

Performing Philosophy: Beauvoir's Methodology and its Ethical and Political Implications

Dr. Christine Daigle and Dr. Louise Renée

Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir's contribution to ethics and politics is articulated through a methodology that successfully renders philosophy as literary and literature as philosophical. Her existential-phenomenological stance permeates her corpus and dictates a philosophical approach that avoids theoretical treatises in favour of philosophy as a way of life which is communicated in a variety of modes of expression. The *Ethics of Ambiguity* furnishes us with an example of said philosophy insofar as it performs the philosophy it offers and thereby appeals to the reader to engage in ethical and political action in her own life.

--

Simone de Beauvoir's works have had a tremendous impact in feminist theory and beyond. *The Second Sex*, arguably her best-known essay, gave feminist thinkers much to ponder and furthermore, the sex/gender distinction it implicitly introduced renewed debates about women's oppression. What is less appreciated is the degree to which the Beauvoirian corpus in every shape and form is deeply philosophical. This may have to do with Beauvoir's own lack of appreciation for her work as philosophical. Indeed, she famously said in an interview with Margaret A. Simons, "[...] for me, a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre: someone who builds a great system [...] it is someone who truly constructs a philosophy."¹ Indeed, Beauvoir is not a philosopher in this narrow sense of the word nor is she interested in doing philosophy in this way. Rather, she is a philosopher in a broader, more interesting, sense in which her project resembles that of Renaissance Humanist thinkers and Enlightenment philosophers. Like them she did not engage in the elaboration of a systematic treatise but rather she used many different forms

of writing including philosophical essays, novels, letters, autobiographical writings, diaries, political articles, and even one play. Further, she shared the views of Renaissance Humanists regarding the role of the writer as social critic as well as about the importance of civic involvement.²

In this essay, we will explore Beauvoir's writings as forming a body of work that presents and performs an existential and phenomenological philosophy. We will begin by explaining her philosophical point of view and the methodology that she favours in light of that philosophical stance. We will discuss her view on the ethical and political role of writing and in so doing we will provide an analysis of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. What our essay will show is that Beauvoir's works perform the philosophy they present and thus successfully communicate with their readers and trigger an ethical and political response in them.

An existential-phenomenological point of view

In her writings and in interviews, Beauvoir offers two different ways of conceiving of philosophy: philosophy as system building and philosophy as a way of life. The latter definition of philosophy is broader and is present early on in her writings. We only need to consider her view in the essay "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom" from 1945 to see an early evidence of this notion of philosophy as a way of life. There she is defending existentialism as a philosophical stance and concludes the essay by saying, "In truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life. 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."³ She is taking a clear stand in this statement, namely there is a philosophy that constitutes itself as system building presented in grandiloquent treatises and then there is philosophy as a way of life. Beauvoir is incisive: it is the latter that is more valuable. Despite the support she showed Sartre and his *Being and Nothingness* and despite all of her interest in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, she is sceptical of the potential of these treatises to explain our human reality in full.

She shares Nietzsche's distrust of those he calls "Systematizers." She might want to issue the same warning as Nietzsche in *Dawn*: "Beware of Systematizers!— Systematizers practise a kind of play-acting: in as much as they want to fill out a system and round off its horizon..." (§318) and again

later in *Twilight of the Idols* he says, “I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity” (“Maxims and Arrows,” §26). In his notebooks, Nietzsche goes even further and refers to systematizers as counterfeiters. Given that Beauvoir’s endeavour in *The Second Sex* constitutes an exploration and exposé of various erroneous narratives that have been constructed about man and woman, such as that of biology, psychoanalysis, historical materialism, and more, she is really exposing these systems as counterfeits.

