Robbie Ritchie

Dr. Zakin

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Beauvoir’s Warnings and Sartre’s Optimism

Existentialism is a philosophy based on the idea that existence precedes essence. This concept can be examined to reveal many interesting philosophical theories. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre are prominent existentialists who wrote *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *Existentialism is a Humanism* respectively. In these works they come to many similar conclusions, such as man’s inherent freedom or the lack of an objective morality. To a certain degree, their logic almost parallels one another’s, however their works differ fundamentally in two different ways. Sartre wrote his work as a defense of existentialism and makes an effort to repudiate several common claims brought against it, while Beauvoir warns of the pitfalls man may encounter when does not embrace the ambiguities she outlines. In most aspects of their works, they agree with each other, despite varying goals, however in their conclusions about the intersubjectivity of freedom, their respective intentions can be brought to light.

To both Sartre and Beauvoir, the idea of the Cartesian cogito is central to their philosophies. This idea, introduced by René Descartes, put simply means that the thing that grounds man in the world is his own consciousness, and through that he is able to understand the world around him. Beauvoir relies heavily on this concept when she says that “[b]y uprooting himself from the world, man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him” (EA 11). This means that man exists in the world only by recognizing his separation from the rest of the world, and in doing so, the rest of the world sees him as separate. For Beauvoir, this is one of the first ambiguities which she sees as an obstacle to man being able to disclose the world, and thus asserts that man cannot shy away from this fact. Sartre takes a similar view on the Cartesian cogito saying that it is “the very moment in which man fully comprehends his isolation, rendering us incapable of re-establishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self, and who are inaccessible to us through the *cogito*” (EH 18). While this sounds like a darker take on the cogito than Beauvoir, Sartre argues for man’s freedom as an individual using this and the fundamental belief of existentialism.

The idea that existence precedes essence is the most essential concept in both Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s works. According to Sartre, the idea existence precedes essence means simply “that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. […] Thus there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it” (EH 22), an idea that critics of existentialism find to be too pessimistic. Sartre on the other hand finds this claim to be liberating. There is no *a priori* definition for man, so each man is responsible for creating his being. While this realization is what Sartre calls despair, it is also optimistic in the sense that it allows man to truly pursue the world in the way he sees fit. This idea ties in strongly to Beauvoir’s writing as well. She agrees with Sartre on this subject, but she goes further in discussing one of the ambiguities resulting from existence preceding essence, the adolescent crisis. A child is born into what Beauvoir calls a serious world, one in which the rules and meanings are concrete and predetermined, since a child “knows that nothing can ever happen through him; everything is already given; his acts engage nothing, not even himself” (EA 39), but eventually he will realize his own freedom. This is what is meant by the adolescent crisis; by the time man realizes that he chooses himself, he has already become somebody without his realizing it. The pain of this realization, Sartre’s despair, causes some people to choose to live in an infantile world by pretending that the world around them is serious and denying their own freedom to choose. Beauvoir warns of this choice as one full of error and willful ignorance.

Beauvoir and Sartre both support strongly the belief that man’s freedom is inherent and cannot be avoided. Sartre takes this to be the point on which he builds the idea that man’s existence is a creative one. He says simply that “in one sense, choice is possible; what is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice” (EH 44). This, taken with the fact that existence precedes essence, implies that man must choose himself. Man cannot avoid that he must make choices, and there is no *a priori* set of values on which he can base his decision, so his decisions always uniquely define himself the way he wants to be defined. This is why, to Sartre, moral choice is like a work of art. A painting cannot be objectively bad, because there are no *a priori* rules of painting which tell man how he should paint, so similarly when man makes a moral choice, it cannot be called objectively good or bad. In this sense, Beauvoir’s argument differs slightly from Sartre. To start, she does not agree that there is no objectively bad painting, so to speak. To her, a painter who paints a bad painting and is satisfied with it is similar to what she calls a sub-man, a man who denies the passion of his existence, that is to say, he wishes to deny his own freedom, “the less he exists, the less is there reason for him to exist, since these reasons are created only by existing” (EA 46). While Sartre simply dismisses this person by stating that man must always choose, Beauvoir details the flaws of the sub-man to emphasize the importance of accepting one’s freedom. The reason that the sub-man’s feelings are unfounded is because “the fact is that no man is a datum which is passively suffered; the rejection of existence is still another way of existing; nobody can know the peace of the tomb while he is still alive” (EA 46-47), which is very close to what Sartre argues in his work. So while her opinion differs slightly from Sartre in this aspect, she still agrees with the conclusion which he comes to.

