EXISTENTIALIST ROOTS OF FEMINIST ETHICS

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by

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation “Existentialist Roots of Feminist Ethics” is an account of existentialist feminist ethics written from the perspective of ambiguous nature of interconnectedness of human freedoms. It explores existentialist tenets in feminist ethics and care ethics and reclaims existentialism as a resourceful theory in addressing global ethical issues. My dissertation moves beyond the once prevalent paradigm that feminist ethics should be devoid of any traditional ethical theories and it shows that an existential phenomenological ethics can complement feminist ethics in a productive way. The first chapter, introduces and discusses an existentialist notion of freedom based on Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre’s writings. In order to establish that human beings are metaphysically free, I explain notions of in-itself, for-itself, transcendence, immanence, facticity, and bad faith which are the basic notions of an existentialist notion of freedom. I discuss the changes in Sartre’s notion of freedom in his early and late writings and point out Beauvoir’s possible influence on this change. The second chapter discusses Simone de Beauvoir’s account of oppression within the framework of her existential feminist ethics. By examining her three major philosophical works which are ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, The Ethics of Ambiguity, and The Second Sex, I explain her notion of interconnectedness of freedom as the basic human condition and develop it as a model of relational subjectivity that constitutes the core of feminist ethics. I argue that the notion of relational subjectivity constitutes the fundamental congruence among feminist and existentialist ethics. The ways in which we relate to and deal with others determines the ethical stance we take in the world. Hence, relational subjectivity invites a broadly construed notion of responsibility as another basic component of Beauvoir’s account of existentialist phenomenological feminist ethics and another point of congruence between feminist ethics and existentialist ethics. I respond the feminist critiques leveled at existentialism and defend Beauvoir’s account as one that already foresees the problems in existentialist ethics and offers viable corrections to them; i.e., Beauvoir’s notion of generosity as a corrective to Sartre’s account of necessarily conflictual human relations.

My third chapter starts with a brief history of feminist ethics and care ethics based on Carol Gilligan’s and Nel Noddings’ works. I show both that care ethics constitutes a preliminary and significant part of feminist ethics, yet it is surpassed by the expanding critiques and discussions in feminist ethics. Drawing on the critiques of care ethics, I examine the recurring appearance of the idealized feminine subject of patriarchy in care ethics. I discuss Margaret Urban Walker’s account of care ethics as a healthy reconstruct of care ethics alert to the potential danger of reification of patriarchal femininity in care ethics. In this chapter, I also show how existentialism plays a significant role in the formulation of care ethics especially in Noddings’ work. I show that Beauvoir’s account of human existence and interpersonal relations as fundamentally interconnected and interrelated through each one’s freedoms and projects as it is developed in Ethics of Ambiguity and The Second Sex seems to offer a desired account that can operate within the framework of care ethics Noddings develops. In the fourth chapter, I explore Judith Butler’s work on feminist ethics in relation to Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist ethics. In the first section, I show how Beauvoir’s account of agency as an ambiguous becoming reverberates in Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In the second section, I discuss how Butler takes on some basic ethical questions concerning vulnerability and violence Beauvoir already accentuates in her writings. In my fifth chapter I discuss the strengths of the existentialist feminist ethics I develop in addressing issues in transnational feminism. I show that this account provides the ground for willing both one’s self and others free and assumes responsibility to foster both. On that basis, I provide an ethical critique of an attitude of indifference, which we all as privileged people living
in affluent countries enjoy, and argue for an ethical responsibility that moves us into action in the face of atrocities we witness all around the world. I emphasize that such a critique from a Western perspective should be mindful of postcolonial and hegemonic discourses that underlies such atrocities. I use Beauvoir’s intervention in Djamila Bouacha’s detention and torture case during the Algerian War as a historical example where that type of a critique proved to be effective. Overall, I argue that the existential feminist account of ethics I develop in my dissertation is practically efficacious in compelling us to action based on the theoretical principles of our being free and our freedoms being intertwined.
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INTRODUCTION

Thesis Overview

My dissertation reintroduces existentialism as a viable ethical theory that has fruitful resources for feminist theory in general and feminist ethics in particular. In my dissertation, I demonstrate that existentialist ideas have had a significant influence on feminist ethics that often is unacknowledged. Through an analysis of the main works in care ethics and Judith Butler’s writings on ethics, I show the abundance of affinities between the basic insights that comprise these ethical theories. By emphasizing possible solutions existentialist ethics may offer for current problems in feminist ethical theory, my dissertation shows the continuing relevance of existentialist ethics.

In bringing existentialist and feminist accounts of ethics together, my aim in this dissertation is to develop a defensible account of existentialist feminist ethics to which Beauvoir alludes in her writings without labeling it as feminist. In Ethics of Ambiguity, she explicitly describes her project as “existentialist ethics”. In The Second Sex, the project of an existentialist feminist ethics takes its most mature form. The fundamental principles of Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist ethics are that human beings are free, that their freedoms are interconnected, and that the first and foremost precondition of ethical action is to acknowledge one’s freedom and the relation of one’s freedom to others’ freedoms. Although I attribute the skeleton of the theory I am developing here to Beauvoir, I go beyond her work and use Sartre’s both early and late work to establish this fundamental principle about freedom. Using Sartre’s writings to support an existentialist feminist account of ethics presents its own challenges. To begin with, Sartre’s writings have been the target of feminist critiques for various reasons. First,
Beauvoir scholars have had to endure a long and challenging fight to show the philosophical independence and originality of Beauvoir’s works, since she has been long considered as Sartre’s follower in the history of philosophy. Therefore a brief discussion of the question of influence along with its impact on how feminists perceived existentialism which has been a central theme in Beauvoir scholarship is necessary here.

