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Chapter 1

‘Pyrrhus et Cineas’ and ‘Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté’

*Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* constitute Simone de Beauvoir’s early philosophical works, prior to the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949. Yet, until relatively recently, most critics have tended to regard them as derivative of Sartre’s *L’Être et le néant*. Such a stance, which negates Beauvoir’s independent contribution to the development of existential phenomenology, is increasingly hard to justify. In this chapter, it will be evident that Beauvoir goes beyond slavish reproduction of ideas in *L’Être et le néant*, not only displaying broad knowledge of the sources of existential phenomenology, but also distancing herself from certain Sartrian notions of freedom, action, corporeality and intersubjective relations. Space constraints preclude a complete analysis here of the divergences in Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s philosophical trajectories in the 1940s, let alone across the broader spectrum of their careers. Instead, this chapter and Chapter 2 focus on Beauvoir’s notion of selfhood in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* and *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in the context of Sartre’s *L’Être et le néant* and Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) because, as Sonia Kruks and Toril Moi have noted, both these texts are important for Beauvoir’s development of her own notion of subjectivity as a situated freedom in the world.

It may be objected that by choosing to examine Beauvoir’s essays for an account of her notion of selfhood, rather than her early fiction of the 1940s, this discussion is inattentive to political issues pertaining to the relationship between gender and genre. In contrast to Sartre, it can be argued that Beauvoir, as a woman writer and philosopher, might be positioned differently to the perceived generic identity of philosophy because of psycho-social interdictions which operate regarding women’s production of philosophy in a traditionally patriarchal society. These interdictions have prevented women from fully participating in the production of philosophy in France and
elsewhere, and have ensured that the philosophy produced by women has not been received as philosophy. An intertextual approach to women’s philosophical writing would challenge masculinist definitions of philosophy and would maintain that Beauvoir’s philosophy may be found in her fiction as well as in her philosophical essays. She certainly drew upon her philosophical knowledge in her fiction, and texts such as *L’Invitée* or *Le Sang des autres* can be read as specific illustrations of certain existential issues, in particular, the parameters of the self-Other relation. However, an intertextual approach to Beauvoir’s philosophical writing is problematic for several reasons. First, she was, at times, strategic in her choice of genre and in the timing of her publications. Second, to read her fiction as disguised philosophy dismisses the literary craft of her writing and overlooks the complex issue of using the medium of literary discourse to communicate philosophical theory. Third, it can be argued that her choice of literature over philosophy is not entirely explained by gendered power relations which govern the production of intellectual and creative work. If this were the case, how and why did Beauvoir produce philosophy at all?

Beauvoir has often defended her choice of genre, asserting that different genres fulfil different functions for her. In *La Force des choses*, distinguishing between her use of the novel and essay forms, she says:

Mes essais reflètent mes options pratiques et mes certitudes intellectuelles; mes romans, l’étonnement où me jette, en gros et dans ses détails, notre condition humaine. Ils correspondent à deux ordres d’expérience qu’on ne saurait communiquer de la même manière. [. . .] Si je me suis exprimée sur deux registres, c’est que cette diversité m’était nécessaire.  

In her explanation in *La Force de l’âge* of how she came to write *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir says that ‘sur certaines choses que j’avais abordées dans *Le Sang des autres* il me restait des choses à dire, en particulier sur le rapport de l’expérience individuelle à la réalité universelle’. Beauvoir has described the early 1940s as ‘la “période morale” de ma vie littéraire’, during which she began to articulate what she had learned since 1939 about solidarity, personal responsibility towards others and the significance of death. She explains in *La Force de l’âge* that her purpose in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* was to ‘fournir à la morale existentialiste un contenu matériel’. To a certain extent, the complex narrative construction of *Le Sang des autres* had enabled
Beauvoir to explore some of these issues. The narration of events by both central protagonists, Jean Blomart and Hélène Bertrand, in the first and third person, and in flashback, enabled Beauvoir to convey that 'our lives are lived both as subject and object, as personal experience and yet inserted in a wider social and political perspective'. The range of issues raised by our relationship to others, and the constraints upon our actions in the world, cannot, however, be adequately or easily addressed within the constraints of a fictional framework; in Pyrrhus et Cinéas, all these issues could be discussed more extensively.

