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Beauvoir and Sartre's "disagreement" about freedom

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Abstract

The French existentialists Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre are renowned philosophers of freedom. But what "existentialist freedom" is is a matter of disagreement amongst their interpreters and, some argue, between Beauvoir and Sartre themselves. Since the late 1980s several scholars have argued that a Sartrean conception of freedom cannot justify the ethics of existentialism, adequately account for situations of oppression, or serve feminist ends. On these readings, Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about freedom—making existentialist ethics, resistance to oppression, and feminism coherently defensible. This article identifies four conceptions of freedom in order to clarify the questions of whether and how they disagreed, arguing that some incompatibilist readings of Sartre and Beauvoir conflate or confuse these conceptions in ways that render their conclusions unconvincing. However, there are stronger grounds on which to claim that Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about morality—and the conditions of its possibility.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The French existentialists Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre are both renowned philosophers of freedom. But what "existentialist freedom" is—and the extent to which it is actual or potential, a fact or a task of human existence—is a matter of disagreement amongst their interpreters and, some argue, between Beauvoir and Sartre themselves. Since the late 1980s several Beauvoir scholars have argued that Sartre's conception of freedom in *Being*

and Nothingness cannot justify the ethics of existentialism, adequately account for situations of oppression, or serve feminist ends. Beauvoir, on these readings, disagreed with Sartre—making ethics, resistance to oppression, and feminism coherently defensible. This article identifies four conceptions of freedom in order to clarify the questions of whether and how they disagreed, arguing that some incompatibilist readings of Sartre and Beauvoir conflate or confuse these conceptions and understate the possibility of compatibility in ways that render their conclusions unconvincing. However, there are stronger grounds on which to claim that Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about morality—including the conditions of its possibility.

Before considering whether Beauvoir and Sartre disagreed about freedom—and if so, how—it will be helpful to delimit some of the methodological challenges their readers face. First, there is the problem of vague texts: in addition to being dialectical thinkers, both are literary writers, whose philosophical prose is often sufficiently allusive for its meaning to be elusive. Second, there are questions of temporal scope and testimony: Beauvoir's and Sartre's careers spanned several decades; according to their own retrospection their views evolved, diverging and converging differently over time. Third, there is the matter of which texts count as evidence: for some periods we have published philosophical texts by both thinkers, while for others we have only letters, diary entries, deliberately unpublished notebooks—or literary works such as novels and plays, the philosophical content and authority of which is disputable. Fourth, whether it is apt to consider conceptions of freedom as belonging (in a proprietary sense) to either: since aspects of 'Sartrean' and 'Beauvoirian' conceptions of freedom may not be original or exclusive to them. Indeed, in a 1943 letter Sartre credits Gabriel Marcel—whom he calls the "French precursor of existentialism"—with leading him to "understood for the first time that to be, for man, is to be in situation," and enabling him to "sense, finally, what freedom was" (Sartre, 2014, pp. 62-63). Finally, matters are further muddied by the politics and sexism shaping their reception. Beauvoir scholars of the last four decades have done well to document this, to publish, translate, and retranslate Beauvoir's early works, and to illuminate many grounds to be sceptical that Beauvoir was *applying* Sartre's ideas rather than developing and defending her own, and influencing his.[1]

In view of these variables, the scope of this discussion is restricted to four philosophical essays from 1940—1946—that is, to Sartre's *The Imaginary (1940)* and *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1946)—and even within these limits only the outlines of a sketch can be drawn. Its shape is four sections. Section (i) turns to *The Imaginary* and *Being and Nothingness* to present a Sartrean conception of freedom-as-transcendence and its relation to the concept of 'situation', and offers a preliminary disambiguation of three senses of freedom operative in that work; (ii) presents the oft-cited autobiographical testimony of Beauvoir concerning their "disagreement" and of Sartre concerning his evolving conceptions of freedom before introducing the trend dominant in the last three decades of Beauvoir studies, according to which Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre's conception of "absolute freedom". In view of these, (iii) argues that the 'disagreement' claim in its influential articulation by Sonia Kruks (1987) does not sufficiently acknowledge the ways that both Beauvoir and Sartre's philosophical texts can be read otherwise. Section (iv) presents the case that Beauvoir effected existentialism's ethical turn by providing the normative justification for existentialist ethics and by introducing and a systematic and developmentally sensitive conception of "moral freedom". I conclude that to attribute this to her "disagreement" with Sartre is disputable for two reasons: first, because it is ambiguously supported by the texts in question, which can be read in more or less compatibilist and incompatibilist ways; and second, because pitting these philosophers against each other as adversaries risks perpetuating an adversarial and hierarchical philosophical imaginary.[2]

2 | FREEDOM AND SITUATION: STARTING WITH SARTRE

After the publication of *Being and Nothingness* many early critics accused 'Sartrean freedom' of being contradictory and self-defeating. As Matt Eshleman puts it, "Sartre's unfortunate penchant for hyperbolic, misleading use of language and often controversial assertions presents a series of obstacles to giving level-headed analysis" (2009: 84). What he means by freedom has generated "perhaps more misunderstanding than any other aspect of his philosophy" (Whitford, 1982, p. 56) because of Sartre's liberal use of one term to denote to more than one referent.