Existentialism emerged as a cultural movement in postwar-Europe in 1940s. Both the movement and the philosophy garnered world-wide attention. The influence of existentialist themes and ideas went beyond the philosophical figures to include artist and writers of the period. By 1970s, however, the movement started to cease its influence and even to be considered as philosophy passé. After that period we see significant existentialist influence in certain philosophers’ works, especially those who are identified or considered as poststructuralists, such as Butler, Foucault, and Derrida, nevertheless existentialism is still considered as not so relevant in today’s philosophical discussions. Feminists, on the other hand, have always tried to distance themselves from existentialist philosophy, because they mostly considered existentialism as inherently anti-feminist. The labeling of the philosophy as anti-feminist finds its justification in the sexist elements in Sartre’s writings. Appropriation of the common misconceptions that Beauvoir was a follower of Sartre and hence, her account of existentialism is simply a reiteration of Sartrean sexist existentialism by feminists until recently resulted in a disregard of existentialist philosophy by feminism.

Through arduous analysis of Beauvoir’s published and unpublished works, feminists such as Margaret Simons, Jessica Benjamin, Sara Heinamaa, Nancy Bauer, Christine Daigle and Linnell Secomb have uncovered the philosophical nature of Beauvoir’s writings and her possible influence on Sartre’s philosophical ideas. Beauvoir was mainly considered as a literary writer
and Sartre’s follower. Edward Fullbrok rightly observes that “Instead of being recognized as one of the foundational philosophers of French existentialism, she was demoted to the status of ‘Sartre’s companion’[…] This female philosopher, who worked so long and so courageously for the right for women to rise above the status of relative beings, died immortalized as one” (Daigle and Golomb 2009:116).

Beauvoir’s self-rejection of herself as a philosopher might have strengthened the wide reception of her writings as of solely literary nature with some philosophical elements adopted from Sartre:

Sartre is a philosopher, and I am not, and I have never really wanted to be a philosopher. I like philosophy very much, but I have not created philosophical work. My field is literature. I am interested in novels, memoirs, and essays, such as *The Second Sex*. However, none of these is philosophy (Simons, Benjamin, Beauvoir 1979:338).

Debbie Evans considers such statements of Beauvoir to further the already existing tendency among commentators to treat Beauvoir’s work as simply applying Sartre’s philosophical ideas (Daigle and Golomb 2009:95). Feminists were able to break this tendency by two primary means and thus, as Michel Kail argues, the battle to establish the philosophical originality and importance of Beauvoir’s works had been won (Daigle and Golomb 2009:143). First, they showed that Beauvoir’s work was in conversation with many philosophers—one of whom was Sartre—and social scientists as we can see in *The Second Sex* (Bergoffen 1997; Heinamaa 2003). We can list Hegel, Marx, Levi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Colette, Woolf and Wollstonecraft as some of the thinkers and writers who have profound influence on *The Second Sex*. According to this reading, Sartre’s influence on Beauvoir’s philosophical ideas is
recognized, yet it is not placed anywhere above other thinkers she was in conversation with. Furthermore, some feminists showed how Beauvoir advanced the ideas she might have adopted from Sartre in very innovative ways. For example, Kruks argues that Beauvoir was “an unfaithful disciple who comes to some very un-Sartrean conclusions” (in Fallaize 1998:43). Kruks analyzes the notion of the “situated nature of subjectivity” which Beauvoir seems to appropriate from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and argues that Beauvoir develops that notion in such a way that eventually it becomes contradictory to Sartre’s account of the autonomy of the subject. Second, given the close intellectual relationship between Beauvoir and Sartre, they showed the ways in which Beauvoir influenced Sartre’s philosophical ideas. Hence, they argued for a mutual influence between the two thinkers. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Simons considers the close attention Sartre pays to Genet’s childhood in *Saint Genet* to Beauvoir’s influence on him. Daigle and Golomb’s editorial work *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence* shows the intricacies of the intellectual relationship between the two thinkers and argues that Beauvoir and Sartre influenced each other, although it is difficult to know exactly how much each influenced the other since “each had the right to borrow from the memory of the other” (Daigle and Golomb 2009:186)

While I acknowledge the significance of the issue, and appreciate this literature on the question of influence, in my dissertation I do not focus on this controversy, and I simply treat Beauvoir and Sartre as intellectual partners. My goal is to find the useful resources in their accounts of existentialist ethics and take these resources in new directions that can aid my goal of developing an existentialist feminist account of ethics.

The second challenge using Sartre’s writings to develop a feminist account of ethics is produced by the blatant sexism in his work. Margery Collins and Christine Pierce’s “Holes and
Slime: Sexism in Sartre’s Psychoanalysis” points out the sexist language in Sartre’s account of
the hole and the slimy which he respectively associates with the vagina and the breast (Collins
and Pierce 1973:112-127). The article rightly takes an issue with the repugnance towards female
body revealed in Sartre’s writings, yet it does not consider the use of sexist language in his
writings as a proof of misogyny that is inherent in and essential to existentialist theory. Hazel
Barnes agrees with Collin’s and Pierce’s conclusion and claims that sexism in Sartre’s writings is
contingent and in no way provides ground for tossing it out without acknowledging its potential
value for feminism (Barnes 1990:340-1) Linda Bell also touches upon the issue of sexism in
Sartre’s work and in a similar vein with Collins, Pierce and Barnes, and defends the rich
resources Sartre’s existentialism offers for feminism and especially for feminist ethics. Bell
explains Sartre’s sexism as a product of being a member of a patriarchal and misogynistic
culture. She also adds that it is not structural and stands in inconsistency with basic tenets of his
theory (Bell 1993:12). My take on the issue aligns with all these four philosophers. I
acknowledge and criticize the use of sexist language in Sartre’s work. Nevertheless, I also
acknowledge the possible contributions his philosophy offers for feminism.