**Pyrrhus et Cinéas**

*Pyrrhus et Cinéas* is the first theoretical text in which Beauvoir outlines her notion of subjectivity as ‘situated’ and ‘practical’. She raises two related questions: what is the purpose of human existence and what is the nature of our relationship to the world and to others?

The focus on ‘autrui’ is established at the beginning of Beauvoir’s discussion, when she relates a number of daily incidents, in which we choose whether or not to become involved in other people’s concerns. She gives the example of the bourgeois sitting at home reading about an ascent in the Himalayas, who identifies himself with human achievement. In Beauvoir’s view such an identification is erroneous:

> En s’identifiant à son sexe, à son pays, à sa classe, à l’humanité entière, un homme peut agrandir son jardin; mais il ne l’agrandit qu’en paroles; cette identification n’est qu’une prétention vide.

We can identify with others’ projects, but if this is not accompanied on our part by active involvement, it remains empty self-deception. Here she argues that language plays an active part in the formulation of a project, but it cannot substitute for action. This is later reiterated at the end of the essay when she argues that there is no ‘outside’ to the human condition, which is always already saturated in language:

> Nous pouvons toujours nous échapper vers un “ailleurs”, mais cet ailleurs est encore quelque part, au sein de notre condition humaine; nous ne lui échappons jamais et nous n’avons aucun moyen de l’envisager du dehors pour la juger. Elle seule rend possible la parole. C’est avec elle que se définissent le bien et le mal; les mots d’utilité, de progrès, de crainte n’ont
Here language takes on a crucial role as the means to found a project. Language is a feature of the human condition, and immediately involves the existence of others. This point is likely to derive from Beauvoir’s reading of Hegel, who argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that ‘in speech, self-consciousness qua independent separate individuality, comes as such into existence, so that it exists for others’. Language is thus a crucial feature of our situation as being-with and for-others.

Beauvoir describes subjectivity here using the Sartrian terminology ‘transcendance’, although she uses it differently to Sartre. In *L’Être et le néant*, Sartre uses the term ‘transcendance’ (derived from Husserlian phenomenology) at times as a synonym for ‘le Pour-soi’ and at other times to indicate a process of being. In both cases it represents consciousness as ‘un jaillissement’, moving towards the realisation of its own possibilities by means of the Other. While Sartre acknowledges in *L’Être et le néant* that we exist in a world of others, he describes self-Other relations in the following (rather pessimistic) way:

Pendant que je tente de me libérer de l’emprise d’autrui, autrui tente de se libérer de la mienne; pendant que je cherche à asservir autrui, autrui cherche à m’asservir. […] Le conflit est le sens originel de l’être-pour-autrui.17

Although Beauvoir refers to consciousness as ‘un jaillissement’, she appears to discard this definition quite quickly. She argues for a notion of the Other as reciprocally equal, as a being who is always already included in this movement of consciousness towards its own perpetual self-construction. Although Beauvoir and Sartre are working within the same philosophical framework – drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, Hegel, Kant and Heidegger – there is already an emphasis on reciprocity in self-Other relations in Beauvoir’s argument. This is not evident in Sartre’s account of *L’Être et le néant*, where the emphasis is rather on the conflictual aspects of self-Other relations.18

Later in the first part of her essay, Beauvoir explains that although we may believe that we act according to our own specific concerns at a particular time, our actions inevitably take on a collective (and potentially different) significance in the future, which is beyond our
control. Our actions are therefore temporally situated and situated in relation to others. She argues, using Sartre’s vocabulary in *L’Être et le néant* (although using a revised notion of transcendence), that we are transcendent beings constantly striving to make ourselves exist.\(^{19}\)

At the end of the first part of *Pyrrhus et Cineas* she refutes solipsism, as she would two years later in *Tous les hommes sont mortels*:

