

The Ethics of Ambiguity; Study Guide

The Ethics of Ambiguity; by Simone De Beauvoir

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Plot Summary

Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986) is a mid-20th century French existentialist and feminist philosopher, a prolific member of a group that includes Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The *Ethics of Ambiguity* is her attempt to lay out an existentialist ethic. Her work consistently emphasizes the importance of freedom and responsibility and of recognizing the true ambiguities of life. Her book, *The Second Sex*, is one of the founding documents of modern feminism.

The *Ethics of Ambiguity* follows on the heels of Beauvoir's previous essay *Pyrrhus et Cineas*. Beauvoir believes that our existence is radically contingent, in that human beings may well not have existed in their present form. Further, there exists no essence of standard of value that exists apart from human beings. She also maintains the existentialist idea that the individual can only be free when others are free. The work is begun when Beauvoir notes that human beings live in a tragic situation. Humans experience their freedom as a drive to becoming more than they presently are despite the overwhelming resistance of the world. Human existence is ambiguous in that it mixes an internal desire to move beyond the world while feeling out of control. To live an ethical life, this ambiguity must be faced.

Many human beings deny this paradoxical being but these individuals are doomed to unhappiness and tyranny. We cannot set up our ends and goals as absolutes and we must also not rely on an external source of value. We act ethically when we accept the magnitude of our choices. Genuine human freedom comes through seeing one's self as the author of all values. Philosophies like those of Kant, Hegel and Marx build human value and meaning on the universal when instead it belongs in the concrete. The existentialist roots human value in the individual but strives to avoid selfish individualism.

Beauvoir's most illuminating argument for her thesis is her description of the development of man and the order of human beings who face the ambiguity of existence. Children cannot be moral but as they grow up they adopt differing attitudes that affect their morality. The first of these people is the "sub-man" who abandons spontaneity and denies his freedom. The "serious man" can recruit him into immorality and bad action. The serious man rests life in an external standard. The free man must resist the attitude of seriousness. Next comes the "nihilist" who is disappointed by seriousness and despairs as a result. The next man is that "adventurer" who is close to authentic morality but is one who cares only for her freedom and projects and thus becomes selfish and potentially tyrannical. The last man is truly free.

While Sartre believed that men could transcend any situation, Beauvoir notes that often times humans set up barriers that really destroy the freedom of others. This is oppression, like the oppression of women and children under patriarchy who adopt false goals for themselves because they know nothing else. We must revolt to free them and to free ourselves.



Chapter 1, Ambiguity and Freedom

Chapter 1, Ambiguity and Freedom Summary and Analysis

Beauvoir opens noting that human beings contain within themselves ambiguity, an indeterminacy in their nature that makes them fundamentally uncomfortable with their lives and the meaning of those lives. In her view, this has resulted in many different philosophical worldviews that attempt to resolve these ambiguities, such as those who try to reduce the mind to the body (materialists) and those who treat them as separate substances (dualism). Philosophical ethics has done the same. However, these ideologies do not console our natural disorder on any deep level, as men feel the paradox of their condition. The more powerful men grow, the more they are swept along by forces beyond their control. Beauvoir suggests that the philosophy of the human should begin by admitting ambiguity.

It was existentialism that first defined itself as recognized ambiguity. However, existentialism sees life as absurd and full of despair, trapping man in anguish. It recommends no principle to help him make choices. Beauvoir suggests a more optimistic approach, arguing that by recognizing the divergence between man and whom he wishes to be, a new ethic is possible. Man is, following Sartre, a being who seeks to nullify being so that new being can come to be. Man nullifies his own being by sharing it with others. He uproots himself from the world and thus makes himself present to the world. By trying to change himself into God, men exist as men. Man's nature is to be incomplete striving for incompleteness. To find truth in his life, man cannot dispel the ambiguity of his being but must seek to realize it.

A true man, therefore, refuses to recognize any foreign absolute. Man projects into an ideal heaven what he wants to be and wants to have, that is, God, because God will change his existence into being. However, men must accept that they must first and foremost be right in their own eyes and not look for affirmation outside of themselves. Values do not come from outside of the world but from humanity. All evaluation is defined on the basis of nonexistence, or absence in the world. Man exists and outside of him there is no one. As a result, man is free to define himself. Though some say that without God, ethics collapses, in fact it is only without God that man must accept full responsibility for the world and only then can ethics begin. Men cannot get rid of their faults without God. The world is willed by man and it expresses his will in reality.