Finally, the third challenge is Sartre’s widely criticized notion of disembodied, or
absolute freedom. Some feminists argues that Sartre’s notion of freedom is so radical that it
cannot be used in a theory of oppression. They argue that his absolute notion of freedom is not
able to account for the limitations brought to one’s freedom in an oppressive structure. In the first
and second chapters, I discuss this problem and show the significant shift in Sartre’s notion of
freedom. It is clear that in Being and Nothingness we do not see much room for a relation of
reciprocal recognition between the self and the other. However, Sartre’s later writings move
from this impasse toward endorsing the idea of interpersonal conflict as contingent. In the
Critique of Dialectic Reason, Sartre develops a Marxist existentialist account of human conflict and locates the source of this conflict in a historical notion of scarcity. Sartre’s posthumously published Notebooks for An Ethics is also based on an account of nonconflictual human relations. As opposed to its formulation as subjugation in Being and Nothingness, love is presented as “deeper recognition and reciprocal comprehension of freedoms” in Notebooks for An Ethics (Sartre 1992:414).

Feminist theory has been undergoing a considerable expansion in the past few decades. Starting with the goal of removing women’s subordinate and unfavorable position in the world, feminists engaged themselves with a variety of ways in which women have been oppressed. They have started to see the interplay between women’s oppression and basic economic, social and cultural structures that reinforce that oppression. Hence, they started to include discussions of topics such as class inequality, disability issues, animal rights, environmental destruction, climate change etc. in their work. Gender oppression operates at different levels depending on racial, ethnic and class structures. A woman is usually oppressed not only as a woman but as a woman of a certain color, certain class etc. Hence, addressing women’s oppression requires feminism to tackle with different forms of oppression. As Alison Jaggar states, women are affected by a variety of issues such as racism, homophobia, class privilege, environmental destruction, war and unequal distribution of world resources (in Card 1991:85-86).

At first, inclusion of such topics in feminist literature was only auxiliary; they were valuable in so far as they helped projects of understanding and removing women’s oppression. However, as feminist theory expanded, feminist ethics went beyond focusing only on women and the task of addressing other forms of oppression became a primary concern on its own. We can say that there has been a shift in feminism towards addressing issues related to oppression in
the broad sense of the term not only because they affect women but mainly because they are morally wrong and require immediate attention. Hence, the goals of feminism are expanding to include both human and non-human animals and even the environment. Following Linda A. Bell and Ruth Ginzberg, I argue that feminist ethics should be “a vital survival tool” that will guide us fighting against oppression in any form (Bell 1993:20). In my dissertation, I use the term feminism in this broader sense which refers to a theory that aims to address, criticize and solve not only gender oppression but other forms of oppression, as well.

Feminist ethics is a broad category that contains a variety of thinkers and theories. In my dissertation I look at care ethics and Judith Butler’s work as representative of feminist ethics. Here, I shall give some reasons as to why I have chosen care ethics and Butler’s work as focus of analysis in my dissertation. As I explain in detail in chapter three, care ethics can be considered as the origin of feminist ethics. Hence, it embodies the main tenets of feminist ethics and becomes central to any discussion of feminist ethics. Butler’s work, on the other hand, stands as an example of the fruitful expansion feminist theory has been undergoing. Although Butler generally is not regarded as a feminist ethicist, nor does she consider herself to be one, I show that her work coincides with the main issues of feminist ethics. Another important reason for me to focus on care ethics and Butler’s work is that both Butler and various care ethicists have read and been influenced by Beauvoir and Sartre’s works.¹ Another common point between Butler’s

¹ Despite the similarities between Noddings’ care ethics as it is developed in her most famous book Caring: a feminine approach to caring and moral education and Beauvoir’s feminist existentialist ethics, there is no reference to Beauvoir in this book. Strikingly, Noddings draws from and cites Sartre extensively both in this book and some of her articles. In “Beyond Teacher Knowledge: In Quest of Wisdom” she endorses Sartre’s notion of responsibility as a good model to be used in teaching students about ethics. She states that “a good dose of Sartrean existentialism might serve as a healthy corrective” (Noddings 1993:232). In this essay she stresses her rejection of the autonomous, constituting subject of Descartes and Sartre and states that although she is not a Sartrean, she has profited from the issues Sartre philosophized about (Noddings 1993:232). Going back to her discussion of Sartre in Caring, we see the same reluctance on Noddings’ part in accepting Sartre’s philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, Sartre’s philosophical ideas seem to carry a certain weight for her since she discusses them in such a detail. Noddings seems to endorse two of the main tenets of Sartrean existentialism, ethical responsibility for one’s actions and ontological interconnectedness of human beings or relationality as Noddings puts it.
and care ethicists’ work that also aligns with the account of existentialist ethics I am developing here is their transformation in similar ways to include questions of justice based on a global scale. Focusing on the unequal distribution of vulnerability across the globe, they both started to address the global socio-political dynamics that create new sites of oppression.

In the last three chapters I explain the potential contributions of existentialist ethics to feminist ethics. For care ethics, I introduce the existentialist idea of treating someone as freedom as a form of caring and derive theoretical support from existentialist notions of freedom and responsibility to establish our responsibility to fight against oppression. Another contribution of existentialism to feminist ethics I discuss is an analysis of care work within the framework of the existentialist dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. Care work has been historically relegated to women, and this unequal distribution of care work among genders constituted a key factor in women’s oppression. By discussing the problems associated with overvaluing care work as motherly or feminine, I show the insights an existentialist account offers to reconsider and relocate care work in feminist ethics.

