To Do Or Not To Do?

The Place of Ambiguity in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir

An Encounter with:
Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*,
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In what ways is ambiguity useful for thinking about political issues? This is one of the main questions that Sonia Kruks poses in *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*. In addressing this question, she aims to show why Beauvoir's work should be considered more broadly. Kruks argues that Beauvoir's consideration of topics such as inequality, freedom and oppression in *The Second Sex*, and elsewhere, require us to engage with ontological and ethical issues. In her book, Kruks demonstrates the originality of Beauvoir's political and philosophical thought, and examines why Beauvoir's ideas are still relevant to current political issues. It is argued that Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity can help us better understand structural problems related to oppression, as well as individual acts of judgement and decision-making. I will focus my review on these topics.

This is a good time to revisit Beauvoir's work, according to Kruks, because there is an impasse between political theory and philosophy whereby liberal humanists who believe in the rational self are unable to engage with poststructuralists who take a radically different view of subjectivity. This is where Beauvoir can assist us, states Kruks, since her emphasis on ambiguity may help us to move beyond this impasse. While Beauvoir's approach to philosophical and

political issues will not resolve the tension between liberal rationalism and poststructuralist thought, her work offers an alternative way of thinking about ethical issues. What is necessary is to reclaim humanism from a postmodernist anti-humanist stance. While we cannot think outside of the humanist framework, we can show how a focus on the sovereign self is not helpful for explaining how we live in the world.

A pervasive thread running through Beauvoir's work is her emphasis on the ambiguity of human existence. In Anglo-American philosophy, a politics of ambiguity is regarded as faulty reasoning. But Kruks, following Beauvoir, claims that ambiguity pervades our decision-making, and informs our being-in-the-world. Moreover, attending to ambiguity alerts us to the potential failure inherent in any action. For instance, because we engage in different projects with different ends, at any moment, our actions may be in conflict with others, who we may view as impediments to our desires. Moreover, individual freedom is often curtailed by social restraints. This tension between individual freedom and social constraint is at the heart of the ambiguity of human relationships.

The paradox of ambiguity is that it cannot be resolved through the application of reason. Thus, acting in accordance with what we regard as right principles does not mean that our actions will be proved right. Neither does it absolve us from personal responsibility. Herein lies the problem with the uncompromising moralist who focuses on whether their actions are good without taking into account the outcomes. Kruks further maintains that political failures cannot be absolved under the guise of justice or rights. This is because, for Beauvoir, such failure is part of life, which is why no systematic program of ethics can move beyond this fundamental ambiguity of human existence.

Our situated, embodied experience is important to the choices we make which, in turn, are influenced by personal history. As part of her overall account, Kruks offers a brief overview of Beauvoir's own personal history. Born in Paris in 1908 to a downwardly mobile bourgeois family, Beauvoir's father was an unsuccessful lawyer whose profligate ways ensured that he did not have enough money to provide his daughters with a suitable dowry. Ironically, this enabled Beauvoir to obtain a good education. In 1929, Beauvoir received the *agrégation* in philosophy while at the Sorbonne, coming second to Sartre. She then began to teach in various places; yet Beauvoir wanted to become a writer. Although her first efforts were rejected, *L'Invitée* [*She Came to Stay*] was published in 1943. Kruks calls this work a philosophical novel par excellence. While some critics have regarded this novel as derivative of Sartre, Kruks notes that Beauvoir's recently published diary entries indicate that she had been thinking about these issues long before she met Sartre.¹ According to Kruks, it was during Beauvoir's so-called moral period, in the 1940s, that her thinking is most akin to Sartre. In describing Beauvoir's work of this period that includes essays such as *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, Kruks maintains that Beauvoir comes closest to Sartre's Manichean belief in freedom. The German Occupation was to have a profound effect on Beauvoir, and in *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir describes the ways in which she tries to cope with a world that had turned chaotic (547). In response, she turns to writing to try and make sense of a world that has grown strange. As I will show later, Beauvoir uses her fiction to think through moral issues.