Un homme seul au monde serait paralysé par la vision manifeste de la vanité de tous ses buts; il ne pourrait sans doute supporter de vivre. Mais l’homme n’est pas seul au monde.\(^{20}\)

In the second part, Beauvoir begins by alluding to her autobiographical project. She reasons that it is pointless to relate one’s lifestory to oneself or to look at oneself in a mirror in order to authenticate one’s existence because one can only experience oneself in isolation as a lack. For Beauvoir, this lack is effectively a lack of the Other, for only the Other can act as a guarantor of my actions and existence.\(^{21}\)

Any ‘culte du moi’, such as that proposed by Maurice Barrès, which, as a philosophy, had tempted Beauvoir during her late teens, is therefore impossible. We need the Other to act as witness to our actions, as receiver of our testimonies. This is a crucial point in relation to Beauvoir’s testimonial auto/biographical project and will be developed in Chapter 6.

Beauvoir then focuses on self-sacrifice, because through this type of behaviour, some individuals try to assume others’ projects as their own. Self-sacrifice is at the far end of the continuum of being-for-others and is also explored in ‘L’Amoureuse’ in the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and in Beauvoir’s fiction, notably in *Les Mandarins* and *La Femme rompue*. If one were to interpret this section biographically, one might view her as working out the philosophical implications of her collaboration and partnership with Sartre.

In her discussion of self-sacrifice, Beauvoir examines the self-deception which is often involved in attempting to exist for the Other, and in mistakenly viewing oneself as the means to the Other’s self-fulfilment. She argues that ‘nous ne créons jamais pour autrui que des points de départ’.\(^{22}\)

Nevertheless, the Other is a crucial element of one’s experience of subjectivity and the world:

Je ne peux rien ni pour autrui, ni contre autrui [. . .] Car quoi que je fasse, j’existe devant lui. Je suis là, confondu pour lui avec la scandaleuse existence de tout ce qui n’est pas lui, je suis la facticité de sa situation.\(^{23}\)

To describe self-Other relations as constituting reciprocally the
facticity of my situation, or the given features of my existence in the world which I have not chosen, signifies that, for Beauvoir, the Other assumes the same importance for me as other elements of my facticity, such as my class, my body, my past, my birth. I did not choose these features of my existence and cannot choose to exist without them, although I can choose how to live them. We cannot use the Other or retreat to collective identity as a means to avoid the burden of individual responsibility for our existence. The existential irreducibility of the Other represents a form of given as far as each individual is concerned. Citing the Dostoievskian epigraph to Le Sang des autres, ‘chacun est responsable de tout, devant tous’, Beauvoir explains that my individual freedom is always enmeshed with another’s freedom, so that the limit of my freedom is the beginning of another’s freedom. Freedom is therefore a collective responsibility.

Beauvoir continues to grapple with the nature of our relationship with others in the next section, and effectively, running in autobiographical parallel, her own relationship to Sartre’s philosophy. She argues that ‘chacun n’est sujet que pour soi’, which appears very Sartrian, for according to his conflictual account of self-Other relations in L’Etre et le néant, I am either subject or object for the Other and vice-versa. Yet as Laurie Spurling notes, this notion of self-Other relations is limited:

There are for Sartre only two paradigmatically authentic emotions: arrogance (myself as subject) or shame (myself as object). Now this framework for understanding relations between people can certainly be illuminating for certain emotions or behavioural ploys – but it is sometimes too dualistic and dogmatic. There are, for example, cases where I can experience the Other as a subject for me – when I experience him as a centre of orientation for objects around him, or as the agent of his actions – without, as a correlate, experiencing myself as an object for him, which should be impossible, if we stick strictly to Sartre’s ontology.24

While Beauvoir similarly advocates that each person’s experience of subjectivity is unique to him or herself, we can nevertheless attempt to communicate that experience of subjectivity to each other. She argues that we need others, as free beings – and that involves them acting as subjects – in order to escape the contingency of our existence: ‘nous avons besoin d’autrui pour que notre existence devienne fondée et nécessaire’.25 Although given that we are in perpetual process of self-construction, no project can express the
totality of our individual existences. Although we may receive occasional validation for a particular action, a single instance of validation by the Other cannot ‘save’ our entire existence, for we are always condemned to reconstruct ourselves if we are to live authentically. This individual desire to be recognised for the totality of one’s being is not valid for Beauvoir, because the totalisation of individual existence or the ultimate determination of the significance of individual existence cannot take place until death. Nevertheless, the desire for totalisation is strong and appears to motivate her to write autobiography, as will be argued in Chapter 4.