Concerning Butler’s ethics, the main contribution existentialism offers is the idea of subject that is still decentered, ambiguous, and non-self-identical yet has full agency. I show that Butler’s account of the opaque self that can never fully account for herself/himself has limitations for a theory of oppression since it leaves much less room for action and change. An existentialist account of ambiguous self, however, although it is opaque and never coincides with itself, is attributed a far greater degree of agency which is fundamental for a theory of oppression.

Finally drawing from these potential contributions of existentialism to feminism, I address a current and pressing problem in feminist ethics: the question of indifference and
intervention. Through my analysis of Beauvoir’s intervention in Djamila Boupacha’s torture, I show how these contributions are solidified in Beauvoir’s actions. I point out two main characteristic of Beauvoir’s intervention that represents her existentialist ethics as exemplary practices for feminist ethics: her self-critique and her respect for Boupacha’s values. While indifference is usually not considered as a plausible option by feminist ethicists, as Alison Jaggar shows in her article “Saving Amina,” feminists end up remaining indifferent to certain forms of oppression due to their inability or unwillingness to read how the socio-economic and cultural practices they share or benefit from create or help perpetuate these forms of oppression. This problem is present in practices of intervention, as well. By drawing on Beauvoir’s self-critique regarding her being a beneficiary of the colonial system in Algeria, I show that this type of self-critique should be essential for a feminist intervention.

Another problem with regard to the question of intervention feminists have been grappling with is related to the issues of agency. Intervention carries the risk of undermining the agency of the person or group in question. I argue that an existentialist account of freedom offers a possible solution to this problem. As I explain in chapters one and two, according to existentialism although one should will everyone free, one cannot free anyone. In other words, a person or a group has to acquire their own freedom. The other’s responsibility for the person or group that is oppressed is only to aid them bring about the necessary conditions under which they can fight for their own freedom. This approach has special strengths because it respects the values and beliefs of the person or the group that is helped. It also overcomes one specific difficulty that has been associated with first world feminism that is imposing their values and standards on the women of the third world. I show that Beauvoir’s objective take on the value Boupacha attributes to her virginity provides a good example of this approach.
Chapters Outline

In the first chapter, I explain and discuss an existentialist phenomenological notion of freedom based on Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre’s writings. In order to establish that human beings are metaphysically free, I explain notions of in-itself, for-itself, nothingness, transcendence, immanence, facticity, and bad faith which are the basic notions of an existentialist notion of freedom. I explain the distinction between ethical freedom and natural freedom and discuss how this distinction helps Beauvoir to establish the connection between freedom and ethics. Finally, I discuss two main criticisms directed towards Sartre’s notion of freedom and point out the changes in his notion of freedom in his early and late writings and Beauvoir’s possible influence on this change.

In the second chapter, I present and discuss an existentialist account of oppression within the framework of existential ethics I develop in the first chapter. By examining Beauvoir’s three major philosophical works which are ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex*, and Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and *The Anti-Semite and Jew*, I explain their notion of interconnectedness of freedom as the basic human condition and develop it as a model of relational subjectivity that constitutes the core of feminist ethics. I argue that the notion of relational subjectivity constitutes the fundamental congruence among feminist and existentialist ethics. The ways in which we relate to and deal with others determines the ethical stance we take in the world. Hence, relational subjectivity invites a broadly construed notion of responsibility as another basic component of Beauvoir’s account of existentialist phenomenological feminist ethics and another point of congruence between feminist ethics and existentialist ethics. I respond to the feminist critiques leveled at existentialism and defend Beauvoir’s account as one that already foresees the problems in existentialist ethics and offers
viable corrections to them; i.e., Beauvoir’s notion of generosity as a corrective to Sartre’s account of necessarily conflictual human relations.

The third chapter starts with a brief history of feminist ethics and care ethics based on Carol Gilligan’s and Nel Noddings’ works. I show both that care ethics constitutes a preliminary and significant part of feminist ethics, yet it is surpassed by the expanding critiques and discussions in feminist ethics. Care ethics debunks the notion of an autonomous and self-sufficient moral subject and argues that autonomy can only flourish in care relations with others—both giving and receiving care. In spite of the progressive criticism care ethics levels at traditional ethical theories, it is not devoid of serious flaws. Drawing on the critiques of care ethics, I examine the recurring appearance of the idealized feminine subject of patriarchy in care ethics. I discuss Margaret Urban Walker’s account of care ethics as a healthy reconstruct of care ethics alert to the potential danger of reification of patriarchal femininity in care ethics. In this chapter, I also show how existentialism plays a significance role in the formulation of care ethics especially in Noddings’ work. I show that Beauvoir’s account of human existence and interpersonal relations as fundamentally interconnected and interrelated through each one’s freedoms and projects as it is developed in Ethics of Ambiguity and The Second Sex seems to offer a desired account that can operate within the framework of care ethics Noddings develops.

The fourth chapter explores Judith Butler’s work on feminist ethics in relation to Beauvoir’s existentialist phenomenological feminist ethics. In this chapter, I analyze Beauvoir’s influence on contemporary feminist ethics by looking at Judith Butler’s work. In the first section, I show the similarities between Beauvoir and Butler’s accounts of agency. I discuss Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Beauvoir’s account of agency as an ambiguous becoming and show that both accounts successfully define agency beyond the dichotomy of determinism.
and voluntarism. In the second section, I show the intersection points between two philosophers’ accounts of ethics by discussing the role of vulnerability, violence, and ambiguity in their ethics.

