positions in relation to power. If we are serious about engaging with our present, we cannot afford to let that engagement be circumscribed by postures of opposition to the "male" past of philosophy. The challenge is to refine the strategies for thinking our way into that past and its processes of exclusion and constitution, and for appropriating its intellectual possibilities the better to understand not only the exclusions we have suffered but also those in which we have been complicit.<sup>275</sup>

The strategies employed by feminists to critique the maleness of philosophy, which has presumed that individuals are somehow essentially "separate" from the social roles they occupy and the relationships they hold, can thus be used to examine how the bias in traditional philosophical accounts of humanity is limiting current conceptions both within and outside the tradition (as well as at its boundaries).

The 'third wave' feminist approach to philosophy can be summarised as a critical analysis of both feminism and philosophy in order to reveal and examine the

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<sup>274</sup> Jagger, Alison and Young, Iris, *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, p 6.

<sup>275</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve., 'No-One's Land: Australia and the Philosophical Imagination', p39.

implicit biases and assumptions that operate within traditional Western thought at both institutional and symbolic levels. One of the fundamental assumptions revealed (and critiqued) by this feminist analysis is the belief that there is a universal, sex-neutral human 'way of being' that underlies all experience. What third wave feminists are keen to reveal is the way in which implicit assumptions underlying understandings of 'reason' are based upon a dichotomous metaphysic that results in and depends upon the exclusion of many. They argue that the liberal account of subjectivity negates the importance of sexual-difference (along with other difference) with its assumption of a universal human norm. Importantly, the third wave approach to feminism is also critical of the opposing 'radical' feminist claim that we *are* our biology, and that women should reclaim and revalue all that has previously been denigrated in its association with femininity. The problem identified with this radical difference methodology is that essentialism based upon biology fails to account for the diversity of lived experience in a cultural milieu, and also depends upon a metaphysic that sees 'man' or the 'masculine' associated with 'reason', control and the mind, and woman with nature, emotion and the body. This bifurcation, which posits an essential male and an essential female way of being, is limiting for both men and women and continues with the type of binary distinction that fails to account for various, particular identities and differences.

#### SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, AMBIGUITY AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

Contemporary American philosopher Nancy Bauer argues that "philosophical feminism not only has the potential to revolutionize philosophy but actually demands a reappraisal, from the ground up, of what it is to be a human - a thinking sexed being".<sup>276</sup> Although many, including the translator of *The Second Sex* did not consider it to be a work of philosophy, Bauer argues that, in this work, de Beauvoir undertakes a serious rethinking of what it means to be human and that, with this, comes a serious rethinking of what *philosophy* is.

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<sup>276</sup>Bauer Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, p 21.

This re-conceptualisation of philosophy through feminist critiques of the underlying assumptions in past and present understandings of human 'being', reveals strong linkages between metaphysical understandings of existence and the ways in which these understandings are played out in 'everyday life'. This method of critique involves an examination of the way in which metaphysical assumptions affect and are affected by socio-political understandings, traditions, discourse and imaginings. *The Second Sex*, according to Bauer, is a challenge to philosophy to transform itself, through an examination of the total, situated existence of woman – that is, through a phenomenological *engagement* with the world.

Bauer points out that, through questioning how it is that women have come to exist in a certain way; through a certain scepticism entailed in the questions "what is a woman?" and "do women exist, really?", de Beauvoir reveals that the scepticism previously employed by Cartesianism fails to provide an adequate means to answer questions about 'sexed being' (or, I would argue, about any 'situated being'). Cartesian scepticism, under Bauer's analysis, does not provide an answer to the question of sexual difference, nor can it rule-out the importance of sexual difference. De Beauvoir here sets aside her assumptions about the existence of women, using the phenomenological method to question that which we take for granted – that is, the understanding that there is such a thing as 'woman'. In doing so she neither denies the existence of women nor does she presuppose it – rather, she questions the very meaning of such an understanding. As I have discussed above, in her account of human existence - and in this instance her account of the 'human female'- de Beauvoir will not concede that woman is defined either through her body (although she believes that one's facticity is important to lived experience) or by some "mysterious" female essence. Her task is to examine the situation of woman through an analysis of historical development in order to come to an understanding of what this term means, without either reifying or denying the existence of 'woman'. De Beauvoir takes up a position that asserts neither essential difference nor essential sameness. The account of existence put forward by de Beauvoir, which underlies her examination of the situation of woman, is of an always-situated and always-related 'being' that cannot be understood through separation from the world



in which it comes to be. It is not just the tension of the 'self-other' relation that is crucial to understanding being, but the relation of self-others-world, a relation that includes one's historicity as well as the intricacies of the current situation.

As Bauer argues, there has long been a perceived contradiction between feminism and philosophy, a contradiction that for many has been viewed as irreconcilable.<sup>277</sup> Traditionally, feminism has been seen to be concerned with 'everyday' practical, political issues, whereas philosophy has 'universal', 'abstract' ideals and concepts as its focus. Often, this has resulted in a perceived separation of the two, with both discourses/areas disregarding the importance of the other. However, what Bauer argues, similarly to Moira Gatens in *Philosophy and Feminism*, is that in actuality the two have very important things to offer one another and these need to be thought *together*. This is because feminism reveals the need to re-think implicit assumptions in Western philosophy and metaphysics regarding the situated subject, and philosophy, when re-thought, reveals the manner in which problematic assumptions are taken up without examination and used in many feminist arguments. As Bauer argues, traditional philosophy as a discourse has lacked the resources to account for sex-difference in particular, and 'difference' in general, and has rarely seen this as a problem. This 'ignorance' or denial of difference is evident in the continued insistence on searching for universal human laws and a universal, objective, sex-neutral way of being. Like Gatens, Bauer argues that, unfortunately, "the debate between essentialists and anti-essentialists now dominates feminist theory".<sup>278</sup>

#### THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY

An important task for third wave feminism, therefore, is to devise a means to theorise philosophically, but to do so in a way that does not lose sight of social and political goals. The task of radically critiquing both philosophy and feminism does

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<sup>277</sup> Remember, again, Parshley's claim that *The Second Sex* is not a book on philosophy, but a book on *woman*

<sup>278</sup> Bauer, Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, p38.

not entail a reduction to one discourse as the ground for the other, but continually reasserts the interdependence of each.

Importantly, this philosophical work must strive to break down the distinction between everyday, lived experience and the abstracted 'objective' philosopher. Another crucial factor in feminist philosophy, a factor that must be passed-on and incorporated into general philosophy, is that theory must "remain tethered to the everyday". For too long, Bauer argues, there has been a sharp distinction between the philosophical and the mundane,<sup>279</sup> and this binary has contributed to misconceptions both about the way in which philosophy should be done, and about the way in which humans are in the world.<sup>280</sup> Bauer argues that *The Second Sex* overcomes this distinction by examining the natural relationship between the metaphysical and the everyday, and that it is, therefore, a paradigmatic example of the possibilities of feminist philosophy.<sup>281</sup> The metaphysical question posed in *The Second Sex* is "what is a woman?" and the everyday answer for de Beauvoir, is "I am".<sup>282</sup> The question for contemporary feminists (as it was for de Beauvoir) is not whether or not there is an essential sameness between women and an essential difference between the sexes. Rather, the question is, "what is to be made of the fact that I am a woman?" and, more broadly "what is to be made of the fact that I am human?"<sup>283</sup>

What is pertinent in de Beauvoir's work is her attempt to account for 'the way things are' through a relational ontology that can be examined through the practical 'everyday' experience of a French woman in the 1940s. As discussed above, although she completed her *Agrégée de Philosophie* at the Sorbonne with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, de Beauvoir did not consider herself to be primarily a philosopher. Bauer (amongst others) argues against this self-appraisal, suggesting

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<sup>279</sup> The term 'mundane' has the meaning "of or pertaining to this world, worldly, earthly" as well as meaning "pertaining to the everyday, dull, routine", *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, p1861.

<sup>280</sup> Bauer, Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, p 24.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, p41.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, p42.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, p44, emphasis added.

that such works as *The Second Sex* in fact give an example of how philosophy itself, through a rethinking of its links with 'everyday experience', can be rethought and made more pertinent to contemporary issues. In asking such fundamental questions as 'what does it mean to be a human in this world and what is the relation between self and others?' and by investigating these questions through a thorough historical analysis of what it means to be a woman in the West, de Beauvoir brings philosophy to the world, rather than seeing it as a discipline isolated from the 'mundane' existence of the 'everyday'. In fact, the mundane and the everyday are re-thought in a way that directly links them with such philosophical questions. If a supposedly 'neutral' and 'universal' philosophy is unable to account for the particular, everyday, lived experiences of human beings, then it is failing in its task of examining or understanding human being. If we take seriously de Beauvoir's questioning and methodology, philosophy must concern itself with questions of how we can understand the world and ourselves in situation, *in the world*.<sup>284</sup>

The following passage from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is an illustration of this belief that one's situation is crucial to understanding oneself:

I remember having experienced a great feeling of calm on reading Hegel in the impersonal framework of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in August 1940. But once I got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it had offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men (TEA, p158).

We can see important linkages between de Beauvoir's quest to provide a phenomenological account of lived experience in the 1940s with some of the aims of contemporary feminism. This is particularly the case with respect to the argument for a philosophy of ambiguity put forward by Gatens. Gatens sees such a philosophy to be evolving through particular feminist critiques of universal, male-

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

dominated philosophies and, as I argued in chapter two, hers is a philosophy that is compatible with de Beauvoir's own. As Gatens suggests:

To view human being as a social product devoid of determining universal characteristics is to view its possibilities as open-ended. This is not to say that human being is not constrained by historical context or by rudimentary biological facts but rather that these factors set the outer parameters of possibility only. Within these constraints, if they can be called that, there is an almost limitless variety of possibilities.<sup>285</sup>

Like de Beauvoir, Gatens is critical of feminist theory that attempts to answer, once and for all, the question 'what is a woman?' She writes that to fix woman's essence in a search for the underlying 'ground' or meaning of 'woman':

...result[s] in the destruction of the *productive ambiguity* of a present femininity that is lived out in a female body that for historical reasons is at present an existence that is simultaneously extremely rich and painfully contradictory. To investigate how this lived femininity has been constructed involves living with and experimenting with these *ambiguities*.<sup>286</sup>

As we have seen in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* de Beauvoir explicitly criticises philosophers for turning away from the ambiguity of existence and seeking to find universal truths to replace it. There she writes, "as long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it" (TEA, p 7).

The urging for feminist philosophy to recognise ambiguity is not to suggest that the insights, strategies and arguments of feminism will be made redundant. However, feminism must acknowledge and accept that the hard-fought battles and significant

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<sup>285</sup>Gatens, Moira, 'Feminism, Philosophy and riddles without answers' in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, Carole Patemen and Elisabeth Gross (Eds), Allen and Unwin, 1986, p28.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

breakthroughs within the feminist movement must apply also to *any* who suffer at the hands of oppression, bigotry, hatred and prejudice. That is why an ethics based on ambiguity is so useful today, because it recognises that it is not just 'women' who suffer because of their sex but that there are many who suffer because of the reification of their 'otherness' and, ultimately, because of the pervasive tendency to downplay or to deny ambiguity.

#### ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

As we have seen, the emphasis of much contemporary feminist theory is on reuniting or recognising the links between philosophy and 'the everyday' and on how metaphysical assumptions about such links influence political decision-making.

As discussed in part one of this thesis, de Beauvoir's ethics is drawn from a phenomenological concern with the situated subject. In her existential-phenomenological account the subject is always seen to be in situation, always a part of a series of intricate and particularised circumstances, which includes a particular political setting. In this sense, de Beauvoir is concerned with "the actual present-day political situation that each human confronts", and not with abstract political theory.<sup>287</sup> De Beauvoir observes that traditional political theory tends to take a standpoint that abstracts from concrete individual experience and is more concerned with 'universal' theories of 'nature' and 'reason' than with particular situations. She writes, "Politics always puts forward Ideas: Nation, Empire, Union, Economy, etc. But [she argues] none of these forms has value in itself; it has it only in so far as it involves concrete individuals" (TEA, p145).

For de Beauvoir, all subjects are situated, all situations have a political dimension and, therefore, ethical persons "cannot escape taking a political position of some kind". Therefore, she argues, "Every political choice is an ethical choice" (TEA, p 148).

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<sup>287</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p112.

## CONCLUSION

To summarise the main points of this chapter, the problematic point made by liberal or equality feminist ethics has been that one should not appeal to pre-existing or natural difference between people in order to make ethical or political decisions. The aim in appealing to equality and neutrality is to undermine sexist arguments that propose women are inherently inferior to men based on 'feminine' characteristics. Liberal ethics, therefore, requires a methodology of equality and transparency, where appeals to 'natural' difference are shunned as essentialism that limits women's existence.<sup>288</sup> An ethics of equality, it is argued, must appeal to the neutral, universal human subject and not prescribe rights and actions based upon difference, because difference is seen to be always *culturally* inscribed. Liberal ethics, therefore, is based on the understanding of the universal human subject as being *abstracted* from his or her particular situation.

However, while it has had some success in undermining prejudice, this view of ethics is not able to address the significance of specific and particular (embodied) experiences. It is unable to give an account of ontology that recognises the importance of 'being-in-the-world' for subjectivity and does not recognise that the "universal" characteristics it proposes as being neutral are, themselves, a social construction.

A radical feminism of difference, on the other hand, can be seen as a reaction to this liberal appeal to a universal human way of being. Radical difference feminism (particularly in its extreme form) reclaims and celebrates particular characteristics such as motherhood, a capacity for caring and a concern for others in an attempt to revalue what has previously been denigrated in patriarchy. In doing so, however, it does not always account for difference *amongst* women and tends toward the claim that certain traits are inherent to certain beings, based upon the bodies that they have. As Claire Colebrook (amongst others) has noted, within the discourse of

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<sup>288</sup> Colebrook, Claire, 'From Radical Representations to Corporeal Becomings: The Feminist Philosophy of Lloyd, Grosz and Gatens', in *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000 p77.

feminism, the sex/gender distinction has generated substantial debate.<sup>289</sup> On one side the 'equality feminists' argue for an understanding of the social construction of gender, which can be separated from biology. Radical difference feminists, on the other hand, argue that gender arises from sexual differences, which are biologically determined. Consequently, sexual difference becomes *either* an ahistorical, determining, 'given' essence, *or* it is seen as purely an arbitrary and disembodied representation.<sup>290</sup> The body, therefore, is *either* essentially sexed *or* essentially neutral ('blank').

Contemporary third wave feminism, in response, investigates the potential to break down this dichotomous understanding of sex and gender and to reveal the interrelated character of situated (ambiguous) existence. This approach emphasises inter-relatedness and becoming, where difference is acknowledged and continually brought to bear upon our actions in the world, without being reduced to biological essentialism. What those such as Gatens and Lloyd are interested to uncover in their work on the relationship between feminism and philosophy, are the ethical implications of this critical engagement, not just for feminism, but for philosophy and socio-political discourse as a whole. Gatens argues that the present concerns of philosophy reflect changes in the social needs and desires of the time and, like de Beauvoir, she proposes a philosophy that entails a rejection of universal truths, a philosophy that focuses "on becoming rather than being, on possibilities rather than certainty and on meaning or significance rather than truth".<sup>291</sup>

What is proposed by this approach is a breaking down of the traditional splits between theory and practice, a rethinking of the dichotomies evident in philosophy and acknowledgement of the ways in which these splits reflect and affect the social

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

See also Moira Gatens', 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction', in Allen, J. and Patten, Paul. (eds), *Beyond Marxism? Interventions after Marx*, Sydney: Intervention Publications, 1983.

<sup>290</sup> Colebrook, Claire, 'From Radical Representations to Corporeal Becomings: The Feminist Philosophy of Lloyd, Grosz and Gatens', in *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000, p78.

<sup>291</sup> Gatens, Moira, 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles without Answers'.

and political needs and desires of the communities in which they operate. Central to this argument is the belief that the alignment of these dichotomies with masculinity and femininity must be re-thought if they are to be overcome. Gatens sees this philosophy as productive and ongoing, as an open-ended project of the future on which, as de Beauvoir says, “we can never close the book”.

The understanding of subjectivity proposed in contemporary third wave feminist accounts results in a non-hierarchical account of being that enables us to talk about ‘difference’ without reverting to discussion of ‘essential’ natures. Woman is no longer seen as the opposed ‘lack’ – the antithesis of ‘man’ – but is understood through her multiple and ambiguous relations to her total situation, and, ‘man’ also is no longer simply the patriarchal enemy but also a situated and ambiguous becoming in a world of relations.

The work of de Beauvoir is, therefore, crucial to a critical engagement with the concept of *authenticité*, as her existential-phenomenological methodology involves a continued attentiveness to assumptions and ‘blind spots’. She reminds us that we must look to the total situation for answers to particular questions rather than attempting to define universal and unchanging moral laws. Her work focuses on unearthing the foundational ambiguity of humanity and critiquing the tendency for philosophy (and humanity more generally) to create absolutes in the face of this paradoxical freedom. As we have seen, an *authentique* voice on de Beauvoir’s account will be one that recognises and celebrates its own and the other’s ambiguity.

There is a recognition within de Beauvoir’s work of the interdependent nature of those terms so often seen to be opposites, as Gatens writes, “...for her the situation of the existent is composed of both facts and values, nature and culture, both biology and consciousness”.<sup>292</sup> In both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir brings to light the *interplay* between biology and culture – revealing that a web of related functions operates to influence woman’s existence. For de Beauvoir,

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<sup>292</sup> Gatens, Moira, ‘Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look’, p22, emphasis added.



biology, culture, history, the economic situation in which she comes to be, as well as her creativity and intellect are all factors that outline a woman's life. Moreover, as Gatens states, "in the final analysis, none of these factors may meaningfully be separated from the others, and taken together they form the contours which constitute the overall shape of a life".<sup>293</sup> What is valuable about de Beauvoir's account is the way in which her analysis captures the connection, instability and movement of the continual tension between what are often seen as opposing factors; self-other, subject-object, subject and world. Rather than attempting to overcome this tension, de Beauvoir encourages us to accept the task of realising it in order to live a fuller, more *authentique*, life.