In one of Sartre's senses of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free (Sartre, 2003, p. 463). In this sense, which I will call freedom-as-transcendence, 'freedom' expresses the ontology of human consciousness which Sartre developed before *Being and Nothingness* in his phenomenological works of the middle and late 1930s. In the conclusion of *The Imaginary* (published early in 1940), Sartre asks "What must consciousness be in order that it can imagine?" (2010: 179). His answer is that consciousness must be free: able to escape the world, to stand back from it and entertain 'irrealities' in which the givens of the real are otherwise. For this Sartre, the imagination is consciousness realizing freedom. Imagination enables us not just to escape the real but to transform it; the first step in modifying the given is imagining something it is not. In the context of this discussion Sartre introduces the concept of 'situations' as "different immediate modes of apprehension of the real as a world". The situation of consciousness, he cautions, should not be seen as an abstract condition of possibility of the imaginary. Rather, each particular situation is the concrete motivation for a *particular* imaginary—a particular way of transcending particular givens (2010: 185). In this sense of the term, I *am* a freedom, and through imagination and action my freedom shapes and is shaped by my situation.

In *Being and Nothingness*, this sense of freedom is called 'transcendence' and is inextricably related to Sartre's conceptions of situation and project. For this Sartre, each human consciousness is "a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself" (Sartre, 2003, p. 195). Each human being is free to imagine more than one future, more than one answer to the question 'Who am I?' Sartre calls these different futures one's 'possibles'. To give a concrete example, I may imagine myself finishing this article before the university term starts, or reading novels instead. But if I read the novels, I will be thwarting my project to be the person who has written the article—who has delivered what I promised, and who can move on to her next projects. In Part II, section III of *Being and Nothingness* (entitled 'Transcendence'), Sartre claims that "I realize a project in so far as I give it being, but I also realize my situation in so far as I live it and make it be with my being" (Sartre, 2003, pp. 202-203). In the case of my article, it will only be written if I value the project of it coming into being and realize a future in which it is written. But to do so I have to adopt a certain relation to other givens of my situation: I must *negate* (among other 'possibles') my desire for novels. 'Transcendence', on the definition Sartre gives here, is "that inner and realizing negation which reveals the in-itself [the given] while determining the being of the for-itself [consciousness]" (Sartre, 2003, pp. 202-203). My freedom (-as-transcendence), in saying no to novels, determines my being as the one who has written.

In defending his definition of freedom as *the being of man* Sartre makes bold and oft-criticized claims, for example that "Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or not free at all" (Sartre, 2003, p. 463) and that "Freedom is total and infinite" (Sartre, 2003, p. 552). Isolated from context, these theses on freedom seem 'radical' or 'absolute'. But many Sartreans argue that they are "balanced" by his concept of situation—on such readings, since each freedom is a relation to a situation of particular givens, freedom is *relative* to the singular embodied facticity of the existant in question. This facticity includes the individual's body, as well as their historical, geographical, and social location: in *Being and Nothingness*, over a 70-page chapter, Sartre analyses five structures of the situation: my place, my past, my environment, my neighbour, and my death.

Although there is not space here to discuss these structures in full, in concluding this section it is important to emphasize that the concept of *situation* is integral to Sartre's account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. The "paradox of freedom" is that "there is freedom only in *a situation*, and there is a situation only through freedom" (Sartre, 2003, p. 511). On this subject, it is worth citing his elaboration in *Being and Nothingness* at length:

> Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human-reality is. […] What we have called the facticity of freedom is the given which it has to be and which it illuminates by its project. The given is manifested in several ways although within the absolute unity of a single illumination. It is *my place*, *my body*, *my past*, *my position* in so far as it is already determined by the indications of Others, finally my *fundamental relation to the Other* (Sartre, 2003, p. 511).

Each freedom is singularly situated with singular givens; each freedom apprehends its situation and can imagine it otherwise as it projects itself towards the future. There is much more to say about conceptions of freedom operative in *Being and Nothingness* and the disputes they have engendered—particularly concerning cognate questions about embodiment, concrete relations with others, and the possibility of ethics and politics. Having sketched this outline, we are nearly in a position to introduce the "disagreement" readings dominant in recent Beauvoir studies. As a final step before doing so, however, it will first be helpful to disambiguate three theses about freedom that feature in compatibilist and incompatibilist presentations of the views of Sartre and Beauvoir, to clarify some of the multiple ways in which they can be taken to agree or disagree.

- *The stoic freedom thesis* (also called 'absolute' or 'radical' or 'freedom to choose'): whatever one's circumstances, one has inalienable metaphysical freedom to choose one's attitude in reaction to those circumstances
- *The freedom-as-transcendence thesis:* that consciousness realizes freedom through imagination and action – through different modes of apprehending and modifying the givens of the real
- *The situated freedom thesis* (also called 'effective freedom' or 'freedom to obtain'): whatever one's circumstances, one has inalienable metaphysical freedom to choose one's reaction to those circumstances, but not all situations confer the same *power* to exercise that freedom in action and to *obtain* the desired realization of your freedom.