In the fifth chapter I discuss the strengths of the existentialist feminist ethics I develop in addressing issues in transnational feminism. I show that this account provides the ground for willing both one’s self and others free and assumes responsibility to foster both. On that basis, I provide an ethical critique of an attitude of indifference and argue for an ethical responsibility that moves us into action in the face of atrocities we witness all around the world. I emphasize that such a critique from a Western perspective should be mindful of postcolonial and hegemonic discourses that underlies such atrocities. I use Beauvoir’s intervention in Djamila Boupacha’s detention and torture case during the Algerian War as a historical example where that type of a critique proved to be effective. Overall, I argue that the existential feminist account of ethics I develop in my dissertation is practically efficacious in compelling us to action based on the theoretical principles of our being free and our freedoms being intertwined.
CHAPTER I
FREEDOM AS THE BASIS OF AN EXISTENTIALIST ACCOUNT OF ETHICS

In this chapter, I lay out the foundations for the existentialist account of ethics I develop in subsequent chapters. This existentialist account of ethics is based on, yet goes beyond, Simone de Beauvoir’s ethical and political writings since it also discusses Jean Paul Sartre’s account of existentialism. As I explained in the Introduction, I consider Beauvoir and Sartre as lifelong intellectual partners whose philosophical ideas greatly influenced each other. In the first section of this chapter, I elaborate on the main existentialist tenet that freedom is the basic human condition. I explain fundamental existentialist concepts as they are entertained by Sartre and Beauvoir in their philosophical writings, which are the in-itself and the for-itself, nothingness, bad faith, natural freedom and ethical freedom, and transcendence and immanence. In the second section of the chapter, I analyze and answer objections leveled against Sartre’s account of freedom, and I discuss Beauvoir’s interventions to it. Finally, drawing from both Sartre and Beauvoir, I offer a defensible and plausible account of human freedom, which stands at the core of the existentialist ethics developed in my dissertation.

1. Freedom as the Basic Human Condition

Freedom sustains the ground of the account of existentialist ethics both Beauvoir and Sartre develop in their philosophical writings. My analysis of Beauvoir’s account of freedom focuses on her three major works which are ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, The Ethics of Ambiguity, and The Second Sex. As for Sartre, I mainly analyze Being and Nothingness, Critique of Dialectical
Sartre argues that freedom is the basis of all value. His initial theory of freedom is based on the ontology that he establishes in *Being and Nothingness*. There he divides categories of being into two; the being of the things which he calls in-itself and the being of the consciousness which is for–itself. Being in-itself refers to the things that are only what they are. Their essence is already *is* and unchangeable. It is the mode of being where being coincides with itself. Sartre describes the in-itself as an infinitely dense being and as “fullness” (Sartre 2001:50). He states that:

> Identity is the ideal of ‘one’, and ‘one’ comes into the world by human reality. The in-itself is full of itself, and no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container. There is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip in” (Sartre 2001:50).

We can think of a stone as a simple example of an object in-itself. The stone is not conscious of itself as being a stone. All the possible things that can happen to a stone happen through some external intervention. The stone may breakdown because of extreme heat, or because someone shatters it. However, this change does not originate from within the stone. Even when broken into smaller pieces, the stone is still the same stone in the sense that it has the same essence that it did before it was broken. The stone can never choose to change itself into something other than what it is.

The being of consciousness, on the other hand, is never what it is and always what it is not. Contrary to being in-itself which is “not a connection with itself”, being for-itself is in a state of constant change, which creates it (Sartre 2001:lxxv). In other words, through its relations
to itself, other for-itselfs and to the things in the world, being for-itself transcends itself and gives meaning to the world.

In other words, being’s being present to itself, which we experience as consciousness, comes with the price of a subject’s never being completely itself. For-itself refers to the mode of being of consciousness. It is the mode of being “in the form of presence to itself” (Sartre 2001:53). For-itself can be considered as a bridge connecting the past and the future in the present while throwing the self into future projects flourishing in the resources of the past. In other words, the for-itself shapes the in-itself and remakes the self in every project. In doing so, it also creates meaning and value. In this sense, it is always active and never in a stable state, this is what Sartre means by the transcendence of the for-itself. Consciousness is always directed toward an end; that is why what the self now is lacks something. By projecting an end that the in-itself does not have, the for-itself negates the in-itself. As Sartre puts it “The for-itself, in fact, is nothing but the pure nihilation of the in-itself” (Sartre 2001:535). As a result of this ongoing state of nihilation, I am what I am not, and am not what I am.

It is important, however, to note that the for-itself does not choose the freedom it enjoys. Freedom is the very fundamental characteristic of the for-itself. Independent of the practical impossibility of the end projected by the for-itself, the for-itself always remains free, because it is condemned to be free. Our ontological structure brings this freedom. We are intentional beings, because we are not full, not complete in the sense an in-itself is. Intentionality means always being directed toward an end. This end is chosen among many other possible ends that could have been chosen by the subject. There is no external force that could limit one’s possibilities to a single one. In that sense, freedom is also one of the givens in our lives, it is among our facticity. Hence, we cannot choose not to be free just as we cannot choose not be born
to a certain language or nationality. Freedom arises from and can be conceived as a result of the “aberrant synthesis of the in-itself and nothingness [for-itself]”. This nothingness or this lack which differentiates us from any in-itself gives us the ability and necessity to define ourselves by doing or acting on the world. Having consciousness and being free are one and the same things for Sartre. Sartre says,

We have established that the for-itself is free. But this does not mean that it is its own foundation. If to be free meant to be its own foundation, it would be necessary that freedom should decide the existence of its being. And this necessity can be understood in two ways. First, it would be necessary that freedom should decide its being free; that is, not only that it should be a choice of an end, but that it should be a choice of itself as freedom. This would suppose therefore that the possibility of being-free and the possibility of not being-free exist equally before the free choice of either one of them- i.e., before the free choice of freedom. But since then a previous freedom would be necessary which would choose to be free- i.e., basically which would choose to be what it is already- we should be referred to infinity; for there would be need of another prior freedom in order to choose this and so on. In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom, as we said earlier, thrown into freedom or, as Heidegger says “abandoned” (Sartre 2001:461).