In relation to feminism, Kruks contends that some middle-class white feminists have, at times, become constrained by guilt. As a result of this guilt, Kruks suggests that feminists, such as Peggy McIntosh, take up a politics of self-transformation. In doing so, they suggest that by making oneself aware of one's own prejudice, it may be possible to transform oneself into a

better person. But this kind of thinking is similar to that of the liberal humanist who believes that in gaining knowledge one can alter who one is. Yet this focus on the self is not sufficient to address political problems. Kruks also shows how a politics of self-transformation is taken up in different ways. For example, she argues that Maria Lugones' appeal for feminists to use their imagination and become world travellers so as to playfully take up the position of others is not helpful for political action. Instead, Kruks contends that it is more useful to use one's privilege to try and change society by engaging in a politics of deployment.

Kruks defines a politics of deployment as a way of using one's privilege in order to fight injustice. She points to how Beauvoir uses her privileged status as a famous writer to publicise the case of Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman who was raped by French soldiers and imprisoned during the Algerian War. In her article in *Le Monde*, Beauvoir tries to gain sympathy for Boupacha's plight by encouraging people to realise that this atrocity is an outrage to French values. Adopting a tone of moral indignation, Beauvoir urges the French public to recognize the inhumanity of the Algerian War. It is not just this particular woman's violation that is at stake, argues Beauvoir, but the place of France within the world. She questions what kind of a country inflicts harm on others in such a vicious manner. Is this not contrary to notions of enlightened freedom so fundamental to French values? While critics like Franz Fanon objected to this form of argument, worried that French intellectuals were indulging in egocentrism, Kruks suggests that Beauvoir took up a rhetoric of patriotism so as to counteract the French government's argument that their actions in Algerian were justified.² This is one of many political interventions Beauvoir undertook in order to use her privileged position as a way to try to fight against injustice. Hence, for Kruks, a politics of deployment is more productive than a politics of self-transformation.

I was fascinated by Kruks' discussion of privilege and oppression, where she makes the strongest argument for a reassessment of Beauvoir's *oeuvre*. A significant strength of Kruks' book is the detailed manner in which she lays out Beauvoir's different accounts of oppression. The three modes of oppression that Kruks argues are relevant to Beauvoir's political analysis are asymmetrical recognition (women), indifference (race) and aversion (aged). Each facet represents the different ways in which we fail to respond to the subjectivity of another by seeing people as types. Unlike Sartre, Beauvoir recognizes that individual freedom is constrained by embodiment and social conditions. These facticities of life affect how we exist in the world. We cannot be free without acknowledging how oppression works in an embodied way.

In her discussion of *The Second Sex*, Kruks refers to the way that humanism "masks and legitimizes structures of oppression" (38). In her view, this book is not just an exercise in phenomenology, but also a Marxist examination of social conditions, as well as an exploration of myths. Published originally in two volumes in June and November 1949, the first volume of *The Second Sex* examines external power structures, while the second volume explores lived experience in a phenomenological manner by focussing on education and customs. *The Second Sex* has often been regarded as Beauvoir's finest work; yet its success has served to marginalize her as a feminist theorist. But Kruks argues that "to theorize about sexualized social relations is already to theorize about a range of politico-philosophical questions" (5).

In trying to show the macro and micro effects of oppression, Beauvoir illustrates not only why it is that women are perceived as inferior, but also how this inferiority is perpetuated. She contends that women's oppression is partly a result of man's bad faith, aided by her willingness to be complicit in her oppression. Why would any woman want to be complicit in her own objectification? The reason, suggests Beauvoir, is that objectification offers some women a

safety net. Rather than desiring solidarity with other women, many middle-class women chose solidarity with the bourgeois male. This results in an ongoing gender dichotomy, that is, a dialectic of asymmetrical recognition. *The Second Sex* has been accused of ethnocentrism although Kruks contends that Beauvoir was writing from the limited sources available to her at the time. But it also points to what Kruks perceives as an “irresolvable tension” between existential phenomenology and a more global analysis of prejudice (52). By concentrating on concrete, lived experience, any phenomenological account may appear narrow, because it is informed by what we know. Paradoxically, this is also the strength of a good phenomenological description, since it offers insight into the human condition *per se*. This explains why Kruks maintains that Beauvoir’s work still appeals to a diverse audience.

