



# Simone de Beauvoir 1908-1986

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# Learning Objectives

- Define the term Existentialism
- Discuss Beauvoir's theory of ethics
- Explain the concept of Ambiguity as it applies to the Human Situation and Existentialism

# Existentialism – (Dictionary definition)

A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts

# Works

- *Pyrrhus et Cineas* (1944)
- *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947)

# *Pyrrhus et Cineas*

- Explores the Existential view of ethical responsibility
- The concept of the free subject implies an ethical consideration of other free subjects in the world
  - Each individual must create a bond with others through ethical action
  - Sees others as the axis of my freedom (without them I cannot be free)
  - Human beings are constantly engaged with projects which transcend the factual situation (cultural, historical, personal, etc.)

# *Pyrrhus et Cineas*

- Constructs the Ethics of Existentialism
  - Others are not the threat to my freedom
  - Others are the axis to my freedom
- Each individual must create a bond with other through ethical action
  - Projects which encourage the individual's freedom while promoting freedom for others

# *Pyrrhus et Cineas*

- One's transcendence of being is realized through the human project which set up its own end as valuable rather relying on external validation or meaning
- The goal of action is established as an end
- Beauvoir believed in
  - absolute freedom of choice
  - the responsibility that such freedom entails
  - that projects must arise from individual spontaneity and not from an external institution, authority or person

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Continues themes first developed in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*
  - No necessity that we exist
  - No predetermined essence or standard of value
  - Human freedom requires the freedom of others for it to be actualized

*“Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means”*

*(Ethics of Ambiguity)*

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Human Situation
  - Human existence is an ambiguous mixture of internal freedom to transcend the conditions of the world and the weight of the world which imposes itself on us
  - To live we must assume this ambiguity rather than flee it otherwise we fail

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

“Existence asserts itself as an absolute which must seek its justification within itself and not suppress itself, even though it may be lost by preserving itself”

“To exist genuinely is not to deny this spontaneous movement of my transcendence, but only to refuse to lose myself in it”

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

“Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else”

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

“The spontaneity of the subject is then merely a vain living palpitation, its movement toward the object is a flight, and itself is an absence. To convert the absence into presence, to convert my flight into will, I must assume my project positively.”

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Existentialist conversion of flight into will
  - Allows us to live at the cross roads of freedom and facticity
  - Requires us to engage our freedom in projects (emerge from spontaneous choice)
  - Ends and goals of projects should never be set up as absolutes
  - Meaning of actions - not determined by an external source of values (i.e. God, the state etc.) – rather our own spontaneous act of choosing them
  - Each individual must assume his/her project and not try to escape freedom by escaping into the goal

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Growth, development and freedom
  - Incorporates an analysis of childhood – argues the will or freedom is developed over time
  - Children live in a serious world – doesn't mean that he is serious - allowed to play
- 'Serious attitude' is the most prevalent form of bad faith – we were all children

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Numerous inauthentic attitudes (allow one to flee accepting ambiguity)
  - Sub-Man
  - Serious Man
  - Nihilist
  - Adventurer
  - Passionate man

# Sub-Man

- Bored & Lazy
- Would like to forget himself
- Negativity is revealed positively as anguish, desire, appeal
- Afraid of engaging in a project – led to the ready-made values of the serious world
- Can be come the paw of the 'serious man'

# Serious Man

- Gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned
- Desires that all existents found their freedom in an objective, external standard
- Upholds absolute and unconditional values to which he subordinates his freedom
- He chooses to live in an infantile world, but to the child values are really given by parents
- Ultimate bad faith – rather than seek to embrace freedom he/she seeks to lose it into an external idol – makes himself the slave of that end

# Nihilist

- If his 'idol' is proved false he may deny that the world has any meaning at all
- Not an authentic choice because he/she does not assert nothingness in the sense of freedom, but in the sense of denial

*"The nihilist is right in thinking that the world possesses no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly."*

# Adventurer

- Throws themselves into life with zest, into exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, politics
- Chooses action for its own sake – does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only to his conquest
- Only cares for his own freedom and projects

# Passionate Man

- Antithesis of the adventurer
- He sets up the object as an absolute, not, like the serious man, as a thing detached from himself, but as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity
- One admires the pride of a subjectivity which chooses its end without bending itself to any foreign law and the precious brilliance of the object revealed by the force of this assertion.
- But one also considers the solitude in which this subjectivity encloses itself as injurious

# Genuine Human Being

- Does not recognize any foreign absolute not consciously and actively chosen by the person himself
- Realizes that an individual is always situated within a community – separate existents are necessarily bound to each other

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Situation and mystification
  - Recognized that some situations are such that they cannot be simply transcended but serve as strict and almost unsurpassable inhibitors to action
    - Oppressed peoples such as slaves and many women who live in a child like world
    - Not living in bad faith – we can only judge the actions of those individuals as emerging from their situation

# *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

- Authentically moral attitude understands that freedom of self requires the freedom of others
  - To act alone without concern for other is not free
  - “No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects”
  - Thus if my project intersects with others who are enslaved- either literally or through mystification – I too am not truly free
  - If I do not actively seek to help those who are not free, I am implicated in their oppression