

Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics

An Introduction for Beginning Students

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Intro to Ethics

Simone de Beauvoir: A Life of Philosophical Engagement (1908-1986)

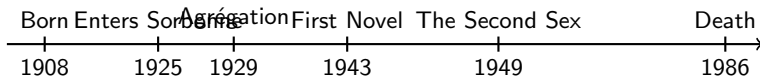
- Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris to a middle-class family and became one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century.
- She attended the Sorbonne where she studied philosophy and met Jean-Paul Sartre, beginning a lifelong intellectual partnership.
- De Beauvoir wrote across many genres including philosophy, novels, essays, and memoirs, using each to explore human freedom and ethics.
- She actively engaged in the political struggles of her time, including World War II resistance, decolonization movements, and second-wave feminism.

Key Works

- *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) - philosophical treatise on ethics
- *The Second Sex* (1949) - groundbreaking feminist analysis
- *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) - first volume of autobiography

Early Life and Education: The Making of a Philosopher

- De Beauvoir received a traditional Catholic education in her early years but rejected religion at age 14, declaring herself an atheist.
- She excelled academically, completing her baccalauréat with distinctions in mathematics and philosophy.
- At the Sorbonne, she studied philosophy alongside luminaries like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lévi-Strauss.
- She passed the agrégation in philosophy in 1929, becoming the youngest person ever to pass the highly competitive exam.



Intellectual Partnerships: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the Existentialist Circle

- De Beauvoir and Sartre formed the center of a vibrant intellectual community in Paris, especially at Café de Flore.
- Their relationship challenged traditional notions of love and commitment, emphasizing intellectual freedom and honesty.
- She maintained important intellectual dialogues with other philosophers including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus.
- While influenced by Sartre's existentialism, de Beauvoir developed her own distinct philosophical voice and contributions.

The Existentialist Circle

Key members of de Beauvoir's intellectual community included:

- Jean-Paul Sartre (philosopher)
- Albert Camus (novelist/philosopher)
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty (phenomenologist)
- Raymond Aron (sociologist)

Writing as Resistance: De Beauvoir During World War II

- During the Nazi occupation of France, de Beauvoir remained in Paris and continued teaching philosophy.
- She joined the French Resistance, though her participation was primarily intellectual rather than in direct combat.
- De Beauvoir wrote her first novel *She Came to Stay* (1943) during this period, exploring themes of freedom and interpersonal conflict.
- The war experience profoundly shaped her ethical thinking, highlighting questions about individual responsibility during political crisis.

War Experience	Philosophical Impact
Nazi Occupation	Questioning absolute freedom
Political Resistance	Ethics of engagement
Material Deprivation	Embodied existence
Witnessing Collaboration	Bad faith and responsibility

Table: World War II's Influence on De Beauvoir's Thought

Global Impact: Travels, Activism, and Political Engagement

- After World War II, de Beauvoir traveled extensively, visiting the United States, China, and the Soviet Union.
- Her travels informed her political critique of colonialism, particularly evident in her writing about the Algerian War.
- She cofounded the journal *Les Temps Modernes* with Sartre, using it as a platform for political and philosophical debate.
- In her later years, she became increasingly active in feminist movements, signing the famous Manifesto of the 343 supporting abortion rights.

Political Causes:

- Anti-colonialism
- Women's rights
- Anti-Vietnam War
- Social justice

Travel Influences:

- USA (American imperialism)
- China (Communism)
- USSR (Soviet system)
- Algeria (Colonialism)

Life as Praxis: How de Beauvoir Lived Her Philosophy

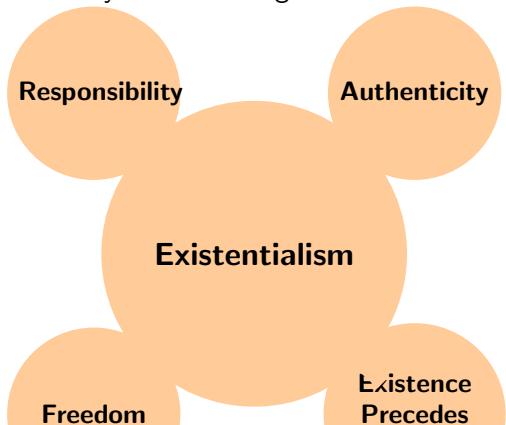
- De Beauvoir rejected traditional marriage and motherhood, living in accordance with her philosophical views on freedom.
- She supported herself financially through teaching and writing, maintaining economic independence throughout her life.
- Her personal relationships embodied her critique of traditional gender roles and monogamy.
- Her later activism for women's rights demonstrated her commitment to moving from theory to practice.