Marxism also recognizes subjectivity and ambiguity but it sees objectivity as forced upon man from the objective, economic and material conditions of the world. The existentialist sees the imposition going the other way and Beauvoir notes that even Marxists must sometimes admit man's inner freedom when they are made aware of their free political action. Nonetheless, the Marxist believes that true freedom leads to disorder as man has no external criterion for choice. However, for Beauvoir, value



comes from freedom. Men produce value by seeking to justify their lives and achieve freedom only by attempting to do so.

The truly free will is produced over time as man pursues his goal of becoming a new being. Men need projects to unite their subjective moments over time and morality can only be part of the world for such individuals. Freedom is confirmed through creation over time and, in particular, when men confront what they cannot change and focus on what they can. The only ultimate end man can have then and not face deep frustration is the goal of having a free movement through existence. Yet this will always involve heartbreak, even along with joy. Freedom cannot trap being but disclose it and so being can be lost. Salvation is only possible if man preserves his ability to act freely in the future and keeps open the possibility of failure.

Disclosure of a particular content of one's life is to take one's self as an end, as an individual worthy of respect and this raises man to a higher moral freedom. However, if this is man's natural goal, how is bad willing possible? It is possible because Beauvoir has defined man as a negativity, not as a positivity. Man is at a distance from himself and must decide to agree not to try to rejoin himself. He always plays with the negative and if he escapes it, he escapes his freedom.

In existentialism, Beauvoir concludes, ethics has a place. In other philosophies, evil cannot be accounted for and so good and right cannot either. Men can only be free if they recognize within themselves an ambiguity that strives both to exist and to deny one's being to become something else. Only in this realization can one be both moral and free.



Chapter 2, Personal Freedom and Others

Chapter 2, Personal Freedom and Others Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2 begins with the observation that man's unhappiness is due to the fact that he was once a child. The child experiences the world as a given, as unchangeable and as imposed upon him from without. Parents are regarded as absolutes that permit freedom in such a world and protect the child, giving him the ability to live out his wants with impunity. Thus the infant's world is a combination of a total lack of control and a totalizing freedom.

Human beings in most civilizations face the same challenges as the child. They live in servitude, with no means to shape their world. Consequently, their capacities remain undeveloped, their freedom unrealized, their moral lives un-lived. Women are frequently in this situation, as they are subjugated to men in nearly every culture. In most times and places, women cannot be blamed for their servitude, as they have no means of liberation but in modern western cultures, if women acquiesce to an oppressive culture they are partly to blame.

Yet in one sense, few people stay in a state of mental childhood as they discuss the flaws in their world and their parents and others as they grow up. Parents in particular stop being gods and the world stops being an absolute; freedom becomes possible. The child is no longer defenseless and he has a choice as to how to deal with his world. Yet he does not know who he will become and does not have it in him. When men make a choice about who to become is when he seeks to justify his existence. It is in this moment that morality becomes possible. He diminishes his being to become something more. "Sub-men" are those who reject entering into the world and becoming something more, always resisting their natural desires. By transcending himself, the real man accepts certain values. The sub-man takes solace in the ready-made values of the world. He lets others define him.

The ethical life is the triumph of freedom over the facts. The sub-man's projects lack meaning because he is not their author and thus he does not live a moral life. He annihilates his subjectivity and submits to the traditions of others. Yet he cannot stop himself from existing. His freedom is obvious. In the face of it, the sub-man becomes "serious", downplaying the possibility and reality of freedom, asking the self-made, free and moral being to become "serious" as he is. The serious man is dishonest and it arises from his ceaseless attempt to deny his freedom and remain in an infantile world. He puts nothing into question and is therefore dangerous. He will sacrifice others to himself and naturally makes himself a tyrant. Instead of rejecting his own seriousness, the serious man rejects the seriousness of others. The values to which others submit become the object of his ridicule. The serious man is prudent and avoids the anguish of freedom by falling into a state of worry. He is always disappointed and can never destroy his subjectivity.