Beauvoir makes a significant point here in terms of her autobiographical project about the use of name and the production of identity:

Ainsi nous imaginons que la louange accordée à un de nos actes justifie tout notre être: c’est pourquoi nous nous soucions d’être nommés; le nom, c’est ma présence totale rassemblée magiquement dans l’objet.26

She expresses a patriarchal view of naming here, according to which name is deemed to contain identity unproblematically. Yet, only a year later, in 1945, Beauvoir had to confront the gendered significance of name, when she wrote some articles for Combat on the Liberation of Paris, which appeared under Sartre’s byline.27 In terms of her autobiographical project which she was to undertake ten years later, it is significant that Beauvoir specifically indicates the importance of name in Pyrrhus et Cinéas as a means of being present to the Other and as a talismanic symbol of identity.

Beauvoir continues by asserting that we are obliged to recognise others as free agents who implement their freedom in different ways. She substantiates her point by an autobiographical example of a disagreement between her father and Zaza, an incident which later appears in Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée.28 In Pyrrhus et Cinéas, Beauvoir describes this episode as an existential ‘scandale’ because it demonstrated to her the relative aspect of her world. Similarly, in the Mémoires, the incident revealed, according to the narrator, that ‘on pouvait avoir un autre avis que mon père’.29

In Pyrrhus et Cinéas and, later, in Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, Beauvoir’s emphasis is less on the conflictual character of relationships with others, and more on the need for reciprocity, although she acknowledges that the latter may not always be possible. Beauvoir concedes that, at times, violence may be necessary against those who
wish to oppress me, although recourse to violence is undesirable because it destroys equality, and equality is necessary for reciprocal relations between people.  

In summary, Beauvoir argues in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* that there is no pre-determined purpose to life, but it is our responsibility to construct ourselves constantly. Subjectivity is therefore an ethical self-fashioning always within the context of our relationship with the Other. We are transcendent beings, who are intrinsically nothing but our projects. There is no recourse to God, an abstract notion of humanity or to any form of the absolute because, as individuals, we need to have our own sense of purpose which is individually relevant to us. Subject to the constraints of our situation, we can choose how to live our relationship with the Other, just as we can choose what significance we give to our past – for our subjectivity is temporally-situated. The notion of choosing our past is highly relevant to Beauvoir’s autobiographical self-representation and will be analysed further in Part II.

In *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir offers a commentary on *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, published sixteen years earlier. She explains that in this text she had attempted to reconcile her differences with Sartre over the issue of ‘la situation’. The notion of ‘situation’ or the unavoidable fact of being positioned in time, space and in relation to others (among other factors) was introduced by Sartre in *L’Etre et le néant*. Beauvoir argues in *La Force de l’âge* that as far as freedom is concerned, ‘les possibilités concrètes qui s’ouvrent aux gens sont inégales’. This crucial recognition of a hierarchy of different situations with different material consequences which impinge on an individual’s possibilities of freedom is introduced in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and developed in her subsequent essay, *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*. In *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir explains that in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* she still appeared committed to the primary existence of the individual, who is then obliged to negotiate the limits of freedom with the Other. She claims that her view at the time of writing *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* was rather that ‘l’individu ne reçoit une dimension humaine que par la reconnaissance d’autrui’. She explains that ‘en vérité, la société m’investit dès ma naissance; c’est en son sein et dans ma liaison avec elle que je décide de moi’.