Rather than viewing feminism as a separate 'women's' discourse, and *The Second Sex* as a book on women, we should see both as useful tools in working out what it means to be human, to be "a thinking sexed being" as Bauer puts it. We can look to the ways in which the insights of feminist theory – or a philosophy of sexed, situated being – can help to re-think political and ethical relations and how we can use this knowledge to inform our relations with one another.

What this means is that the *authentique* voice of woman may be black, white, deaf, blind, old, young, American, French, Islamic, Christian, middle-class or working-class, but, each *authentique* voice will be particular and will never be the voice of 'woman' *per se*. A key point is that the *authentique* voice will recognise its particularity, and with this, recognise that it is *a* voice, not *the* voice. One can endeavour to represent other's voices where it may be required (for a political gain, to bring to light injustice, to overcome prejudice) but one cannot speak as *the* authentic voice for others and should not attempt to represent them without means for seeking input and clarification (through dialogue). What is important about this account of difference is the recognition and acceptance of ambiguity – which involves the continued tension between 'self' and 'other' but without attempting to nihilate, nor reify, the differences that distinguishes us.

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, p6.

**CHAPTER FIVE:  
AUTHENTICITY, AMBIGUITY AND THE THREAT OF THE OTHER**

...exclusion is an inevitable consequence of any attempt to establish a tradition. To  
have an identity at all, a tradition must be selective, partial.

(Robert Bernasconi).<sup>294</sup>

Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness  
in order to secure its own self-certainty.

(William Connolly).<sup>295</sup>

...delimitation marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it  
were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer. This  
marking off will have had some normative force, and indeed, some violence, for it  
can construct only through erasing; it can bound a thing only through enforcing a  
certain criterion, a principle of selectivity.

(Judith Butler).<sup>296</sup>

In previous chapters we have been examining how it is that de Beauvoir's notion of an ambiguous freedom can provide a means for moving beyond dichotomous conclusions in situations where questions about sexed identity are being asked. This chapter functions as a further applied analysis, or 'case study', of the ways in which problematic understandings of authenticity can affect socio-political situations and impact in important ways upon understandings of identity and subjectivity. The historical analysis described herein illustrates the ways in which everyday, 'lived', experience is impacted upon by underlying ontological assumptions about the ways that identities develop, and how identities are lived-out in response to these

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<sup>294</sup> Bernasconi, Robert, 'Almost Always More Than Philosophy Proper', in *Research in Phenomenology*; 2000; 30, p1.

<sup>295</sup> Connolly, William, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

<sup>296</sup> Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge: New York, 1993, p ii.

assumptions. This particular chapter describes the way that misconceptions of existence are reflected in a situation where individuals are arguing over who is, and who is not, an 'authentic' Aborigine.

Through a brief historical analysis, I aim to illustrate how processes of exclusion and constitution, which are based on a denial of ambiguity, have affected understandings of what constitutes authentic Aboriginal identity within Tasmania.<sup>297</sup> Ironically, the conflict over who is - and who is not - a 'real' Aborigine, takes place within a context where for over one hundred years Aboriginal Tasmanians were seen to be an 'extinct race'. Since the death in the late 1800s of the woman many believed to be the last 'full-blooded' Aborigine, the recognised descendants of the original Tasmanians have occupied a precarious position in legislation, science and the cultural imaginary.

Against this historical backdrop, I argue that many current assumptions about what it means to be 'authentically' Aboriginal lean toward essentialism by privileging what are seen to be *irreducible* differences. Moreover, such assumptions reflect a problematic and outmoded scientific discourse, which (ironically) saw such a profound exclusion of Aboriginal people and culture throughout Tasmania's history. The problematic concept of authenticity that arises in this debate is limited by an underlying metaphysics that fails to recognize the dynamic and ambiguous nature of human existence. This problematic understanding of authenticity is linked to a "spirit of seriousness", and is opposed to the idea of *authenticité* that we have been examining in previous chapters.

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<sup>297</sup> Tasmania is a small island State off the coast of Australia. I do not claim here to have done justice to an historical analysis of the development of contemporary Tasmania. Time permits only a very cursory glimpse at some key points in order to illustrate my claim that the concepts of ambiguity and *authenticité* impact upon the lived-experience of everyday people.

For contemporary analyses of the history of Aboriginal and settler relations in Tasmania see for example: Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Re-Examination of the Tasmanian Wars*, Penguin Books Australia, 1995; Lyndal Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1996. For an alternative reading and critique of the first two works see Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847*, Macleay Press: Sydney, 2002.

I conclude that, by re-thinking the connections between *authenticité* and ambiguity (which entails the different levels of freedom discussed above), we can develop a framework that enables an articulation of shared experience and culture without resorting to essentialist discourse. Ambiguity, as articulated by de Beauvoir, allows shared (embodied) experiences to be expressed, without negating the differences between (and freedom of) subjects within a group. In this way, one difference is not privileged over another, and 'absolutes' are not insisted upon. By embracing ambiguity and freedom the *authentique* subject will not become the tyrant that oppresses but will insist upon a continued questioning of identities and their relationships to others and will allow for an open future in which belonging will not necessitate a denial of ambiguity.

#### FRAUDULENT IDENTITIES?

On the nineteenth of October 2002, the local paper carried a photo of a group of people gathered outside the Federal Court building in Hobart, Tasmania. Three of these people sat together on the steps, one with head in hands, while another strode angrily in front of them.<sup>298</sup>

The president of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal had just passed a ruling that 129 people were legally entitled to have their names included on what was known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) electoral roll.<sup>299</sup> At the same time, these people had their Aboriginality 'confirmed' by the court. This judgment was made in response to a previous denial of the eligibility for those people to vote in the ATSIC elections. Their claims to Aboriginality had earlier been rejected by an Independent Indigenous Advisory Committee (IIAC), which was established specifically to adjudicate when objections to individual's eligibility to

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<sup>298</sup> *The Saturday Mercury*, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2002.

<sup>299</sup> The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was a government funded organization established by the Hawke Labour Government in 1990. The role of ATSIC was to administer indigenous health, welfare and education services. ATSIC was to be administered by Aboriginal people elected to positions by other indigenous people. The electoral roll was an attempt to prevent what was perceived as 'vote rigging' by ensuring that only Aboriginal people could vote in the election. After a great deal of controversy and accusations of corruption, ATSIC was disbanded by the Liberal Government in 2005.

vote in the elections were made. The IIAC was comprised of both archivists and 'recognised' members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and this committee had assessed archival evidence to reach their conclusion that numerous people who had registered to vote in the ATSIC elections could not *prove* their Aboriginality.<sup>300</sup>

The purpose of the electoral roll was to determine who could legitimately vote in the upcoming Tasmanian ATSIC elections, and who could run for a position on the ATSIC. Over one hundred of those people who had been identified as 'non-Aboriginal' by the committee and who were, therefore, deemed ineligible to vote, had taken the matter to the Federal Court, appealing against their removal from the roll and objecting to the selection criteria used in determining Aboriginality. In order to be considered Aboriginal, the challenged applicants were then required to produce official documents tracing their heritage back to traditional Aborigines at the time of European arrival. The rules governing the ATSIC electoral roll included the clause that "The submission must provide evidence that the applicant is an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander".<sup>301</sup>

Those who were unable to provide evidence in the form of a record of ancestry, and who were thus denied Aboriginality by the IIAC, argued that oral history, as well as family photographs and letters should also be considered as 'evidence', along with a demonstration of their ongoing participation in the Aboriginal community in Tasmania.

Significantly, the findings of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal report that those making representations to legitimise their inclusion on the ATSIC roll make repeated reference to what they saw to be traditional Aboriginal cultural ways to

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<sup>300</sup> Marina Furescu's *Aboriginality in Tasmania*, Issue Brief 2000, no. 3, September 2000, Tasmanian Parliamentary Library, provides a more comprehensive background to the dispute over identification in Tasmania.

See also Gardiner-Garden, John, 'Defining Aboriginality in Australia, *Current Issues Brief*, no 10 2002-03, Social Policy Group, 3 February 2003, for discussion of the ways in which legislation has changed regarding Aboriginal identification.

<sup>301</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (Regional Council Election) Amendment Rules, 2002 (No.2).

prove their authenticity or legitimacy. There are numerous claims to ancestors with 'dark' skin, to women who were "thick-set yet quick", to their participation in activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering, and to relatives having an "affinity with animals" in order to demonstrate their connection to 'authentic' Aboriginal life.<sup>302</sup> Others provided photographs to the court as evidence of relatives who display the "physical characteristics of an Aboriginal person". One made reference to an ancestor who "had dark skin and talked like an Aborigine". It is evident that the bodies of ancestors (and particularly their skin colour) are seen to be important to those attempting to authenticate themselves because it is their "blackness" that is being questioned.

Social philosopher Patrick Johnson argues that, in such situations, when one individual or group appropriates 'blackness' to the exclusion of others "individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier [blackness] in order to *circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups*".<sup>303</sup> In this case, those seeking 'authentication' were attempting to demonstrate what was perceived to be a legitimate physical link between themselves and a 'real', 'authentic' Aborigine.

Johnson warns, however, that it is important to remain aware of what he calls the "arbitrariness of authenticity", and the "ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding".<sup>304</sup> In other words, if we do not remind ourselves of the ambiguity of that which we deem to signify a *genuine* way of being, then we run the risk of solidifying particular traits or characteristics and limiting the possibilities of an open future. It can be argued that the applicants in this case appealed to such traits in their attempts to prove their authenticity but that, by tying Aboriginality to an affinity with animals, to particular

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<sup>302</sup> *Findings of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal*, 18 October, 2002, Hobart Tasmania (55,66,111,155,156,178,192,195,196,248, 249, 321,340, 394).

<sup>303</sup> Johnson, Patrick, E., *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, Duke University Press: Durham, London, 2003, pp2-3 (my emphasis).

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid*, p3.

facial characteristics or ways of speaking, they deny the ambiguity of identity and its potential to change and adapt over time.

After almost two weeks of hearings and deliberations, the Court found in the favour of most of the applicants, agreeing that oral history and family documentation could be used as evidence, and, using the 'three part definition' of Aboriginality as its guide, the Court found "that they and each of them are persons of the Aboriginal race of Australia".<sup>305</sup>

Members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC)<sup>306</sup> were incensed by the court ruling, and claimed that only Aboriginal people could and should decide who is a member of their community. One member for the TAC argued that the stories of the applicants were false, and called on the Government to "come up with a fool-proof solution that will not enable *impostors* and *frauds* to pass through the net".<sup>307</sup>

Others, especially those who had their claims to Aboriginality upheld, saw it as proof that the TAC had for too long dictated the criteria for identity and, in doing so, had excluded many whose claims are valid. Understandably, feelings on both sides were strong and the debate raised questions for many in the Tasmanian community about what it meant to be Aboriginal and how decisions could be made by governments about the validity of claims. Many felt that their hard-fought battles for recognition and for indigenous-specific services were being taken-over by 'new people' who did not share their history. The following quote represents this view well:

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<sup>305</sup> The three part definition states that to be considered an Aboriginal person the individual must, firstly, show Aboriginal descent; secondly, self identify as an Aborigine, and thirdly, be recognised as an Aborigine by the Aboriginal Community. For full details see: *Findings of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal*, 18 October, 2002, Hobart Tasmania, p9.

<sup>306</sup> The TAC is a funded non-government organisation providing information, legal, health, counselling and recreation services to the Aboriginal community in Tasmania. It has also worked to repatriate cultural artifacts and human remains, which have been held in museums and international collections. The TAC has been accused of being exclusionary by other groups claiming Aboriginality in Tasmania who have been denied access to services.

<sup>307</sup> *The Hobart Mercury*, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2002, p 7, (emphasis added).

...the difference is, we've been Aboriginal *all our lives*, we've been there, done the hard yards, suffered the government policies, finally started to get somewhere and the new people start to identify and they are coming in and getting [the benefits] anyway.<sup>308</sup>

In response to an article written by Tasmanian author and political commentator, Richard Flanagan on this fraught topic,<sup>309</sup> Michael Mansell, a well-known member and advocate of the TAC argued that "the ATSIC process is an exercise by the federal government to find the legal mechanism to rid Aborigines of *white imposters* [*sic*] seeking an advantage". However, he asserted that, "apart from some several thousand of Flanagan's white colleagues trying to falsely claim to be Aboriginal for the purpose of rorting the system, the question of who is Aboriginal is not in dispute".<sup>310</sup>

According to Mansell, he and the TAC are quite clear on the fact that "there are 6000 Aborigines in Tasmania, made up of people of the Aboriginal families whose ancestors were Aboriginal *before* the British invasion and who, in the two hundred years since, *have known no other identity*".<sup>311</sup> On this view, Aboriginal identity is linked to a time prior to 'invasion' and has been maintained in opposition to any other identity since that time.

A major issue for Mansell, and for many others, is that the numbers of people identifying officially as Aboriginal in Tasmania has increased substantially over the past twenty years (from around 2,500 in the 1981 Census, to nearly 16,000 in 2001). The concern is that loosening the 'boundaries' will mean that anyone can identify and, therefore, claim to represent the needs of the Aboriginal community. The question then becomes, how does one *prove* one's Aboriginality (and should one

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<sup>308</sup> Dickson, Leonie, *The Saturday Mercury*, Tasmania, 4 September 1999, (emphasis added).

<sup>309</sup> Flanagan, Richard, 'The Lost Tribe', *The Guardian*, Monday October 14 2002

<sup>310</sup> Mansell, Michael, "Tasmania - Australia's Answer to America's Deep South", 21st October 2002, published on The Koori History Website <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html>, last accessed 9 June 2008, (emphasis added).

<sup>311</sup> Ibid, (emphasis added).



have to), and what constitutes proof or evidence of belonging? Another irony is evident in that those attempting to prove their Aboriginality were asked to make use of archival records kept by the colonial authorities to prove a legitimate link to 'pre-colonial' ancestors. Due to the fact that many were unable to unearth such archival "evidence", oral history and photographs became central to the appeals of claimants.

Although Mansell takes umbrage with much of Flanagan's assessment of the situation, he would appear to agree with Flanagan's claim that there is a problem inherent in using oral history alone as 'proof' of Indigeneity. On this topic, Flanagan writes:

The problem with oral history is that it is also a wonderful quarry for the *creative* and the *fraudulent*. Alongside those families who, despite the lack of documentary evidence, all acknowledge to be Aboriginal, there has flourished in the past 10 years many families whose claims to Aboriginality are fiercely contested. Their tales of descent from lost tribes seem, to the sceptical, highly dubious, bordering on the fabulous, and have no basis in the historical record.<sup>312</sup>

How then, *can* one determine what it means to be a 'real' Tasmanian Aborigine in the absence of 'hard' historical evidence? What are the necessary requisites so-to-speak? Moreover, if those claiming Aboriginality cannot agree on this, how should the government respond? How *does* one decide what constitutes an 'authentic' claim to Aboriginality? As we have seen, authenticity is a fraught concept, and its use has been problematic in philosophy and social discourse.

As Cressida Heyes has noted, the concept of authenticity is not easily aligned with the theories of any one group. Interestingly, both liberal and difference theorists have used it for their own aims:

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<sup>312</sup> Flanagan, Richard, 'The lost tribe', *The Guardian*, Monday October 14 2002, (emphasis added).

While doctrines of equality press the notion that each human being is capable of deploying his or her practical reason or moral sense to live an authentic life qua individual, the politics of difference has appropriated the language of authenticity to describe ways of living that are true to the identities of marginalized social groups.<sup>313</sup>

It is the latter use of the term that is being employed in the current debate over identity in Tasmania, with Aboriginality being determined via its difference from the 'white' community and also, in some cases, via its difference from the 'impostors' who seek to undermine the coherence of this identity.

As Regina Bendix argues, what is challenging about the concept of authenticity is the implication of "the existence of its opposite, the fake," and, she argues, that it is this "dichotomous construct that is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic".<sup>314</sup> I will come back to this claim later and argue that, although the concept of authenticity as commonly used is problematic, a re-thought *authenticité* in fact assists to overcome dichotomous constructions.

#### AUTHENTICITY: 'GENUINE, 'REAL AND 'TRUE'

In a recent publication examining the relationship between political theory and Indigenous rights, political theorist Sonia Smallacombe analyses the contemporary interest in Indigenous culture and looks at conceptions within socio-political discourse of the 'authentic' Aborigine. Her analysis reveals the ways in which much contemporary understanding of authentic Indigenous identity reflects assumptions about a closeness to the pre-colonial, and ignores the possibility of changing traditions and developing identities.<sup>315</sup> Heyes also notes this tendency to

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<sup>313</sup> Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed).

<sup>314</sup> Bendix, Regina, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*, University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1997, p 9.

<sup>315</sup> Smallacombe, Sonia, 'On Display for its Aesthetic Beauty: How Western Institutions Fabricate Knowledge about Aboriginal Cultural Heritage', in *Political Theory and the Rights of*

‘authenticise’ that which is associated with the traditional or pre-colonial, and she writes that “[f]or many proponents of identity politics this demand for authenticity includes appeals to a time before oppression, or a culture or way of life damaged by colonialism, imperialism, or even genocide”.<sup>316</sup> To illustrate this claim, Heyes provides a quote from a proponent of a return to traditional indigenous values. Here we see the idealisation and romanticisation of the indigenous, contrasted with what is seen as an inherently flawed contemporary (non-indigenous) system:

Indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream. Western notions of domination (human and natural) are noticeably absent; in their place we find harmony, autonomy, and respect. We have a responsibility to recover, understand, and preserve these values, not only because they represent a unique contribution to the history of ideas, but because renewal of respect for traditional values is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social problems that beset our people.<sup>317</sup>

Claims such as this seem to either explicitly or implicitly, depend on an understanding of identity and authenticity that is static and that exists in separation from an ‘other’ identity against which it is defined. The traditional, indigenous way of life is represented as being inherently good, as being ‘naturally’ peaceful and harmonious, and the colonisation process is marked as that which has infected and tainted this way of life.