How these theses relate to each other is a question with many answers in the scholarship. For example, on some readings of Sartre, Sartre only holds the freedom-as-transcendence thesis in Parts I and II of *Being and Nothingness*, and this appears to be consistent with the stoic freedom thesis. Whether it is or not depends on what other parts of the text one appeals to—for example, whether one looks to the introduction's claim that consciousness can only be limited by itself (Sartre, 2003, p. 11) or to the claims of Part IV that it can be limited by others (Sartre, 2003, p. 545ff.).

3 | FREEDOM AND SITUATION: BEAUVOIRIAN CRITIQUES

In Beauvoir's memoir *The Prime of Life* she describes a "discussion" she had with Sartre in early 1940 concerning the relation between "situation and freedom".[3] Given its significance in subsequent scholarship it is worth citing in full what I will call the "not-every-situation" passage:

> I maintained that from the point of view of freedom, as Sartre defined it—not as stoic resignation but as an active transcendence of the given—not every situation is equivalent: what transcendence is possible for a woman locked up in a harem? Even this confinement could be lived in several different ways, Sartre said. I persisted for a long time and only yielded half-heartedly. Fundamentally, I was right. But to have been able to defend my position, I would have had to abandon the terrain of individualist, thus idealist, morality, where we stood.[4]

By the late 1980s it was a "critical cliché" that Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy "moved away from a conception of absolute freedom towards a mature position which takes into account the constraints and conditioning of the external world" (Howells, 1988, p. 1). Sartre played no small part in perpetuating this story, according to which Early Sartre affirmed the existence of inalienable ontological or 'absolute freedom', while Later Sartre admitted that this 'Stoic' conception of freedom was mistaken and focussed increasingly on society and situation, adopting an "almost diametrically opposite" conception (Sawada, 2013, p. 291).[5] In the late-life interviews in *Adieux*, Sartre claims that the concept of freedom operative in *Being and Nothingness* was a stoic freedom, on which human beings are "always free, even in an extremely unfortunate circumstance which can lead to death", and it was only later that he came to the view that "there are situations in which one cannot be free".[6] Note, however, that the conception of freedom Sartre names as operative and mistaken in *Being and Nothingness* is not the conception Beauvoir specifies in the "not-every-situation" passage as "active transcendence of the given".

In addition to the consolidation of the 'critical cliché' concerning the evolution of Sartrean freedom, the 1980s saw the inauguration of what Toril Moi has called "the philosophical revision" of Simone de Beauvoir (Moi, 2004, p. 37), during which philosophers and feminist theorists set out to correct the widespread misconception that Beauvoir was a writer "whose contribution to philosophy is to have applied the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre" to the woman question in *The Second Sex* (Lundgren-Gothlin, 1999, p. 83). Central to these efforts were the contributions of Sonia Kruks and Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, who published analyses of Beauvoir's and Sartre's conceptions of freedom, arguing that Beauvoir's bears greater resemblance to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's than to Sartre's (Lundgren-Gothlin, 1999; Kruks, 1995). This effort of retrieval was multiply motivated—in part by the desire for a more accurate history of philosophy, and to address conceptual feminist concerns that Beauvoir's account of oppression in *The Second Sex* was hamstrung by its commitment to existentialism. In Sartre scholarship, for example, some early compatibilist readings of Sartre and Beauvoir seem not even to consider the possibility that Beauvoir's ethics might be *Beauvoir's* ethics, presenting *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a work expressing Sartre's views[7] or as "the official commentary" on them (Flynn, 1984, p. 39). In Michèle Le Doeuff's articulation of the feminist concern, to affirm Sartrean freedom involved denying "every possible determination" of the individual (Le Doeuff, 1980, pp. 284-286) and refusing the significance of situation. Clearly, on this line of thought, no feminist could affirm this—did Beauvoir?

One answer, advanced in Sonia Kruks' 'Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits to Freedom' (later published under the title 'Teaching Sartre about Freedom'[8] and widely adopted in Beauvoir studies since[9]), is that Sartre endorsed an 'absolute' or stoic freedom in *Being and Nothingness* whereas Beauvoir began to advance a different conception, 'situated freedom', in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, which she was to develop further in *The Second Sex*. According to Kruks, it is impossible to derive an ethics or an account of oppression from a stoic conception of freedom. Kruks cites the "not every situation" passage in support of the argument that although Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about freedom, she was "never willing to challenge Sartre's conception of freedom head-on." Instead, Kruks claims, Beauvoir "quietly subverts it" in the essays of her moral period and *The Second Sex*. On Kruks' reading, Sartre understands the subject to be a "pure in-itself", whereas Beauvoir's view is closer to Merleau-Ponty's in that the subject is an "embodied consciousness, a socially situated and conditioned freedom" (Kruks, 1995, p. 82). Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, in a Heideggerian reading of Beauvoir, also identifies the locus of disagreement in the nature of 'situation': for Sartre, Lundgren-Gothlin writes, "human beings always have a prereflective intuition of their freedom", whereas for Beauvoir "freedom is disclosed in and by a situation" (Lundgren-Gothlin, 2003, p. 51). Although their emphases vary, incompatibilist views have been widely adopted in Beauvoir studies; Toril Moi, for example, writes that Beauvoir's conception of freedom—which is fundamental to her feminism—is 'not absolute, but situated'.[10]