According to Beauvoir the existentialist-phenomenologist, when one philosophizes, one must be able to tackle human existence in all its complexities and ambiguities. She is forthcoming about her position; thus, in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, she claims, “The perspective we have adopted is one of existentialist morality”⁴ and again in the chapter on “Biological Data”, she explains that the perspective she adopts is that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.⁵ Her review of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* testifies to her enthusiasm with his phenomenology, one which emphasizes embodiment and ambiguity. Therefore, the perspective she is embracing is that of existential phenomenology. That perspective, however, requires a mode of philosophizing that expands beyond the narrow confines of the philosophical treatise. This explains why Beauvoir, along with many other existentialist thinkers, opted to write essays, novels, plays, autobiographies, etc. Even a more systematic phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty used literary accounts and first person narratives to better circumscribe the notions he was tackling in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Likewise, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Second Sex* are permeated by literary accounts. One feature that definitely makes *The Second Sex* a phenomenological work is the use of multiple narratives. What contributes to making the work so long is the quantity of quotes that Beauvoir provides from women writing about their experiences as women. The quantity and variety of quotes is astounding, but it is what allows her to describe the lived experience of women.

It is clear that for Beauvoir there is no strict dividing line between philosophy and literature just as there is no separation between philosophy and life. Reflecting on Beauvoir’s methodology, Penelope Deutscher writes, “Beauvoir made the literary philosophical... What if she had allowed the philosophy to be more literary?”⁶ However, this implies that Beauvoir’s philosophical essays were not literary which, as we will show, is a misreading

and a misunderstanding of Beauvoir's methodological stance. Nevertheless, Deutscher argues that a text on ambiguity must be written in an ambiguous style: "If there is a necessary ambiguity in seeking to grasp the thickness of things, can there really be clear and unambiguous statements about this ambiguity in philosophy, any more than there can be in literature – particularly if the former has turned to the latter because faced with that very dilemma?"⁷

Indeed, a narrow type of philosophizing might be problematic because it cannot hope to address ambiguity. However, there are methodological strategies that Beauvoir adopts and which allow her to address ambiguity without writing ambiguously. Philosophy that is literary and literature that is philosophical (literature in Beauvoir's case encompasses fiction as well as autobiographical writings) is the most apt approach to the ambiguous nature of human beings and of existence in general. The use of different modes of expression is at the heart of such an endeavour.

In this context, it is important to consider Beauvoir's views on literature and its role. She has theorized quite extensively on the social and political role of literature, fiction, and non-fiction alike. She conceives of literature as a metaphysical adventure. Its task is to uncover truth(s) about the world, and this truth, being constituted by the intentional consciousness the human being is, is necessarily subjective. In her "Literature and Metaphysics," she says, "A metaphysical novel that is honestly read, and honestly written, provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression. [...] insofar as it is successful, it strives to grasp man and human events in relation to the totality of the world, and since it alone can succeed where pure literature and pure philosophy fail, i.e., in evoking in its living unity and its fundamental living ambiguity, this destiny that is ours and that is inscribed both in time and in eternity."⁸ As we have suggested earlier, even at her philosophical best, Beauvoir does not offer what she qualifies as "pure philosophy," nor is she interested in doing so. Because her philosophy is existential and phenomenological, it avoids the traps that "pure philosophy" inevitably encounters – the philosophy that attempts to establish a systematic understanding of human reality. Beauvoir's works do not systematize human experience and do not dwell in the realm of abstract principles. Instead they focus on the concrete ambiguous experiences of human beings. Beauvoir's works – literary, philosophical, and otherwise – all provide the "disclosure of existence" she is seeking. Further, this disclosure entails an appeal to the reader to think, be critical and, as a result,

act. One is always speaking from one's own perspective and this is also necessarily true of the writer. By unveiling reality from her own perspective, the writer plays an important role that renders literature a political commitment.⁹

Another important aspect of Beauvoir's writings is the manner in which she philosophizes in the various modes of expression she chooses. As Sara Heinämaa argues, Beauvoir is more interested in questioning than in constructing a world. Thus, Heinämaa understands Beauvoir's writings as an unveiling that questions the reader.¹⁰ This unveiling and questioning is done in a non-systematic fashion, thus allowing for ambiguity to be unveiled. Similarly, Ulrika Björk sees this unveiling in the work of Beauvoir, although under a Kierkegaardian light. She explains that systematic philosophy and its conceptual abstract language "is capable of expressing only what is universal in character. It therefore fails to account for human existence in its pregnant sense, that is, as a universal *and* singular reality."¹¹ Therefore, like Kierkegaard, Beauvoir is critical of "pure philosophy" and explores different modes of expression and philosophizing.