In order to examine how the tendency to focus on an ‘authentic’ pre-colonial way of being has developed, Smallacombe examines the social imaginary of the nineteenth century, arguing that Australia was founded on the beliefs of *terra nullius*, ideas of ‘the doomed race’ and those that underlay Social Darwinism. These notions, along

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*Indigenous Peoples*, Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, Will Sanders (eds), Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp 152 -162.

<sup>316</sup> Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed).

<sup>317</sup> Taiaiake, Alfred, quoted in Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics".

with the imagery surrounding the ideas of the 'noble savage' and natural selection, saw the exclusion of Aboriginal people and their culture from the emerging Nation. In this system of exclusion, indigenous Australians were constructed as 'the Other' and what Smallacombe terms the nation's 'collective amnesia' functioned to justify a European-based culture and identity for the British Colony.<sup>318</sup>

During the period of colonisation, a fascination for the Other and the rise in science as the dominant discourse resulted in an interest in the anatomy of Indigenous Australians. While Indigenous bodies, both living and dead, were shipped around the globe to be observed, probed and experimented upon, or used as exhibitions in side-shows and museums, back in their own countries, they were excluded from participating in the development of the new Nation, and policies of annihilation and assimilation were put into place.

Smallacombe argues that, since the 1970s, however, there has been an increase in the appropriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture in the construction of Australia's national identity. She questions whether or not this growing interest is evidence of a genuine desire to remedy the social and economic position of Aboriginal people, or if it is evidence of a cultural appropriation that ignores the plight of thousands of Indigenous Australians whose identity falls outside that defined as 'authentic' within the current socio-political context. Smallacombe suggests that it has been more of the latter and uses the following quote from an Australia Day speech given by (now retired) Governor-General Bill Hayden to illustrate this point:

Aboriginal creativity has taken its place as a major influence in our national consciousness. We're receptive to what Aboriginal artists, dancers, writers and performers have to say. In a very real sense they are helping to reshape our own concept of self and of country – of the way we see and feel things as Australian – and as others see us.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Smallacombe, 'On Display for its Aesthetic Beauty', p154.

<sup>319</sup> Bill Hayden, Australia Day Speech, January 1996, quoted in Smallacombe, p 155.

As can be seen in the above quote, in many 'affirmations' of Aboriginal culture and heritage, there is a celebration of 'traditional' aspects of Aboriginality, and either a forgetting or an outright denial of the validity of the experience of other Aboriginal people. The social problems that impact so significantly on many indigenous Australians are seen to be a result of a clash between 'white' and 'Aboriginal' ways of being. At the same time as we are celebrating the art, music, food, dress and spirituality of the 'First Australians', there is an ignorance of the experience of dispossession, ill-health and exclusion that characterises large sections of Aboriginal Australia. Moreover, this celebration entails a denial of the 'authenticity' of those urban Aboriginal people of mixed descent who fail to meet the ideal of the 'real' Aborigine. The 'authentic' Aborigine in this imaginary is the one who is close to nature and who represents the lost past of pre-colonial Australia.<sup>320</sup>

Smallacombe argues that such comments as those cited above reflect a "hunger for the 'exotic', 'primitive' and 'the unknown', which is part of the fascination for 'the Other'".<sup>321</sup> Australia was defined through the *exclusion* of Others and today, this *selective inclusion* of Indigenous culture into Australia's national identity results in another exclusion. The 'authentic', 'real' Aborigine is upheld as an example of the spiritual and cultural roots from which Australia as a Nation has sprung, and the 'inauthentic' Aborigine is moved to the margins. This binary distinction between 'real' and 'inauthentic' Aboriginal people and Aboriginal experience denies the possibility that there could be other experiences, or in fact very different and unique but, nonetheless, *authentique* experiences of Aboriginal identity within Australia. As Manuhua Barcham comments, attempts to assert the rights of indigenous people have resulted in a situation in which:

...theorists and practitioners alike have created a reified and ahistorical idealisation of the indigenous self whereby the constitution of oneself as an

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<sup>320</sup> Sneja Gunew also points out that in the context of multiculturalism in Australia, that "the usual way diversity is celebrated is through a multicultural food festival" as if to suggest that food or diverse cuisine is the only valuable contribution from migrants (*Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, p16).

<sup>321</sup> Smallacombe, Sonia, 'On Display for its Aesthetic Beauty', p156.

'authentic' indigenous self has been conflated with specific ahistorical assumptions concerning the nature of Indigeneity, a process intricately linked to the continued subordination of difference to identity.<sup>322</sup>

Important in this argument is the recognition that the selective incorporation of 'traditional' Aboriginal customs and culture into the cultural imaginary of the "Nation", and into legislation, functions to marginalise or deny the experience of many other Aboriginal people. It also reveals a perspective that refuses to acknowledge the changing nature of identity and implies that Aboriginal people can only have cultural authenticity if they remain closely aligned with the pre-colonial. As Smallacombe points out, this has serious implications for legal claims, as well as limiting views within identity politics.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Daiva Stasiulis also makes this point in her discussion of the representation of indigenous people in literature, where she argues that "...the prehistoric Aborigine is valorised, so that contemporary First Nations people are [seen as] either...vague glimpses or...deviants, drunks and prostitutes".<sup>323</sup> Stasiulis sees the appropriation of prehistoric cultural attributes as an attempt to overcome the 'white' sense of alienation and otherness through "indigenisation".

The above examples demonstrate that these issues are by no means limited to debates over Indigeneity in any particular country. In an analysis of recent struggles within New Zealand over post-treaty assets and organisational representation due to the Government legitimisation of Iwi over non-Iwi, or urban Maori, Barcham argues that "the tensions leading to the emergence of these struggles can be traced

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<sup>322</sup> Barcham, Manuhaia, '(De)Constructing the Politics of Indigeneity', in *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, Will Sanders (eds), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000, pp137-138.

<sup>323</sup> Stasiulis, Daiva, 'Authentic Voice: Anti-Racist politics in Canadian feminist publishing and literary production', p44.

to fundamental disagreements over issues of identity and authenticity, including the question of who and what constitutes an 'authentic' indigenous subject".<sup>324</sup>

As we have seen above, similar ideas about what constitutes authentic Aboriginality are also evident in Tasmania today, and are taken up by members of both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. As Barcham argues (supporting my claim that a re-thought notion of *authenticité* based on ambiguity can provide a means to re-think the problematic metaphysical assumptions that underlie such debates) "the importance of the interplay [between] ...multiple and shifting identities has been ignored in the recognition of atemporal difference through the reification of Indigeneity *to an ideal of immutability*".<sup>325</sup> So, rather than looking at how we have *become* what we are via our relations with others, there is a privileging of identity as if that way of being is ahistorical and atemporal and, therefore, *cannot* change if it is to maintain authenticity.

#### A QUESTION OF HISTORY?

In late 2002, not long after the Federal Court ruling on the Indigenous Electoral Role was handed down, historian Keith Windschuttle published a text which polarised the community and brought into question the historical validity of much of Tasmania's 'black' history. In his work, Windschuttle criticises heavily what he terms 'black armband history' and accuses several prominent historians of skewing their historical accounts in order to paint a particular picture of 'black and white' relations in Tasmania.<sup>326</sup>

While time does not permit a thorough critique of Windschuttle's claims or the counter-claims of those he criticises here, I make note of the epilogue to his book, which deals specifically with the issue of authenticity as it relates to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their place in the history of the island. Windschuttle's is the

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<sup>324</sup> Barcham, Manuhua, '(De)Constructing the Politics of Indigeneity', p137.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid, p146 (emphasis added).

<sup>326</sup> Windschuttle, Keith, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847*, Macleay Press: Sydney 2002.

epitome of approaches to the question of identity which are underlain by the metaphysics of seriousness described above. The kind of historical analysis undertaken in his work reveals a focus on historical 'truth' and 'fact' and he is unable to acknowledge the possibility of subjective interpretation being included in the reports provided by historical figures. For Windschuttle, 'Science', (documented) 'History' and 'Anthropology' are factual and objective discourses that should be utilised to determine 'fact' from 'fiction' in this debate.

Windschuttle takes up the question of how one can determine who can authentically claim to be a Tasmanian Aborigine and aims to show how historical 'fact' can provide an answer to this question. In criticism of claims by members of the Aboriginal community that indigenous remains and 'artefacts' should be returned to the Aboriginal community from museums and universities, Windschuttle poses the question:

When [the representative] talks about 'our people', 'our past' and 'our culture', who are the people she is referring to? Apart from her own assertions, which are not infallible, how is anyone to ascertain who the modern members of this people and this culture really are? How can anyone tell that the platform from which [she] and her colleagues speak is legitimate?

Although this is a pertinent question, and one which lies at the heart of the problem we are examining here, Windschuttle does not provide a satisfying answer. His claim is that, "with the death of the last full-blooded Aborigine [in 1876]...the indigenous population had been exterminated, although mixed-blood descendants today still identify themselves as Tasmanian Aborigines".<sup>327</sup> Windschuttle argues that Aboriginal culture and identity "was an invention in the 1970s by modern urban political activists" rather than something that had "survived down the generations through the island community".<sup>328</sup> He suggests that it became 'popular'

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<sup>327</sup> Windschuttle, Keith, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, p13.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, pp 424-433.



in the 1970s to 'discover' Aboriginal ancestry and claims that, at this time, government legislation also provided "financial relevance" for people to claim Aboriginality.

Despite the fact that he acknowledge that changing social perceptions meant that people felt more able to identify as Aboriginal without fear of persecution in the 1970s, he maintains that, "It is equally clear that a great incentive is access to the more generous welfare payments available to Aborigines than to whites".<sup>329</sup> Note here, that on his account, there is a split in which there are "Aborigines" (or those who claim to be) and "whites". His account does not lend itself to nuance or complexity. To him, the contemporary 'urban' culture is not an authentic one, but an invention or a fabrication in order to claim welfare payments and land rights.

Reflecting a scientific approach to identity based on the idea of blood quantum, he makes the claim that "DNA testing could possibly confirm the authenticity of some who claim to be descendants [of traditional aborigines]" and goes on to say that, whilst he acknowledges that there may be other lineages than those recognised by the TAC, that:

Today, most of the fifth-generation descendants of these alternative lineages would have no greater Aboriginal connection than to one of their 32 great, great, great grandparents, but [he says] this is true of a number of their factional rivals as well. Of course, anyone with such a slender link who seriously claims to be Aboriginal can only be regarded with cynicism by outsiders. But as long as government largesse is available, the charade is sure to continue.<sup>330</sup>

As evidenced by such remarks as those above, public perception often sees claims to Aboriginality as linked to a welfare mentality; however, I would assert that this is not simply a debate over who has the right to access services and funds dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal people. It is also a question about who has the right to speak

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid, pp 433-434.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, p 435.

for and as a Tasmanian Aboriginal, and who can speak on behalf of the Aboriginal community. It would seem that the identities of some Aboriginal people in Tasmania are threatened by 'others' whose claims cannot be 'authenticated'. At the same time, those who are unable to *prove* their relationship to a Tasmanian Aboriginal person living in the 1800s through archival records struggle to justify their claims and are accused of maintaining *fraudulent* identities.

This is not a clear-cut question of finance, but a question of belonging. As feminist philosopher Judith Butler has argued, it is through the exclusion of some aspects that a thing is defined – it is via its relationship and distinction to another thing or subject that an identity is formed and it is this which makes the idea of belonging possible:

...delimitation marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer. This marking off will have had some normative force, and indeed, some violence, for it can construct only through erasing; it can bound a thing only through enforcing a certain criterion, a principle of selectivity.<sup>331</sup>

The next section of this chapter provides an outline of the way in which Enlightenment discourse, which privileged Reason and Civilisation over the 'natural' during the development of Tasmania, enhanced processes of exclusion and constitution in colonial encounters, thus contributing to the dichotomous and essentialist perspective that underlies much of the debate over Aboriginal identity in Tasmania today.

#### LOOKING BACK - A TASMANIAN STORY: FORMING AND ISLAND IDENTITY

In September 1803, a ship loaded with both convicts and sailors arrived at what was to become known as Risdon Cove. The site was intended to flourish into a new settlement, and its establishment took place against a political backdrop that was unfolding thousands of miles away. Overcrowding in Britain, of both the cities and

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<sup>331</sup> Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge: New York, 1993, p ii.

the floating cells used to house those found guilty of crimes, had resulted in a political decision being made to remove large numbers of 'criminals' from England altogether – to reduce pressure on resources in England, but also to lay claim to the Great South Land.<sup>332</sup> Van Diemen's Land, as the island of Tasmania had previously been named, showed signs of providing access to profitable whaling grounds and to tall eucalypts that would make good timber for ship-building. The new arrivals on the island were, thus, negotiating their identities in this new and strange environment, surrounded by and embedded in the cultural imagery that they brought with them from Britain, but separated by a geographical distance of thousands of miles.

In her work on missionary writing and Empire, historian and post-colonial theorist Anna Johnson argues that Britain was undergoing a crucial period of social reform in the early 1800s and that, at this time, "many of the cultural narratives central to British self-imagining were (re)invented."<sup>333</sup> Johnson argues that there was also a great renewal of religiosity in Britain during this era, and that it characterised a period of exploration and colonisation, which entailed encounters with various cultures and peoples; encounters which were seen to provide access to 'knowledge' about these others and, crucially, to add to knowledge about Britain at the same time. Through its encounters with Others, the Empire was able to recreate images of *itself* as the arbiter of morality and goodness; as a leader in cultural, intellectual and technological development; and as the beneficent patriarch bestowing Christianity and civilisation on the rest of the world. The definition of the Empire was, therefore, re-created and re-established at the same time as the *creation* of the colonised. Johnson comments that ideas about race, class and gender were all under negotiation at this time and Britain believed itself to possess the moral

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<sup>332</sup> As convict records show, the majority of the crimes that saw people sentenced to deportment to the penal colonies included theft, robbery and burglary. Some were sentenced for transportation for seven years for thefts of such things as coats, handkerchiefs, pigs, sheep and chickens. See for example, The National Archives of Ireland Convict Database, which holds records of the crimes and sentences of convicts sent to Australia. URL <http://www.nationalarchives.ie/search/index.php> (last accessed 14 June 2008).

<sup>333</sup> Johnson, Anna, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p4.

imperative to bring the colonised into “civilised society”.<sup>334</sup> These ideas of cultural imperialism and perceived superiority are examples of what could be termed a ‘colonial seriousness’ and the detrimental effects of the failure to recognise the fundamental freedom of those being ‘civilised’ are still blindingly evident today.

#### SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS, THE DOOMED RACE AND IDENTITY

By the 1820s the Aboriginal population in Van Diemen’s Land had diminished substantially and the relationship between the original occupants and the newcomers had been fraught with conflict. From 1829 to 1834 George Augustus Robinson was employed by then Governor, Colonel George Arthur, to gather together all remaining Aborigines on the mainland of Van Diemen’s Land and move them to a reserve on Flinders Island, a small Bass Strait island in the Furneaux Group off the North East Coast. This reserve was named Wybalenna (meaning *black men’s houses*), and the history of this place is characterised by disease and death for the Aboriginal people who lived there. Many children were removed from their families to live with white people, in an attempt to teach them the ‘benefits’ of civilisation. However, new food and new diseases, along with such sudden changes to their way of life had a disastrous effect on the small population and many became extremely ill and died.<sup>335</sup>

As discussed in previous chapters, Genevieve Lloyd has been interested in an examination of the operation and processes of exclusion and constitution in philosophical thought and socio-political discourse. Lloyd undertakes this examination through her discussion of the Stolen Generations, and an analysis of the imagery involved in the policy of assimilation. She considers the way in which our ‘collective imaginings’ have functioned to support the ideas that allowed Europeans to claim ‘settlement’, rather than ownership-through-invasion, of

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> For accounts of the conditions on Wybalenna see for example Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996; Cassandra Pybus, *Mannalargenna’s Daughters, Outback Heat*, Vol. 15, 2000; and Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Re-Examination of the Tasmanian Wars*, Penguin Books Australia, 1995.

Australia, and argues that the Enlightenment ideals of 'reason' and of property and ownership functioned to:

...rationalise European presence as embodying the most fully human way of relating to land. Colonisation [then] is imagined as the historically inevitable unfolding of nature in the spread of enlightenment, and the participation of indigenous peoples in its fruits.<sup>336</sup>

According to Lloyd these visions of the human race, "emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of its progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness", are reflective of a dichotomised understanding of existence. Such an understanding sees 'Nature' on the negative side and 'Reason' on the other as positive and given *prior* to cultural or social understandings. Transcendental reason, truth, objectivity and virtue become the dominant concepts against which all 'Others' are defined. The 'natives' then, with their traditional beliefs, religions and cultures are seen as opposed to all that is 'good' and 'pure' in civilisation. Their difference from those who are 'colonising' marks them as 'Other', but the colonisers fail to see their *own* otherness in this relationship and view themselves as the 'One'.

Lloyd argues that what lay beneath the policies and actions of white Australians in the colonisation process did not necessarily represent a malign and brutal intent but, rather, the failure to recognise *difference*.<sup>337</sup> Policies of assimilation, the removal of indigenous children from their families, and the forced destruction of indigenous cultures, were seen as benefits of a civilised and more developed people sharing their knowledge with the native inhabitants. I would argue that what we see here is a failure to recognise *ambiguity*. Once again we see an example of the colonial seriousness, which ultimately denies the freedom of *both* colonised and coloniser in a construction of identity based upon assumptions about existence and values that negate ambiguity.

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<sup>336</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve, 'No-One's Land: Australia and the Philosophical Imagination', *Hypatia*, Vol. 15, 2000, p34

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid*, p36.

As Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, during the formation of identity the 'other' is created in part (although not consciously) to assist in the clarification and solidification of *one's own* identity or group identity. He writes in an historical illustration of this point that:

the Malay came to know one another as such only after and in opposition to, the arrival of the Chinese; the Hindu became Hindu only when the British created the class in the early 19th Century, to take in those who weren't members of the famous monotheisms, and the identity gained salience only in opposition to South Asian Muslims.<sup>338</sup>

As we have seen previously, de Beauvoir analyses this human tendency towards self-construction through the exclusion and opposition to the 'not me' in *The Second Sex*. There she writes, "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" and she describes the process of 'Othering' as follows:

Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself...Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged (TSS, p17)

Without a broader social setting in which to identify differences from 'Others', that which defines the 'One' would not have the same significance. The relation between the Other and the Self is a reciprocal one, and each plays off the difference of the other in order to maintain the distinction that defines them.<sup>339</sup> Self-identity depends upon one's worldly situation and the way in which the self-other relation is played out. Identity is not something that stands alone or exists in isolation. Even if one wants to change and adopt a particular identity, this is done in negotiation with the 'external' world.

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<sup>338</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *The Ethics of Identity*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p64.

<sup>339</sup> Although it should be noted that de Beauvoir argues that in the situation of women, this has not historically been the case and women have assumed the status of the 'Other' without recognising the reciprocity of this relationship.

The distinction between civilisation and savagery, wilderness and containment, nature and reason, all impacted upon the Tasmanian imaginary in the nineteenth century, and with this, upon colonial legislation and the construction of identity. In creating images of the Aboriginal Tasmanians as uncivilised and childlike, and as inevitably doomed to extinction, colonial society *at the same time* contained its own image of itself as reasoned, rational, beneficent, moral and ordered – attempting to keep itself safe against the threat of disorder (and ambiguity).

The 'benevolence' of the colonisers was based on the founding assumption that scientific knowledge, 'culture' and education lead to the inevitable progress of humanity. What they failed to recognise was that this ostensibly *universal* account of humanity was defined by notions of Reason and Civilisation that were dependent upon the exclusion of the 'other' for their coherence. The following quotation describes the way in which popular conceptions of Aboriginal identity were affected by the scientific theories of the time:

... a new idea took hold in the late 19th century, backed with the ballast of the most advanced scientific thought. Nothing seemed to offer more striking proof to the late Victorian mind of the infernal truth of social Darwinism than the supposed demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines. They were an inferior race, a meek and primitive people doomed to die out, and the coming of the English, with their diseases and guns, had merely hastened the inevitable.<sup>340</sup>

In demonstration of this belief, in 1843, the wife of the Governor of Tasmania, Lady Jane Franklin, wrote to her sister in England, describing a young Aboriginal girl the Franklins had adopted. Along with a portrait of the girl, known as Mathinna, she included some of the girl's hair in the package sent to England:

... I send you now some of her woolly hair - in this particular the inhabitants of this island differ to those of Australia who have curly hair. Mathinna's portrait is extremely alike...I think you will find people much interested in

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<sup>340</sup> Flanagan, Richard, 'The Lost Tribe', *The Guardian*, Monday October 14, 2002.

this portrait and the hair - *she is one of the remnant of a people about to disappear from the face of the earth.*<sup>341</sup>

The idea that the Tasmanian Aborigines were destined to die-out was a dominant one in the nineteenth century, and this assisted in the justification that these people should be scientifically examined because of their uniqueness.<sup>342</sup>

#### THE LAST TASMANIAN

The idea that the Tasmanian Aborigines were doomed to extinction was prevalent throughout much of the colonising period and, in 1876, this belief was confirmed for many when Trugannini, the woman believed to be the last 'full-blooded' Tasmanian Aborigine, died in Hobart. Trugannini's death took place at a time when Science was seen as benefiting the progress of humanity and, in the name of Science, attempts were made to secure her skeleton for the Royal Society of England. Rather than being seen as remains to be treated with respect, Trugannini's skeleton was regarded as a 'specimen' that should be preserved for the benefit of scientific research and, ultimately, for the benefit of human kind. In a plea to convince others that Trugannini's remains should be held by the Royal Society one man wrote:

...this specimen must beyond all others be ever regarded *as truly genuine*, and as the last of a race must always be unique...It must therefore be difficult to conceive that any portion of an *enlightened* and *rational* community could object to having a skeleton carefully preserved in the National Collection...<sup>343</sup>

The enlightened and rational, according to this kind of argument, are those who saw Trugannini's skeleton as a specimen of interest to science and the progress of

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<sup>341</sup> Tasmanian Archives: NS 279/2/4, Letter from Lady Jane Franklin to her sister, 14 February 1843, my emphasis.

<sup>342</sup> For further discussion of this point see for example Lyndall Ryan's, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996.

<sup>343</sup> For extensive discussion of the relationship between science and Aboriginal Tasmanian remains see John J. Cove, *What the Bones Say: Tasmanian Aborigines, Science, and Domination*, McGill-Queen's Press, 1995.



humanity. Those who believed this must have been great in number, or in power and influence, because Trugannini's skeleton was kept as a museum artefact for nearly one hundred years.

Even in the 1970s, when contemporary Tasmanian Aborigines were asserting their claims to Aboriginality in a very public manner, the idea that science proved that the Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct was still evident. This belief can be seen in the following attempt by one man to justify the role his family had played in the research conducted on the remains of Aboriginal people:

With the *realisation* that the race was about to become extinct there was in the 1860s a growing scientific interest in London to acquire an entire skeleton of a Tasmanian Aborigine for the collections of the Royal College of Surgeons... I believe that, if the three members of my family... were so involved in such an activity, *it was purely in the interests of science and humanity in general...and that they acted entirely through love of science and in the hope that both science and humanity might be assisted by the study of such a skeleton deposited at the centre of the scientific world.*<sup>344</sup>

Here again is the assumption that, through Science, humanity progresses in its understanding of what it means to be fully human and the 'other' becomes the specimen against which humanity is defined. As William Connolly writes, in this way, "...doubts about self identity are posed and resolved by the constitution of an other against which that identity may define itself".<sup>345</sup>

Whilst there is, at least in a banal way, a certain truth in the claim that science has something to offer our understanding of humanity, Connolly is rightly critical (as was de Beauvoir) of the way in which the desire to maintain particular values or social norms, which are seen as being "God-given", results in a definition of that

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<sup>344</sup> Crowther, William (Sir), March 1976, quoted in, Ellis, V, *Trucannini: Queen or Traitor?*, DBM Publishing Company: Hobart, 1976, emphasis added.

<sup>345</sup> Connolly, William, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002. p ix-x.

which opposes these values and norms as 'evil'. This results in attempts being made "to protect the purity and certainty of a hegemonic identity by defining as independent sites of evil...those differences that pose the greatest threat to the integrity and certainty of that identity".<sup>346</sup> The problem in the reification of the differences that characterise identities is that the ambiguity of these identities is ignored or denied in favour of 'certainty'. As Connolly argues:

An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to conceal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates. *Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.*<sup>347</sup>

## AMBIGUITY

In historical encounters with the colonisers, the 'first' Tasmanians were defined as Other with the notion of *terra nullius* and their 'failure' to occupy the land.<sup>348</sup> They were constituted as Other when imperial subjects tried to bring 'culture' to the

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Connolly, William, *Identity/Difference*, p 64, my emphasis.

<sup>348</sup> The term *terra nullius* is Latin for 'land of no one', or 'empty land' (land that does not belong to anyone). The concept was used in International Law to enable one nation to 'settle' a country without the need for a treaty or for payment. The philosophical idea underpinning the concept of *terra nullius* was based on the Lockean concept of property ownership and those deemed to inhabit a land without property laws were not therefore seen to 'own' it – making the land and its resources 'no one's' and thus open to claim of discovery. For discussion of the concept of *terra nullius* see for example Damien Short's "Reconciliation, Assimilation, and the Indigenous Peoples of Australia", *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Oct, 2003), pp 491-513.

colony, and they were constituted as Other when seen as the doomed race against which British culture defined itself as superior.

When Trugannini died, and the myth of the Last Tasmanian was born, the descendants of the 'Original Inhabitants' came to occupy a precarious position in the Tasmanian Imaginary; they existed somewhere between 'black' and 'white'. Up until (and even after) the public and political campaign of the 1970s, when the families of Aboriginal women taken to the Bass Strait islands began their very public fight for recognition, it was common for the Aboriginal people of Tasmania to be referred to as an 'extinct race'.<sup>349</sup> Those who were recognised as descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines were considered to be 'half-castes'.<sup>350</sup> Their ambiguous position was also evident in state legislation. Although for the previous seventy years people of 'mixed descent' living on Cape Barren Island had been officially identified by the Government as 'part-Aboriginal' under the *Cape Barren Island Reserve Act* of 1912, a State Government decision changed this in 1951 when the Act was 'extinguished' and the Islanders were then deemed to be 'non-indigenous'.<sup>351</sup>

This change of external identification occurred in the same year that the third (national) Native Welfare Conference agreed that assimilation should be the aim of native welfare measures. The policy and theory of assimilation assumed that "in the course of time... all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like other white Australians do".<sup>352</sup> This coincided with the broader aim within Australia to 'uplift' Aborigines by encouraging and helping them to live like the 'white' population. Assimilationist policies, as Lloyd argues, were not necessarily aimed at brutally removing Aboriginal people from sight due to malign intent.

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<sup>349</sup> See for example, Lloyd Robson's *A History of Tasmania*, in which he writes that the Tasmanians were "dispossessed and destroyed by their invaders and conquerors in an impressive example of extermination". *A History of Tasmania: Volume 1*, Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1983, p vii.

<sup>350</sup> Ryan, Lindal, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996, p 2.

<sup>351</sup> Cove, John J., *What the Bones Say*, McGill-Queen's Press, 1995, pp 81-87.

<sup>352</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* [Commissioner: R. Wilson] (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Many who argued for such policies did so on humanitarian grounds, based on the liberal ideal of equality or on religious beliefs that all humans were shaped in God's image. As Moran notes:

Assimilation was a project that drew upon humanitarian impulses, and notions of justice and egalitarianism. It meant that the Australian nation was finally embracing those long excluded and denigrated. *However*, such intentions were structured by a settler-colonial relationship that assumed the disappearance of Aboriginality.<sup>353</sup>

As we have seen above, appeals to a liberal equality and a 'universal human good' *necessarily* exclude some aspects of human culture and ways of being in order to maintain the 'neutral' human.<sup>354</sup> Whether based on ideas of racial superiority and hatred or on ideals of emancipation and human rights, the idea that those of 'mixed descent' were in essence 'the same' as the rest of the population undermined and denied the significance of both bodily and cultural *difference*:

By stressing that Aborigines were really no different to whites, and in fact were animated by the same values, beliefs and aspirations, fears about national unity and cultural homogeneity, such as they were, could be allayed.<sup>355</sup>

The denial that Tasmania had an Aboriginal population meant, amongst other things, that as 'white' people they were not entitled to Government support as a special status group and, also, the risk of land claims was reduced. The official denial of Aboriginality, however, contrasted strongly with the treatment of the Islanders as "other" by the rest of the community – and perhaps most significantly – it contrasted with their own beliefs about their own identity and belonging. The

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<sup>353</sup> Moran, Anthony, "White Australia, Settler Nationalism and Aboriginal Assimilation", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 51, Number 2, 2005.

<sup>354</sup> For discussion of the various philosophies and beliefs underlying policies of assimilation see for example, Anthony Moran, "White Australia, Settler Nationalism and Aboriginal Assimilation", pp. 168-193.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid*, p 179.

criteria for identity were based on the prevailing metaphysical assumptions of the era, and blood-quantum was seen as the crucial determinant of Aboriginality.<sup>356</sup> If conceptions of identity at this time were based on the assumption of static, unchanging, biological facticity, then the changing nature of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community would have been 'proof' of its 'inauthenticity'.<sup>357</sup>

As noted above, in the 1970s members of Tasmania's Aboriginal population began to fight publicly to reassert their essential difference from 'white' Tasmanians. As with other forms of identity politics, this assertion of inherent difference became increasingly important in order to distinguish a group and to assert value to those ways of being that had been denigrated or denied previously. However, as seen in feminist debates, asserting difference by revaluing what has in the past been denigrated often serves to perpetuate essentialist and exclusionary understandings of identity. This is not simply because of the difficulty in overcoming hierarchies associated with dichotomised ways of thinking, but also because of the ambiguous position occupied by those asserting Aboriginality in Tasmania.

The contemporary debate in Tasmania, which sees different groups in conflict over who is a 'real' aborigine and who is a 'fraud', provides an example of the problematic distinction between authentic and inauthentic Aboriginal 'ways of being' highlighted by Smallacombe and others. In Tasmania today, the debate takes place within an historical context in which, for a long time, *no-one* was granted legal recognition as a Tasmanian Aborigine. Flanagan has described Tasmania as an "Island of Ironies" and one of these ironies is that those who fought for so long for recognition of Aboriginality, are now fighting against what they see to be a

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<sup>356</sup> Blood quantum refers to the idea that the 'amount' of Aboriginal blood one had defined their Aboriginality. People were defined as 'full-blood', half-caste and quarter-caste. This terminology was used in legislation up until the 1970s (from 1912 to 1951 in Tasmania). For further discussion see, for example Gardiner-Garden, 'Defining Aboriginality in Australia, *Current Issues Brief*, no 10 2002-03, Social Policy Group, 3 February 2003.

<sup>357</sup> Anthony Moran notes that anthropologists working to 'uplift' Aborigines in NSW in the early to mid 1900s saw a distinction between the 'mixed' blood people and the 'full-blooded', who were still seen to possess a 'significant Aboriginality'. Removing children from those of mixed-descent was seen to be an acceptable practice in a way that was not for 'full-blood' children. See Moran, *op. cit.*, page 184.

fraudulent rise in claims to Aboriginal identity by people who may have ancestral links but who, they argue, have not *lived* as Aborigines.

To recapitulate my previous points, what I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter is that this debate remains limited by an underlying assumption in the cultural imaginary that surrounds it: that is, you either *are*, or you *are not* an Aborigine. As we saw above, what also adds to this problematic is the tendency to view 'real' Aborigines as being closer to 'nature' and spirituality, or to identify Aboriginality through biology and blood-quantum. This is the same kind of discourse that has dominated the last two centuries of the island and which saw Aboriginal people explicitly excluded from the development of Tasmania as a State. Excluded physically, in the Government 'round up' that removed many people to Flinders Island and, culturally, in that the development of the Tasmanian identity included the belief that, with Trugannini, the last of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people had died.

The return to 'authenticity', which appears to be characterising contemporary national discourse, has seen a growing interest in indigenous culture and history. However, as Smallacombe points out, the irony is that although it was *explicitly* excluded from the development of Australia as a nation, indigenous culture and spirituality are now being *selectively* incorporated into our national imaginary and 'sold' as an Australian way of being. At the same time, this idea of 'authentic' Aboriginality denies the authenticity of the common experience of those taken from Aboriginal families as small children and raised within other families and institutions. Also problematic is the idea that a subject is *either* indigenous *or* non-indigenous, which leaves a difficult space for those many people who feel their identities are somewhere 'in-between' these two definitions. When government or private enterprise selects particular, Aboriginal traditions as 'authentic' there is always a risk of excluding other significant aspects of indigenous identities.

## A PHILOSOPHY OF AMBIGUITY AS A POSSIBILITY FOR THE FUTURE: AN AUTHENTICQUE IDENTITY?

Although Appiah argues that one can in many ways determine one's own identity and adjust one's way of being to fit a particular identity, he maintains that there are certain elements of life over which individuals do not have control. He uses one's sexuality, race, sex and level of physical or intellectual ability as examples of such elements. He concludes that it is, therefore, not just 'up to us' to adopt an identity (or not), because one must respond to facts which are determined *outside* of the self. Appiah writes, "the meaning of who I am isn't just in my head; my ethical projects flow from a universe of social facts".<sup>358</sup> In the face of this situation, where one must in a sense *negotiate* both one's facticity and one's social situation, Appiah asks the question as to how one determines who is an 'X' within a setting that supports self-determination. He asks, "how, in short, are we to establish the boundaries of the group deserving deference?" and he imagines the risk of a situation in which "a vast brigade of state-employed ethnographers [is] tasked with certifying this or that practice as legitimized by this or that social group".<sup>359</sup>

We can see here how this argument relates to the debate over Tasmanian identity discussed above, where the government has attempted to establish an 'independent' advisory committee to determine if certain people could satisfy set criteria and *prove* their Aboriginality.

On a practical level (and we are exploring here how philosophical assumptions about identity play out in everyday life) it becomes extremely difficult for those in the Government and non-Government sectors to liaise with or seek input from members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community when there is such debate over who *belongs* to that community and who can represent it. Short of asking for 'certification', groups seeking the advice or opinion of indigenous people (for example when designing a service for them) have to act on the faith that those who *claim* to be able to represent Aboriginal needs and points of view are actually able to

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<sup>358</sup> Appiah, Kwame, Anthony, *The Ethics of Identity*, p 198.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid, p76.

do so. Obviously, this presents difficulties and runs the risk of certain groups or individual's being excluded if they do not fit with the socio-political understanding of what an 'authentic' Aborigine is. This risk is further increased if particular groups feel the need to define themselves in relation to this perception of the authentic Aborigine and are, therefore, not able to acknowledge the changing needs and issues of their community (and the different individual needs within that community).

The philosophy of ambiguity developed by de Beauvoir, which is critical of the failure of both 'essential equality' and 'essential difference' and which proposes an ontology that is engaged, fluid and relational, looking to the world without assumptions of inherent essence, provides a means to move beyond the impasse in current debates. As we have seen, her aim is to give an account of human 'being' and existence that does not depend on dichotomies and binary oppositions but reveals the interdependence of subject, world, thought and discourse. This approach *emphasises* ambiguity rather than denying it, and provides an ethics of *becoming*, in which 'interrelatedness' is acknowledged and continually brought to bear upon our actions in the world.