Sometimes the failure of the serious man creates a disorder, nihilism, the avoidance of being anything at all. The will to negation, however, brings its own life and defeats itself. It creates a tension on its own. The nihilist must also reject the existences of those who confirm his existence. If he wishes to be nothing, he must wish that others are nothing. Nihilism then becomes a desire for power. However the nihilist attitude reveals truth because it exposes the ambiguity of the human condition but it defines man in precisely the opposite way as he should be defined, not as the positive existence of a lack, but as lack at the heart of being. Freedom is still experienced in rejection but it is not fulfilled. The nihilist, when he challenges all values, does not find beyond him the universal and absolute end that is his freedom.

To avoid nihilism, man can become an adventurer, which involves unifying an original, abundant vitality with reflective skepticism. The choice to be an adventurer is close to the choice to be moral, even though it is often poorly motivated. Even when the desire for adventure is pure, it seems only to satisfy a desire for existence in a present, subjective, abstract moment. The adventurer must avoid the future and stays indifferent to the human meaning of his actions. He therefore is not fully autonomous and cannot himself avoid tyranny, either by becoming a tyrant himself, like the conquistadors, or submitting to the power of others. The adventurer sees his existence positively and so has a moral life but he ignores the value of others and therefore tries to achieve a false independence from others.

The man of passion is the opposite of the adventurer. He tries to synthesize freedom and content like the adventurer but unlike him, he fails to fulfill his subjectivity rather than the content of the subjectivity. The passionate man sets up his object as an absolute as something upon which his subjectivity is focused. Nothing exists outside of the project and the passionate man is never fulfilled. The passionate man in this way inspires a kind of admiration but also a kind of horror. His solitude in his desire is the horror because true relationship with him is impossible. He too moves towards tyranny and tries to impose his passion on others. Maniacal passion is a form of damnation that requires denying the self in a bad way and thus, again, denying the being of others.

The problem with the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer and the passionate man is that all of them lose their freedom and seek tyranny, all of them are never satisfied, because they do not recognize that their existences cannot be fulfilled without being related to the existence of others and depending upon them. Relationships bring about the possibility of failure and he delegates part of his existence to others. Men cannot escape the world. Instead, he must realize himself in the moral life. Freedom moves towards its own reality through a content it establishes. Ends are valid only when freedom is returned by seeking it. This freedom is also not dissipated in seeking the goal. The subject must desire that there be being. To will one's self as free and to will that being exists are the same choice.

Freedom cannot will itself without hoping and intending to find an open future. The ends that we give ourselves in freedom must be those that cannot be transcended by reflection and always involve knowing others. In this way, existentialism cannot be achieved without being related to others and so those who suggest that existentialism is



a form of solipsism are wrong. Existentialist ethics condemns self-focus. While every project arises from the subject, subjective movement seeks to transcend itself. Man finds justification for his existence only in the existence of other men. There is no way to escape needing a justification for one's existence. Moral anxiety comes from within. Coming to face one's anxiety means learning to be concerned for one's self and for others. To will that one's self be free means willing that others are free. Some say that this formula is too formal, that it is not concrete, but Beauvoir resists this conclusion. The formula points out concrete action to each person. The man of good sees that even when others are separate and opposed, there are concrete and difficult problems that face them and this is the positive aspect of morality.



Chapter 3, The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity, Sections 1-3, The Aesthetic Attitude, Freedom and Liberation, The Antinomies of Action

Chapter 3, The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity, Sections 1-3, The Aesthetic Attitude, Freedom and Liberation, The Antinomies of Action Summary and Analysis

Beauvoir has argued that every man has to do with other men but some will object that if freedom consists in being so related, one cannot will to be free because one is nearly almost always free by being around others. Beauvoir calls this attitude aesthetic because those who adopt it claim to only approach the world through detached contemplation. Many take this aesthetic attitude during moments of confusion and despair. Yet the present is still a moment of choice and action. Man never purely contemplates; he acts. The writer and the artist often approach the world through contemplation but there would be no point in it if all action and future choice ceased. In this way, men must will freedom to make meaning even out of their contemplation.