Kristana Arp (2001), Matt Eshleman (2009), and Harvey Langley (2023) argue that these critiques misconstrue or misunderstand Sartre's position—or at any rate, Sartre's possible positions—in *Being and Nothingness*. Kruks—in what Langley names "the situational insensitivity critique"—attributes to Sartre an "absolute" view of freedom, arguing that "[s]ince situations are each uniquely brought into being by an individual free project, we [cannot] judge one situation to be more free than another" (1995: 86).[11] On Kruks' reading, Sartrean freedom does not admit of degrees and is therefore insufficiently sensitive to the diversity of situations, whereas Beauvoir acknowledges that under situations of oppression freedom itself is modified such that "the capacity to project" itself is suppressed (1995: 84). Kruks is not alone in reading Sartrean freedom as something that does not admit of degrees; claims such as "I am absolutely free" (Sartre, 2003, p. 530) make it easy to see why. However, in this piece Kruks does not consider the possibility that Sartre himself saw 'absolute freedom' as an indefensible position—or the claims of Sartre scholars that if we read Sartre charitably, he himself rejects it 500 pages into *Being and Nothingness*, after giving up his methodological solipsism (see Eshleman, 2009, 2010). Eshleman, while endorsing the spirit of efforts to defend Beauvoir's philosophical value, claims that the lack of "any serious study of Sartre's influence on Beauvoir" runs the risk of overstating Beauvoir's influence on Sartre (2009: 65-66). I agree that it runs this risk—which is exacerbated in cases where their mutual influences are neglected, as though they were an impermeable dyad—and now turn to consider some textual support for the compatibilist view that Beauvoir and Sartre agreed about two of the three theses about freedom outlined above, namely, the freedom-as-transcendence thesis and the situated freedom thesis.

4 | ASSESSING THE CASE FOR "DISAGREEMENT"

It is striking how closely some aspects of Kruks' (1995) and Lundgren-Gothlin's presentations of Sartre resemble the view Beauvoir rejects in her essay 'Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism' as 'Pseudo-Sartreanism'. Pseudo-Sartreanism, according to Beauvoir, is "a philosophy of the subject" where the subject and consciousness are merged and meaning "is imposed on things by a decree of consciousness which is motivated *ex nihilo*" (Beauvoir, 2007, p. 207). *Sartreanism*, by contrast, does not understand consciousness to be 'a subject'. Rather, consciousness is presence to itself and a 'subject' is unveiled and mediated through imagination, reflection, and existence with others. What the Pseudo-Sartrean fails to grasp, on Beauvoir's reading, is the theory of facticity—"one of the foundations of Sartre's ontology" which she takes to commit Sartre to the view that there can only be "embodied consciousness" (Beauvoir, 2007, p. 209).[12]

Whether or not Beauvoir's 'Sartreanism' is an accurate representation of the views of Jean-Paul Sartre, I take it that to be convincing a claim that the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* understands the subject to be "pure in-itself" and not an "embodied" and "socially situated and conditioned" freedom would need to do two things Kruks (1995) and Lundgren-Gothlin (2003) do not. First, to engage extensively with two significant discussions of *Being and Nothingness*.

- Sartre's phenomenology of the body in Part III section 2, in which Sartre claims before Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* that "I am my body" and that "we can not *act* without being *acted on*" (Sartre, 2003, p. 347); and
- Sartre's 70-page discussion of the concept of 'situation' in Part IV, section 1, which is devoted to the inseparability of freedom from its embodied, historical, social, and economic facticity.

Second, having done so, it would need to conclude that Sartre's considered view denies that freedom is both embodied and situated by constraints other than those of its own choosing.

Such conclusions would be contestable, at best. For Sartre, as we saw above in his elaboration on the paradox of freedom (Sartre, 2003, p. 511), our projects are not "individual free projects" in the sense that they arise unconditioned by anything but our own wills; rather, they are modifications of the given, where the given is perpetually evolving over time and includes the determinations of my being by others. For the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, one of the reasons we wish to flee freedom is that it is ambiguous. It is impossible, on Sartre's view, to know precisely where to cut the joint between your freedom and your facticity: freedom is "an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existent" (Sartre, 2003, p. 509).

However, before concluding without caveat that Kruks et al. are justly criticized for overstating their case and understating the complexity of Sartre's account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*—particularly concerning the centrality of the concepts of situation, project, and facticity—it is important to acknowledge that neither Eshleman (2009) nor Langley (2023) draws on Kruks' most developed articulation of her view.[13] In Kruks' 1990 book *Situation and Human Existence* she avoids the perils of a dyadic approach to Sartre and Beauvoir, contextualizing her reading in an excellent discussion of Gabriel Marcel's notion of situation and acknowledging the mutual indebtedness of Sartre and Beauvoir to it. On her reading here, *Being and Nothingness* is "one of the most profound contemporary meditations on human subjectivity" which must be examined by anyone who wishes to "rethink the notion of the subject and [...] develop an account of socially situated subjectivity" (Kruks, 1990, p. 52). But, Kruks claims, there are three senses of 'situation' in it (Kruks, 1990, p. 67ff), and in addition to being equivocal Sartre's situated freedom must be rejected on metaethical, ontological, and political grounds: because of its subjectivism or relativism, dualism about embodiment, inherently conflictual understanding of interpersonal relations, and incapacity to adequately account for social (rather than interpersonal) relations.[14]