Consciousness desires an end. When we are conscious of something, we are necessarily attributing meaning to the world in a way that highlights the object we are conscious of. The object of consciousness stands out among so many other objects in the world. According to Sartre this is the essential way of establishing our relationship with the world as for-itselfs. We perceive the world with objects in it in accordance with their meaning for our projects. This book, Sartre’s Being and Nothingness, standing in front of me, gains meaning as long as I am working on existentialism. What meaning would it have for me, if I were not interested in existentialism? Going one step further, what meaning would it have for me, if I did not even know English? The bottle of water on my table keeps me hydrated without interrupting my writing process. My eyeglasses help me see what I am writing on the computer. The lamp on my
colleague’s desk attracts my attention as I am looking for an example of an object that is not relevant to my project. The moment it—that is, finding an object that is not relevant to my project—becomes my project, the lamp stands out and I notice it. In this account, free will is a necessary element of consciousness, because the things we are conscious of are already a part of the projects we chose. In other words, it is our intentions which guide our consciousness.

Now the question is, how do we choose our projects? Where do our intentions come from? Are they caused by prior events? Sartre rejects the idea that our projects are causally determined. We do not come to pursue certain projects as a causal outcome of certain prior events. In the section “Being and doing: freedom” of Being and Nothingness, Sartre argues that to speak of an event without a cause would bring a denial of the intentional structure of our actions which leads “rendering the act absurd” (Sartre 2001:455). Nevertheless, Sartre does not endorse a determinist approach to freedom by claiming that there is no act without a cause, because for him “in order to be a cause, the cause must be experienced as such” (Sartre 2001:455-6). An event becomes a cause only after the for-itself attributes the value of a cause or a motive to it. The for-itself constitutes this event as a cause. However, this does not mean that the motive causes the act; it is “an integral part of the act” (Sartre 2001:456). He talks about the motive (cause), the act and the end as three structures each of which claim the others as their meaning. Those three structures bring about an organized totality which cannot be explained by any outside structure. The for-itself chooses its act and hence chooses its ends and its motives and this act is the “expression of freedom” (Sartre 2001:456).

The in-itself represents the limit of coincidence with itself. At that instance, there is no space left for the self, because perfect coincidence with itself is contradictory to the reflexive nature of the self. The self is present to itself, and this presence refers to a relation that
necessarily requires a distance between the self and itself. Hence, the self can neither coincide with itself, nor can it totally separate itself from itself. Sartre calls this the law of being of the for-itself, which is also the ontological foundation of consciousness. That is why, contrary to the total coincidence of the in-itself with itself, for-itself always “escapes identity while positing it as unity” (Sartre 2001:53).

While the for-itself is the ontological foundation of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*, the in-itself is the ontological foundation of the body, hence they are represented as two distinct ontological categories. The for-itself is always at the same time consciousness of itself when it is a consciousness of an object. As Sartre explains a consciousness that is not a consciousness of which it is a consciousness of is absurd (Sartre 2001:46). Therefore, the for-itself is a consciousness that has an immediate consciousness of itself, which Sartre calls a non-positional consciousness (Sartre 2001:48). This relation of immediacy also explains how the for-itself relates to the body as in-itself.

Although the presentation of the in-itself and the for-itself as ontologically distinct categories does not set the in-itself and the for-itself as contraries, still it makes explaining the interaction between the in-itself and for-itself difficult. Sartre explains this interaction as a necessary project of each human being: “Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself and a project of the appropriation of the world as a totality of being-in-itself, in the form of a fundamental quality” (Sartre 2001:618). Sartre seems to refute Cartesian dualism in *Being and Nothingness*, yet, as can be seen in the previous quote, he is establishing the duality of consciousness and body as a fundamental characteristic of human beings. However, as Judith Butler argues, he does not locate personal identity in either of those parts (Butler 1986a:38). The in-itself is the undifferentiated
being, while the for-itself is the structure of consciousness that imposes a certain structure upon this undifferentiated being. When it comes to the relation between my body as an in-itself and my consciousness as a for-itself, Sartre says “my body is a point of departure which I am and which at the same time I surpass” (Sartre 2001:355).

The body seems to have a different characteristic in comparison to the other in-itselvs. It is not a simple organic structure; it is the condition of my freedom and surpassing in the world. As an embodied consciousness, a human being is both a consciousness and a thing at the same time, but never a pure consciousness nor a pure thing. Hence, a human being is both for-itself and in-itself simultaneously. Sartre calls this being in-itself-for-itself. Nevertheless, since a human being is never what it is and is what it is not, in-itself-for-itself is never achievable for human beings. It is the Ideal a human being strives for. The basic characteristic of the in-itself-for-itself is its capacity to modify being (Sartre 2001:24). Sartre argues that,

This being […] is the in-itself-for-itself, consciousness become substance, substance become the cause of itself, the Man-God. Thus the being of human reality is originally not a substance but a lived relation. The limiting terms of this relation are first the original In-itself, fixed in its contingency and its facticity, its essential characteristics being that it is, that it exists; and second the In-itself-for-itself or value, which exists as the Ideal of the contingent In-itself and it is characterized as beyond all contingency and all existence. Man is neither the one nor the other of these beings, for strictly speaking, we should never say of him that he is at all. He is what he is not and he is not what he is […] (Sartre 2001:583).

When we consider a human being, it is an example of a for-itself, since it can actively cause change in in-itself through action. In its active interaction with the world, it both shapes itself and its world. If we go back to the stone example, contrary to a stone, a human being can choose to change itself into this or that type of human being. A person who hates exercising can change herself into someone who loves exercising. Nevertheless, while the stone is an example of pure in-itself, a human being is never an example of a pure for-itself. As stated above, Sartre refers to
human beings as an amalgamation of substance and consciousness. Hence, a human being is ever neither a pure in-itself nor a pure for-itself, it is an in-itself-for-itself.