In "Freedom and Liberation" Beauvoir addresses the objection to existentialism that its prescription to "will freedom" is simply hollow and is not action-guiding. However, freedom realizes itself by engaging it in the world, Beauvoir claims. She argues that willing freedom and willing to disclose one's self are the same choice. So freedom is constructive. Many human practices like science are concrete attempts to conquer existence through willing freedom. Though, science often condemns itself to failure when it becomes too infatuated with the serious. Science itself is an activity of freedom and constructive. It only acquires its meaning when it is seen as a movement towards freedom. Yet today some men justify their actions only through negative action. In such cases, men often live in states of oppression where their relations to others suppress their transcendence. By allowing themselves to be oppressed, many men's existences become like those of vegetation. The oppressor feeds on the transcendence of others and will not recognize it. The oppressed can only resist by denying the harmony with humans who seek to oppress him.

All men have a need for freedom, as Marx suggested. All aim to be free even though at times the slave does not recognize his servitude. His submission cannot justify the tyranny used against him. Sometimes liberators struggle to make the slave aware of his servitude but this sometimes leads to tyranny itself. In some cases, liberating others is part of one's attempt to avoid being a tyrant herself. In this way, the liberator wills his own freedom by resisting his complicity in tyranny and thus his own will to freedom leads him to extend it to others. Oppression calls on everyone to end it in order to be



truly free. So all people have a moral duty to abolish suppression and each individual's struggle is defined by her context. Liberators must be on guard to seek the universal cause of freedom in their struggle for liberation rather than becoming oppressors themselves.

The oppressor often objects that she is deprived by her freedom through removing her ability to oppress but Beauvoir thinks this is sophistry. Freedoms that wish to deny freedom to others must be defined. Freedom is not merely having the power to do what one wills but the ability to go beyond what is towards an open future. The oppressor knows this. To be sure, moving towards the future requires sacrifice. Freedom also requires integrating the past into the present world. However, the past also concerns us because of its human signification. Oppression cannot justify itself in the name of the content which it defends. This content requires that itself be suppressed as freedom always points forwards and outside of itself. The oppressor sometimes responds by claiming the future for himself and he also sometimes claims that real freedom is impossible. However, to be happy and moral, the oppressed must reject these arguments at all costs.

In "The Antinomies of Action", Beauvoir maintains that if the oppressor understood the implications of his own freedom, he would be logically committed to denouncing oppression. However, the oppressor is dishonest. The freedom used to deny freedom to others is outrageous, so much so that the violence used to stop it seems to have almost no drawback. Yet, the oppressor must always have accomplices among the oppressed themselves. Mystification and ignorance are common tools. However, not all people who are oppressed are accomplices. So the problem for ethics is that a commitment to freedom requires ending oppression, which in turn requires ending it by force when the oppressor will not relent. This is a paradox: any action that man generates can be turned against him. Further, the oppressor class often degrades the oppressed in order to make it easier to oppress them. Death and murder have similar functions. However, this hatred for man, while convenient, is dangerous. It cannot incite men to struggle and sacrifice for their own regime. Doctrines that aim at liberation cannot rest on hatred for the individual or his sacrifice to the community. In the end, despite even the elaborate doctrines of Hegel, if the individual is nothing, society cannot be something.

Democratic societies, in contrast to totalitarian ones, strive to help citizens realize their individual value. Even rites of collectivity affirm the individual's value. If the individual has irreducible value, sacrifice regains its meaning from the totalitarian who claims that sacrifice is nothing. When individuals see their differences, their relations with one another can be established. Only in individualism can real community be sustained. If the individual is valuable, then violence becomes an outrage because it is always against a being with value. Everyone tries to justify violence by appealing to utility but the repugnance remains. The word utility does not have absolute meaning in itself. When we trace it out, we are led to understand utility as a contribution to man's ultimate end which for the existentialist is his true freedom.

Yet, is the cause of Man that of each man? Utilitarians want to demonstrate this. However, there is no universal, absolute man. We all come to the table as our own

valuers. In one way, utilitarianism appeals to a perspective that does not exist. What often appears useful, in fact, is just to maximize value for the strong. Usefulness and utility come down to sacrificing the weak. When we resist this sacrifice and affirm the individual, we can move towards our goals of freedom. We can then and only then affirm our future path. The problem now is to make sense of the idea of the future.