For both Kierkegaard and Beauvoir, it is a matter of adopting indirect communication. Björk explains, "While direct communication 'speaks' its meaning abstractly and by means of conceptual language, indirect communication does not speak. Rather, it 'shows' or makes meaning manifest by the presence of contingent details and the use of different narrative voices."¹² This is the disclosure of existence, which is the task of metaphysical literature as identified by Beauvoir. Beauvoir's writings indeed aim to "show" rather than "speak." This showing is an appeal to the reader to act.

In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir had explained that one's free project stands in need of validation by the freedom of the Other. According to her, one always appeals to the Other to validate one's own projects. The act of writing is one form that the appeal to the Other may take. By disclosing existence in writing, the writer appeals to the reader to validate her project of disclosure of existence, but she also appeals to the freedom of the reader to undertake to act. Writing is thus a political gesture since it discloses to the reader a world in need of changing and appeals to the reader to act in order to change the world. When communication is successful between author and reader, an act of liberation may take place, conditions for the

flourishing of freedom may be put in place. This is the way in which literature is committed and can serve an ethical and political function.

Beauvoir appeals to her readers by making use of different modes of expression. It thus appears that she is trying to maximize the impact of her appeal by communicating through these various modes. It is interesting to ponder whether there is an advantage to literary writing as opposed to more phenomenological writings – keeping in mind that no strict distinction is to be drawn between them for Beauvoir.

If, as Erika Ruonakoski suggests, “The role of literature is to facilitate communication within separation, or, in other words, grant us access to the other’s world, to the first-person perspective of the other,”¹³ than it seems that literature may have a privileged stance after all especially if the aim of literature is to communicate and incite action in the reader. Ruonakoski points out, “all literary works are essentially a search, which – in opposition to scientific writing – operates on the level of non-knowledge and communicates the meaning of lived experience to the readers.”¹⁴ The successful work of literature offers its insights in a non-didactic, non-dogmatic way. Phenomenology is a type of philosophy that explores the meaning of lived experience in a way in which traditional systematic, what Beauvoir calls “pure,” philosophy is unable. For example, *The Second Sex*, replete as it is with first-person accounts, certainly serves the same function as literature as described here, i.e., it unveils a world and multiple perspectives to a reader while constituting an appeal to the reader.

According to some commentators, literary writing holds an advantage over other modes of expression. Ulrika Björk considers novels and autobiographies and their focus on singular experience to be “privileged places of intersubjectivity.”¹⁵ To her, the novel is advantageous in that it provides a multiplicity of perspectives while the autobiography provides merely one. If she is correct, one would have to claim that phenomenological writings such as *The Second Sex* are at the same level as novels since they too provide a multiplicity of perspectives. We would argue however, that to try to establish a hierarchy among the different modes of expression used by Beauvoir is unhelpful. As we said earlier, there is no sharp distinction in Beauvoir between literary and philosophical writing. All of her writings are philosophical and literary at the same time and in different degrees. What is important for us to highlight is how these different modes of writing all constitute a performance of the philosophy of

ambiguity. That being said, while novels may not be more advantageous in Björk's sense, they are more evidently providing us with an "ambiguous" account of ambiguity. Further, it is our contention that all of Beauvoir's writings accomplish this task. For example, autobiographical writing allows the writer to make the case that it is possible to perform one's philosophy and incorporate it in one's life project or rather to make it one's life project. Beauvoir's memoirs are an integral part of her self-creation as both a writer and a philosopher. They serve to explore the life of single individuals from her own subjective point of view and this is done as a means to test the applicability of her own philosophy of ambiguity. As our analysis is about to show, philosophical writings such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* also perform philosophy, albeit in a different way.