Philosophical Praxis in Action

De Beauvoir's decision to remain childless was not merely personal but philosophical: "My life was in my head, not in my ovaries." This choice reflected her commitment to intellectual freedom and rejection of socially prescribed feminine roles, embodying the existentialist principle that we define ourselves through our choices rather than predetermined essences.

What is Existentialism? Core Concepts and Ideas

- **Existentialism** is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice.
- Existentialists argue that humans have no predetermined essence or purpose beyond what they create through their own actions..



Existence Precedes Essence: The Fundamental Existentialist Claim

- **Existence precedes essence** means that humans first exist in the world, then create their meaning or purpose through their choices.
- This directly challenges traditional philosophical views where humans have a predetermined nature or purpose given by God or metaphysical reality.
- For de Beauvoir, this principle grounds her understanding that women are not determined by biology but define themselves through action.
- This concept establishes the foundational existentialist commitment to radical freedom and responsibility.

Traditional View vs. Existentialist View

Traditional View

Humans have predetermined essence
Meaning comes from external sources
Nature determines behavior
Fixed human nature

Existentialist View

Humans define themselves through actions
Meaning is created by the individual
Freedom shapes identity
Open-ended human becoming

Freedom and Responsibility: The Burden of Choice

- For existentialists like de Beauvoir, humans are **radically free** to make choices that define who they are.
- This freedom is not a gift but a burden, as it comes with complete responsibility for one's choices and their consequences.
- De Beauvoir argues that we cannot escape this freedom—even choosing not to choose is itself a choice.
- With radical freedom comes **anguish**, the emotional experience of recognizing the weight of our responsibility.

The Burden of Freedom

De Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: “Man is condemned to freedom, and from the moment he is thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to him to give life a meaning.” This responsibility creates existential anxiety but also opens the possibility for authentic ethical action.

Bad Faith: How We Flee from Freedom

- **Bad faith** (mauvaise foi) is the existentialist concept describing how humans deny their freedom and responsibility.
- People in bad faith pretend they are determined by external factors like biology, social roles, or past events.
- De Beauvoir identifies bad faith in women who claim they can't pursue careers because of "feminine nature" or in men who claim "that's just how men are."
- Bad faith provides psychological comfort but prevents authentic ethical engagement with life.

Forms of Bad Faith

Defining oneself by social roles

Avoiding difficult choices

Claiming biological determinism

Hiding behind tradition or convention

Authenticity vs. Inauthenticity: Choosing One's Life

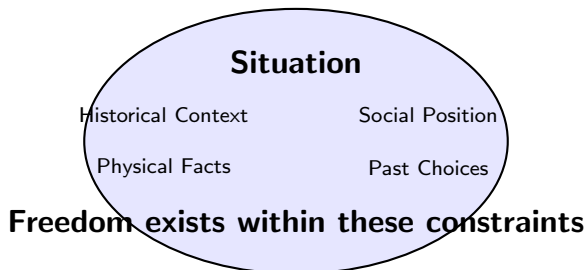
- **Authenticity** means acknowledging one's freedom and taking responsibility for creating one's self through choices.
- An authentic person recognizes that nothing—not God, society, or nature—determines who they must be.
- **Inauthenticity** means living according to external expectations or pretending one has no choice.
- For de Beauvoir, the path to ethical living begins with authentic recognition of one's freedom.

Examples of Authentic vs. Inauthentic Living

- **Authentic:** A woman chooses not to have children because she values other pursuits, fully acknowledging this as her free choice rather than claiming inability or disinterest.
- **Inauthentic:** A person remains in a career they hate but claims they "have no choice" because of financial obligations, rather than acknowledging this as a value decision they continue to make.

The Situation: Freedom Within Constraints

- De Beauvoir uses the term **situation** to describe the concrete circumstances that both enable and limit our freedom.
- Our situation includes physical facts (body, health), social position (class, gender), historical context, and past choices.
- While we don't choose our initial situation, we do choose how we respond to it and what meaning we give it.
- Understanding one's situation is essential for exercising authentic freedom rather than abstract, impossible freedom.



De Beauvoir's Contributions to Existentialist Thought

- De Beauvoir extended existentialist concepts beyond abstract philosophy to address concrete human experiences.
- She argued that freedom must be understood in relation to embodied existence and social context, not as pure abstraction.
- Her focus on the lived experience of women revealed how existentialist concepts manifest differently across genders.
- She developed the concept of **situated freedom**—the idea that freedom is always exercised within concrete constraints.