It remains puzzling why Beauvoir appears to have deliberately articulated views which were effectively more Sartrian than her own, or played down her own notions of freedom and subjectivity as
always already interdependent. In *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir claims that in mid-April, 1940, when Sartre returned to Paris on leave and discussed his ideas in *L’Être et le néant*, she disagreed with him about his notion of ‘situation’. She says:

Nous discutâmes certains problèmes particuliers et surtout le rapport de la situation et de la liberté. Je soutenais que, du point de vue de la liberté, telle que Sartre la définissait — non pas résignation stoïcienne mais dépassement actif du donné — les situations ne sont pas équivalentes: quel dépassement est possible à la femme enfermée dans un harem? Même cette claustrophobie, il y a différentes manières de la vivre, me disait Sartre. Je m’obstinai longtemps et je ne cédai que du bout du lèvres. Au fond, j’avais raison. Mais pour défendre ma position, il m’aurait fallu abandonner le terrain de la morale individualiste, donc idéaliste, sur lequel nous nous plaçions.

As Sonia Kruks has noted, Beauvoir ‘was never willing to challenge Sartre’s conception of freedom head-on’ but instead ‘was quietly to subvert it’. Furthermore, Toril Moi, in her discussion of the intellectual collaboration between Sartre and Beauvoir, has offered many convincing reasons why Beauvoir remained intellectually and affectively loyal to her ‘significant Other’, such as her precarious position as a female intellectual, her determination to forge an innovative relationship with Sartre, her admiration for his intellect and ‘superior’ philosophical gifts and her view of Sartre as her lifelong project.

It was only in the late 1940s, with the publication of *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, that Beauvoir was to develop further her own notion of the importance of the Other in ‘situation’. Her different notion of ‘situation’ was not acknowledged, however, as she was already perceived as espousing Sartre’s philosophy of *L’Être et le néant*. Furthermore, as Sonia Kruks and Terry Keefe have argued, from the mid-1940s, Sartre had already begun to understand the limitations of the conflictual system of self-Other relations in *L’Être et le néant*. Keefe argues that although there is clear evidence in *L’Être et le néant* that Sartre does accept the role of others within our ‘situation’, he is constrained by his own subject/object dualism — either I am a subject or object for the Other and vice versa. The range of different ways I can exist for-Others thus remains largely untheorised. Keefe notes that in *Cahiers pour une morale* (which although written between 1947–48 remained unpublished until 1983) Sartre develops a third attitude towards the Other — reciprocity. As already noted, Beauvoir had already advocated the reciprocity of
self-Other relations in *Pyrrhus et Cínèas* and its fictional counterpart, *Le Sang des autres*, which she had begun in October 1941. Furthermore, as will be argued below, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was also working within a phenomenological framework, had argued (in opposition to Sartre) for the existence of incarnate intersubjective relations in his *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945).

*Pyrrhus et Cínèas*, however, is the first theoretical text in which Beauvoir began to outline her notion of subjectivity as ‘situated’ and ‘practical’.

**POUR UNE MORALE DE L’AMBIGUÏTÉ**

Beauvoir developed her notion of subjectivity further in her second essay on ethics, *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* which, after being serialised in *Les Temps modernes*, was published integrally in November 1947.\(^{39}\) It is longer than *Pyrrhus et Cínèas* and is rather badly constructed because of repetitiveness and lack of clarity, which may be a result of its initial serialised publication. These stylistic flaws have probably not encouraged positive reception of Beauvoir’s philosophy.

In *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* Beauvoir begins by arguing that the human condition is ambiguous, by which she means that the meaning of human existence is not fixed, but must be constantly created. We are embodied consciousnesses who are condemned to mortality. For Beauvoir, the majority of philosophers have failed to deal with the ambiguity of existence. They either lapse into dualism, which establishes a hierarchy between mind and body and fails to integrate both elements into human existence, or theories of immortality, which deny the reality of death, or the subordination of life to spirituality, which denies the material reality of life. Existentialism, according to Beauvoir, deals with the ambiguity of the human condition. In the first of several references to the post-Second World War situation, she argues that now more than ever, following a world war which involved multiple forms of genocide, people are forced to address this ambiguity. Part of the first section is a defence of Sartrian existentialism, conceived much in the same manner as her essay, ‘L’Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations’, first published in *Les Temps modernes* at the end of 1945. She addresses herself particularly to the charge that existentialism is a subjective if not a solipsistic philosophy. Comparing existentialism with Marxism, she
argues that the existentialist’s focus on the individual’s assumption of his or her own freedom is a moral act, and one that involves others’ freedom.