The situation in Tasmania reveals the ways in which those structures and theories - such as legal, scientific and political systems - which have been assumed to give a neutral and 'objective' account of humanity, have in fact developed through exclusion of the 'Other'. As we have seen, Tasmania developed through the exclusion of Aboriginal people and culture, as part of both legislation and in the cultural imaginary - therefore, what must be re-thought is the dichotomous metaphysic that underlies current socio-political discourse and which limits current debate. The assumptions about what it means to be 'authentic' need to be critically re-thought, because such assumptions are reflective of the claim that we can have objective knowledge about 'reality' and 'truth'. As Moira Gatens has argued, looking at ourselves within our historical context and with a focus on our underlying assumptions enables us to think about how we want to be in the future. As she puts it, "we need to understand and remember how we became what we are, not in order



to live what we have become as our 'truth', but rather as our conditions of possibility for that which we may become".<sup>360</sup>

Recognition of our situated totality, of our mutual connectedness and historicity, and of the possibility of ambiguity provides a different understanding of authenticity, in which there is not *one* Aboriginal way of being and in which many different experiences can be *authentique*. There must, however, be some connection to a particular history and situation. As we have seen above, it is not possible to simply 'adopt' any identity in isolation from one's situation because one's body and one's past are a significant part of one's identity.

Understandings of identity, then, must account for freedom-in-situation. This means it is acknowledged that an individual is not inherently and 'absolutely' a particular 'thing' in isolation, but that there are certain elements of their situation that they share with others, which lead to a strong identification with a particular identity (their history, their social position, their body, their family relations).

This does not, however, answer "once and for all" the question as to how one should determine Aboriginality, and in fact, would assert that this question will never be finalised. Re-thinking *authenticité* and ambiguity provides a means from which to start this questioning, by critically engaging with constructions of identity as determined by legislation and within the cultural imaginary. At present, many of those caught up in this debate are limited by an approach that has grown from a dichotomous metaphysical base, and which has seen science as an arbiter of truth and impartiality. Re-thinking authenticity through ambiguity, so that what we have is an understanding of *authenticité*, entails a critique of identity and the problem of 'seriousness' that arises in the face of our fundamental freedom.

Whilst it does deny the possibility of an inherent and *essential* Aboriginal 'essence', ambiguity does not deny the possibility of an identity that is embedded in history and which takes into account one's lived, embodied, experience. De Beauvoir would argue that it is possible to share a group identity, with shared goals, aims, stories

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<sup>360</sup> Gatens, Moira, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, p77.

and histories - but that each within that group is always, at the same time, a particular individual whose 'self' is defined in relation to 'others'. These 'others' are not just those outside the group, but also those within it. It must be recognised that Aboriginality, as a way of being, is defined through the exclusion of 'non-Aboriginal' ways of being and in relation to the 'non-Aboriginal'. The self-other-world relation is at play here and our views of each other and of ourselves cannot be distinguished from this relation. The desire to associate 'real' Aboriginality with pre-colonial history faces the problem of not acknowledging the vast history that has occurred since that time and the many definitions that "Tasmanian" identities have undergone. Moreover, it assumes that there was a single, 'real' Aboriginality prior to colonial history. Those who claim Aboriginality today cannot claim an identical relation to land, custom and social orders that their ancestors had prior to the arrival of British colonists. The intervening centuries and all that has occurred during this time mean that changing relations are, of course, inevitable. Tasmanian people now exist in a particular spatio-temporal location and their identities are negotiated in relation to this particular situation, of which their ancestry is only a part. This does not mean, however, that their identities are any less *authentique* than those of their predecessors, but recognises that they are different.

#### TEMPORALITY AND SITUATION

Merleau-Ponty's body-subject, as examined in previous chapter, provides us with another means to examine a notion of ambiguous identity here. Unlike traditional metaphysical accounts, the body-subject for Merleau-Ponty *must* be ambiguous and indeterminate because of its location in a 'temporal situation'. He says that:

My hold on the past and the future is precarious and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn, further developments in order to be understood (PP 346 cf 426).

The urging here is for recognition of our always-situated existence in a temporal location, which is never fully realised and which is importantly connected both to our history *and* to our fears, hopes and beliefs about the future. This conjures an image of an always-moving, continually-developing subject-in-situation, who is never entirely bound by, nor entirely free from, what has gone before and the possibilities of what is yet to come. This subject must continually acknowledge and negotiate the temporal location so that, as Merleau-Ponty says, we can “never say ‘I’ absolutely” (PP, 208). Our ‘self’, the ‘I’, is never final or fixed under this account but is in continued relation to the spatial and temporal situation so that who ‘I’ am today (or even at this very moment) is not a final product but a stage in the ever-developing story of my life.

As Debra Bergoffen describes this, “Existential freedom as structured by time renders my identity unstable...it is a never-ending story. As finite I necessarily fail to bring closure to myself or my projects”.<sup>361</sup> This way of thinking about a temporally located subject – a subject that is always developing and negotiating its ‘self’ in relation to a situation – provides a useful tool for debates over identity. If the ambiguous ‘self’ (which cannot be reduced to biology, history, consciousness or a particular relation - but is an interweaving of *all* these things) can be acknowledged, then one *can* argue for the importance of historicity and intersubjectivity (or identity in relation to numerous factors) without reducing the subject to essentialist claims that determine their identity. In terms of ‘identity politics’, where particular individuals seek recognition or demand rights based upon their ‘belonging’ to a group, these individuals are recognised as both belonging to, and yet simultaneously not reducible to, that group identity. There are important life experiences, important historical facts that are shared and unite subjects in the world – factors that distinguish them from others who have not shared the same experience (which can include the way their bodies are lived). However, there are also important factors that distinguish them from one another and which can be lived and interpreted differently (which also includes their bodily

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<sup>361</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, “Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, p 83.

differences). As such, one can insist upon the importance of historical location, the importance of lived experience in relation to situation (which includes one's biological/material existence), without relying upon the traps of essential determinism that limit individuals to reductive accounts of identity. Within limits, one can choose aspects of one's identity, whilst other aspects are dependent upon how one is perceived by others and upon material or biological factors. Here we see the way that de Beauvoir's notion of freedom-in-situation provides the framework to think *authentically* about questions of identity.

Like de Beauvoir's interdependent subject who exists always in connection with others in the world, Merleau-Ponty's subject-in-situation is seen as a "knot of relations". The subject is part of a network, in which interdependence is the condition for existence and reducing or pulling apart this knot or network to find the 'ground' or essence of being, in separation from the inter-dependence, will always result in imposed dichotomies and dualisms that limit expression and understanding.

Merleau-Ponty's aim of re-orienting philosophy and subjectivity by re-uniting it with 'the world' provides a means for exploring the implications of 'difference' without resulting in the idea that one is essentially determined by that difference. If we understand essentialism to be the argument that there is an 'essence' underlying all the seemingly irrelevant and contingent relations and aspects of human 'being', an essence that can be gotten *closer to* through a reductive account of existence that searches for a 'ground' or 'core', we can see how this kind of account is demonstrated in a great deal of scientific and philosophical discourse, which reduces human being down to *either* biology *or* culture. Both cultural determinism *and* biological determinism remain constrained by the underlying dualism that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir critique, which fails to recognise interconnections and the relational dependence of 'nature' and 'culture' as if the two were separate entities and human action were not 'natural'.

## CONCLUSION

In an examination of the concept of authenticity in relation to black identity, Patrick Johnson argues that the development and maintenance of identities is difficult and problematic, especially given the deconstructive and post-structuralist turns, which have resulted in a thorough critique of traditional understandings of being. He writes, in support of a theory of being that incorporates the body:

...negotiating any identity is a dangerous adventure, particularly in a post-modern world in which we have come to recognise that identities are made, not given. We must also realise that the post-modern push to theorize identity discursively must be balanced with theories of corporeality and materiality.<sup>362</sup>

Johnson rightly acknowledges that with the 'deconstruction' of identity comes the risk of a denial of the importance of the body to being and to identity. He urges us to balance our desire to rid ourselves of notions of essentialism and rigid identity with theories that also account for our corporeal existence. A philosophy of ambiguity allows us to do this "balancing" by insisting on maintenance of the tension implied in our ambiguous existence. Such a philosophy allows recognition of the importance of body to being but without a biological determinism because, if we take seriously de Beauvoir's notion of freedom-in-situation, we see that one's facticity is important and *significant* but that it is not deterministic.

De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty offer us the means to theorise identity with reference to both materiality/corporeality and transcendence or 'freedom from essence'. As we saw in the previous chapters, de Beauvoir's notion of freedom enables us to argue that one is both free *and* situated *at the same time* – to examine how one can recognise the significance of the factors of one's embodied situation without resorting to the argument that it must be understood in *this* particular way.

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<sup>362</sup> Johnson, Patrick E., *Appropriating Blackness*, p 218.

A philosophy of ambiguity, as developed by de Beauvoir, does not 'pull the rug from underneath us' without a means to move forward but, rather, provides us with tools to live with *authenticité* in our relations with others. It shows us that in order to be ethical, to be *authentique*, we must first understand the complex relation between the other and our self – between our self and the world. We must acknowledge and celebrate our own and the other's ambiguous becoming-in-situation, through our engagement with others. As Merleau-Ponty shows us in *Phenomenology of Perception*, perception is not only the means by which I make *sense* of the world around me but the means by which I make sense of *myself* in relation to the world. I am formed through my engagement with the world and with others and, therefore, I can never say "I" absolutely.

Just as we can never say "I" absolutely, I am not proposing a final answer on how one can define what it means to be an Aborigine 'absolutely'. Whilst this may be an uncomfortable conclusion for some, especially for those who wish to be able to identify what it is that makes a person an 'authentic' Aborigine, it is this conclusion that must be reached in order to develop an *authentique* account of identity. What ambiguity and *authenticité* show us is that, although we are not left with a definitive answer, we are provided with a means to rethink how we engage with others. What ambiguity and *authenticité* offer us is a way to think about how we are in relation to others and how we have all come to be within this particular situation. We can then ask questions as to how government might respond to people who share some similar life experiences but who are not exchangeable for one another? How do we account for difference without reifying the 'otherness' of the other? In short, how can we relate with *authenticité* to the difference of the other in a way that takes into account their ambiguity?

Whilst this chapter has raised and begun to address these questions, the following chapter deals more explicitly with how we might engage with others when we recognise their fundamental freedom *and* their situation – with how we might have positive and worthwhile relationships with others if they are, as de Beauvoir asserts, totally free from a given essence.

## CHAPTER SIX: RESPONDING ETHICALLY TO THE FREEDOM OF THE OTHER

... in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from ... this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world.

(Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, p xv)

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

(Beauvoir, *TEA*, p 20).

As we have seen throughout the preceding chapters, the existentialism associated with Sartre and, in many instances with de Beauvoir, has been criticised for putting forward a “miserablism”, for focusing too narrowly on the individual at the expense of others and, therefore, as being unable to provide us with a means to “move forward” in contemporary situations. Sartre’s account of freedom has drawn continued criticism for its conflictual nature and has been described as a philosophy in which “our relations with other people are characterized by insecurity, danger, confrontation and conflict”.<sup>363</sup> His philosophy of self-other relations has been described as follows:

... the hostile look becomes a paradigm for relations with others in Sartre’s philosophy because his subject-centred philosophy forces him to conceptualize relations with others as circular, each person trying to reduce others to objects in order not to be objectified themselves.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Atkins, Kim, *Self and Subjectivity*, Blackwell: London, 2004, p89.

<sup>364</sup> Whitford, Margaret, *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Sartre’s Philosophy*, French Forum Publishers: Lexington and Kentucky, 1982, p 25.

We have seen that this account of relations between subjects has its foundations in Hegel's so-called 'master-slave dialectic' and Sartre's account of what is fundamental to self-other relations is described by 'the Look', most evocatively exemplified by the person caught peering through a keyhole. What is portrayed in the Look is "an experience of annihilation of one's subjectivity" where the self is reduced to an object when looked at by the other, the judging gaze. For Sartre then, freedom entails surging up in the world as "confronting others" who try to objectify us and we do the same by trying to objectify them.<sup>365</sup>

Although Sartre did later attempt to address criticisms of negativity and individualism in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and other works, critics continue to argue that in *Being and Nothingness* there seem to be only two options for Sartre – that one is *either* a subject *or* an object. As one recent analysis of Sartre has stated:

There seems to be no possibility of mutual recognition between individuals in this picture of human relationships. If we are inevitably a subject or an object, sadistic or masochistic, a master or a slave, then human relationships can only oscillate between these two polarities without ever approaching a more complementary or reciprocal intersubjectivity.<sup>366</sup>

While many have read de Beauvoir as a disciple or follower of Sartre, this thesis has taken up the arguments of some more recent interpretations to position de Beauvoir away from such a reading. Nancy Bauer, for one, rightly argues that de Beauvoir's interpretation and appropriation of the master-slave dialectic and the self-other relation differs in important ways to Sartre's. Bauer argues that:

...a careful reading of *The Second Sex* reveals that the idea that human beings harbor a 'fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness' does not

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<sup>365</sup> Langer, Monika, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity', p92.

<sup>366</sup> Reynolds, Jack, *Understanding Existentialism*, Acumen: Chesham (UK), 2006, p 99.



entail for Beauvoir – as it does for Sartre – the impossibility of non-hostile human relations.<sup>367</sup>

Bauer argues that de Beauvoir takes this conclusion from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which she saw to entail an "optimism" that we can actually negotiate the hostility we have toward one another in order to achieve "reciprocal recognition". In this recognition we acknowledge each other as human and Bauer reads de Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel to be different to Sartre's and more easily aligned with Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, which she maintains that Sartre misinterprets.<sup>368</sup> De Beauvoir herself describes the experience of being in the world with others as involving an engagement with the world through our bodies:

Every human event possesses a metaphysical signification beyond its psychological and social elements, since through each event, *man is always entirely engaged in the entire world*; and surely there is no one to whom this meaning has not been disclosed at some time in his life. In particular, it often happens that children, who are not yet anchored in their little corner of the universe, experience with astonishment their "being-in-the world" as they experience their bodies (*LM*, p 273).

If we take the arguments of the preceding chapters seriously, and recognise both our own and the other's fundamental freedom, we must ask the question as to whether or not it is *really* possible to avoid the conflictual relations with others described by many existential philosophers since Hegel. The ultimate question, once we have placed ambiguity and freedom at the centre of an ethics, is: how can we respond *ethically* to the freedom of the other in a way that affirms existence and acknowledges the potential for joy in our relations with them?

The answer this thesis has proposed thus far is that we should begin our response to the other in the way in which de Beauvoir has suggested: that is, with recognition of

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<sup>367</sup> Bauer, Nancy, "Beauvoir's Heideggerian Ontology" in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret Simons (ed.), Indiana University Press, 2006, p 68.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

*authentique* freedom and ambiguity. In this final chapter, I propose that the life-affirming aspect of such a response is further supported with a focus on wonder, and with willing attention to the openness and generosity evident in de Beauvoir's work. What becomes crucial in de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity is the recognition of the tension in the self-other relationship, and significantly, the potential for joy in this relation. As Eva Gothlin argues "Beauvoir presupposed that human relationships can be characterized either by conflict and oppression or by friendship and solidarity: it is the second form that she sees as most authentic [*authentique*], when human being is in its "truth".<sup>369</sup>

The task of this final chapter, therefore, will be to examine the ways in which the concept of *authenticité*, which we have been exploring in the preceding chapters, points to and is strengthened by the concepts of generosity and wonder. Here, *authenticité*, which entails both 'freedom' and 'ambiguity', is used to open up ways of thinking about subjectivity and existence, with 'generosity' and 'wonder' becoming the attitudes we take-up towards one another, *together with* this understanding of the importance of freedom and ambiguity.

This concept of wonder, in the sense of an attitude toward the world, conjures images of openness at what we are faced with, or what we *encounter*. An attitude of wonder insists on a *prejudicative* openness that allows for what we encounter to speak for itself in one sense, but also to remain unspeakable and ungraspable on another level. That is, to maintain its *alterity*. If we take this attitude toward those 'others' that we are attempting to understand (at least in some way) and respond appropriately to, we welcome the *alterity* that they possess in their relation with us, and cease attempting to force them into a pre-determined state of being. To allow ourselves to 'wonder' at the being of others, and to celebrate their *alterity*, forces us to continually insist upon their possibility and potential to be other than, or more than, what we experience them as being. As de Beauvoir herself writes, "mutually recognising each other as subjects, each will remain for the other an other..." (TSS, p 740).

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<sup>369</sup> Gothlin, Eva, 'Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger', p59.

Demonstrating, again, the shared links between her work and that of Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir describes this relation of openness to (and of) the other in her review of *Phenomenology of Perception*, "... at the same time as they offer this familiar aspect, things offer another side, they also are *silence and mystery*, an Other who escapes us. They are never completely given but, on the contrary, *always open* (RoPP, p163, my emphasis).

## RESPONDING TO FREEDOM

De Beauvoir writes, "Every man is originally free" (TEA, p25), however, as we have seen, she acknowledges that humans often attempt to create solid identities and meanings in order to deny their freedom. The existentialist claim is that it is far easier to identify oneself with a position in society, with religion, with a job or sporting team, or with one's possessions, than to admit that one must continually make and re-make oneself and one's meaning through projects and with reference to others. She writes of this striving for solidification into 'thing-hood':

...Fleeing his freedom, his subjectivity, he would feign lose himself in the bosom of the Whole. This is the origin of his cosmic and pantheistic dreams, of his longing for oblivion, for sleep, for ecstasy, for death. He never succeeds in abolishing his separate ego, but he wants at least to attain the solidity of the in-itself, to be petrified into a thing (TSS, pp 268-269).

A major aim of the preceding chapters has been to demonstrate that this common attempt at solidification into the 'in-itself', into a 'thing', is unethical and inauthentic and that to be ethical (*authentique*) requires that one also *will oneself free*. This means that, when faced with our fundamental freedom, we do not flee it, we do not seek to lose ourselves or make ourselves 'be' through others or through possession of material goods, we do not assert our existence as given once and for all by God or by Nature. On the contrary, we work *with* our freedom, we reaffirm it in our everyday lives and in our encounters with others and we *bring it to bear* on our ethical decision-making. Accordingly, morality only becomes possible *because* there are different ways in which people can and do respond to their original freedom.