Chapter 3, The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity, Sections 4-5, The Present and the Future, Ambiguity and Conclusion

Chapter 3, The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity, Sections 4-5, The Present and the Future, Ambiguity and Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Beauvoir regards the term "future" as having two meanings. First, when we speak of the future we speak of the future of our particular projects and plans, one that exists in a certain sort of way once the project is begun as we foresee that future. However, since the Christian age, another conception of the future has arisen that is world-historical, often apocalyptic and dangerous. Men imagine a revolution in history, be it brought by Christ or by socialism or what have you. As a result, they make it through life's present challenges and tragedies by pointing to a future age. However, the problem with using the eternal future to downplay life's tragedies is that life's successes and triumphs are downplayed as well as is the importance of the ethical life.

To be free means moving away from totalizing views of reality and history that takes being as an undivided whole. Instead, we must focus upon the individual first and the collectivity only second. In the world of the individual, the reality of ambiguity and unclarity comes into clear focus and thus the responsibility that comes with being a human being. With responsibility comes a rebirth of human energy and life along with the acceptance of tragedy. Men see their end clearly, their deaths, and it moves them. Further, we can not deny utility any concrete meaning as we are so embedded in the perspective of the individual. Utility can no longer be used to avoid choice and to justify tyranny and violence.

In "Ambiguity", Beauvoir emphasizes the distinction between ambiguity and absurdity. If existence is absurd, it cannot be given a meaning. If it is ambiguous its meaning is not fixed and must always be fought for. Absurdity challenges ethics but ambiguity creates it. We cannot leave it up to the future to give meaning to our existence. Instead, we must look towards many present moments to achieve our freedom and thus our meaning in line. We must also substitute "seriousness" and all its power of control with the life that comes from beyond it. The radical moves forward in human history always disrupt the serious. Further, the serious man is satisfied with his anguish about life. His suffering gives him meaning. However, the better man accepts his indefinite questioning. He accepts ambiguity. Freedom must constantly confront itself and question itself.



How do these recommendations become concrete? First, the individual must keep himself as one of his ends. We must be interested in aiding the individual not just humanity. We must also aim for our own being to disclose the joy of existence to others. We must have the joy of a child laughing and at play. The ambiguity of freedom introduces a complexity within our relationships with others. It is no longer precisely clear what it requires. Loving others requires complex choices, a struggle to discover what is required of us. We cannot say in the abstract what is required of us but only in the moment where we will our freedom and disclose it to others and share with others the joys of existence. On top of this, violence is thus not immediately justified when the will opposes free acts that it considers perverse. One reason for democratic institutions is that they enable the sharing of joy as a nation, though democratic politics has degraded into the delegation of responsibility from the many to the few which is bad for both and creates oppression. A democratic order must be more than this.

The good of an individual or group means that it must be taken as the end of our action but we cannot decide upon this end independently of our experience. We must also recognize that our personal freedom lies in securing the freedom of others. We must seek freedom and happiness for both ourselves and the other. These goals go together. The cause of freedom often requires particular sacrifices. Value comes in concrete individuals. Tyranny comes from abstract unities. Beauvoir notes that ends give actions much of their moral character and can make cruel uses of means less morally wicked in the service of a good end than a bad end, though the means must still be condemned. We must condemn all a priori justifications of violence practiced with a good end but also every a priori condemnation. They must be made legitimate in the concrete. Situations are often complex. Much analysis is required before we face the ethical point of choice. Sometimes the choice of means far predates the ends, so that violence committed in the concrete becomes itself ambiguous. We must always confront the values realized with the values aimed at and the meaning of the act with what it actually consists in. Actions must always fulfill man. Both tyranny and crime must be stopped from establishing themselves. They are only justified by the aim of conquering freedom and we must therefore keep alive the assertion of freedom against them.

Beauvoir then begins her conclusion. Is her ethic individualistic or not? Yes in that it accords the individual absolute value and responsibility. It is opposed to totalitarianism as well. Yet it is not solipsistic since individuals are defined by their relationships to the world and that he aims only to transcend himself into a state of freedom. This individualism does not lead to anarchy. He finds law in his freedom and must accept the responsibility of his freedom. The conquest of man over his being and unfreedom is never finished and so life must always be an energetic striving. Men must be woken up from their seriousness and attempts to avoid striving beyond themselves. Only in this way can men be happy. The justification for life must also always be finite. Men must realize that they are themselves limited works.