Although Kruks points to textual evidence for her readings of *Being and Nothingness* the conclusions of this longer treatment are also contestable: not all readers of *Being and Nothingness* take his discussion of values to entail subjectivism, his discussion of embodiment to be dualist, his understanding of human relations to be necessarily conflictual, or his views to be antithetical to feminism.[15] While remaining sympathetic to earlier readers' aims to defend Beauvoir's philosophical value and correct sexist tropes, these aims do not entail denying the plausibility that the conceptions of "Beauvoirian freedom" that Kruks (1987) and Lundgren-Gothlin offer can, with good textual support, also be attributed to *a* Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*. After all, in the not-all-situations passage Beauvoir describes a 'discussion' that took place in early 1940, before *Being and Nothingness* was completed—and given that he did hold a 'stoic' view at that point it is possible that the scope of her dissatisfaction concerned the conclusion of *The Imaginary* or Sartre's 1939 notes on the concept of situation in his *War Diaries*: the text is underdetermined and other evidence is inconclusive.[16]

In the widespread adoption of Kruks' claim that Beauvoir 'disagreed with Sartre about freedom' (1995: 82) there has been some conflation of the three theses about freedom in representations of Beauvoir's texts and testimony. In the introduction to their valuable collection of essays on *The Riddle of Influence*, for example, Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb offer a gloss of the not-every-situation passage, according to which:

> [Beauvoir] recounts that Sartre held to a notion of *absolute* freedom, while she was more concerned with the *constraints* brought by one's situation. She was arguing that a slave or a woman in a harem could not be free in the same way as other people, whereas he would say that they were still as free as anybody else and that it was up to them to decide on the meaning of their enslavement (Daigle & Golomb, 2009: 5)

If the distinctions I've drawn are accurate, however, this is not what Beauvoir claimed: the conception under discussion was not "stoic resignation" but rather freedom-as-transcendence: "an active transcendence of the given". Moreover, if Beauvoir's point is that a woman in a harem cannot be free "in the same way as other people" this claim is uncontroversial.

As I see it, such readings are uncharitable to both Beauvoir and Sartre. Multiple times in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre warns that the freedom to choose must not be conflated with the freedom to obtain, explicitly raising instances of powerlessness as potential challenges to his conception of freedom (Sartre, 2003, p. 505, 526). In the section on the situation in Part IV Sartre writes: "we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action" (Sartre, 2003, p. 505). It would be absurd to claim that a prisoner's 'possibles' or projects rely only on his freedom—a prisoner's situation involves *having been imprisoned* by another; it may involve collaborators with whom he can 'get himself liberated' through a jointly pursued project. But if he does not have the capacity to *imagine* the irreal that is his escape, he is less likely to realize it. As I read it, Beauvoir's point in the not-every-situation passage is not a rejection of the conception of freedom-as-transcendence, but rather (as Kruks also discusses) a denunciation of their 'idealist' morality (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 759; Beauvoir, 1962, p. 434; Kruks, 1995).[17]

Moreover, there is textual evidence pointing the other way—that is, to support the view that the notions of freedom Kruks and Lundgren-Gothlin call "Sartrean" were held by Beauvoir in this period. Several passages in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and other essays of Beauvoir's moral period support the view that the conception of freedom central to Beauvoiur's existentialist ethics is the phenomenological sense of freedom-as-transcendence. *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* defines the "forward movement" of transcendence as "freedom itself" (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 138). Of course, it cannot be taken for granted that Beauvoir's uses of this term are employed in the same sense in which we find it in *The Imaginary* or early sections of *Being and Nothingness*. Andrea Veltman (2009) argues that her development of this concept in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* owes much more to Hegel, Pascal, Horace, Valéry, Gide, and Epicurus, than to Sartre,

whom she only mentions twice. But the presence of these (arguably diverse) thinkers is not necessarily evidence of her divergence from Sartre. In other texts of the period Beauvoir claims that 'transcendence' is a shared commitment of existentialists.[18] It is possible that Beauvoir's account invokes other writers because she thought they too testified to a human phenomenon her readers would recognize in their own consciousness, disclosing the world in ways that resounded with their own experience.

Like Sartre, in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir acknowledges the Cartesian distinction between freedom and power. Also like Sartre, she claims that "the slave's chains do nothing about freedom" (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 124). If we understand by this freedom-as-transcendence, Beauvoir's view would seem to be that this basic human freedom cannot be taken away by enslavement or confinement: the slave still has the power to disclose a world, to see the real from a point of view that is hers alone and to imagine it and herself otherwise. In this she may be seen to agree not only with Sartre but with Viktor Frankl's remarks on "the last of human freedoms", which could not be taken away even in concentration camps: the freedom to choose one's attitude *and* one's way even in that situation (Frankl, 2004, p. 75).

There are passages in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that support the conclusion that Beauvoir continued to hold these views in it, for example her claim that "the freedom of man is infinite, but his power is limited" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 28). These passages give us reasons to be sceptical that what Beauvoir and Sartre disagreed about was not *these theses* of freedom per se—it can, with textual support, be claimed that in *Being and Nothingness* and *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* both affirmed freedom-as-transcendence, that both employed distinctions between freedom to choose and freedom to obtain, and that both thought that to be free-in-situation was inseparable from the being of man—or woman.