De Beauvoir vs. Sartre

Sartre's Focus

Abstract freedom
Individual consciousness
Ontological questions
Universal human condition

De Beauvoir's Focus

Situated freedom
Social relations
Ethical questions
Gendered experiences

The Second Sex: Revolutionizing Feminist Philosophy

- Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* applied existentialist analysis to the situation of women.
- The book examines how women have been defined as the **Other** in relation to men, who are positioned as the Subject.
- De Beauvoir analyzes female experience through biology, psychology, history, and myth to reveal how femininity is constructed.
- This groundbreaking work laid the theoretical foundation for second-wave feminism and contemporary gender studies.

Revolutionary Impact

The Second Sex was immediately controversial upon publication for its frank discussion of women's bodies, sexuality, and oppression. It was placed on the Vatican's list of prohibited books, yet sold over 20,000 copies in its first week. The text remains foundational to feminist philosophy and continues to influence contemporary discussions of gender worldwide.

One Is Not Born, But Rather Becomes, A Woman: Social Construction of Gender

- De Beauvoir's famous statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" introduced the concept of **gender as socially constructed**.
- She distinguishes between biological sex (physical characteristics) and gender (social roles and expectations).
- This insight revealed that what society considers "feminine" is not natural or inevitable but learned and enforced.
- By showing gender is constructed, de Beauvoir established that women's subordination is not determined by biology but by social structures.

The Process of "Becoming a Woman"

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| - Childhood socialization | - Family expectations |
| - Education differences | - Religious teachings |
| - Media representations | - Economic limitations |

The Concept of 'Other': Women as the Second Sex

- De Beauvoir argues that throughout history, men have positioned themselves as the essential Subject and women as the inessential **Other**.
- This othering process defines woman as relative to man—she is what he is not (emotional vs. rational, passive vs. active).
- Unlike other types of otherness (race, class), the relationship between men and women involves intimate proximity and economic dependence.
- This concept helps explain why women have often participated in their own subordination, internalizing their status as Other.

The Logic of Othering

Beauvoir writes: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” This dynamic appears in language (mankind includes women, but womankind excludes men), symbolism (God as male), and social structures (male as default, female as exception). This framework reveals that what appears as natural difference is actually a power relation.

Immanence vs. Transcendence: Gendered Experiences of Freedom

- De Beauvoir uses the terms **immanence** (being confined within oneself) and **transcendence** (projecting outward) to analyze gendered experience.
- Historically, men have been associated with transcendence—creating, building, exploring, and pursuing projects in the world.
- Women have been confined to immanence—maintaining the home, repeating cyclical tasks, and caring for others' bodies.
- This division denies women full human freedom, as authentic existence requires both immanence and transcendence.

Immanence (Associated with Femininity)	Transcendence (Associated with Masculinity)
Repetitive, cyclical tasks Maintaining life Private sphere Body-oriented	Progressive, linear projects Creating new things Public sphere Mind-oriented

Myths of Femininity: How Culture Shapes Gender

- De Beauvoir identifies various **myths of femininity** that shape cultural expectations of women.
- These myths (woman as mother, virgin, temptress, etc.) limit women's freedom by presenting restrictive ideals as natural.
- Literature, religion, and psychology have all contributed to these myths that position woman as mysterious Other.
- These myths serve to justify women's subordination while making it appear natural and inevitable.

Key Feminine Myths in Western Culture

De Beauvoir examines how literature and culture perpetuate contradictory myths of femininity:

- The nurturing, selfless mother (life-giver)
- The pure, innocent virgin (moral guardian)
- The dangerous temptress (threat to male reason)
- The mysterious, unpredictable creature (unknowable Other)

Each myth limits women's humanity while serving male interests.

Lived Experience: The Embodied Reality of Gender

- De Beauvoir introduces **lived experience** (l'expérience vécue) as a philosophical concept examining how gender is experienced in the body.
- She analyzes experiences like menstruation, sexual initiation, and motherhood to reveal how biological facts acquire social meanings.
- These experiences are not merely biological but are shaped by cultural attitudes, economic factors, and social expectations.
- Understanding lived experience reveals that biology alone doesn't determine gender—it's how biological facts are interpreted and experienced.