Ultimately, one can *will* oneself free or one can choose *not* to will oneself free. The final choice of response, once freedom is recognised, is always up to each individual. As de Beauvoir says, “our very passivity is willed; in order to not choose, we still must choose not to choose. It is impossible to escape” (PC, p126). However, whilst our freedom is, ultimately, “inescapable”, we have seen that de Beauvoir acknowledges that people can, and do, respond in different ways to recognition of this situation:

One may hesitate to make oneself a lack of being, one may withdraw from existence, or one may falsely assert oneself as being, or assert oneself as nothingness. One may realize his freedom only as an abstract independence, or, on the contrary, reject with despair the distance which separates us from being. All errors are possible since man is a negativity, and they are motivated by the anguish he feels in the face of his freedom (TEA, 34).

While de Beauvoir argues that the response that most take toward their freedom is a spirit of seriousness that represents *bad-faith*, she also recognises that our relations with others open up experiences of meaning and value that are rich in their complexity. She acknowledges that our relations with others offer opportunities for love, harmony and companionship – as well as the potential for domination and conflict that has been presented in the Hegelian-Sartrean self-other relation. This is not to *refuse* the self-other relation, and de Beauvoir does not deny that conflict, hatred and domination can and do arise, but she *does* deny that these are the *only* possible attitudes or responses to such a relation. So, unlike Sartre who wrote that “the essence of the relations between consciousness is not the *Mitsein*, it is conflict” (BN, p555) de Beauvoir sees our relations with others and the world to be in tension, but with the possibility for anger, hatred, domination and conflict being as real as the possibility for love, harmony, acceptance and respect. Importantly, the tension in self-other relationships means that individuals will be continually changing, learning and adapting and, so too, will their responses to others. De Beauvoir writes of the tension implied by disclosure, “but the disclosure implies a perpetual tension to keep being at a distance, to tear one-self from the world, and to assert oneself as a

freedom" (TEA, pp 23-24). This tension is ongoing, it is not something to be overcome.

Monika Langer argues that a key point of difference from Sartre is that de Beauvoir's account of ambiguity and potential ethics "emphasizes attachment, joy, and a positive bond with others, whereas Sartre emphasizes uprooting, nausea and conflict with others".<sup>370</sup> Even as de Beauvoir acknowledges that "the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition will always open up to man the possibility of opposing choices" (TEA, 118) and, therefore, the potential for violence, she argues that conflict is *not* inevitable. She saw great potential in existentialism and argued, against criticisms of nihilism, negativity and individualism, that:

...the existentialists are so far from denying love, friendship, fraternity that in their eyes it is *only* in human relations that each individual can find the foundation and the accomplishment of his being (ESN, p37, emphasis added).<sup>371</sup>

Here we see a significant difference from the negative account of self-other relations described by critics of existentialism and, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir further demonstrates how ambiguity and freedom are crucial to an ethics that allows for positive relationships between subjects. To live our freedom *authentically* we must realize how we are connected to others, that we are 'bound' to others and that our freedom is bound to theirs:

In order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness... if we do not love life on our own

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<sup>370</sup> Langer, Monika, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on ambiguity', p90.

<sup>371</sup> "L'Existentialisme et la suggestion des nations". Kristana Arp cites this article written for *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945, which demonstrates the important ways de Beauvoir's account differs to that of Sartre's in *Being and Nothingness*. Arp, K, *The Bonds of Freedom*, p 36.

account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way (TEA, 135-36).<sup>2</sup>

For de Beauvoir, freedom is not a “thing” or a “quality naturally attached to a thing” but rather it “merges with the very movement of this ambiguous reality which is called existence and which is only by making itself be” (TEA, p25). By this, she means that the failure of man to attain ‘being’ as a solid state is definitive of the human condition – we *cannot* ‘be’ being, this failure is inherent in our ontological condition. However, in de Beauvoir’s terms, our response to this failure to *be* does not necessarily entail pain and negativity but can actually result in openness and joy. She asserts that, unlike in the Hegelian dialectic, existentialism seeks a ‘conversion’ rather than a synthesis or surpassing and that in *authenticité* “the failure [to be] is not surpassed but *assumed*” (TEA, p13 emphasis added). She writes, “To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realising it” (TEA, p 13). Hegel’s reconciliation entails the raising and preserving of a contradiction through synthesis whereas, for de Beauvoir, this reconciliation is problematic because it evades ambiguity. De Beauvoir wants to preserve the ambiguity and paradox, to maintain the tension it implies, rather than reconciling it in the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.

Man is never anything more, or less, than an ambiguous-becoming-in-situation and de Beauvoir acknowledges that this *can* generate *Angst*. However, she claims that recognition of this ambiguous becoming can also generate a sense of joy:

[m]y contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy. I cannot 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 (TEA, p12).

Rather than seeing fundamental freedom as reason for despair or anxiety, de Beauvoir argues that “on the contrary, it appears to us that by turning toward this freedom we are going to discover a principle for action whose range will be universal” (TEA, p23). Others are fundamental to this account and, as Kruks points

out, de Beauvoir introduced a different idea of social relations to Sartre quite early on with her claim, in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, that these relations were not inevitably conflictual. There she argued that our existence is *affirmed* by others, and that “only the freedom of the other is able to give necessity to my being” (PC, p96).<sup>372</sup>

#### MEANING AND THE FREEDOM OF OTHERS

A fundamental claim throughout her work is that our connections with others are a crucial part of the revealing or unveiling of *meaning* in the world and, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir writes, “one can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men” (TEA, p71). In addition, she writes, “if I really were everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. There would be nothing to possess, and I myself would be nothing” (TEA, p71). Others are crucial and, for de Beauvoir, my freedom and my capacity to act ethically *require* the freedom of others.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty shares a similar belief in the importance of others to an understanding of self and, in *Signs*, he writes that “whenever I try to understand myself, the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it comes the others who are caught in it” (*Signs*, p15). The self-other relation, and the need for recognising our responsibility to others, is a key theme in de Beauvoir’s work and is crucial to an *authentique* ethics of ambiguity. Like Merleau-Ponty, she is concerned with demonstrating the potential for positive self-other relations based on recognition of ambiguity.

As we saw above, Heinämaa argues that de Beauvoir was influenced by Husserl through her reading of Merleau-Ponty and that she adapts the concepts of intersubjectivity and corporeality from Husserl’s later phenomenology in an effort to explain the self-others relation in a way that overcomes (or at least offers an alternative to) the Hegelian subject-in-conflict.<sup>373</sup> De Beauvoir argues that, rather

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<sup>372</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Situation and Human Existence*, p87.

<sup>373</sup> Heinämaa, Sara, ‘The body as instrument and as expression’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p66.

than a Hegelian synthesis, the existential conversion “should be compared to Husserlian reduction” where each man puts “his will ‘in parentheses’ and” is thereby “brought to the consciousness of his true condition” (TEA, p14). The phenomenological reduction shows us that the presence of the world cannot be contested, that we cannot “do without” our bodies or the world:

And just as phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external world, *whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however contest*, so existentialist conversion does not suppress my instincts, desires, plans and passions. It merely prevents any possibility of failure by refusing to set up as *absolutes* the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself, and by considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them (TEA, p14, my emphasis).

The existential conversion situates us, it maintains our connection with the world and with our freedom, it reminds us that the goals we aim at are not absolute but are ends established in freedom, and in situation.

In a similar vein, and also reflecting a more positive emphasis than Sartre’s work tends towards, Merleau-Ponty writes (against Kant) that the phenomenological reduction should be thought of as a sense of ‘wonder in the face of the world’ and that, when conceived of properly, this reflection:

...does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals the world as *strange and paradoxical* (PP, xv, my emphasis).

This ‘strangeness’ and paradox, which is revealed to us in the phenomenological *epoché*, is illustrative of openness and wonder. What Merleau-Ponty wants to



demonstrate is that we can never see the world other than from an embodied (and therefore historically situated) perspective; “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (PP, pxv). We are in the world in a particular relation to all that surrounds and interacts with us and we cannot step “outside” of our bodies to conceive of the way the world is ‘objectively’. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world” (PP, p5). However, rather than trying to reveal all the secrets of the world, to reveal all in detail and make all understood, the task of phenomenology is to “reveal the *mystery of the world* and the mystery of reason” (PP, xxiv, my emphasis).

This explicit discussion of mystery is important for this thesis, as it supports my aim to emphasise the importance of wonder in a positive, life-affirming ethics. Whitford argues that Husserl’s phenomenology provided Merleau-Ponty with a means to reintroduce a “wonder before the world” which, for him was “the genuine philosophic attitude”.<sup>374</sup> Perhaps the most significant point is that the aim of philosophical questioning should not be an ultimate reduction or a static ‘Truth’ but an openness to experiencing the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that it is the task of philosophy to ‘question’ its own assumptions and he writes:

The philosopher, as [Husserl’s] unpublished works declare, is a perpetual beginner, which means that he takes for granted nothing that men, learned or otherwise, believe they know. It means also that philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true; that it is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning...(PP, xv-xvi).

## OVERCOMING UNIVERSAL MAN

As we have seen in previous chapters, de Beauvoir shares the assertion of contemporary feminist philosophers that we must question our assumptions about being, in order to overcome implicit biases within philosophy. Central to the

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<sup>374</sup> Whitford, Margaret, *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Sartre’s Philosophy*, p 14.

questioning of our own aims, which de Beauvoir also urges us to undertake, is the question of our *implicit* assumptions as well as our explicit beliefs about humanity. This is because ethics and politics continually talk of acting 'for the good of man' or in 'man's best interests' when the good suits a particular group, often at the expense of another's freedom. There are countless examples of this throughout history and many pertinent examples in contemporary conflicts, where a dominant group uses the rhetoric of 'for the good or benefit of mankind' to justify limiting the actions of another, or to justify their own actions. De Beauvoir's existential ethical questioning, however, begins, not with the task of determining if an action is good for man, but with the question "is the cause of Man the cause of each Man?" (TEA, p112) and de Beauvoir argues that "Universal, absolute man exists nowhere" (*Ibid.*). She makes the claim that the attempt to posit a 'universal, absolute man' is the result of bad metaphysics, where certain ideal characteristics are set up in opposition to those which are seen as less desirable, and then attributed with the status of 'the given'. Thus, a method of self-creation entails in which the 'excluded other' helps to define the 'One' whose values, beliefs and ideals are seen to be determined *a priori* and inherent to their 'essence'. Existentialism aims to overcome such reductions through its insistence on a continual questioning and by returning us to the world. She writes:

...for Existentialism [unlike for Hegel], 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 irreducible as subjectivity itself (TEA, p 17-18).

For de Beauvoir, the ambiguous nature or reality of human existence sees each individual embedded within a total situation, in a position of being *both* self and other, subject *and* object, for-itself *and* for-others. It is this ambiguity which provides the basis for ethical responsibility and she claims that "...coming to recognise and accept oneself in one's ambiguity is the necessary pre-condition of the moral life" (TEA, p81). Moreover, she argues "if one denies with Hegel the concrete thickness of the here and now in favour of universal space-time, if one denies the separate

consciousness in favour of Mind, one misses with Hegel the truth of the world” (TEA, p121-22). De Beauvoir wants to reveal the importance of the particular considerations of how one should live one’s life, and to contest ethics that appeal to the universal at the expense of the particular. Her own personal experience of living through war in France, as well as her broad philosophical studies, demonstrated to her that one cannot “lose” oneself in the Universal, that we must each find a way of living that is relevant to our own situation and which is based, ultimately, on our fundamental freedom.

As Debra Bergoffen notes, “the meaning of our situated freedom, the material conditions of justice, the possibilities of the appeal, and the risks of violence are issues that will concern Beauvoir throughout her life”.<sup>375</sup> Bergoffen summarises de Beauvoir’s ethics in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* as follows:

[In de Beauvoir’s work] the abstract Cartesian method and the universal optimistic Hegelian dialectic are rejected. In their place, Beauvoir develops a method of reflective description that appeals to concrete examples and focuses on the particulars of the existential singular to delineate the paradigms and ambiguities of the ethical injunctions of our existential freedom.<sup>376</sup>

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the key concepts of *authenticité*, ambiguity and freedom support each other and the ethics that de Beauvoir proposes. On their own, none suffices to support an ethical framework but, when understood as intimately connected, and as underlying our existence and our relations to others, these concepts provide the foundation for a positive ethics. A component of any ethical decision for de Beauvoir will be a questioning of the complex situation in which decisions must be made and an understanding of one’s own existential freedom and the freedom of others. What I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis, however, is that this freedom is not a denial of the importance of others or of the

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<sup>375</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, “Introduction to *Pyrrhus et Cineas*” in *Simone de Beauvoir. Philosophical Writings*, Simons et al (eds) Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p 86.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

world but is embedded in a shared world with others. Meaning, value and significance are seen to arise in this shared world. What must be brought to bear on our actions and our deliberations is the ambiguous nature, not only of these meanings and values, but of our selves.

A key point that has been alluded to but not yet fully dealt with in this thesis, is that an important part of *authentique* relations with others entails recognition and acceptance of the 'mystery' of the other, That is, of their *alterity* and their irreducibility. This alterity is important, especially in its connections with an attitude of wonder and generosity, which I argue are crucial to an *authentique* ethics of ambiguity.

#### DIALOGUE AND ASYMMETRICAL RECIPROCITY

We have seen that the complexity of the self-other relationship (and assumptions about this relationship) impact unwittingly on social policy and ethics. Iris Marion Young is another social and political philosopher concerned, like de Beauvoir, with analysing traditional ethical principles and some of the problematic metaphysical assumptions that operate within them.<sup>377</sup> I will briefly take up Young's analysis here, as her account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' provides another way to think about the ambiguous self-other relations we have been examining, with social aims in mind.

Young argues that the common use of the suggestion to 'think from the position of the other' when making ethical decisions appeals to problematic assumptions that must be re-thought. Although she concedes that attempting to think from the perspective of another has some benefits (for example in its capacity to draw people "away from selfishness or parochialism in their reasoning about moral issues") Young argues that what is problematic about such an appeal is the belief that subjects are 'symmetrical' and can be substituted for one another, that each has the

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<sup>377</sup> Young, Iris Marion, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought', *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1997.

potential, capacity or ability to *really* see what it is like to *be* the other.<sup>378</sup> Young critiques this idea of exchangeability and argues that what most often happens in such appeals is a 'reduction to the same', or a reduction to the point of view of how the 'exchangee' imagines they would feel in the other's place. Giving examples of incidents in North American social research, in which such a presumed symmetry lead to poor social policy, she demonstrates how such a seemingly beneficial mode of developing ethics can, in fact, lead to a misinterpretation of the other's wants, needs and desires, which is then implemented in legislation and policy.<sup>379</sup> Young gives an example of a survey conducted to determine the needs of people with disabilities with respect to their access to health fund rebates. The survey was conducted by asking able-bodied people how they would feel about certain situations if they were disabled and their responses were then used to determine policy which had practical effects upon people with disabilities. Rather than interviewing those with disabilities and hearing from them what they needed, the surveyors used the 'evidence' of how able-bodied people *thought* they would feel in order to develop policies that impacted upon those who actually lived with disabilities. The resulting legislation was ultimately found to be discriminatory to people with disabilities and was eventually overturned. However, what this example demonstrates is that it can be extremely difficult for a person to imagine what the lived-situation of another is like, especially if their world's are experienced very differently.

Whilst the concept of reciprocity is important for Young's account of ethical relations, she argues that we must recognise the *asymmetry* of our own and the other's situation and take into account the fact that we each have different and particular histories and situations. Young's argument has some alignment with de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that, rather than aiming for universal ethical norms, we should be attentive to *particular individuals* and recognise how they have *come to be* in complex situations. Attempting to develop 'universal' ethics

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid, p38.

<sup>379</sup> For discussion see Young, pp41-42.

denies the importance of difference, and forgets that there is no such thing as a 'neutral' universal man.

Young argues that a successful theory of ethics, which recognises difference and particularity, requires recognition of *asymmetrical* reciprocity and she sees 'reversibility' and 'symmetry' of perspectives to be concepts that impede the project of developing a theory of communicative ethics.<sup>380</sup> On this view, attempting to adopt one another's standpoint is a mistaken move, which fails to recognise the impossibility of *actually* seeing things from the point of view of others and which masks the importance of difference. She posits the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity as an answer to this problem and emphasises a focus on *particular* history and social position, a recognition that reveals the relations between subjects to be asymmetrical and connected. Young argues that a "communicative theory of moral respect should distinguish between taking the perspective of other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their positions, on the other".<sup>381</sup> The emphasis in this instance is on 'dialogue' and 'understanding across difference' and it is crucial to recognise that this does not entail 'reversibility' or 'exchange'. This asymmetrical reciprocity has some synergies with de Beauvoir's account, which emphasises that we all share the common *ambiguous* situation of being at the same time self and other, but that in recognising the fundamental freedom that we share we must also recognise the practical and situational differences that separate us and make us unique and irreducible subjects.

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<sup>380</sup> Young gives an analysis of the work of Seyla Benhabib on communicative ethics and argues that her own account of asymmetrical reciprocity has more to offer. The theory of communicative ethics comes from Jurgen Habermas' reformulation of Kantian Categorical Imperative. Habermas argued that the validity of norms must be justified intersubjectively – that is in dialogue between individuals. Through communication, dialogue and argument we can come to an agreement on meaning and the validity of norms. Habermas uses the tools of "role taking" or "perspective exchange" in his theory of communication, and it is this that Young addresses in her argument that we cannot simply reverse roles to understand how it is for the other. See for discussion Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmyr (eds), *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, MIT Press: Cambridge and Massachusetts, 1990.

<sup>381</sup> Young, Iris Marion, p39.

As we saw in chapters four and five, there is a very real risk entailed in trying to adopt another's standpoint: that is, the risk that the other loses their 'voice' and is spoken for by someone who does not understand their situation. Such examples of this loss of voice and 'speaking for' others have been demonstrated in colonial discourse and also historically in situations where dominant groups in a society speak for those who are denied the capacity to speak for themselves. In speaking for others the dominant group reinforces their own view of how the other feels, or of what life is like for the other, without actually listening to them. Young writes, "when asked to put themselves in the position of a person in a wheelchair, they [the able-bodied] do not imagine the point of view of others; rather, they project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves".<sup>382</sup> Young suggests a method of 'careful listening' as a solution, which enables sharing *some* understanding of aspects of each other's lives, but which does not equate to being able to take up another's standpoint. Careful listening actually *requires* recognition of the impossibility of reversibility, and, the recognition of ambiguity.