Although it cannot be presented exhaustively here, given the ambiguity of the texts in question, a strong textual case can be made for *Being and Nothingness* and *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* agreeing about the meaning of the three senses of freedom I have so far delimited. It is little wonder that so much of the French scholarship on Beauvoir and Sartre sees "the question of influence […] at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon critique" to be "nearly impossible" to judge (Jeannelle & Lecarme-Tabone, 2018: xxxix). Either case runs the risk of ampliative reasoning—and requires more exegesis than short articles allow.

5 | THE ETHICAL TURN: MORAL FREEDOM

So far it may seem that we've accomplished fairly little, saying merely that texts can be read more than one way and concepts can have more than one history. Where there is a stronger case to be made for Beauvoir's departures from Sartre (where departure does not necessarily imply incompatibility) is the way she develops the ethical implications of her understanding of freedom-as-transcendence.[19] In particular, Beauvoir effected existentialism's ethical turn by delivering on the promise of an ethics at the end of *Being and Nothingness*.[20] Central to this achievement was her development of the concept of *moral freedom*.

The question central to *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*—Can transcendence meet the human need for meaningful action in the world?—had been asked in many ways by many in her philosophical generation. But her answer to it was unique: yes, when we understand the two senses in which freedom is our essence: that it is both a given and a creative moral task. The givenness of freedom consists in the fact that a human is not a thing, but rather 'a project of self towards the other, a transcendence […], a spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts' (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 93). The task is that we must will our freedom *and others*' in the recognition that "our freedoms support each other like stones in an arch" (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 140). In order to accomplish the task of freedom – to "assume our actions in uncertainty and risk, [which] is precisely the essence of freedom" (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 139) – two conditions must be met. "I must be allowed to appeal" to others; and there must be others who can respond to my appeal (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 136–7). Already in this text, Beauvoir claims that moral freedom requires intersubjective interdependence—it cannot be realized alone—and the meeting of material needs. Well before *The Second Sex*, she rejects the Hegelian dialectic of recognition as too abstract, since it is not merely as 'self' or 'subject' that I want to be recognized, but as the singular communication of *my freedom*.

In asking, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 'can transcendence justify an ethics?' Beauvoir develops her account of freedom-as-task and outlines a naturalistic normative justification for ethics, rebutting the claim that existentialism is a subjectivism in favour of a hybrid view of values.[21] Among Beauvoir's motivations for giving an account of "the subjective and formal aspect" of freedom in this text (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 26) were early critics of existentialism who charged that its claims about freedom were contradictory. In particular, Beauvoir addresses those who asked: "Does the presence of 'natural ['given'] freedom' contradict the notion of 'moral freedom'?" How can one *will oneself free* if one *is* free? How can freedom be both a task to accomplish and a given? (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 24).

The charge of contradiction would apply, Beauvoir says, if freedom is understood as "a thing or a quality naturally attached to a thing" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 25). Then, freedom would not admit of degrees: one would be free or not. However, Beauvoir rejects this, instead distinguishing between an ontological freedom and a moral freedom that consists in assuming a particular attitude towards ontological freedom. Moral freedom, on Beauvoir's account, involves "willing oneself free", which is to "effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing an authentic freedom on the original stream of our existence" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 25). One cannot will *not to be free*: each human consciousness is free and their freedom discloses being as it realizes itself. But one can fail to will oneself and others free—for example, by vainly desiring to be, to escape the cycle of transcendence, or by seeing the other merely as an object of my consciousness.

Moral freedom involves recognizing that given freedom "always projects itself toward something" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 25) and that my project is never founded in any final sense, but must continue to found itself. It also involves acknowledging intersubjective interdependence, that my being 'escapes' toward the other, who sees me as an object in the world. Authentically assuming my relation to the other involves assuming my presence before them as object without relinquishing my position as subject. However, adopting the moral attitude to my own freedom and others' requires a constant tension: sometimes, to avoid the anxiety of my own freedom, I may choose to deny my spontaneity and accept that I *am* only the object the other sees. Moral freedom is a relation to freedom-as-transcendence which *wills tension*—the tension of being a perpetually transcended transcendence, transcended by my own consciousness and by the transcendent freedoms of others.

To the question 'Can one will oneself free in any matter?' Beauvoir offers a developmental account of the capacity to will freedom: both in the sense that it begins in childhood and in the sense that "it is in time that the goal is pursued and that freedom confirms itself" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 26). In the early stages of childhood the child has not yet reached the maturity to pose moral questions "he is still incapable of recognizing himself in the past or seeing himself in the future". Once the moments of his life are organized into patterns of behaviour, however, "he can decide and choose" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 27). If this child has what she calls "an apprenticeship in freedom", "a creative freedom develops happily without ever congealing into unjustified facticity. [...] His present project embraces the past and places confidence in the freedom to come, a confidence which is never disappointed. It discloses being at the end of a further disclosure." (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 27-28).