Beauvoir also emphasizes that we experience ourselves both as “a thing” and “a consciousness”, which in Sartrean terms means both as an in-itself and as a for-itself (Beauvoir 1976:7). She depicts this human condition of being an in-itself-for-itself by appealing to an imaginary conversation between Pyrrhus the militaristic king of Hellenistic Epirus and his chief advisor Cineas in her first philosophical essay ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’. Pyrrhus tells his plan to conquer the world to Cineas. After listening to him, Cineas asks about his plans after he finishes this project. Pyrrhus answers “I will rest.” Cineas asks “Why not rest right away?” In this conversation, Beauvoir refers to what is unique of human being, which is action. For Beauvoir, if there is something that completely belong to us, it is our actions. She says “the only reality that belongs entirely to me is my act […]” (Beauvoir 2004:93).

Everyone has to realize their existence; and this is possible only through acting in the world. In this process of realizing our existence, we get involved in actions that others have initiated and in the same vein our actions and projects are endorsed and taken up by others. In that sense, we partake in many things that do not entirely belong to us. A house built by someone else becomes mine when I move into it. When I take concern in suffering of a people or a nation, I relate myself to them even though I have never seen them. The limits of my reality are to be drawn by me through my choices and actions which are shaped in my relations to others. All those choices and actions serve certain projects, as Beauvoir puts it “The human being exists in the form of projects that are not towards death [projects vers la mort] but projects toward singular ends.” (Beauvoir 2004:115) These singular projects constitute the lifelong movement toward being. Every project is an end in itself. Nevertheless once I realize it, I have to surpass it. Although my
project necessarily extends as time passes, possibly with engaging others into it, I can no longer justify my being with this project. Hence, I will need to move on to another project. This lifelong movement from one project to another testifies for our freedom. Action of human beings stands as a proof of our freedom.

ii) The Notion of Nothingness:

Nothingness is founded in the consciousness of a human being. Nothingness is a part of human experience. According to Sartre nothingness emerges out of being, hence it “can have only a borrowed existence” (Sartre 2001:73). The appearance of nothingness is borrowed from being. However, this appearance exists only for a consciousness. In Sartre’s words “man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world” (Sartre 2001:81). In the example Sartre gives in Being and Nothingness, absence of Pierre in the café stands out as a result of the expectation to find Pierre there. Pierre’s absence is experienced through the consciousness that expects to see him in the café. The same consciousness does not notice absence of so many other people that are not in the café at the moment. Their absence is not experienced by this consciousness, since they are not a part of its projects.

For Sartre the main characteristic that describes man’s relation to being is his ability to modify it (Sartre 2001:81). This ability comes from the essential characteristic of consciousness to negate being. In other words, consciousness has the capacity to imagine what is absent. Hence one can alter being in their engagements with it to realize their projects. They can choose to change their relation(s) to the in-itselfs around themselves in their daily interactions with them. They can opt for illuminating some objects while leaving some other aside depending on their project. By leaving an existent outside of their project’s scope, they indeed are choosing their existence out of this environment in relation to that existent. Therefore, it becomes impossible
for that existent to act upon them, since they become nothingness with respect to it, and it becomes nothingness with respect to them. Nothingness arises out of one’s act of choosing, which is an act freedom. As Sartre states, freedom is the necessary condition for the possibility of one’s conditioning herself as nothingness. Therefore, Sartre concludes “there is no difference between being of man and his being free” (Sartre 2001:24). He states that for-itself operates on in-itself and creates new possibilities by shaping the in-itself.

For-itself’s ability to create new possibilities and meanings necessarily implies that we are free, because freedom is the very precondition of postulating a project for the future and acting upon it to realize it. For Sartre, freedom is also a necessary precondition of a subject’s being in time. In order to expect a future and think of the past, the subject has to be free. In the same vein, understanding and remembering one’s past also necessitates freedom, since only the future acts can make one give meaning to her past. In addition, it is never possible for someone to give an objective, unchanging recounting of their past. What we call “past” is only the interpretative and inferential thoughts about one’s past chosen among many possible ways of interpreting it. I can never remember my past as a series of events that have objective, or stable meaning. As I engage in new projects through my projecting freedom, my past puts on a different meaning. Therefore, I understand my past through my freedom.

Just as it is in Sartre, the basic human condition according to Beauvoir is that we are aware of ourselves as freedoms and this freedom is realized through negating one’s being. The subject strives to become what it is not and to surpass immanence through projects that reflect her values. The experience of nothingness specifically becomes apparent in interactions with other people. Beauvoir contends that “I must simultaneously grasp myself as object and as freedom and recognize my situation as founded by the other, while asserting my being beyond the
situation.” (Beauvoir 2004:123). Contrary to the missing emphasis in early writings of Sartre, in ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, we see a metaphysical conception of the self who lives in a world with others and who needs to be recognized and recognize others in order to fulfill her transcendence. In the constructive movement of surpassing my past, I always need others as my peers and not as my rivals. Hence, for Beauvoir the experience of nothingness is always accompanied by the touch of others.

iii) The Notion of Bad Faith:

Freedom as the basic mode of human beings brings about a certain burden on the subject. The subject usually desires to escape from that burden and pretends as if she is not free and subjugates herself to the given. Sartre calls this attitude self-deception or bad faith. Bad faith is a component of the mode of being-free which is the essential mode of being for humans. Every subject oscillates between acting on their freedom and escaping from it. Bad faith can be described as the desire or tendency of escaping from the choices they need to make in order to surpass their given situation. It is the desire to remain as an object in order to escape the burden of self-determination.