In the introductory section, Beauvoir tries to distinguish between different ways of conceptualising the relationship between freedom and existence. She cites Sartre’s proposition that everyone is free because it is not possible for us not to be free, and that we can always escape our fate because we are free. However, Beauvoir distinguishes between the subject’s natural freedom, which is the spontaneous, contingent freedom of coming into existence, and moral freedom, grounded by a project. This latter type of freedom implies the need to consider other people. As moral freedom needs a future dimension in order to have a purpose, it is automatically temporally-situated.

In the second section, anticipating her autobiographical self-representation, Beauvoir begins with a philosophical discussion of childhood, certain features of which are represented in the specific case study constituted by Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée. In Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, she says that the child finds him or herself in a given world, which appears absolute. The child is happily irresponsible because parents play the role of divine beings to which she or he is subject. Yet the child’s world is metaphysically privileged because he or she escapes the anguish of freedom as a result of the existential unimportance of his or her actions. This brief description of the childhood ‘situation’ is significant for, as Margaret Simons has noted, Beauvoir’s philosophical interest in the experience of childhood is a feature which distinguishes her work from Sartre’s prior to 1950. It is also an aspect of this essay which has received little critical attention.

Beauvoir continues her discussion by challenging indirectly Sartre’s views on freedom in L’Etre et le néant. She argues that there are certain groups of people who are obliged to live in an infantile world, because they have been kept in a state of slavery and ignorance, such as black slaves in the Southern American states or women in patriarchal societies. She notes:

Même aujourd’hui, dans les pays d’Occident, il y a encore beaucoup de femmes, parmi celles qui n’ont pas fait dans le travail l’apprentissage de leur liberté, qui s’abritent dans l’ombre des hommes; elles adoptent sans discussion les opinions et valeurs reconnues par leur mari ou leur amant, et
There is evidently a degree of irony in Beauvoir’s observation here because her comments form part of her own subversion of Sartre’s philosophy. She points out that whereas the child’s situation is imposed upon him or her, (Western) women choose or at least consent to their situation. This contrasts with the situation of a black slave in the eighteenth century or a Muslim woman forced to remain in a harem, who have no means of challenging their oppression. Their position has to be judged according to their relative possibilities of action. Once the possibility of freedom exists, however, it is remiss not to seize the chance to act.

Returning to the situation of the child and adolescent, Beauvoir characterises adolescence as a time when one discovers one’s own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others. The adolescent discovers that he or she is obliged to participate in the adult world by assuming his or her subjectivity and this is a source of existential crisis and moral choice. The experience of being ‘irresponsibly’ free during childhood produces a lifelong nostalgia for that time. For Beauvoir, unsurprisingly, the child does not contain the future adult, although it is always on the basis of the past that an adult makes choices regarding future behaviour:

C’est toujours à partir de ce qu’il a été qu’un homme décide de ce qu’il veut être: dans le caractère qu’il s’est donné, dans l’univers qui en est corrélatif, il puise les motivations de son attitude morale; or, ce caractère, cet univers, l’enfant les a constitués peu à peu sans en prévoir le développement.

Although the ‘choix originel’ made by an individual can be reversed or remade, it is not without significance because the world reflects back to us our earlier choices, which means that it is increasingly difficult for us to escape the consequences of such temporally-situated choices. The importance of childhood in the construction of the self is also emphasised in Beauvoir’s memoirs, as we shall see in Part II.