A stance of 'respectful distance' is often what is required when one person or group attempts to understand another, and Young gives the example of indigenous peoples and the taking-up (or over) of their cultural practices by non-indigenous people who want to 'experience' indigenous life. As described in previous chapters, what is obscured in this attempt at taking up another's culture is the complex shared history that is integral to particular rituals and stories and, also, the risk of reification entailed in problematic accounts of cultural authenticity. Moreover, as was discussed in chapter four, this 'speaking for' can also be a problem for some feminists who, in seeking to ameliorate the position of particular groups of women, fail to recognise the differences in social position that may prevent them from understanding *how it is* for those other women. Ethnicity, age, economic status, ability etc. all play a part in marking the differences that distinguish women from each other - even though they may share some similarities in life experience and embodiment.

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, p42.

Young makes several pertinent points against the idea that we must take the perspective of the other in moral decision-making processes, which are worth examining briefly here. Firstly, she argues that the concept of symmetry obscures difference. What she means by this is that (as we have seen above) there are many factors that combine to make a person's lived situation and many ways in which these factors can be interpreted. The fact that people share some common traits does not mean that each can be "exchanged" in a symmetrical relation for one another. Young argues that the idea of reversibility elicits a conception of reflection, mirroring, seeing oneself as another and vice versa. For her this attempt at seeing oneself as another supports "a conceptual projection of sameness...at the expense of their differences".<sup>383</sup> As we saw in the discussion of maternity and childbirth in chapter two, the 'fact' that women share the capacity to bear children does not mean that the experience of maternity, childbirth and parenting will be identical for all who take it up. We also saw in the discussion of indigenous identity that the assumption of 'authentic' Aboriginality also risks obscuring important differences that mark the lives of Aboriginal people.

Secondly, Young argues that it is *ontologically* impossible to substitute one for another. Social positions depend upon relations and interactions and, Young argues, it is not possible to simply extricate one person from their particular situation and 'slot' them into another and to retain each position as identical. We can see here a close link between Young's claim and de Beauvoir's argument that each subject is at once *both* subject and object in a complex relation and she emphasises the *irreducibility* of the self-other relation. The particular body that one has/is is also key here, as this is not something that is exchangeable, or as Merleau-Ponty terms, not something which can be 'moved away' from me.

Thirdly, Young argues that politically undesirable consequences can arise from such attempts to exchange standpoints with others. Here we see the problem of hierarchies, top-down imperialism and oppression. There is always the risk of imposing or projecting our own desires, fears and beliefs upon others and, in trying

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid, p44.



to speak for another, we run the risk of 'arrogating' another's view, which ultimately "... threatens to violate or do away with it altogether".<sup>384</sup> Again we see a correlation with de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that it is all too easy for the harem-owner to assert the happiness of his slaves in order to justify his own position (TSS, p 28). This final point is also demonstrated in political situations where one country or group justifies invading another on the grounds of "freeing" its inhabitants from 'backward' social practices.

While Young concedes that some sort of reciprocal recognition is crucial to communication, she argues that reciprocal recognition (such as the reciprocity described in Hegel's account of self-other relations) actually *precludes* the possibility of reversibility of standpoints, rather than *providing* for it. This is because Hegel's account of reciprocal self-other relations emphasises the constitution of each standpoint through its *inter-relation* with others. As de Beauvoir elaborates in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, recognition of the interconnection between self and other, and the irreducibility of this ambiguous relation, is fundamental to developing *authenticité*. We must be able to recognise ourselves as being at the same time *both* self, (for ourselves) and other (for others) in relation to a particular situation. This self-other relation, and the tension that it implies, must be observed and preserved in ethical encounters – rather than denied as many traditional accounts have proposed.

Young concedes that, in encounters with others, there is always the possibility for us to be carried 'beyond our immediate standpoint'; however we are not carried so far as to be *in* the standpoint of the other. A major problem with the concept of reversibility is that it neglects the importance of relation. Politically, for example, there exist relations of privilege and oppression, where a dominant group sets itself up in opposition and through the exclusion of those who are 'outside'. Therefore, the potential for a reversal of standpoints runs the very high risk of an unknowing misrepresentation of the other's situation. The idea that one can take on another's

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid, p45 .

standpoint may actually prevent people listening to the other, because they already think they *know* how the other feels.

On the other hand, if we begin with the “assumption that one cannot see things from the other person’s perspective and [instead] wait to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences”, then we can adopt what Young terms a stance of ‘moral humility’.<sup>385</sup> Moral humility requires that we assume that there are many ‘unknowns’ and, therefore, that we must be open to careful listening in order to gain some understanding of what things are like for others. As Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir would describe it, we must “stand back” and suspend our assumptions in order to let the world be disclosed to us, to allow the ‘upsurge’ of the world in our encounters.

Moral humility recognises that even if we were to ‘trade places’ with an other for a period of time, we are still not provided with access to their standpoint. This is because we are always aware that our ‘day in the life of another’ is limited and that we each have a different history and different relations to the world. What is required in ethical relations with others is a ‘humble recognition’ of the ‘remainder’ that comes with them (and with ourselves). Each of us has a situated history (or *is a* ‘situated totality’ in more de Beauvoirian terms), which is not readily exchangeable and which alters our perceptions and experiences. Our religious background, our age, our sexuality and our familial relations, for example, all play a part in determining our world view. Attempting to speak for all Christians, all fifty year olds, or all heterosexual women fails to take into account many other diverse and important factors. Attempting to speak for humanity is by far the most reductive ‘standpoint’ of all, which is why universal ethical principles which argue for the ‘good’ of ‘mankind’ are so problematic. The key point here is that we must remain *open* to the other in our relations with them. We must strive to *listen* to how it is for them.

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid, p49.

Importantly, though, the concept of ‘irreversibility’ does not mean that we should cease trying to better understand one another and Young writes:

... communication is sometimes a creative process in which the other person offers a new expression, and I understand it not because it fits with given paradigms, *but because I am open and suspend my assumptions in order to listen.*<sup>386</sup>

By employing this phenomenological method we consciously suspend our assumptions in order to try to better understand our relationship to the world.

People do, of course, share some aspects of experience in being human, however, these similarities are not enough to assume the possibility of symmetry. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, an approach based upon the notion of embodied, gestural communication, which proposes a shared world, or a shared horizon allows us to, at the same time, maintain an openness to the other. He writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator (PP, p413).

He goes on to argue that “we coexist through a common world” and that “in the present dialogue, I am freed from myself, for the other person’s thoughts are certainly his...” (PP, p413). By overcoming the distinction between self and world, we are returned to the world through ambiguous embodiment so that we and the world are combined or co-existent.

The account of asymmetrical reciprocity that Young puts forward is influenced at least in part by her readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray. From them

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid, p53.

she takes the idea of the 'remainder', of the 'in-between': that is the aspect of the relation between self and other, which cannot be surpassed. Levinas has been critical in his work of the (Western) philosophical tendency to attempt to reduce to the same or to assimilate experiences in order to attempt to know, grasp or understand the other. For him, the positions of each subject are irreducible and irreversible and each always retains an element of *alterity*.<sup>387</sup> Levinas' onto-ethical stance is that we must respect this particularity and that it is impossible to go beyond this impasse. What we have here is a connection to the *aporetic* nature of ethical relations in the recognition that we cannot surpass the paradoxical (ambiguous) situation that is human existence. We share a common world, and common human traits, however each is irreducibly individual in our particular situation - which includes our complex connections to others. We cannot know all there is to know about the other, and we should accept this aspect of their otherness.

Irigaray is also opposed to the argument (evident particularly in Descartes' philosophy) that value is, and should be, determined through investigation. She argues that we must 'welcome' what is unknown and foreign and that the way in which men and women should respond to each other, is with wonder,<sup>388</sup> with a prejudicative openness to difference. In wonder, there is an acceptance of independence, difference and uniqueness in which the Other should be encountered and 'accepted in their irreducible *alterity*'.<sup>389</sup>

A respectful stance of wonder, as described by Young and influenced by Irigaray and Levinas, requires asking the other for a description of *how things are for them*. This also entails recognition of the possibility of changes, new perspectives and experiences and, thus, the other is never fully 'comprehended' or understood and remains, at least in part, a mystery.

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid, p50.

<sup>388</sup> La Caze, Marguerite, 'The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity', *Hypatia*, Bloomington: Summer 2002, Vol. 17, Issue 3, p8.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid, p9.

## LUCE IRIGARAY: ON WONDER AND DIFFERENCE

In her 1984 work, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray argues that wonder provides an appropriate basis for an ethic of sexual difference. Here she challenges the idea that ethical subjects could be 'substituted' for one another and argues that sexual difference is *the* most basic and fundamental difference for human kind:

To arrive at the constitution of an ethics of sexual difference, we must at least return to what is for Descartes the first passion: wonder. This passion is not opposed to, or in conflict with, anything else, and exists always as though for the first time. Man and woman, woman and man are therefore always meeting as though for the first time since they cannot stand in for one another. I shall never take the place of man, never will a man take mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly fill the place of the other - the one is irreducible to the other.<sup>390</sup>

Irigaray's argument that man and woman is the most "mysterious and creative couple" has created some resistance in feminist readings of her work, and understandably, accusations of heterosexual bias. Historically there has been significant debate over what has been read as essentialism in Irigaray's work. Some argue that she sees women's bodies as having particular sexual capacities that have been repressed by patriarchy, whilst others argue that she uses essentialist language as a strategic move to undermine the oppression of the feminine. Later interpretations of her work have seen her as attempting to inscribe feminine attributes with a more positive interpretation in order to develop an ethics of sexual difference that celebrates rather than denigrates the feminine.<sup>391</sup> I do not wish to engage at length with the debate over essentialism in Irigaray's work here, as it would be a divergence from the theme of this chapter. However, I do agree with

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<sup>390</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *The Irigaray Reader*, Margaret Whitford (ed.), Blackwell, 1994, p171.

<sup>391</sup>. See Stone, Alison, The sex of nature: A reinterpretation of Irigaray's metaphysics and political thought, *Hypatia*, Summer 2003. Vol. 18, Iss. 3 for further discussion of the different readings of Irigaray. See also Schor, Naomi, 'This essentialism which is not one: Coming to grips with Irigaray', in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist philosophy and modern European thought*, Carolyn Burke et al. (eds), Columbia University Press: Columbia, 1994.

both Marguerite La Caze and Iris Young, in that the account of wonder described by Irigaray does need to be extended so that it is applicable across *all* difference, including differences within 'each' sex (that is, within 'man' and 'woman').

Both Young and La Caze argue for an extension of Irigaray's application of wonder *beyond* sexual difference so that it is applied to encounters and relations between all others.<sup>392</sup> A recognition of difference - which is based in wonder but which also has ambiguous freedom as its foundation - must go beyond sexual difference, so that the 'unknowable other' is not just "that which differs sexually from me" as Irigaray argues, but that which differs *situationally* from me.<sup>393</sup> As we have seen throughout this thesis, the reduction to two such distinct and firm categories as sexed 'man' and sexed 'woman' does not allow for particular individual experience and results in a reification of the male and the masculine (in opposition to the female and feminine), which denies the possibility of vastly different male experiences. We saw this also in descriptions of the problems within identity politics that privilege certain aspects of one's being over others. Each ethical subject should be recognised as *particular* in their situation, with factors such as (but not exclusive to) sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, economic and social position and dis/ability playing vital roles in the ethical placement of an individual in a *total situation*.

Irigaray correctly argues that women should not be understood on a male or 'masculine' model. However, her account does not go far enough and should include the assertion that *men* should not be understood on a male or masculine model of humanity either. Neither 'sex' should be understood on such a supposedly universal or neutral model, nor should they be understood purely on a gendered model that is based upon sexual difference as the most crucial factor of a life. We should, rather, be understood on an ambiguous and situated model of human existence described by de Beauvoir. For Irigaray, an appropriate response *between the sexes* negates a reduction to the same and is based in openness and

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<sup>392</sup> La Caze, Marguerite, 'The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity', p10.

<sup>393</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *Elemental Passions*, (Trans Joanne Collie & Judith Still) Routledge: New York, 1992.

recognition of alterity, “wonder cannot seize, possess or subdue such an object” and wonder provides for the ‘desire’ of the unknown.<sup>394</sup> Extending wonder to human encounters acknowledges the fundamental freedom and ambiguity that is crucial to the account of *authenticité* offered in this thesis.

## GENEROSITY

In her analysis of the appropriateness of wonder as the basis for an ethic, La Caze raises the question as to whether or not wonder *alone* is a rich enough concept to support an ethics. According to her argument, we need something more, in addition to wonder, to allow for such things as acceptance and respect. As Young notes, wonder alone runs the risk of exoticism and/or eventual contempt for the other and, for La Caze, ‘generosity’ towards others and oneself is necessary in order to prevent this. She writes:

This concept of wonder is dangerous. It would not be difficult to use it to imagine the other person as exotic. One can interpret wonder as a kind of distant awe before the other that turns their transcendence into an inhuman inscrutability. Or wonder can become a kind of prurient curiosity. I can recognise my ignorance about the other person’s experience and perspective and adopt a probing, investigative mode toward her. Both stances convert the openness of wonder into a dominative desire to know and master the other person<sup>395</sup>.

It seems to me that the question to be raised here is, what happens *after* the initial response of wonder? What is the ‘next step’? How do we respond to the other’s *alterity* after wonder? Is there a risk of disdain, fear, hatred, indifference or contempt once we go past the initial response of wonder? In order to avoid this disdain or contempt, La Caze introduces Descartes’ account of *générosité* (generosity), which she argues is wonder *combined* with love and rightful self-regard. On her account, appropriate self-esteem leads to appropriate responses to

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid, p172.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, p56.

others and *générosité* involves seeing our own value and possession of free will for both our self and others.<sup>396</sup> There are, of course, important differences between Descartes' account of free will and de Beauvoir's understanding of freedom from determination. Not the least of these is that Descartes' understanding presupposes a particular account of the subject – that is, a rational (disembodied) subject that exists 'in separation' – as we saw in earlier chapters. As we have seen throughout this thesis, for de Beauvoir, our fundamental freedom does not preclude the importance of others to me, nor does it negate the significance of the situation in which I have become, which includes the significance of my particular body.

Despite these differences, there are some important aspects in La Caze's interpretation of Descartes, which tie in with that of de Beauvoir. According to La Caze, *générosité* requires that we see that others are free in the same way that we are (we all have freedom from determination as a 'thing') and our aim should be to use (or 'take up') this freedom in a way that respects the freedom of others. The key point of the use of *générosité* to 'limit' wonder here is in allowing that we do share *some* similarities with others, if only at the most basic level of our fundamental freedom.

For La Caze, generosity equals regarding others as having free will like ourselves, and wonder involves seeing others as *different* to ourselves. She argues that we need *both* for ethics and that generosity involves both a limit for wonder and a regard for what we share. Like Descartes, she cautions against 'wondering too much' as in this constant wondering lies the risk of the other being seen as alien or exotic (as Young also points out):

Generosity can provide the limit which prevents wonder from falling over into exoticising, crass curiosity, or contempt because generosity is an acceptance of a fundamental sense in which we are all of worth, regardless of the differences which may exist.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> La Caze, Marguerite, 'The Encounter Between Wonder and Generosity', pp 15-16.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.



Wonder prevents assumptions of sameness, allows for alterity, and prevents the idea of substituting one for the other. Generosity limits wonder by allowing for some similarity and for asserting that all have worth. For La Caze, wonder and generosity become *attitudes* rather than emotions. What this means is that we can *cultivate* wonder by refusing to reduce or “get to the bottom of” situations with which we are faced. Instead, we must recognise our own assumptions and describe our lived experience. We can cultivate wonder and form an attitude of generosity in the recognition and the willing assertion of ambiguity.

The important point here is that we do not reduce the other to a thing by either denying their worth or by reifying it. As the examples of scientific desire to study the remains of Trugannini showed, such desires reduce the other to object and their inter-subjectivity is ignored. When Trugannini’s skeleton became the centre of a scientific debate, her *situation* was denied, her lived-experience as an Aboriginal woman in relation to both her own (pre-colonial) past and her encounters with the colonisers was forgotten and she was reduced to an artefact.

Debra Bergoffen makes a similar point about the importance of maintaining openness and generosity in our encounters with others. She argues that de Beauvoir’s account of ambiguity allows for *alterity* – so that the other is never fully known by us; there is always a part of the other that we cannot see, touch, understand/grasp: “the other, as other, is something strange, free, and forbidden”.<sup>398</sup>

For Bergoffen, following de Beauvoir’s lead, “the proper way to affirm the strangeness of the other is to allow their freedom to elude us – to renounce all forms of direction or possession, to forgo all projects”.<sup>399</sup> She argues that we must respect the strangeness of the other. We should not seek to possess, contain or *own* the other and must remain aware that they are not a solid entity (“X”) but an ungraspable other in relation to us. We must allow the other their freedom. This ‘allowing’ is an

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<sup>398</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, “Between the Ethical and the Political: The Difference of Ambiguity”, in *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, W. O’Brien and L. Embree (eds), Kluwer Academic Publishers: Netherlands, 2001, p191.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

active decision and a continued effort to remain open to the other; to avoid trying to 'grasp' or 'posses' the other while at the same time maintaining our connection to them.

## TWO-FOLD INTENTIONALITY

In order to examine the potential for ethical relationships between ultimately free beings, Bergoffen seeks to explicate what she sees as a 'two-fold' intentionality in de Beauvoir's work. On this account, de Beauvoir's analysis of relationships shows us that consciousness is a relating activity which takes "two basic forms and expresses two different desires".<sup>400</sup> Bergoffen describes this two-fold intentionality thus:

Determining that this duality of conscious life is contesting but relational, [Beauvoir] allows for a subject that is singular rather than unified and refers to us as ambiguous rather than divided. Further, conceived of as intentionality, the ambiguous subject discovers that its boundaries are permeable. It is always in some sense outside itself; always in some sense toward the other/otherness; and always in some sense permeated with others/otherness.<sup>401</sup>

What she describes here is the subject as connected irretrievably to others and situation, a self with 'permeable' boundaries, but nonetheless a 'self'.

