

Kristina Arp

The bonds of freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist ethic

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Simone de Beauvoir says of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: "Of all my books, that is the one that today irritates me the most" (Beauvoir 1965, 67). But Michele Le Doeuff has cautioned us to be wary of Beauvoir's sometimes self-deprecating claims (that she is no philosopher for example) (Le Doeuff 1991) and Kristina Arp now gives us convincing evidence, contra Beauvoir's own misapprehensions, of the value and originality of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

In *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics*, Arp provides the first comprehensive analysis of Beauvoir's ethics revealing that this is by no means an "irritating" book but instead a significant contribution to and extension of existentialism. In a detailed and nuanced reading, Arp contends that Beauvoir extends existentialist conceptions of freedom by demonstrating the operation of a moral freedom, in addition to the ontological freedom to which we, Sartre claimed, are all condemned.

Importantly, Arp not only explains and analyses Beauvoir's position in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* itself but also situates this work within existentialism more broadly and in relation to Beauvoir's own earlier essays and novels. Arp provides clear and concise vignettes of the philosophical theories of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and traces Beauvoir's reception of and engagement with their work. She also evaluates Beauvoir's earlier work, identifying the similarities to and differences from *The Ethics*. Arp outlines the theoretical trajectory from a Sartrean and Hegelian position whereby "each consciousness seeks the death of the other" (Hegel, quoted in Arp, 2001, 21) discernable in *She Came to Stay* to an acknowledgement of the "need to forge bounds with others" (Arp, 2001, 27) in *Who Shall Die?*, which is finally fully fleshed out as a theory of moral freedom in which "working with others, not for others, can give human life meaning" (Arp, 2001, 42) in *The Ethics*.

Having contextualized Beauvoir's work and traced the transition in her thinking from antagonism to respect and reciprocity in self-other relations Arp then begins her analysis of *The Ethics* itself. For Arp, Beauvoir's main thesis is that "in order to be genuinely free a person needs to interact with others who are working to develop genuine freedom" (Arp 2001, 47). This claim is founded on a conception of human existence that recognizes both its carnal and its immaterial aspects. This ambiguous existence—involving both mind and body—explains why ethics is required. If we were atomistic consciousnesses morality would be irrelevant. But as we are vulnerable living bodies, and at the same time free and capable of judgment, ethical life and ethical acts and decisions become necessary. Arp carefully traces both the influence of existing existential thought in Beauvoir's formulation of ethics and the radical new perspective that

Beauvoir develops from this foundation. As an existentialist, Beauvoir contends that we are free and should embrace rather than reject this freedom. Yet, Beauvoir does not accept, as Sartre did (at least in *Being and Nothingness*), that our freedom conflicts with that of others, and moreover she contends that the self requires the other's freedom in order to reach for her own freedom.

In order to explain how we can be at once free and yet also reaching toward freedom Arp points to Beauvoir's distinction between "natural freedom" (which Arp calls "ontological freedom"), which we all possess, and "moral freedom," which we attain through the enactment of our freedom. As Arp points out Beauvoir's discussion of refusal of freedom parallels, though is also more detailed than, Sartre's conception of bad faith. However, Beauvoir's originality lies in the way she links my freedom with that of others. Even ontological freedom is reliant on the like freedom of others. Our existence as free agents involves our engagement with the world so as to disclose the world. It is through consciousness that we give meaning and significance to, and thereby disclose, the world. But this meaning is not constituted in isolation. Rather the world is constituted, or rather is disclosed, jointly with others. Arp explains that for Beauvoir: "If human freedom, even at the level of bare ontological freedom, is always at the same time a disclosure of a world, then the existence of other human subjects is the condition of this freedom" (Arp 2001, 66).

While even bare ontological freedom is reliant on others, this inter-subjective necessity is extended in moral freedom. Moral freedom involves an active desire for the disclosure of the world. This involves a temporal dimension as we engage with others in enacting this desire for a continuing disclosure into the future. As Arp writes: "Others open the future for me....The meaning that is bestowed by the future on my actions comes from other free subjects who in concert with or in opposition to me create the future in the present through their projects and plans" (Arp 2001, 71).

Arp goes on to discuss more fully how Beauvoir's ethics can be read as existentialist and to deflect some of the criticisms of existentialist ethics as subjectivist. She also provides a thoughtful elaboration of Beauvoir's notion of moral freedom explaining how it impacts on a politics of liberation. Finally, she explores the relation between the conception of freedom in *The Ethics* and the discussion of immanence and transcendence in *The Second Sex* and provides a way to overcome at least some of the apparent inconsistencies that emerge between these two accounts.

Beauvoir scholarship necessarily, initially, focused on demonstrating that Beauvoir is more than simply an insignificant philosopher who reiterates the work of others but is instead, what Deleuze and Guattari have called, a "concept creator" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 15-34). This important early valorization of Beauvoir's work, which was necessary to save it from philosophical obscurity, has paved the way for work that reinterprets Beauvoir, perhaps in conjunction with other philosophers, to demonstrate her relevance for current issues and debates. While both these approaches—her valorization and her reinterpretation—may be valuable and useful, Kristana Arp has contributed to a third and perhaps more respectful approach within Beauvoir scholarship. She provides a comprehensive and considered reading of Beauvoir's ethics, which points to both her originality and her current relevance but more importantly undertakes the serious task of providing a detailed account of and commentary on Beauvoir's

concept of moral freedom. As such this book is not only essential reading for Beauvoir scholars and a useful tool for students, but also an inspiring example of what Judith Butler, in another context, advocates when she appeals “For a Careful Reading.” This is precisely what Arp so shinningly provides.

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