**POUR UNE MORALE DE L’AMBIGUÏTÉ: FREEDOM AND OTHERS**

In the second part of *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, Beauvoir resumes the discussion begun in *Pyrhhus et Cinéas* about the issue of freedom
and the role of Others. Here she offers a series of portraits, or case studies, of types of individuals who exhibit different forms of self-deception. This is a technique she also uses both in the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and in her memoirs, in micro-biographical sketches of people in her entourage, and can be viewed as evidence of Beauvoir’s interest in psychology and psychoanalysis. Robert Cottrell has likened these portraits to La Bruyère’s *Caractères* (1688); but perhaps a more useful comparison is to the various portraits of the absurd man in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), particularly since Beauvoir and Camus use similar categories on occasions, albeit for different purposes. \(^{45}\) In his essay on the absurd, Camus offers the examples of Don Juan, the actor, the conqueror and the artist, as illustrations of life lived in the recognition and rationalisation of absurdity. Beauvoir, however, uses the categories of the sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer and the passionate man as demonstrations of various types of ‘mauvaise foi’ through which such people attempt to avoid their freedom. At the end of *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, differentiating her position from that of Camus, she explains the difference between an absurd existence (which she rejects) and an ambiguous one (which she endorses):

Déclarer l’existence absurde, c’est nier qu’elle puisse se donner un sens; dire qu’elle est ambiguë, c’est poser que le sens n’en est jamais fixé, qu’il doit sans cesse se conquérir. L’absurdité récuse toute morale; mais aussi la rationalisation achevée du réel ne laisserait pas de place à la morale; c’est parce que la condition de l’homme est ambiguë qu’à travers l’échec et le scandale il cherche à sauver son existence. \(^{46}\)

Towards the end of Part II, Beauvoir again rejects a conflictual model of self-Other relations, derived from Hegel and employed by Sartre in *L’Etre et le néant*. She cites the epigraph which she used for *L’Invitée* from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ‘chaque conscience poursuit la mort de l’autre’, and notes that this hatred can only be a naïve, preliminary reaction to the Other, because the Other simultaneously takes and gives the world to me. Without the Other my world is meaningless:

S’il est vrai que tout projet émane d’une subjectivité, il est vrai aussi que ce mouvement subjectif pose de soi-même un dépassement de la subjectivité. L’homme ne peut trouver que dans l’existence des autres hommes une justification de sa propre existence. \(^{47}\)

While we might need others, however, our relationships with them
are nonetheless problematic, and in the final part of *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, Beauvoir examines various factors relating to oppressive relationships.

She initially condemns the ‘aesthetic attitude’ vis-à-vis others, which involves regarding others with detached contemplation, because if we are all free in all circumstances, why do we need to bother to struggle to preserve freedom? Beauvoir gives the example of the French accepting the German Occupation in 1940, and the indifference of certain intellectuals, which constituted ‘une manière de fuir la vérité du présent’.48 Anticipating again her subsequent testimonial autobiographical project, Beauvoir concludes here that because we cannot undo the atrocities of the past, ‘tout ce que nous pouvons faire, c’est d’empêcher leur histoire de retomber dans la nuit indistincte de l’être, c’est de la dévoiler, de l’intégrer au patrimoine humain’.49

In her discussion of oppression, Beauvoir observes that it is the mutual dependence within our relationships with others which explains how oppression exists at all, and why it is unacceptable. Oppression creates two classes of people – those who parasitically depend on the oppression of the Other, and who force humanity to forge ahead in spite of itself, and

Ceux qui sont condamnés à piétiner sans espoir, pour entretenir seulement la collectivité; leur vie est pure répétition de gestes mécaniques, leur loisir suffit tout juste à la récupération de leurs forces.50

Significantly, Beauvoir demonstrates here the effect of oppression on the material reality of people’s lives and its power to crush their physical, psychological and emotional capacity for resistance.