An important aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate that an ethics of ambiguity can be applied to current contemporary social and political situations, where conceptions of self and 'authenticity' prove to be limiting debates. I have tried to show that the ethical and political are connected in the sense that what underlies both is our conception of the self-others relation and that the way this relation is conceived impacts upon how we act in the world.

Bergoffen, however, argues that there is a 'gap' between the ethical and the political which we should not rush to close and that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not just about

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid, p189.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

distinguishing the legitimate from the illegitimate political project as some have argued. She argues that there is a difference between the existentialism described by de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and traditional existentialism, in that it describes a difference between political relationships and ethical relationships. Bergoffen argues that the political seeks the other's freedom in order to work on joint projects that strive for liberation, whereas the ethical seeks the freedom of the other without asking anything in return – the ethical relationship "asks nothing of the other's freedom".<sup>402</sup>

What this means is that we can live our responsibility to the other in two ways: politically by engaging the other in joint projects that seek liberation, and ethically, by 'clearing the space for the other's lived freedom'. This two-fold intentionality can be described as follows. As beings inhabiting the world together we can be seen to share desires, conditions, goals and projects and that is what the political focuses on. Politics seeks to engage others in projects that aim toward a shared need or goal. Political freedom emphasises the roles that each of us play in ensuring that the conditions of freedom are met. Ethics, on the other hand, is about the way in which we live our "humanity in radically different ways. It attends to the ways in which we are, as other to each other, vulnerable to the other's desire to negate and/or assimilate our otherness".<sup>403</sup>

So, as we saw in the previous chapters many forms of identity politics, in forgetting the original response of openness, attempt to assimilate the otherness of others in order to achieve political ends. These political ends are not, in themselves, illegitimate but they run the risk of being so if they negate the link between the original moment of openness, which allows for a strangeness that eludes us, by reducing the other to the same. Political projects seek a change, they want to *make* particular things happen, often to realise the conditions of freedom (variously interpreted), to achieve liberation, to overcome oppression. Whilst the political is informed by the ethical, Bergoffen argues that the two modes are distinct. The

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid, p190.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, p191.

political can be *guided* by the ethical but the ethical must come first as it is the original mode of response – the sense of ‘wonder’ at the other or the world. On Bergoffen’s account, the political actions and decisions represent the second intentional moment, whereas ethical concerns pertain to the first intentional moment – the desire to disclose being, to let being *be*, to *allow* openness. On this understanding, the political can be legitimate or illegitimate depending on whether or not it is informed by the ethical. Those that seek mastery and who forget that meaning is disclosed in ‘letting be’ are perverse; these are the ‘tyrants’ who trick the oppressed into believing in their own inherent worthlessness by denying their ambiguity.

Projects which reject the call of the first intentional moment are illegitimate, those that heed this call and attend to it are legitimate: but *all* projects are political because they desire to bring about meaning, change, an outcome. The ethical, however, “is identified with the desires of disclosure that refuse to impose a meaning on the world”. Ethics, on such an account, is “a generosity marked by an aimlessness that is receptive to the unfolding that we call world”.<sup>404</sup>

In more ‘Levinasian’ terms, the ethical is about ‘letting be’ and keeping a space for the other’s ‘otherness’ open. “Political acts take up projects. Ethical acts are gifts” according to Bergoffen. Ethical acts “express a generosity that asks nothing, neither recognition nor reciprocity, from the other, for as soon as something is asked, the other’s vulnerability is compromised, its freedom is now caught up in the law of exchange”.<sup>405</sup>

The call of the first intentional movement is to disclose being and Bergoffen conceives the ethical as a lived openness to the world. The ethical does not expect anything in return. Generosity is non-judgmental. Reciprocity and recognition then are not to be equated with the ethical – for both *demand* something of the other:

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid, p 194.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, p 191.

As gifts, ethical acts are situated beyond/outside the political field of exchange, debt and accountability. Asking neither for reciprocity nor recognition – asking for nothing in return – these acts enact the desires that take delight in the otherness of the world and the other of freedom that eludes us. Guided by these generous desires, we do not move to transform the givenness of the “is” into the ideal of an “ought”.<sup>406</sup>

The urging is to break away from the idea that reciprocity is necessary in order for an act to be ethical. For, as Bergoffen says, “the parent-child relationship is generous, not reciprocal” and we should not assume that relationships *must* be reciprocal in order to be ethical. Bergoffen argues that reciprocity and recognition have been privileged as masculine in patriarchy and that our bond with others has been equated with the feminine and, hence, seen as weak:

Patriarchy has inverted the relationship between disclosure and possession. It sexes as male the secondary mode of transcendence associated with the desire to possess the world and privileges it as the original mark of the subject. It sexes as female the inaugural mode of transcendence associated with the desires of disclosure. It marks these desires as weak and passive and identifies them as the signature of the secondary, inessential Other.<sup>407</sup>

In patriarchy, the demand for recognition is linked to violence and risk, for example, in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, which is a “battle to the death”, even if in reality such an outcome is averted. Those who seek recognition in this way are associated with the masculine. However, if we understand our response to the world and to the other in terms of a two-fold intentionality, we can see that there is an original moment of intentionality for all of us that is characterised by “openness, relationship and joy”. This is a *human* moment, not a feminine moment. Bergoffen argues that the meaning of humanity is perverted by patriarchy’s division of human

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid, p194.

<sup>407</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, “Simone de Beauvoir: (Re)counting the sexual difference”, in Card, Claudia, (ed) , *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p258.

experience in which autonomy and independence are valued as the marks of the (masculine) subject and the valuing of the bond, generosity and the gift is associated with its feminisation, so that these moments of response are separated and given different value dependent upon who demonstrates them and in which context.<sup>408</sup> De Beauvoir shows us that *authenticité*, on her terms, must acknowledge both 'modes' of our ambiguous being.

#### AN AMBIGUOUS MARRIAGE?

Bergoffen argues that de Beauvoir's phenomenological account of two-fold intentionality in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is exemplified in the marriage (erotic) relationship. For Bergoffen, the couple demonstrate that they are at once private, individual beings in an intimate and erotic relationship and also, at the same time, they are subjectivities in a social and political world in which judgments must be made and actions taken. De Beauvoir's 'two-fold' subject is an instance of the way in which intentionality is experienced and lived in two distinct ways. Firstly, the initial or spontaneous facet of intentionality is the receiver of worldly input - this is the 'openness' to the world, to the other, that comes *before* judgement and prejudice and which is represented, for Bergoffen, in the intimate, erotic encounter. This 'letting-be' is the disclosure of the world to consciousness, and is associated with wonder and a 'gift' to the other.

The second aspect or facet of intentionality is the more practical, judgment-oriented, 'meaning-making' role of consciousness, in which new experience and data is incorporated into past knowledge and understanding and with which new ideas, judgements and responses are made. Whilst it may seem that Bergoffen is proposing a dualistic account here, this is not the case; a philosophy of ambiguity stresses that each subject possesses (or is comprised of) *both* these intentional aspects and needs *both* to function ethically in the world. Both are crucial to our capacity to relate to others and the world and neither aspect is privileged over the other. Bergoffen describes marriage (or the relationship of the couple) as:

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid, p198.

... the place where the desires of the erotic body and the demands of the body politic intersect and as alerting us to the fact that we will not have a politics of justice unless and until we attend to the ethical meanings and political implications of erotic desire.<sup>409</sup>

Bergoffen's aim is to examine how State interactions with marriage reflect the ethical views of that State and the level to which ethics and the political are connected. Any political state that fails to recognise the two-fold character of the marriage relationship is, for Bergoffen, "perverting the erotic ethical meaning of marriage". This perversion occurs whether the state sees marriage as either an "exclusively political institution" or as an institution that is "irrelevant to the political".<sup>410</sup> She asserts that:

Those societies that legitimate heterosexual desire [through legislation which only gives marriage rights to heterosexual couples] ...only recognise the desires of those couples they define as legitimate. Structurally then, the rule of authority continues to trump the voice of desire. Marriage's past continues to pervert its ethical and political meaning.<sup>411</sup>

Bergoffen argues that an examination of intentionality, ambiguity and the erotic "point to crucial strains of Beauvoir's thinking and to ways of exploring the ethical and political meanings of marriage". As she suggests, two-fold intentionality, or ambiguous inter-subjectivity, provides an ethics that can move beyond dichotomous understandings of self-other relations and reveals the importance of our historical and temporal location to our accounts of ethics. For example, in her critique of the effects of patriarchal marriage on wives in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes:

The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be

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<sup>409</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, 'Marriage, autonomy, and the feminine protest', *Hypatia*, Fall 1999, Vol. 14, Issue 4, p3.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid, p3.

maintained, for it to expand towards the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation. These two elements - maintenance and progression - are implied in any living activity... (TSS, p 449).

Here again we see the argument expressed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that the ambiguous nature of humanity is something to be recognised and worked with, rather than ignored or denied. For Bergoffen, the ethic of generosity, which she argues comes from recognition of ambiguity is "...a possible ethic [only] for those men and women who understand that it is neither as men nor as women, but rather as *ambiguously desiring, fleshed and embodied beings* that they occupy the place of the subject".<sup>412</sup>

De Beauvoir makes a similar claim in *The Second Sex* when she argues that:

If love or desire evokes the full consent of both partners; the delight the lovers give and take in *mutual recognition of their freedom* is what lends strength and dignity to physical passion; under these circumstances nothing they do is degrading, since nothing is a matter of submission, everything is a matter of *willing generosity* (TSS, p 463, my emphasis).

Therefore, for a relationship to be considered *authentique* on de Beauvoir's account, we must first recognise our own and the other's fundamental freedom. With this comes the acknowledgement that marriage, sex roles and gender are all part of our ambiguous historical situation and have no inherent meaning other than that which has developed in socio-political context (for Bergoffen this would be the first intentionality and she associates this with the 'ethical'). Secondly, it is not enough that we recognise this freedom, but we must "take it up" and work to ensure others are able to live and express their freedom (this for Bergoffen would be the 'political')

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<sup>412</sup> Bergoffen, Debra, "Between the Ethical and the Political: The Difference of Ambiguity", in *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, W. O'Brien and L. Embree (eds), Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands, 2001, p 203, emphasis added.



aspect of meaning-making and judgment). A marriage relationship is, therefore, both ethical and political – it is ‘two-fold’.

Participants in a relationship must be free both ontologically and practically and have that freedom accepted at all times (ethically). This entails a free choice to enter and remain in a marriage/relationship, which is recognised as being an ongoing project. In *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir argues that marriage is a flawed principle due to the enforcement of necessity and demand upon what should be freely given actions. Here she is criticizing the inscription of value and removal of choice that came especially in traditional patriarchal accounts of the marriage relation which, for women of her time, also entailed a loss of independence and identity. Contrary to some interpretations, the desire to make such a commitment to another person is not inherently unethical and, as Bergoffen describes, such a commitment can actually represent the ethical assumption of our own and the other’s freedom and our responsibility to them. The unethical aspect of marriage as an institution comes in ascribing it with inherent value and meaning, which, in actual fact has developed in a patriarchal and heterosexist context and which, thus depends upon the exclusions of others. Marriage, or committed relationships, are unethical when do not acknowledge the openness to the other of the first intentional moment, when they lack a sense of wonder.

As de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, there is potential for erotic relationships to be lived in freedom, based on a pure generosity, if those who participate in the relationship are free to engage authentically with their freedom:

The couple should not be regarded as a unit...rather each individual should be integrated as such in society at large, where each (whether male or female) could flourish without and then attachments could be formed in *pure generosity* with another individual equally adapted to the group, attachments that would be founded upon the acknowledgement that *both are free* (TSS, p 497, my emphasis).

The promise, the contract and the commitment of marriage would, then, have to be recognised for what they are; that is, concepts ascribed weight and given meaning within a *particular* historical context. Marriage would require a commitment to continually working to open the future to each partner and the limitations implied by marriage would have to be continually freely chosen by each. This does not mean that each partner does 'as they please' without thought of the other, because, recognition of ambiguous freedom entails recognition that what I do creates the situation in which the other must act. This would mean that marriage would be continually adapting and attempting to be open towards the future, and the responsibility of each not to 'close off' the future of the other would require continued recognition of the ultimate freedom of each. The concepts of 'wonder' and generosity would here come into play, and each partner would participate fully in both aspects of a two-fold intentionality, which would see openness and wonder toward the other at the same time as the need for 'meaning-making' and practical decision-making in interaction with the world.

In her analysis of the various ways in which people respond to their freedom, de Beauvoir briefly discusses what she calls a 'generous passion'. A subject who takes up this attitude "accepts the distance that necessarily separates him from his beloved instead of trying to eliminate that distance" and, in doing so, he acknowledges "the loved one as another free subject".<sup>413</sup> She writes:

It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the other is revealed as another. And to love him genuinely is to love him in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes... One cannot love a pure thing in its independence and its separation, for the thing does not have positive independence... Passion is converted to genuine freedom only if he 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* (TEA, p67).

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<sup>413</sup> Arp, Kristana, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics*, Open Court: Chicago, 2001, p63.

As we have seen in previous chapters, one of the most crucial factors of de Beauvoir's account of ethical response is her insistence that we must not close off possibilities for other human freedoms; we must recognise the "bond of each man with all others" (TEA, p70) and we must not attempt to reduce them to things. So, if the passionate man fails to recognise freedom in its entirety and instead "seeks possession; he seeks to attain being" then he fails to be *authentique* because he "... makes himself a lack of being not that there might be being, but in order to *be*" (TEA, pp 64-65).

Passion itself is not the problem here though, and it is possible to have a generous passion that accepts freedom. De Beauvoir writes in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* that our actions should be guided by "a lucid generosity" and she (like Young) dismisses the notion of exchange, arguing that generosity is founded on freedom, and that to attempt to compensate someone for an act of generosity denies this freedom:

A tip given in thanks for a generous act is insulting. It is a way of denying the act its freedom by supposing that it was not done freely, for nothing, but out of self-interest. Generosity wants and knows itself to be free and asks for nothing but to be recognized as such (PC, p124).

Generosity then, tempers wonder, but is also influenced by the sense of openness to the other that wonder implies. Through generous acts we allow the other to be disclosed to us and, also, allow the other their freedom. We do not seek recognition for generosity and, in wonder, we do not seek to unearth or overcome the ambiguity of the other. Our relation with others is characterised by this tension, a desire to know and understand the other but also an acknowledgement that there is a 'gap' that we cannot overcome. It is our task, in order to be *authentique*, to maintain this tension and to acknowledge and affirm the ambiguity of self, of the other and the relation that holds between us.

A key point of this thesis has been to demonstrate that ambiguity, which expresses our existence as irreducibly free and yet thoroughly situated beings, describes the ontological character of the world and that *authenticité* refers to the moral or ethical

“taking up” of this ambiguity in our encounters with others. Together ambiguity and *authenticité*, both of which require freedom, provide the basis for a contemporary ethics. That is, an ethics that allows us to celebrate both our freedom from inherent meaning and the significant meanings that exist in the world.

The second part of this thesis, by focusing on an application of an ethics of ambiguity in socio-political settings, demonstrates that de Beauvoir’s philosophy can, and does, provide us with a means to move beyond the impasse described by some critics of existentialism. By acknowledging the significance of our ambiguous situation – material, social, historical and psychological – we are able to celebrate difference, to celebrate the things that we share with others, and yet to remain open to a future which is not yet defined.

In opposition to those who have argued that existential freedom and ambiguity leave us with no basis for ethics - with a sense of despair or misery and absurdity that denies life – we can see that, in de Beauvoir’s work (which is influenced by those such as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as well as Hegel and Sartre), we are provided with a life-affirming ethics. This ethics does not deny the potential for violence, hatred and oppression – but it does deny that these are inevitable in all cases. It is up to each of us, together, to work toward a world in which generosity and joy are possibilities which can be taken up. As Barbara Andrew argues, when faced with the tragedy of human existence, de Beauvoir “... turns toward engagement and sees its possibilities as well as its dangers and potential failures. Her writing finds joy in moments of connection with others and the world, while it never forgets the potential oppression this connection may bring”.<sup>414</sup>

Furthermore, as de Beauvoir’s account of ambiguity suggests, an attitude of wonder, which is tempered with a focus on generosity, allows the ‘mystery’ of the world and the mystery of the other to be revealed or disclosed, not as something to

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<sup>414</sup> Andrew, Barbara, ‘Beauvoir’s place in philosophical thought’, in Card, Claudia, (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge University Press, 2003 pp 42-43.

be overcome, but as something to be *maintained*. It is wonder in the face of the *ordinary* that we can cultivate with a willing assumption of ambiguity:

... while wonder may often be evoked by the self-evidently extraordinary, it may also arise out of the simple, sudden, immediate awareness of the existence of some thing; out of the recognition of the questionability, the strangeness, the wondrousness of things, and of our encounter with them, as it occurs in the most common and ordinary of ways.<sup>415</sup>

As Nancy Bauer has argued, a strength of de Beauvoir's particular form of existential phenomenology is that, by returning us to the world, to an examination of what the 'mundane' offers us, it allows us to question the assumptions that underpin much traditional philosophy. By focusing on such questions as 'what does it mean to be a woman in this particular situation?' de Beauvoir shows us that philosophy must speak to our particularities and that sexed, raced, embodied being is key to understanding the meaning of human existence. Universal man demonstrates a failure to account for difference and, therefore, a failure to account for humanity.

In order to act ethically, on de Beauvoir's terms, we must willingly assume our freedom, embrace our ambiguity and live the tension of our existence with *authenticité*. It is fitting to leave the final word to her:

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 feels the joy of existing. They then manifest existence as a happiness and the world as a source of joy (TEA, p41).

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<sup>415</sup> Malpas, Jeff, 'Beginning in Wonder', in *Philosophical Romanticism*, Nick Korpdis (ed.), Routledge: London, 2006, p 54.

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