In her discussion of the varying forms of oppression, Beauvoir emphasizes how individuals are perceived as interchangeable units, for example, through race or class prejudice. In *America Day By Day*, Beauvoir describes some racist acts of oppression she witnessed during her four-month trip across The United States with her then lover, the critic and novelist, Nelson Algren. Beauvoir illustrates the hypocrisy in the U.S. Constitution’s abstract credo of “the essential dignity of human beings,” and the lived reality for people of colour. Yet Kruks shows that Beauvoir was not immune from racist comments. For example, in *Santé Fe*, Beauvoir describes how the Taos took advantage of the white tourists. But Beauvoir’s response to the racism she sees in states like Texas and Mississippi is profoundly different, not least because she sees herself implicated in the spatial segregation, whereby whites and coloreds stand in separate lines and sit in separate rooms. In a particular instance, Beauvoir describes her confusion when she wants to come to the aid of a pregnant, black woman who repeatedly fainted, only to be jeered at by some of the white passengers. Yet Beauvoir reasoned that by giving up her seat, she

might be placing both her and the black woman in danger. Perhaps so, but when I read Kruks' account and then turned to Beauvoir's telling of the story in *Prime of Life*, what emerged for me was a contradiction between Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity, and her certainty of what would happen if she aided this woman. In a way, this serves to illustrate Beauvoir's contention that "we are the enemy despite ourselves" (78).

For Kruks, oppression is more than a structural phenomenon because it works by taking away the ambiguity of each individual in favour of their group status. In Beauvoir's *Coming of Age*, published in 1970, she describes how badly the elderly are treated in most Western societies. Beauvoir based her account on a variety of autobiographical accounts as well as surveys. She describes how people talk of their frailty as an impediment, but worse that their own fear of their weakened state is how others regard them as irrelevant. This negativity toward the elderly is borne out of fear that we may too become frail as we age, and not have the mobility necessary to continue with our projects. It is this fear against the elderly that encourages society to perceive them as no more than a series, rather than unique human beings. Beauvoir notes how elderly people view their body as other since, due to the ageing process, movement is constrained. The aged lack the ability to resist their oppression/oppressors more than any group. Their increasing isolation and physical incapacity makes it harder for them to mobilize and to develop strategies for resistance. Poverty plays a huge part in this degradation.

Moreover, because Western societies are so entranced by the new, this has the negative effect of viewing the wisdom of the elderly as unproductive members of society. By being seen in this way, elderly people lose their identities as meaningful subjects. Yet what is missing from Beauvoir's analysis, according to Kruks, is that she does not consider how active some elderly people are. I was reminded of my next door neighbour, a bright and active eighty-year-old

woman who described her frustration at the way people speak down to her. “It will happen to you when you are my age,” she said. Reading Kruks’ cogent account of Beauvoir’s description of the plight of the elderly encouraged me to read *A Very Easy Death*, Beauvoir’s account of her mother’s illness. This is a poignant description of a loved one’s death, and certainly deserves greater attention, as does Beauvoir’s critical appraisal of the injustice experienced by the aged by a careless society.

Each of us bears responsibility for the oppression of others, even when we are not directly causing harm. Moreover a lack of awareness is not a sufficient response. The problem with oppression is that it is interconnected with notions of privilege, which is viewed, states Kruks, as a “scarce resource.” As Beauvoir shows us, oppression is never a Black or Jewish problem; rather the problem lies in ourselves, and the ignorance and indifference to the plight of others. What is sometimes missing from Beauvoir’s analysis, according to Kruks, is that she fails to take into account how there are more than one modes of oppression taking place simultaneously. Yet Kruks suggests that a concept like intersectionality is not always helpful, since it is used too broadly. What we need instead is to see how oppression “curtails the ambiguities of an embodied subject and forecloses freedom” (91).

In the latter part of the book, Kruks looks at specific ethical dilemmas that arise from political judgement. For Beauvoir, judgement is not merely rational. This erroneous way of thinking is related to Kantian ethics. Kruks demonstrates how Kantian-inspired scholars like Jürgen Habermas fail to understand the role that embodiment plays in individual judgement. Critical to Beauvoir’s understanding of decision-making is how we are influenced by varying emotions, alongside reason. Moreover, because there is always more than one solution to any problem, judgement is always ambiguous. This is one reason why Beauvoir refers to political

decisions as wagers. In her chapter on political judgement, Kruks explores how we arrive at such wagers. She contrasts Hannah Arendt's ideas on political judgement with those of Beauvoir. In her discussion of the Arendtian notion of reflective judgement, Kruks maintains that it is impossible to shed one's idiosyncrasies in the manner Arendt suggests. Rather, it is through our embodied being that we engage in deliberation. Hence, she argues that it is helpful to think about how we perceive judgement phenomenologically, and this is what Beauvoir explores through the character of Henri Perron in *The Mandarins*.