But some lack this apprenticeship; in some situations—under conditions of oppression—childhood is an apprenticeship in frustrated freedom and foreclosed possibility. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir reiterates the importance of Descartes' distinction between freedom and power (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 28) and claims that some freedoms are privileged (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 32). She rejects what she calls the 'Stoic' conception of freedom as an "abstract notion", "emptied of all content and all truth" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 29). In confronting a closed door it is not "freedom" in either of her senses just to accept not opening it. Rather, Beauvoir claims, "It is the particularity of the project which determines the limitation of the power, but it is also what gives the project its content and permits it to be set up" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 29).

The ambiguity of the human condition, on Beauvoir's view, is that each human being is both a freedom and a thing. Because we are freedom-as-transcendence we cannot assume our ambiguity—we cannot will freedom—once and for all. But we can adopt moral freedom as our ideal, taking it as "the unique end to which man should destine himself" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 49). The precept of existentialism, Beauvoir claims, is to treat the other "as a freedom so that his end may be freedom" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 142). Put succinctly:

- ***The moral freedom thesis:*** that moral freedom is a willed relation to one's freedom-as-transcendence and to the ideal of moral freedom, which involves recognizing our indeterminacy and interdependence and adopting freedom as an end for oneself *and* others

But wait! Readers of Sartre may worry that in attributing 'moral freedom' to Beauvoir I have ignored my own warning, and overstated Beauvoir's independence. It is true that Sartre hints at a similar view in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, when he writes:

> in willing freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends on ours. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is involvement, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own freedom. I can take my freedom as a goal only if I take the freedom of others as a goal as well. Consequently, when in total authenticity I've recognized that man is the being in whom existence precedes essence, that is a free being who, in various circumstances, can will only his freedom, I have at the same time recognized that I can will only the freedom of others. (2007: 49)

However, Sartre makes this claim after *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* was written and after Beauvoir argued that we depend on the freedom of others and that "our freedoms support each other like the stones in an arch" (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 140). Jonathan Webber argues that in this passage from *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre offers a summary of Beauvoir's argument (Webber, 2018, p. 168). In any case, Sartre states it without explanation (Veltman, 2009, p. 223), does not claim this is a foundation for an ethics, and does not proceed on the basis of this conception to denounce oppression or argue for a commitment to liberation (Arp, 2001, p. 84). Sartre calls those who fail to will freedom cowards and bastards. Beauvoir, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, articulates a view resembling Marx's, according to which human agency—freedom-as-transcendence—is ineffaceable, but *what* agency is realizable is constrained by material and ideological conditions.[22]

6 | CONCLUSION: DISAGREEING ABOUT DISAGREEING ABOUT FREEDOM

After outlining Sartre's conceptions of freedom in *The Imaginary* and *Being and Nothingness* and introducing Beauvoirian critiques of Sartrean freedom, I have argued that Kruks' early "disagreement" claim is justly accused of overstating differences between "Beauvoirian" and "Sartrean" conceptions of freedom, since these claims are ambiguously supported by the texts in question. I have offered some disambiguation by identifying four distinct senses of freedom and claimed that Beauvoir departs from Sartre in offering a more fully developed conception of moral freedom than we find in Sartre's texts up to 1946.

Constraints of space have precluded the lengthier discussions that these texts and their critics deserve, and inevitably, this leaves many questions unanswered—particularly concerning Beauvoir's philosophical commitments in *The Second Sex*. I will address some of these elsewhere. Here, I wish to conclude with a question of my own: Is the "Anglo-Saxon" preoccupation with influence premised on the claim that philosophical independence is a necessary condition of saving Beauvoir from 'patriarchy's history of ideas'?[23] Although I recognize that I would not be posing this question if earlier generations' investigations of influence had not paved the way for Beauvoir to enter the philosophical canon, now that she has entered it the question deserves a different kind of interrogation: because both Beauvoir and Sartre were undeniably dependent on their predecessors' and contemporaries' conceptions of freedom and situation; because it is possible for two philosophers to share some of their convictions and for neither to be diminished by it; and because adversarial approaches to their works risk misrepresenting the interdependence of their projects and what philosophy itself can be. When Beauvoir writes of their views in the plural possessive—for example, that "our thoughts have been so assiduously criticized, corrected, supported, that they are all common to

us" (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 2: 365)—might we not see, instead of internalized sexism, an invitation to resist the hierarchical and proprietary paradigms of master and disciple, genius and muse, gladiator and adversary—and to catch glimpses instead of generous dialogue?

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ENDNOTES

[1] For some fruits of this important collective effort, see the University of Illinois Press' Beauvoir Research Series, edited by Margaret Simons and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, and the journal of the International Simone de Beauvoir Society, *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, edited by Jennifer McWeeny.

[2] Readers familiar with Beauvoir's autobiographical descriptions of this relationship and its sexist and feminist receptions may consider this approach (as one anonymous reviewer put it) "superficially neutral" on the question of sexism in Beauvoir's self-assessment and reception. I have written elsewhere that I do not consider this reception or these descriptions neutral (Kirkpatrick, 2019); here, however, my aims are conceptual and textual rather than biographical.

[3] The discussion is not dated in Beauvoir's narrative but it is likely that this took place during one of Sartre's military leaves – 4–15 February or 29 March–9 April 1940.