The ethic of the existentialist is not experienced in the abstract but in the truth of life. Its pride comes in its resistance to the universe that opposes it. Each man must define his absolute for himself. Individual weakness in the collectivity must be faced in order to have real love, real revolt and a real will. We must do what we must to be alive and free.

If men lived as the existentialist recommends, they would no longer need to dream of paradise where they would be reconciled in death.



Characters

Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir is the author of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. It is her philosophy of the moral life that pervades the text. De Beauvoir was one of the most important postwar French existentialists and writers. She was an associate of figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. She wrote on many topics, including feminism and ethics primarily but she was also known for her political thought. She also wrote an autobiography and several works of fiction. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir produces an ethic for existentialism that focuses on the value of the individual against the value of the collective and the importance of the immediate in guiding life rather than the abstract. She is also focused on the total rejection of what she calls the "spirit of seriousness" where people locate value outside of themselves. In later work, she came to see women as victims of oppression by patriarchal societies, which relegated them to passively accepting roles assigned to them by others. In her novel, *The Mandarins*, she dramatizes some of these themes.

Beauvoir had many distinct philosophical influences. Her primary influences derive from French thinkers stretching all the way back to Descartes though she was also influenced by the philosophy of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Beauvoir focuses most, however, on Marx and Marxists on the one hand and Kant and Hegel on the other.

The Free Man

Like many philosophers before her, Simone de Beauvoir ties freedom and ethics together. An ethical norm is not the sort of thing that can be imposed from "outside" of a person but most come from that person's own reason and free choice. In this way, a man may only be truly ethical if he is free. For Beauvoir, man exists in a paradoxical state of striving to transcend his being despite being trapped into certain social roles by the world. Being free requires not being trapped into those roles, such as the role of the Serious Man who locates his values outside of himself. The free man is somehow self-determining or autonomous and recognizes himself as his own absolute. The free man also avoids being trapped in monotony and embraces spontaneity. He does not divide the world into black and white but instead accepts the ambiguity of the world and the ambiguity of his own identity.

A man can be enslaved and oppressed in two ways: by himself and by others. A man is enslaved to himself, Beauvoir argues, when he is not true to his own paradoxical and ambiguous nature. Instead, he will be trapped in a state of unhappiness and perhaps will place this unhappiness upon others. Beauvoir describes several developmental states of men where these dysfunctional characteristics manifest themselves. While men can transcend these inner prisons, he cannot always transcend the prisons



imposed upon him by others. Thus Beauvoir argues that the free man cannot be oppressed or made the tool of others through the manipulation of his desires.

Jean-Paul Sartre

One of the fathers of existentialism, Sartre was an inspiration to Beauvoir and his thought was in many ways Beauvoir's starting point in philosophy.

Immanuel Kant

The late 18th century philosopher who understood the world in terms of the absolute, transcendental categories of the mind and who denied that particular things could be known in their essence, which Beauvoir rejects. However, he emphasized an ethic of respect for persons and autonomy which Beauvoir embraces.

G.W.F. Hegel

The idealist philosopher who believed that the entire universe was a single entity evolving into self-consciousness and that all human beings were simply manifestations of this absolute spirit. While Beauvoir learns much from Hegel, she stridently resists his identification of the real with the universal and absolute as against the particular and concrete.

Karl Marx

The mid-19th century philosopher of communism whose views Beauvoir partly admires but rejects for its excessive materialism and inability to generate a coherent ethics.

The Sub-Man

The man who refuses to face his ambiguity and lives a life of boredom and control by others.

The Serious Man

The man who locates absolutes outside of himself and oppresses the sub-man by making him adopt the same values.

The Nihilist

The man who recognizes the ambiguity of his existence and yet despairs, giving up on the stresses of life.

The Adventurer

The man who recognizes the ambiguity of his existence and fills it with projects and plans, though they become the only thing that gives him meaning in his life.



Objects/Places

Essence

For Beauvoir, man has no essence or nature save that she gives to herself.

Value

Value is subjective for Beauvoir and comes from human valuation.

Human Existence

Human existence is a paradoxical tension between the internal drive to supplant one's being and the restraints of the world.