Through Henri's fictional dilemmas, Beauvoir sheds light on the complexity surrounding how we make decisions. Briefly, Henri is a young novelist who, during the Second World War, was the editor of *L'Espoir* [*Hope*], a leftist daily. He faces two major decisions. First, he must decide whether to allow *L'Espoir* to become the official mouthpiece of the French Communist Party. This is a complex decision for Henri since, although he desires to return to his former life as a novelist, he finds that it is impossible to do so. The reason why he cannot return to his old life is that the War has changed him. Earlier I mentioned how Beauvoir talked about how her thinking was profoundly altered by the events of the Occupation; thus, it is not surprising that she uses fictional characters like Henri to explore her own existential dilemmas. Giving up control of the paper is difficult because, as Kruks points out, it has become Henri's world. In the end, he agrees to hand over control of the paper to the French Communist Party. But his act is one of bad faith, since he makes up his mind the night he learns that the Russians have entered Berlin. He reasons that his personal actions no longer have much meaning, and that he may just as well obey others, rather than take responsibility. Henri's confusion about what choice to make illustrates how often the choices we make could be otherwise, and are not always based on solid principles. Yet Beauvoir is not asking us to judge whether or not Henri makes the right choice.

Rather, she wants us to recognize how judgements are complex and, sometimes, contradictory. And this is why judgements are always wagers.

The second wager Henri has to make is whether or not to publish an article exposing the horrors of the Soviet camps. This incident is loosely based on something that happened at *Les Temps Modernes*, the left-wing journal that Beauvoir, Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty created after the Second World War. Merleau-Ponty wrote about the camps, and this was to result in his break with the French Communist Party. In Beauvoir's fictional account, we see that Henri is not sure how to proceed, not least because he obtains his initial information about the camps from an anti-communist. In discussing his ethical dilemma as to whether or not to publish this article, Henri meets with Dubreuilh, his former mentor. We learn that Dubreuilh is staunchly opposed to its publication, arguing that disseminating information about the Soviet camps will prove negative to the socialist cause in France. What is most important is to work to destroy American imperialism. But Henri eventually decides to publish information about the Soviet internment camps. His reasoning is partly a result of his distrust of Dubreuilh, together with what Kruks describes as a machismo desire to stand up to his former mentor. Henri's equivocation regarding what is the best decision to make serves to highlight Beauvoir's contention that decisions are never straightforward. Rather than a rational decision, judgements are always a wager. We make wagers not as a rational actor, but as a particular self in a certain situation. Thus, judging is never a rational decision alone.

Kruks notes that recent studies in neuroscience suggest that judgements are nothing more than "manifestations of circuits of synaptic brain activity" (14). This way of thinking is far too deterministic for Kruks, and she disputes the notion that our decisions are a result of brain maps, whereby past experience structures future decisions. Rather, a judgement is always made by an

“idiosyncratic” self. As such, it is subject to failure. Therefore, we must take into account that whenever we judge, we do so based on the facts available, and with the knowledge that we may be wrong. Such potential failure is never an excuse for failing to take action. Instead, we must act in the awareness that ambiguity is fundamental to our being-in-the-world.

In the final chapter, Kruks takes up the question of revenge. She focuses on Beauvoir’s essay “An Eye for an Eye,” where Beauvoir recounts the trial of Robert Brasillach, a right-wing intellectual who was the editor-in-chief of *Je Suis Partout*, a fascist weekly that published the names and hiding places of Jews and Resistance fighters. Brasillach was tried for his complicity as an enemy of the French State. His trial proved to be a contentious event for French intellectuals. An example of this contention relates to the clemency petition that many intellectuals signed, including Sartre and Albert Camus, to obtain leniency for Brasillach. But Beauvoir refused to sign this clemency petition. Her reasoning was that in signing the petition, she would be disrespecting the lives of those who were murdered. Kruks finds Beauvoir’s response to this dilemma somewhat dubious. Perhaps Beauvoir would have agreed, since while she regarded revenge as irrational, at the same time, she perceived it as a valid response to those who commit absolute evil. Reason alone will not offer us insight into revenge, since vengeance is also an emotive act.