The Example of The Ethics of Ambiguity

Going back to Deutscher's question and regarding *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, one may ask whether a text on ambiguity can be anything other than ambiguous. While Deutscher makes an interesting point, we are suggesting something different; the text is not ambiguous in the ordinary sense of the term; rather, it actually *performs an ethics of ambiguity*. Both author and reader experience the metaphysical adventure—*l'aventure spirituelle*—that Beauvoir discussed in "Literature and Metaphysics." *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is obviously not a novel, but we contend that it employs certain literary devices that have the same effect on us as if we *were* reading a metaphysical novel. What if the style that Beauvoir used makes us *feel* ambiguity in a visceral and meaningful way, so much so that we are shaken at our very core and even possibly transformed?

Regardless, the overt purpose of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is to defend existentialism and to show how an ethics can be derived from its key ideas. As many scholars have pointed out,¹⁶ Beauvoir develops an original ethics that she herself had probably not foreseen before she started writing. From this point of view, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* proves to be a spiritual adventure for her as well as for the reader. In "Literature and Metaphysics," she writes, "as the story unfolds, [the writer] sees truths appear that were previously unknown to him, questions whose solutions he does not possess" ("LM" 272). Beauvoir composed her ethical essay in precisely the same way given that it is *not* a "rigid theory," a "preconstructed ideological framework," nor a "fully constituted, self-sufficient system" ("LM" 272). On the contrary,

the way that it was written reminds us more of a “novelistic experiment” where the author “takes sides, runs risks” (“LM” 272) and attempts to grasp reality not by intelligence alone, but as a metaphysical experience. We grasp it in “its subjective, singular, and dramatic character, as well as its ambiguity” (“LM” 275). *The Ethics of Ambiguity* discloses ambiguity as a “living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought” (“LM” 275). And just as with a metaphysical novel, this essay requires us to participate in the adventure because it appeals to our freedom (“LM” 276). In other words, this essay *performs* the very thing that it urges us to feel for ourselves – ambiguity.

In particular, three stylistic choices destabilize the text so that it never offers us a safe resting-place: paradoxes, porous profiles, and perpetual permutations. Beauvoir does not explain philosophical ideas: she *suggests* them by using paradoxes.¹⁷ She divides inauthentic attitudes into five porous profiles that flow in and out of one another. All the while her key notion of ambiguity continuously sustains multiple permutations. This may lead us to question whether this is a philosophically “immature” text or whether Beauvoir is performing a different kind of philosophy, offering us a blueprint or rather a musical score that we may interpret as we see fit. Back in 1989, in her *L'Étude et le rouet*, Michèle Le Doeuff astutely noted that Beauvoir never claimed to have adopted an existentialist *philosophy* but rather, an existentialist *ethics*. Her aim is not to *convince* us of anything, but rather to be the catalyst of an inner transformation within each reader.

Paradox is the rhetorical figure of ambiguity and is the means Beauvoir uses to circumscribe her notion of ambiguity. A paradox proposes two apparently contradictory ideas and maintains a constant tension between the two terms, never offering the possibility of a synthesis. Beauvoir delights in using paradoxes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. At the very beginning of the text, she points out the dichotomies of our human condition and calls them paradoxes because they cannot be dismissed nor can they be synthesized. She explains, “A new paradox is thereby introduced into his destiny. ‘Rational animal,’ ‘thinking reed,’ he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it.”¹⁸ She uses paradoxes throughout her text; for example she writes, “by taking the world away from me, others also give it to me, since a thing is given to me only by the movement which snatches it from me” (EA 71). “its being immediately generated against men” (EA 99).