Oppression

The state of man when his freedom is restricted and his development stunted by the deliberate manipulation of others.

Seriousness

The state of men who adopt external absolutes and attempt to impose them on others. The serious man must always be resisted in the name of freedom.

Spontaneity

The opposite of seriousness. The spontaneous man locates value within himself.

Absolutes

Categorical, unbreakable sources of value. Men can choose their absolutes, be it God, money or self and freedom.

The Concrete

The concrete is opposed to the abstract and universal. Beauvoir sees reality as the concrete and particular in experience.

Ambiguity

The natural state of man who has no existence or essence that he himself does not define. If ambiguity is not recognized, man will lose mental health and happiness.

Revolt

People must revolt against oppressors in order to be truly free.



Themes

Freedom and Ambiguity

One key element of existentialist thought is that value is subjective and that essences do not exist. In short, there are no external standards of nature and value that can bind human beings. Humans project value onto the world and have no determinate nature. Instead, they are radically free in the sense that they can imbue a valueless universe with value and can create their own natures freely from a prior existence. "Existence proceeds essence" was Sartre's existentialist motto. We exist prior to having a nature. Our nature or essence arises from our own free choices.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir adopts this idea of freedom. It leads her to focus on the reality of the individual and to de-emphasize the primacy of the universal and the abstract. Attending primarily to the universal and abstract creates the illusion of uniformity among human beings and thus places the standard of reality outside of the self. Instead, one should focus on human individuals in their particularities. In doing so, human beings can be truly free. However, humans must also recognize that to be free they must recognize their deep internal ambiguity between a being who seeks to transcend her being and one whose being is trapped by the external constraints of the world. The reason that book is called *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is because Beauvoir roots ethics in freedom and responsibility and roots freedom and responsibility in the ambiguity of man.

Development

The aim of every human life is to be free, Beauvoir claims. We are born with an internal drive to go beyond our own being, to become more than we were before. Our existence in this way seeks to move forward and disclose itself to the wider world. As children, we have no real essence or personality but are driven forward to develop into a being with a self-constructed essence. Yet, this developmental process can be slowed down and even completely halted into a handful of destructive stages. All of these dysfunctional categories of men are guilty of "bad faith" or of believing in something they know to be false and who hide themselves from the truth.

The "sub-man" comes first. He is bored and lazy and destroys his original spontaneity by denying his freedom. He thus rejects his freedom and becomes fodder for the purposes of others who would use and abuse him. Most of all, he makes himself the subject of the "serious man." The serious man is the most common dysfunctional stage, in Beauvoir's view, because she contains the desire that all existing beings accept an external, objective standard of value and thus becomes an oppressor of all others. The serious man thus gives up his freedom to his external absolute and tries to make others do the same. Other categories of bad faith include individuals like the "nihilist" who recognizes his ambiguity but refuses to take up the responsibility of living while facing it.



There is also the "passionate man" who loses himself in pleasures. The "adventurer" has his own projects and plans and is thus self-guiding and so close to the free man but he cares only about his freedom and projects and becomes selfish. Beyond all these figures lies the free man.

Oppression

The great French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre believed that man's responsibility over his nature is absolute and that man is entirely self-creating. Since self-creation in the face of meaninglessness is a central theme of Sartre's, he sees the possibility of freedom as tied up with the individual will. Wherever the individual exists, whatever the circumstances, she can make herself free even if she is in prison and being tortured. Beauvoir, however, rejects this view. She believes that men can always choose to make themselves free so long as they are free from coercion. The fact is that for most of history, man groups have been subordinated to the will of others so thoroughly that they never had the opportunity for freedom.

The problem with coercion is that it is by definition and attempt to manipulate the will of others. Consequently, with enough coercion the will of another can be contorted away from its ability to author itself. Beauvoir sees this process as rampant in the treatment of women in the large majority of human societies. Women are so subordinated to men that they lack the opportunity to be free and, consequently, turn to mysticism and emotionalism in order to avoid the pain that comes with being coerced should they try to be free like so many men. Thus one theme of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is the notion that oppression must be fought because some people cannot be free otherwise. Beauvoir also ties this notion of oppression in with the freedom of all people. For one person to be free, all must be free and so each person is committed to freeing all from oppression.