Because every man has the capability to choose for himself, and existence precedes essence, man must decide for himself what is moral. He may have some preconceived notion of what is moral, instilled in him by society, but he has the choice to believe or disbelieve this notion. Sartre justifies this concept on the grounds that existence precedes essence, and that there is no god. Since existence precedes essence, if there were to be an *a priori* good, it would have to come from a being whose essence precedes its existence, however, since Sartre does not believe in god, there is no such being. Furthermore “if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom” (EH 29). This outlook on existentialism is precisely why Sartre is trying to convince his audience of its intrinsic creativity. He takes a world in which man has no basis but his experience to make decisions on as one that allows man to find meaning in the world, rather than one in which action is meaningless. In fact, he states that action is the only way for man to truly demonstrate his feelings, “I may say that I love a friend well enough to sacrifice a certain sum of money for his sake, but I can claim that only if I have done so. I can say that I love my mother enough to stay by her side only if I actually stayed with her” (EH 32), which is quite contrary to the charges often put against existentialism. Beauvoir also explicitly defends against these claims, but, as with the rest of her arguments, she focuses on why it means man must embrace his own freedom more than Sartre does. The non-existence of god is also important to Beauvoir’s argument, “a God can pardon, efface, and compensate. But if God does not exist, man’s faults are inexpiable” (EA 15), a much more serious outlook than Sartre. However, while she decides to focus on the possible detriments of denying existentialism, her argument still aligns with Sartre’s very closely. In saying that “one can not start by saying that our earthly destiny *has* or *has not* importance. It is up to man to make it important to be a man, and he alone can feel his success or failure” (EA 15) her sentiment differs only slightly. She recognizes the optimism which Sartre associates with existentialism, but she also acknowledges the burden and anguish that this freedom places on a free man.

One of the last, but most important parts to the argument of intersubjective freedom is that all of man’s choices speak to the world he wishes to create. This idea is closely related to man’s freedom to choose himself, “when we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be” (EH 24). This is one of Sartre’s less optimistic points about existentialism as it places a large responsibility on man, but at the same time, it places a large amount of power into man’s hands. In a sense, man has the ability to influence the world in a way he sees fit. Not only because he gives meaning to the world himself, but also because with every action he indirectly communicates to others how he thinks the world should be. As Beauvoir puts it, “he bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well” (EA 15). On this point, Sartre and Beauvoir agree with one another almost completely, as it is one of the most important steps both authors take in their arguments to conclude the intersubjectivity of freedom.

Beauvoir and Sartre’s arguments align very closely in many aspects, but in the final step they take in justifying the intersubjectivity of freedom, they differ, however they are still based upon agreed concepts. Sartre takes freedom’s connection to action as the basis of intersubjectivity, because “freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged too will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own” (EH 48-49). While Sartre does not provide much more insight into this idea, bringing it slightly into question, it fits very well with the stern optimism he wishes to convey. Not only does he portray existentialism as a philosophy of action, but also as one in which all men’s freedoms are interconnected, which is extremely positive compared to the pessimistic solipsistic philosophy its critics make it out to be. Beauvoir on the other hand bases the interconnectivity of freedom in man’s separation from other men. Similar to the Cartesian cogito, man can only know the world from his own perspective, but we are still able to recognize other men as individuals like ourselves. This recognition of others is key, “if I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. […] by taking the world away from me, others also give it to me, since a thing is given to me only by the moment which snatches it from me” (EA 76), yet another ambiguity. This can be considered as one of the key reasons why Beauvoir emphasizes embracing ambiguity, to acknowledge one’s own freedom, and in doing so realize the freedom of other. Unlike Sartre, she does not attempt to make this concept encouraging, but rather portrays it as the harsh reality it is.

It is clear that in many regards, Beauvoir and Sartre put forth almost identical arguments. From fundamental arguments to existentialism, such as existence precedes essence, to more complex ones such as man’s responsibility for the world he has created, the difference between the two writings is slight, however Beauvoir provides more content in outlining her ambiguities and their importance. The question may still be asked, which one constructed a better argument, and from what I have shown, I argue that they are both excellent arguments constructed to fit different agendas. Sartre wishes to demonstrate that existentialism is not a pessimistic or nonsense philosophy by revealing its inherent creativity, while Beauvoir believes existentialism holds the way for man to disclose the world around him, and wants to warn people of the danger in denying its key tenants.

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