[4] Translation mine. See Beauvoir, 2018, p. 759; for English Beauvoir, 1962, p. 434. Kruks, 1995 renders the French "les situations ne sont pas équivalents" "not every situation is equal". This passage also opens the discussion of Beauvoir in Kruks, 1990, p. 83.

[5] Where most scholars take 'Early Sartre' to end in the 1950s ('mid-50s' for Howells, 1988, p. 1; 1952 for Webber, 2018: 1– 2).

[6] Sartre uses this term with this definition in *Adieux* (Beauvoir, 1984, p. 358).

[7] See Detmer, 1986, p. 180; Anderson, 1979, p. 4 (although Anderson later distinguishes between Sartre's and Beauvoir's views).

[8] This influential paper was first published in short version in *Social Text* in 1987 as 'Simone de Beauvoir and the limits to Freedom', and subsequently republished twice in English: under the more polemical title (not chosen by Kruks) 'Teaching Sartre about Freedom' in Kruks, 1991 and in Margaret Simons' 1995 volume *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. In correspondence with the author Kruks wrote that if it were not for the latter, she doubted that "it would have achieved much prominence in the 'Beauvoir did it first' arguments. Such are the contingencies of academic publishing and reputation!" (Kruks to Kirkpatrick, 30 March 2023, cited with permission). In French it was published in 1989 in *Les Temps Modernes* (520) as 'Simone de Beauvoir entre Sartre et Merleau-Ponty' under the erroneous name Sonia Kraüs. References to this work in this paper are to Kruks, 1995.

[9] For Beauvoir scholars who quote or refer to Kruks' analysis in acceptance, see also Tidd, 1999, pp. 28-29; Andrew, 2003, p. 33; Lundgren-Gothlin 2003, p. 51, n. 15; and, in part, Arp, 2001, pp. 6-7, 141.

[10] Moi, 1999, pp. 65–66. For book-length discussions see also Moi, 2008 [1994] and Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996. Debra Bergoffen claims that Beauvoir writes in 'two voices', one Sartrean and another concerned with an ethics of generosity and the erotic (Bergoffen, 1997).

[11] Constraints of space preclude discussion of all of the feminist critiques of Sartrean freedom, including that it is voluntarist (Heinämaa, 1997); or cannot move from its ontology to sociology and politics (Moi, 1994, p. 150ff; Kruks, 1990).

[12] Although it should be noted that this takes us outside the textual window 1940–1946, to 1955, and that in defending Sartre against Merleau-Ponty's charge that Sartre's view renders intersubjectivity impossible, Beauvoir's discussion draws not only on *Being and Nothingness* (1943) but also *Saint Genet* (1952). Webber argues that the conception of freedom Beauvoir defends here was in fact endorsed by Beauvoir before Sartre was converted to her view (2018: 56).

[13] Indeed, readers looking for the most developed articulations of Le Dœuff's and Moi's views are advised to consult their book-length discussions in *Hipparchia's Choice* (Le Dœuff, 2006; first edition published 1991) and *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Moi, 2008; first edition published 1994).

[14] On Sartre's 'solipsistic relativism' see Kruks (1990): 69; on ontology see 1990: 72; on conflictual human relations 1990: 76.

[15] For a range of feminist interpretations of Sartre, see Murphy, 1999.

[16] For discussions of 'situation' in their 1939 and 1940 diaries, see Sartre, 1984, pp. 41, 24 November 1939; Beauvoir, 2009, pp. 252, 9 February 1940.

[17] 'Idealism', in this period of Beauvoir's thought, is a form of inauthenticity she associates with classical morality (especially Kant's), which appeals to universal imperatives and ideals such as justice, right, and truth and from which (on Beauvoir's view) it is impossible to gain guidance about what to do in concrete situations.

[18] See also *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom*: "existentialists affirm that man is transcendence" (Beauvoir, 2004b, 2004a: 212).

[19] I am not the first to make this claim and Beauvoirian readers may consider it a matter of consensus (given that it is affirmed, for example, in Le Doeuff, 1980, Butler, 1986, Bauer, 2001, Eshleman, 2009, Webber, 2018), but for the sake of those engaging with Sartre scholarship that does not consider Beauvoir's influence I do not take this for granted. Webber 2018: chapter 10 offers a reconstruction of Beauvoir's argument in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* that freedom is a value and the source of all other values.

[20] This claim divides commentators; for agreement see Jeannelle et Lecarme-Tabone 2018: xl; Imbert, 2004, p. 8; Arp, 2001, p. 1. For disagreement see Flynn (2014, p. 266), who sees Sartre's posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* as the fulfilment of this promise.

[21] For more on Beauvoir on normative justification, see Arp, 2001, Eshleman, 2009, Webber, 2018. See Berk, 2022 for an analysis of the subjectivist and objectivist strands of Beauvoir's metaethics and an argument in favour of a hybrid view.

[22] For discussions of Beauvoir's Marxism, see Shepherd, 2018, Kruks, 2012, p. 8; Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996, p. 177. In *Situation and Human Existence* Kruks categorizes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a synthesis of existentialism and Marxism (1990: 99).

[23] See Fulbrook, 2009.

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