As Sonia Kruks has noted, this analysis of oppression is distinct from Sartre’s voluntaristic account in *L’Être et le néant*.51 Sartre describes freedom here as an ‘all or nothing’ phenomenon:

La liberté n’est pas un être: elle est l’être de l’homme, c’est-à-dire son néant d’être. Si l’on concevait d’abord l’homme comme un plein, il serait absurde de chercher en lui, par après, des moments ou des régions psychiques où il serait libre; autant chercher du vide dans un récipient qu’on a préalablement rempli jusqu’aux bords. L’homme ne saurait être tantôt libre et tantôt esclave: il est tout entier et toujours libre ou il n’est pas.52

Sartre at no point denies the existence of obstacles to freedom. He argues however that we choose how to interpret such obstacles:

La réalité-humaine rencontre partout des résistances et des obstacles
Sartre’s overestimation of individual will power and choice when faced with crushing oppression leads him to the unhumanitarian and naively abstract position from which he argues that those who submit under torture do so freely, and that a Jew is free to choose whether to accept his or her oppression at the hands of anti-Semitic people. As Sonia Kruks has also noted, it is astonishing that Sartre is able to make the latter point in the middle of the Second World War.

Beauvoir, on the other hand, discusses the mechanisms of oppression at some length in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, addressing how we can struggle for the freedom of others – by assisting others to reach a position where they might assume their freedom – yet acknowledging that acting for some people in certain circumstances is often to act simultaneously against others. There are privileged courses of action in struggling for freedom from oppression: for example, Beauvoir acknowledges that it is more appropriate that black people struggle for other black people, Jews for Jews, and so on. To belong to an oppressed group is to have a ‘privileged’ experience of oppression that cannot be shared by an individual who merely wishes to express solidarity with the struggle of another oppressed individual.

In her conclusion, Beauvoir reverts to defending existentialism against the charge of solipsism, arguing that individuals can only be defined by their relationship to the world and to others. We must therefore assume our existence both as individuals and as members of society, and existentialism’s focus on ‘la vérité de la vie’ helps us to do this.

Despite this focus, Terry Keefe notes that Beauvoir makes few concessions to the average reader in her references to Hegelian philosophy and Marxist theory. On the other hand, she draws extensively on relevant and comprehensible examples from the Second World War and its aftermath, such as the Nuremberg Trials which were taking place as Beauvoir wrote her essay. This contrasts with Sartre’s abstract condemnation of anti-Semitism, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), which, as Claude Lanzmann has noted, failed to mention the Holocaust.

*Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* nevertheless makes a significant
contribution to the development of Beauvoir’s notion of selfhood, on
several counts. Firstly, it develops the notion of reciprocity intro-
duced in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, according to which I assume my sub-
jectivity by assuming a relationship to the Other. Secondly, it briefly
examines childhood and adolescence as important stages during
which we assume subjectivity. Thirdly, Beauvoir addresses some of
the mechanisms of oppression and makes connections between types
of oppression, especially anti-Semitism, sexism and racism. Lastly,
Beauvoir develops further the notion of temporally situated subjec-
tivity first outlined in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, which will be particularly
important in her project of testimonial autobiography. All of these
features will shortly be developed in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in the context of
an analysis of gendered subjectivity.

A notable absence in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, which *Le
Deuxième Sexe* will remedy, is any extended discussion of the body and
its role in subjectivity. Although Beauvoir acknowledges that our
physicality plays a role in our relations with others, if, for example,
we use violence to resist oppression or if it is used against us, the
body does not have any determining role at this stage:

Sans doute est-ce à partir de ses possibilités physiologiques que chacun s’y
jette [dans le monde], mais le corps même n’est pas un fait brut, il exprime
notre rapport au monde et c’est pourquoi il est lui-même objet de
sympathie ou de répulsion, et d’autre part il ne détermine aucune conduite. 58

For all their flaws, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*
constitute an important stage in Beauvoir’s development of her
notion of subjectivity. They are also important because they establish
that, although she is working within the same philosophical frame-
work as Sartre, Beauvoir gives a different emphasis to the manner in
which individual subjects acquire a notion of selfhood in relation to
others. The next chapter, which concludes this examination of
Beauvoir’s notion of selfhood, will examine the text for which she is
possibly best-known: *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 