Aspects of Lived Experience Examined by de Beauvoir:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| - Sexual development & initiation | - Motherhood & reproduction |
| - Marriage & domestic life | - Aging & bodily changes |

Liberation Through Work and Independence

- De Beauvoir argues that **economic independence** is essential for women's liberation from subordination.
- Meaningful work offers women access to transcendence—the ability to create and engage in the world beyond the home.
- She criticizes the double burden many women face: expected to work professionally while still handling all domestic duties.
- True liberation requires both economic and psychological independence from men and rejection of imposed feminine ideals.

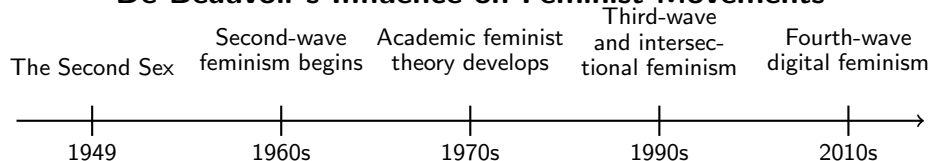
The Path to Liberation

“It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice.” De Beauvoir argues that work alone is insufficient—women must also challenge the cultural myths that define femininity and develop a sense of personal agency and independent identity.

De Beauvoir's Feminist Legacy: Influence on Modern Feminism

- De Beauvoir's analysis laid the groundwork for distinguishing between sex and gender, a fundamental concept in contemporary feminism.
- Her critique of women's objectification influenced later feminist analyses of media representation and sexual politics.
- The concept of situated freedom helped develop intersectional approaches that examine how gender interacts with race, class, and sexuality.
- Her insistence that women's liberation requires both material changes and conceptual shifts remains central to feminist theory.

De Beauvoir's Influence on Feminist Movements



The Ethics of Ambiguity: An Introduction

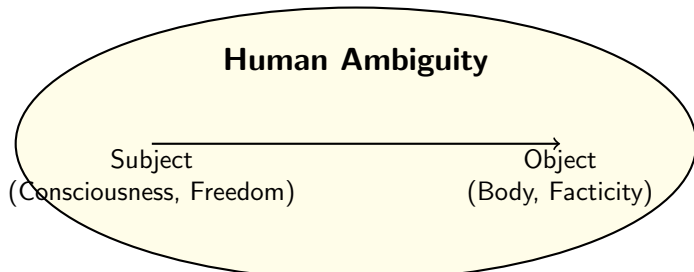
- Published in 1947, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is de Beauvoir's most systematic work on ethics.
- The text develops an existentialist ethics based on the recognition of human freedom and the absence of fixed moral values.
- De Beauvoir argues that traditional ethical systems fail because they seek absolute, universal principles that ignore human ambiguity.
- The work establishes that authentic ethics must acknowledge the tension between our freedom and our facticity (material limitations).

The Central Question

How can we establish ethics in a world without absolute values? De Beauvoir addresses the challenge posed by Dostoyevsky's famous question: "If God is dead, is everything permitted?" Her answer is that human freedom itself provides the basis for ethics, not through abstract rules but through reciprocal recognition of others' freedom.

Ambiguity as the Human Condition: Neither Pure Object Nor Pure Subject

- **Ambiguity** refers to the fundamental tension in human existence: we are both subjects (conscious beings) and objects (physical bodies).
- We are simultaneously free to choose and constrained by material conditions we did not choose.
- We are both separate individuals and fundamentally connected to others through shared humanity.
- De Beauvoir argues that traditional ethics fail because they attempt to resolve this ambiguity rather than recognizing it as the human condition.



Ethical Freedom: Beyond Nihilism and Absolutism

- De Beauvoir rejects both **nihilism** (the belief that no values exist) and **absolutism** (the belief in fixed, universal values).
- She argues that the absence of God or absolute values doesn't mean "everything is permitted"—human freedom itself establishes ethical limits.
- We create values through our choices, but these values aren't merely subjective; they arise from our shared human condition.
- The recognition of others' freedom becomes the foundation for ethics in a world without absolute principles.

Between Two Ethical Extremes

Ethical Absolutism

Fixed universal values exist
Values transcend human choice
Denies human freedom

Ethical Nihilism

No values exist at all
Values are purely subjective
Renders choices meaningless

De Beauvoir proposes a third way: values emerge from human freedom itself and our recognition of others' freedom.

Assuming Our Freedom: The Basis of Ethical Action

- For de Beauvoir, ethics begins with **assuming our freedom**—honestly acknowledging that we make choices rather than being determined.
- This means recognizing that our actions create who we are; there is no pre-established self that our actions merely express.
- Assuming freedom also means accepting the full weight of responsibility for the consequences of our choices.
- This authentic assumption of freedom is the foundation for all genuinely ethical action.