The most difficult paradox appears at the beginning of the text when, quoting Sartre, she says that man makes himself a lack of being in order to be: "His being is a lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence" (*EA* 13). Near the end of the text, she claims, "it is by making himself a lack of being that man exists, and positive existence is this lack assumed but not eliminated" (*EA* 118). This paradox is never explained, but Beauvoir seems to be suggesting that our very being *is* a paradox. Given her phrasing, it appears that "being" stands for immanence while "existence" stands for transcendence. This distinction would be similar to Sartre's distinction between being in-itself and being for-itself. However, while these are in opposition and radically distinguished in Sartre the distinction Beauvoir provides is not that clear. The binaries of the paradox remain intertwined and there is movement back and forth between them. This movement entails that Beauvoir does not decidedly claim that either term is good or bad. Thus, the paradox quoted above is the very image of our ambiguity. In other words, this paradox is the rhetorical figure that best encapsulates the idea of ambiguity because meaning can never settle comfortably into a fixed interpretation.

This particular paradox allows us to understand how ambiguity relates to freedom. According to Beauvoir, there are three kinds of freedom: ontological freedom which amounts to a natural spontaneity that is implicit to our being, moral freedom which is the decision to do something with our ontological freedom, and concrete freedom, the conditions that allow us to act on these decisions.¹⁹ She implores us to choose an intentional and purposeful project that originates from our freedom and then to wholeheartedly take it up. However, one must do so without losing one's freedom completely. She explains, "though engaged in his undertaking, [an individual] is at the same time detached from the goal" (*EA* 59). In other words, we have to be fully engaged in a specific project as if our life depended on it while maintaining the crucial distance from it that prevents us from conferring unconditional value upon it. If we do lose ourselves in our project our freedom becomes absorbed in it and we settle comfortably into security. One may wonder whether there is anything wrong with such a security. However, if freedom rests it disappears and we forget that it must be in a forward motion, constantly striving. If we lose ourselves in a project, we betray the truth of our metaphysical ambiguity and belie our situation as transcendent beings. Thus, freedom and ambiguity go hand in hand: we cannot fall into dogmatism or even certainty because if we come to a safe resting-place we are refusing to acknowledge the constant tension of our

multiple dichotomies. Ambiguity, as expressed in the various paradoxes presented by Beauvoir, is the threshold to this important insight. Because ambiguity maintains the tension between two terms, it prevents us from falling into certainty. Constant questioning is the very spirit of freedom: just like the endless dialogue between Pyrrhus and Cinéas; we move forward, carried by the movement of our actions, but we also pause to reflect on our actions, enjoying the temporary respite of ataraxia. This never-ending alternating motion, between action and reflection, is the way ambiguity works and it entails that meaning is never fixed once and for all. This is the very essence of freedom according to Beauvoir.

Beauvoir develops this idea further by giving examples of various ways in which we try to avoid the ambiguity of our condition. She organizes general attitudes into five types or profiles: the sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, and the passionate man. She carefully explains how each attitude can easily slip into an other; this is how each attitude relates to and overlaps with other attitudes. The categories are not rigid, thus the same person may hesitate between several attitudes at once or even combine them. The reader would like to think that these are neat subdivisions of lived freedom, but on the contrary, they are porous profiles that merge into one another. However, each type is judged according to two key factors: 1) one's attitude towards freedom and 2) one's attitude towards others. Freedom is making choices in the absence of all external value-based authority while being conscious of the impact those actions have on others. Therefore, the ethical person will be constantly on guard, in a state of internal tension to ensure that she is always making decisions based on her own values, and that her decisions help others attain their own freedom.