Style

Perspective

Simone de Beauvoir is the author of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and so the perspective of the book is entirely her own. Beauvoir is one of the most prominent French existentialists of the post-war period. Existentialists, very generally, hold that the purpose of philosophy is to aid individuals in dealing with the challenges of individual existence, her emotions and choices. Many existentialists have held that individuals are responsible for giving their own lives meaning and that living passionately and happily is within the grasp of all people. Many focus on how the individual achieves a fulfilling life and what constitutes such a life. They also deal with the question of what life can mean in a world without God. Existentialism became popular in part as a way to assert the primacy and value of the individual in the face of totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century and in this way became an antidote to communism and fascism in the post-World War II period.

Beauvoir follows this line of thought very carefully, particularly the thought of French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* her concern is primarily to draw out the consequences of the existentialist worldview for ethics and how to live an ethical life with others. In her view, because human beings have no intrinsic nature given to them by God, they must face their own ambiguity. If they ignore it, they will fall into dysfunction and unhappiness. If they accept it, they can become happy and find value in themselves and others.

Tone

The Ethics of Ambiguity is a work of moral philosophy and as such it may often come off to the reader as dry and obscure. Beauvoir uses many complex terms and phrases that will initially seem incomprehensible to the reader. When she speaks, for instance, of human existence as an existence that tries to move beyond its existence, the reader may understandably be confused. The book also focuses on the contributions of other philosophers, which are outlined without any context in terms of explaining who they are; thus the reader unfamiliar with these figures will not be able to appreciate these parts of the book. Furthermore, many of the ideas Beauvoir is working with are drawn from particularly idiosyncratic interpretations of the great philosophers and so even those who have learned about these figures may yet be confused.

Nonetheless, there is a deep clarity in Beauvoir's central message. She aims to make clear that man's life is either one of accepting a profound responsibility for one's own choices and the lives and well-being of others or a sad disaster. She carefully outlines a theory of human development illustrated with pictures of those who refuse to recognize the ambiguity of their existence and build their lives around resisting the reality of their



responsibility for the world. The tone in these passages reveals the standard high degree of passion and emotional movement in existentialist writings.

Structure

The Ethics of Ambiguity is not a long book. In fact, it contains only three chapters, all of which are capable, somewhat, of functioning as independent essays. The first chapter, "Ambiguity and Freedom" outlines Beauvoir's main conception of the nature of human existence. In some sense, man is a being whose being attempts to transcend its own being. Man has an internal drive to become more than he is. However, he has this drive in part because he is a kind of non-being and is therefore capable of "making himself up" as he goes along, as it were. Since man has no concrete essence, he possesses a deep ambiguity and it is this idea of ambiguity that Beauvoir develops in the chapter.

Chapter 2, "Personal Freedom and Others", is largely a defense of existentialism against the criticism that its individualism is egoistic. Existentialism postulates that the true end of the human being is its own freedom and that in seeking its freedom from all obstacles, it can achieve true happiness. However, this leaves open the question of how others fit into this schema. In Beauvoir's view, the solution is to define human freedom in such a way that it requires the freedom of others by definition. Thus for Beauvoir, one cannot be free unless she cares for others and seeks their freedom as well.

Chapter 3, "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity" has five subsections, "The Aesthetic Attitude", "Freedom and Liberation", "The Antinomies of Action", "The Present and the Future" and "Ambiguity." These subsections all focus on the ability of the individual to draw something powerful from recognizing his own ambiguity such as his ability to appreciate true beauty, how to face and understand the oppression of others and how to avoid falling into the trap of worshipping an abstract and universal value whether than the concreteness of one's own existence. A brief conclusion follows Chapter 3.

Quotes

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Topics for Discussion

What is ambiguity? How does recognizing it relate to the achievement of human freedom?

What is man's natural state, according to Beauvoir? What is paradoxical about it?

Discuss the different forms of dysfunction that men can fall into, according to Beauvoir. What is wrong with each stage? Mention at least three.

What does it mean to be free, for Beauvoir?

Why does Beauvoir think that we should care about others? Is her argument successful? Why or why not?

What is wrong with being serious for Beauvoir?

What is oppression? How does oppression destroy the freedom for others for Beauvoir? Be specific.