The Fundamental Ethical Choice

De Beauvoir writes: "To will oneself free is also to will others free." This means that authentic freedom isn't merely doing what one wants—it's recognizing that one's own freedom is bound up with the freedom of others. This recognition transforms individual freedom into a basis for ethical relations with others.

The Serious Person: Avoiding Ethical Responsibility

- De Beauvoir describes the **serious person** as someone who escapes freedom by treating values as absolute and external.
- The serious person claims to serve pre-established values (God, Nation, Tradition, Family) rather than taking responsibility for creating values.
- This attitude allows the serious person to avoid the anxiety of freedom and justify imposing their values on others.
- Examples include the religious fundamentalist, the unquestioning patriot, or anyone who claims "this is just how things are."

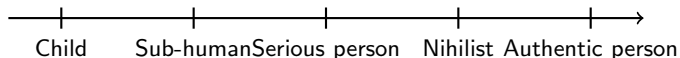
The Danger of Seriousness

The serious person claims to serve absolute values but actually uses these values to escape freedom. This perspective is dangerous because it leads to tyranny—since these values are considered absolute, the serious person feels justified in imposing them on others by force. The 20th-century totalitarian regimes demonstrate the ethical and political dangers of the serious attitude.

The Stages of Ethical Development: From Child to Authentic Adult

- De Beauvoir outlines several ways people relate to freedom, from the child who hasn't yet discovered freedom to the authentic person who fully assumes it.
- The **child** lives in a world of ready-made values, taking the adult world as fixed and given.
- The **sub-human** refuses freedom and lives purely in the moment without projects or values.
- The **serious person** escapes freedom by serving external values.
- The **nihilist** recognizes freedom but responds with destructive denial of all values.

De Beauvoir's Stages of Ethical Development



Movement from unreflective acceptance of values → to destructive rejection of values → to creative establishment of values

Reciprocal Freedom: Ethics in Relation to Others

- De Beauvoir's ethics centers on the concept of **reciprocal freedom**—recognizing and supporting others' freedom while exercising our own.
- Unlike Sartre's early view that others threaten our freedom, de Beauvoir sees the possibility of ethical relations between free individuals.
- We need others to recognize our freedom for it to be concrete and meaningful rather than empty abstraction.
- This mutual recognition establishes an ethical bond that isn't based on external authority but on shared commitment to freedom.

Unethical Relation to Others	Ethical Relation to Others
Seeing others as means to an end	Recognizing others as ends in themselves
Imposing one's values on others	Respecting others' freedom to choose
Treating others as objects	Acknowledging others as subjects
Using others for one's projects	Creating shared projects with others

Table: De Beauvoir's View of Interpersonal Ethics

The Appeal to Freedom: Justifying Ethical Choices

- De Beauvoir introduces the concept of **the appeal** (l'appel)—the ethical call we make to others to recognize and support our projects.
- When we undertake a project (a political cause, artistic creation, etc.), we implicitly appeal to others to acknowledge its value.
- This appeal is not coercive but invites others to freely join our project or recognize its legitimacy.
- The appeal respects others' freedom while seeking their participation or recognition.

Examples of Ethical Appeals

The artist creates work that appeals to an audience to recognize its value. The activist appeals to others to join a cause without forcing participation. The teacher appeals to students to freely engage with ideas rather than imposing them. In each case, the appeal invites rather than compels, creating the possibility for shared values that emerge from freedom rather than authority.

Ethics Without Absolutes: Finding Meaning in Ambiguity

- De Beauvoir argues that ethical life requires embracing ambiguity rather than seeking certainty in absolute rules or values.
- We must recognize that moral choices are made in specific situations without the guidance of universal principles.
- This doesn't mean ethics is merely subjective—our shared human condition and need for reciprocal freedom provide a basis for judgment.
- The authentic ethical person remains open to ambiguity while taking responsibility for creating meaning through choices.

The Challenge of Ethical Ambiguity

“Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art.” De Beauvoir emphasizes that there is no formula for ethical action—each situation requires fresh judgment and a willingness to assume responsibility for our choices without the comfort of absolute rules. This makes ethics more demanding but also more authentically human.