Each of the five attitudes can be seen as varying in degree, not content. The sub-man does not employ his freedom and does not consider others at all. The serious man sinks his freedom into a cause and does not consider the impact of his actions on others. The nihilist sees the lie of the absolute cause but does not use his freedom to create value or to value others. The adventurer uses his freedom to choose projects arbitrarily—others are only a means to his ends. The passionate man freely chooses a cause based on his own values, but is indifferent to others unrelated to his cause. The ideal type would be the creator such as a scientist, writer, or artist who throws himself into each project as if it were an absolute, but who refrains from losing himself in it; his freedom prevents him from identifying too closely with

any of his creations. These creations act as springboards for others to become more transcendent themselves.

It appears that the five types serve as gradients that respond to Beauvoir's ethics of intersubjective freedom.²⁰ However, in the course of her description of each type, she insists on how each may morph into the other. For example: "Nihilism is disappointed seriousness which has turned back upon itself" (*EA* 52) or "an adventurer is a nihilist who takes delight in living" (*EA* 57). She also explains how each of the types except for the sub-human is on the right track. For example: "It is obvious that this choice is very close to a genuinely moral attitude" (*EA* 59).²¹ But most importantly and problematically, all five types have the potential to become oppressors. Beauvoir explains, "Thus, though we have defined him as a denial and a flight, the sub-man is not a harmless creature. He realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of" (*EA* 44); "The serious man can become a tyrant: the inhuman idols are more important than people" (*EA* 49); "If [the nihilist's] rejection [of the world] ends up in a positive desire for destruction, it then establishes a tyranny which freedom must stand up against" (*EA* 57); "Favorable circumstances are enough to transform the adventurer into a dictator" (*EA* 62); and "The passionate man is on the way to tyranny. He knows that his will emanates only from him, but he can nevertheless attempt to impose it upon others" (*EA* 65). The porous profiles of the five types dissolve into the threatening figure of the person who has not come to terms with his ambiguity and who thinks he has the right to oppress others.

This brings us to a third rhetorical strategy that destabilizes the text, namely perpetual permutations of the main theme of the essay—ambiguity. Throughout the text, Beauvoir keeps modifying, adding nuances, giving different examples, and basically rendering a stable definition of ambiguity virtually impossible. Traditionally, philosophy has valued clarity and certainty above all else. At least this is what "pure philosophy" aims to achieve. Normally, by "ambiguous" we mean "obscure, dark, wavering, changeable, doubtful, uncertain, disputed, unreliable, and untrustworthy."²² However, Beauvoir means something entirely different. She explains, "... to say that [existence] is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed" (*EA* 129). Ambiguity is the notion that the *meaning of existence* is never fixed. It refers less to uncertainty than to a constant tension between two equal but opposite forces that prevent us from ever settling into certainty.

Awareness of this tension allows the flow and flexibility of both meaning and movement.

Many scholars have summarized Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity by focusing on only one set of binary opposites, namely the fact that we are both subject and object. However, at the very beginning of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir refers to many more dichotomies that are meant to flesh out the notion of ambiguity: life comes with death, we are a pure interiority and a thing crushed by exterior forces, we are solitary yet in relation with others, we are free and yet exist in servitude, indispensable and insignificant, spirit and matter, and both the ends and the means of action. Beauvoir rejects philosophies that attempt to privilege any one term over the other or philosophies that try to synthesize binary opposites. Instead, she operates what she calls a "conversion" such that the terms in opposition to one another are maintained and are irreducible. One way of interpreting this is to say that Beauvoir wants us to keep these dichotomies in balance at all times to respect the opposites that are a real part of the human condition. In other words, we should not end up privileging one of the terms, even though this would definitely be the easy way out. Maintaining dichotomies in constant tension is difficult and moreover, it prevents us from falling into the comfort of certainty and thus betraying the opposing forces of our condition—living in bad faith.

How does this description of the human condition translate into an ethics? It is because every action or project that we choose is always already in a human situation, that is, our decisions necessarily affect others. She says, "He must disclose the world with the purpose of further disclosure and by the same movement try to free men, by means of whom the world takes on meaning" (EA 74). If everyone has the same constitution, that is if everyone experiences oneself in terms of ambiguity, experiencing these dichotomies in living tension, then we must recognize one another's need to maintain them in tension as well. In this sense, the existentialist "conversion" would entail keeping both terms of a dichotomy in balance, in tension, and therefore, never slipping into dogmatism. Moral freedom makes us constantly question our decisions and keeps us on our toes.