For Beauvoir, revenge is always an embodied response to a particular situation, and encompasses physical, affective, cognitive and moral dimensions. In describing Beauvoir’s notion of revenge, Kruks considers three different types. The first type of revenge is the privileged case whereby someone seeks revenge on his or her own behalf. There are accounts, albeit not well documented, states Kruks, of concentration camp victims who turned on their captors to seek vengeance. But the problem, for Beauvoir, is that there can be no reversal of the

relationship since to hurt another is to not to gain one's subjectivity, but to lose one's freedom. In the second type of revenge, we take up the suffering of others. It is through a sense of imaginative empathy that we experience a sense of another person's suffering. For example, Kruks notes that we may feel an intense reaction as we learn about a violent act being committed. When a heinous act is committed, our world can change and us with it. In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir shows how she was deeply affected when her nineteen-year-old friend Bourla and his father were rounded up, and shot by the Gestapo.

Such acts of evil have a more devastating effect upon us when they occur to people we know, or even in places that we recognize. For example, Kruks suggests that we feel a more visceral sense of outrage when a violent act occurs closer to home. Conversely, we may feel less intensity when something happens to people in places that we do not know. In this way we are able to distance ourselves from things happening to people in other parts of the world. On several occasions, Kruks refers to the events of 9/11 to illustrate how a random act of violence affects people. She reflects upon the retaliation by the West, and the difficulties of revenge. As I was reading her book, I wondered about whether a lack of knowledge of people and place enables those pilots who carry out drone attacks to see their action in a more abstract way than military personnel on the ground. If so, this may serve to lessen the connection between what they are doing and the harm they are causing innocent people because the act seems to be less embodied and situated. Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity could offer insight to this ongoing perpetuation of violence.

The third type of revenge is punishment through legal means. The problem here, according to Beauvoir, is that we never judge in an objective manner. Instead, the legal system offers a way to hide behind the language of universal principles that masks our desire for

revenge. While legal sanctions are always preferable to vigilante justice, there is no way to restore a world after absolute evil. When our world changes, there is no way back to our former life. At the same time, however, Beauvoir contends that absolute evil deserves punishment, since a society needs to have shared values. It is here that we see the greatest division between Arendt and Beauvoir since for the former, legal means offer us a valuable opportunity to bring individuals to justice. Unlike Beauvoir, for Arendt, social values are a problem since they can mask indifference, and allow for a perpetuation of injustice.

In exploring contemporary questions of political justice, Kruks considers some ethical problems that arise from the actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Concentrating on South Africa, Kruks notes that the TRC has been perceived as “perpetrator friendly” (177). It appears that some victims have been devastated by how their alleged perpetrators have been unwilling to make reparation for their actions, even by accepting their guilt and saying sorry to their victims. For instance, Kruks describes how one woman asked what kind of restorative justice allows the perpetrator of harm to keep his well-paying job, while she has to continue to live in abject poverty. This woman’s anger toward what she regards as the injustice of the TRC also indicates why slogans like “revealing is healing” are in poor taste. For me, this discussion on Restorative Justice, while interesting, was too short to make a sufficient case for why Beauvoir’s thinking on justice is relevant. A more detailed exploration would have enriched Kruk’s account of why the politics of ambiguity is important to these concerns. Similarly, I felt that the comparison between Arendt and Beauvoir on judgement could have been fleshed out.³

That being said Kruks offers us an excellent account of why Beauvoir’s political writing is worthy of greater examination. I found this book especially strong in its phenomenological

analysis of privilege, oppression and judgement. Kruks writes clearly on a subject that she obviously knows well. Her book contains a tremendous amount of informative footnotes that offer the reader additional insight. In conclusion, Kruks makes a strong case for why Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity can provide us with alternative ways of thinking about ethical issues. As such, this book is a welcome addition to feminist philosophy, and political theory more generally.

Notes

¹ For an interesting account of the links between Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, see Fulbrook.

² Kruks describes how Beauvoir chose to support the FLN even when they forcibly returned Boupasha to Algeria against her will. Although Hamili wanted Beauvoir to try and stop this, Beauvoir refused to interfere in FLN internal politics.

² Lori Marso offers an interesting comparison of how Arendt and Beauvoir use their respective reportage of the trials of Robert Brasillach and Adolf Eichmann to think about judgement. Like Kruks, she sees ambiguity as giving Beauvoir insights into judgement that Arendt misses.

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