Beyond Kant: De Beauvoir's Critique of Universal Ethics

- De Beauvoir critiques Kantian ethics for abstracting moral principles from concrete human situations.
- She rejects Kant's **categorical imperative**—the principle that one should act only according to rules that could be universal laws.
- For de Beauvoir, this approach ignores the specific contexts and relationships that give moral choices their meaning.
- While Kant seeks universal rules that apply in all cases, de Beauvoir emphasizes situated judgments that respond to particular circumstances.

Kantian Ethics	De Beauvoir's Ethics
Universal moral laws	Situated ethical judgments
Duty-based morality	Freedom-based ethics
Rational principles	Embodied decision-making
Abstract moral subject	Socially situated human being

Challenging Utilitarianism: Why Happiness Isn't Enough

- De Beauvoir challenges **utilitarianism**, which judges actions by whether they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
- She argues that utilitarian calculation treats humans as objects whose suffering and happiness can be quantified and compared.
- This approach ignores the unique freedom of each person and reduces ethics to a technical problem of maximizing pleasure.
- For de Beauvoir, the ethical goal isn't happiness but freedom—the opportunity to create meaning through authentic choices.

De Beauvoir's Critique of Utilitarian Ethics

- | | |
|--|---|
| • Reduces humans to calculable quantities | • Establishes external criterion of "utility" |
| • Treats happiness as a simple, measurable good | • Makes ethics a technical problem |
| • Ignores the value of freedom itself | • Overlooks meaning beyond pleasure/pain |
| • Can justify sacrificing individuals for majority | • Disregards ethical importance of intention |

Marxism and Ethics: De Beauvoir's Critical Engagement

- De Beauvoir engages with **Marxism**, appreciating its analysis of material conditions while criticizing its deterministic aspects.
- She agrees with Marx that economic conditions shape our possibilities but rejects the idea that history follows predetermined laws.
- De Beauvoir critiques Marxist ethics for sometimes sacrificing present individuals for an abstract future society.
- She argues that revolution must be grounded in ethical commitment to freedom, not just economic analysis.

De Beauvoir and Marx: Points of Agreement and Disagreement

Points of Agreement

Importance of material conditions
Critique of bourgeois individualism
Need for social transformation
Analysis of exploitation

Points of Disagreement

Economic determinism
Subordination of ethics to politics
Sacrifice of present for future
Belief in historical inevitability

Existentialism vs. Traditional Religious Ethics

- De Beauvoir contrasts existentialist ethics with **religious ethics** that derive moral principles from divine authority.
- She argues that religious ethics often avoid ambiguity by establishing absolute rules that followers must obey.
- While religious ethics provides certainty, it can lead to the "serious attitude" that escapes responsibility for creating values.
- For de Beauvoir, authentic ethics requires assuming responsibility rather than following pre-established commands.

Religious Ethics vs. Existentialist Ethics	
Religious Ethics: Source of value is external (God, scripture, tradition)	Existentialist Ethics: Source of value is human freedom (personal choice, responsibility)

Situational Ethics: Context, Freedom, and Ethical Choice

- De Beauvoir argues for a **situational ethics** that considers the specific context of each moral decision.
- She rejects both abstract moral principles and complete moral relativism in favor of contextualized judgment.
- Each ethical situation must be evaluated in terms of its particular features, the people involved, and material conditions.
- This approach recognizes that ethical choices occur in concrete situations with specific constraints and possibilities.

Ethics in Context: A Case Example

De Beauvoir discusses violence as an ethical dilemma: Is violence ever justified? Rather than offering an absolute yes or no, she argues that violence must be evaluated in specific situations. Violence in self-defense differs from violence to oppress others. Violence as part of liberation movements differs from violence that maintains oppression. The ethical evaluation depends on whether the violence expands or diminishes human freedom in that specific context.

De Beauvoir's Ethical Legacy: Influence on Contemporary Thought

- De Beauvoir's ethics has influenced diverse philosophical movements including feminist ethics, existential psychotherapy, and political theory.
- Her emphasis on situated freedom anticipates contemporary approaches that examine how identity factors affect ethical choices.
- Her analysis of gender demonstrates how abstract ethical principles often ignore the specific situations of marginalized groups.
- De Beauvoir's integrative approach—connecting philosophy, literature, and politics—continues to inspire interdisciplinary ethical thinking.

Contemporary Relevance

De Beauvoir's ethics remains highly relevant to contemporary issues: Her critique of abstract universalism speaks to debates about global ethics across cultural differences. Her analysis of how gender affects ethical experience informs feminist ethics of care. Her emphasis on situated judgment helps address complex bioethical dilemmas. Her thought continues to evolve through the work of philosophers like Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Marion Young.