This ethical exercise ties in perfectly with Beauvoir's thesis in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*. Although Beauvoir claims that Pyrrhus is the one who is right, wanting to push on and continue in his life project, engaging in action, she nevertheless says that their dialogue continues without end. The dialogue

between Pyrrhus and Cinéas represents another important dichotomy in our ambiguous condition namely, we reflect and ask why, such as in the case of Cinéas, and we make decisions and act, such as in the case of Pyrrhus. We are ambiguous such that we are always already going back and forth and thus, it is impossible to settle into pure action or pure reflection. This movement enables us to maintain our freedom and to defend others' freedom from oppressors.

It ought to be specified that an ethics of ambiguity does not advocate moral ambiguity in the sense of uncertainty or indecisiveness. There is no ambiguity whatsoever in Beauvoir's unequivocal condemnation of all types of oppression. When she talks about ambiguity, she is referring to the opposites that make up our condition and that they must be maintained in a constant state of tension if we are to be faithful to our reality. Such a state of constant tension resonates with moral freedom which is the idea of constantly making decisions based on our own values and yet sensitive to others' freedom. The most important feature of ambiguity is its connection to freedom and our relationship with others. Beauvoir writes, "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" (*EA* 18). Thus, ambiguity puts us squarely in relation with others; we are not separate beings, on the contrary, we are all interconnected and therefore, have no right to oppress others unless they are themselves oppressors. Beauvoir claims, "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the freedom of others limits my own freedom: 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" (*EA* 90).

We may ask why Beauvoir chooses to *perform* an ethics of ambiguity rather than just claim that we must reject oppression at all costs and be done with it? Kristana Arp claims that there is no philosophical argument that can decisively convince people to be moral.²³ There is thus a need to appeal to readers through indirect speech, a philosophy that resists systematizing and metaphysical literature that unveils and appeals. Or one may appeal to readers with an essay such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and do so through unveiling and performing ambiguity. Beauvoir has said in "Literature and Metaphysics" that we have to be moved to our inner core such that we have to work our way through an experience in order to truly understand what

being moral is all about. The appeal effected by philosophy, literature, and an essay such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* may achieve that.

As we mentioned above, an ethics of ambiguity does not dwell in or champion uncertainty; rather, it is “the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (*EA* 133). If an essay such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* uses techniques to destabilize the text, to make it slippery, confusing, and opaque, then it makes us *feel* the impossibility of ever being sure once and for all. In other words, the text bypasses the brain, makes us experience complexity, and stimulates a kind of awakening. Dogmatism is what leads to oppression, and that is precisely what an ethics of ambiguity vigorously combats. Does this not contradict Beauvoir’s certainty about the evil of oppression?

By breaking down conceptual and verbal boundaries with the help of paradoxes, porous profiles, and perpetual permutations, Beauvoir operates on a textual level what she hopes we will feel deep within us: our interconnection with each other and the impossibility of ever settling into certitude. The most important paradox of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is that Beauvoir unambiguously attacks oppression by advocating an ethics of ambiguity. Ambiguity is meant to be felt and not understood rationally. We question, we revise, and we never truly stop wondering what she is really trying to say. The text does not mean to leave us with a feeling of uncertainty, but rather to destabilize the hardened attitudes within us that turn us into bullies and oppressors. This destabilization is meant to bring about a profound change of consciousness that provides hope of effecting a real transformation in society. Therefore, its impact is not only ethical but also political.

Our analysis of Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* illustrates how non-systematic philosophizing appeals to its readers. We have claimed that Beauvoir wishes to distantiate herself from what she qualifies as “pure philosophy” and wishes instead to explore and expose her existential phenomenology while achieving an act of communication with the reader; such an act amounts to an appeal to value freedom and act accordingly. Beauvoir achieves this by using alternate modes of expression and applying the method she identifies as that of the metaphysical novel in her philosophical writing as well. In Beauvoir the literary is truly philosophical and the philosophical is truly literary. Given that this is the case, Beauvoir’s appeal to her readers is wider, more encompassing, and potentially more

impactful. Her methodological approach has ethical implications in that it provides an experience of uncovering one's own ambiguity as well as that of others. It also has political implications in the way that it places freedom at the heart of this experience of ambiguity. Beauvoir unveils a human being and a world that revolves around freedom and that requires freedom to thrive. The appeal is thus both ethical and political.

Notes

1 Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 11.

2 For a detailed argument about this, see Christine Daigle, "Making the Humanities Meaningful: Beauvoir's Philosophy and Literature of the Appeal" (17-28) in *Simone de Beauvoir – A Humanist Thinker*, eds. Annlaug Bjørnø and Tove Pettersen (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2015).

3 Simone de Beauvoir, «Existentialism and Popular Wisdom» (195-220) in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2004), 217-218.

4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 16.

5 Beauvoir 2011, 46. For her review see Simone de Beauvoir, "Review of Phenomenology of Perception" (151-164) in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2004), 159-164.

6 Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57.

7 Deutscher, 54.

8 Simone de Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics" (261-278) in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2004), 276; hereafter "LM."

9 This view is shared by Sartre. In his *What Is Literature?*, he explains that literature is committed insofar as there is an act of communication between writer and reader that binds the freedom of the reader and commits her to action. For Sartre literature is also ethical and political.

10 Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 4-6.

11 Ulrika Björk, "Reconstituting Experience: Beauvoir's Philosophical Conception of Literature", *Sapere Aude* 3, no. 6 (2012), 74. Heinämaa also sees Kierkegaard's questioning as well as his critique of Hegel as influential on Beauvoir. See Heinämaa, 14-15.

12 Björk, 85.

13 Erika Ruonakoski "Literature as a Means of Communication: A Beauvoirian Interpretation of an Ancient Greek Poem", *Sapere Aude* 3, no. 6 (2012), 254. Ruonakoski focuses on Beauvoir's later talk "My Experience as a Writer" from 1965. While it is a much later expression of her views, we contend that they amount to the same as those presented in "Literature and Metaphysics." What differs is the vocabulary Beauvoir uses; she leaves out "metaphysical."

14 Ruonakoski, 255-6.

86 Janus Head

15 Björk, 88.

16 See for example Michèle LeDoeuff, *L'étude et le rouet. Des femmes, de la philosophie, etc.*, (Paris: Seuil, 1989) and Margaret A. Simons, "Introduction" to *Simone de Beauvoir*.

Philosophical Writings, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 1-12.

17 This is similar to Kierkegaard's strategy in his writings. The philosophy of paradoxes constitutes indirect communication that is more effective on the reader than direct communication. See our discussion above of Kierkegaard's possible influence on Beauvoir.

18 Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 7; hereafter *EA*.

19 There is quite a lot of extant literature on the notion of freedom in Beauvoir. Of foremost importance are: Sonia Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom" in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 79-95; and Kristana Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

20 As discussed above, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* explores the notion of the appeal to the Other. Beauvoir explains that human beings must undertake to make their life a project and in order for these projects to not be absurd, they must appeal to the Other to validate them using their freedom. *Pyrrhus and Cineas* thus establishes the basis for an intersubjective ethics in which freedom can truly be free only in relation to another freedom.

21 The French reads «une attitude authentiquement morale.» A better translation, that is one that would have allowed for the emphasis on the importance of authenticity in Beauvoir's ethics, would have read an «authentically moral attitude.»

22 Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. (Gainesville: Florida State University Press, 1989), (89).

23 Arp, 95.