We see many descriptions and examples in Being and Nothingness portraying a variety of ways in which human beings try to escape their freedom. Bad faith is a situation hard to avoid completely due to the ambiguous human condition. As mentioned above, for Sartre, man is what he is not and is not what he is. He repeats this definition in the section on Bad Faith and says that “we have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (Sartre 2001:100). This ambiguity which arises out of the stranded condition of the subject between her being as an in-itself and a for-itself expedites this attitude of self-deception that leads the subject to perceive herself either as her facticities or as subject that has transcended
them. In both cases, the subject is in bad faith, since it is never possible to be pure immanence nor to be pure transcendence. Sartre gives the example of a woman who agrees to go out with a man for the first time. The woman insists on ignoring the romantic comments the man makes and does not respond his advances in any way. Finally, the man puts his hand on her hand, yet she still does not react. Sartre contends that she is trying to postpone the moment of decision by doing so. Although she makes a choice by leaving her hand there, she “does not notice that she is leaving it” (Sartre 2001:109). She thinks herself as pure consciousness and ‘divorces’ her consciousness from her body. She treats both her body and actions of the man as passive objects in the mode of the in-itself. However, she is at the same time aware of the fact that she is her body and her body and consciousness are not separate. In doing so, Sartre argues that, the subject in bad faith forms “contradictory concepts which unite in themselves an idea and a negation of that idea” (Sartre 2001:98). Ignoring the fact that a human being at once is both facticity and transcendence, the subject in bad faith does not take the pains “to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis” although “these two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination” (Sartre 2001:108-9).

Sartre introduces a different way of being in bad faith in the example of the waiter. The waiter identifies with his role as a waiter to the extent that all his actions seem to be exaggerated. This self-identification with one’s role goes against the nature of being which never what it is. In all those forms of bad faith the subject submits itself to the already existing values or definitions and refuses to take up the responsibility their freedom entails. Sartre says “I do not have nor can I have recourse to any value against the fact that it is I who sustain values in being” (Sartre 2001:94). Sartre also discusses the serious man as another example of a human being in bad faith. He contends that:
Anguish is opposed to the mind of the serious man who apprehends values in terms of the world and who resides in the reassuring, materialistic substantiation of values. In the serious mood I define myself in terms of the object by pushing aside a priori as impossible all enterprises in which I am not engaged at the moment; the meaning which my freedom has given to the world, I apprehend as coming from the world and constituting my obligations (Sartre 2001:94).

Beauvoir also talks about the serious ambiguities involved in the basic human condition defined by freedom. Those ambiguities and the anguish accompanied by them make the subject want to flee from their freedom. Beauvoir discusses the different ways individuals respond to this condition in the Ethics of Ambiguity. Acting in bad faith is one of the most common ways people choose to deal with the anxiety produced by the ambiguity. Beauvoir’s discussion of the ideal types of “sub-man” and “serious man” provides a detailed explanation of how a person acts in bad faith. The sub-man lives in the world in a constant state of fear; “he is afraid of engaging himself in a project as he is afraid of being disengaged[…] He is thereby led to take refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world” (Beauvoir 1976:44). By taking on the normative role ascribed to him by the society, the sub-man identifies himself with certain behaviors which are appropriate to his role. He escapes from the responsibility of identifying himself through his genuine projects. The serious man on the other hand, refuses to see the ambiguity of his condition and behaves as if he is sure of what the right thing to do. The ethical problem with the behavior of the serious man is that, he never questions his ends and projects and follows them regardless of the cost of realizing them. The course of actions to be followed in order to realize his project seems quite apparent to him. In doing so he tries to escape the human condition which is essentially ambiguous. As Kimberly Hutchings points out, one of the key points in The Ethics of Ambiguity is Beauvoir’s “replacement of transcendence as the heart of moral agency with the concept of ambiguity” (Hutchings 2007:124) The serious man can easily become an oppressor,
since for him there is no ethical question in objectifying others for the sake of his own project. In being totally inconsiderate of the means he uses to realize his project, the serious man risks becoming a tyrant. The tyrant is an example of the ideal type of the serious man Beauvoir provides in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The tyrant not only asserts himself as transcendence but also treats others as immanences (Beauvoir 1976:102).

iv) The Notions of Ethical Freedom and Natural Freedom:

We are naturally free, yet we also choose to will ourselves free or not. In the very first pages of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir names those two freedoms as natural freedom and ethical freedom (Beauvoir 1976:24). Instead of postulating these freedoms as two separate types of freedoms, drawing from Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook I argue that they are two dimensions of our freedom (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998:106). Natural freedom and ethical freedom are two different experiences of our freedom. One’s experience of herself as a consciousness is the same as one’s experience of herself as freedom. In that sense, being free is the essential mode of all human beings which she describes as natural freedom. However, according to Beauvoir, in our interactions with others we are also objects and we need recognition of others in order to create and pursue our projects. In creating our genuine projects and demanding attention of others to our projects we are exercising ethical freedom. Beauvoir states that “To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence” (Beauvoir 1976:25). However, one may abstain from exercising her ethical freedom because of different reasons. Two main reasons Beauvoir considers for failure in exercising ethical freedom are being in bad faith and being under oppressive conditions. In “laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience” one is escaping from the anguish her freedom brings about. In situations of oppression, on the
other hand, the oppressed is not given the chance to assume her ethical freedom and act upon it. If the oppressive condition ceases to exist and the oppressed still does not claim her freedom, then she would be in bad faith.

These notions of natural freedom and ethical freedom are referred as ontological (metaphysical) freedom and practical freedom respectively. In my dissertation, I interchangeably use the notions of ontological and metaphysical freedom for natural freedom and the notion of ethical freedom for practical freedom. For Beauvoir, natural freedom is the very condition of ethical freedom. We are able to choose among ethical action and unethical action only because we potentially have ontological freedom. Beauvoir contends that “There is ethics only if ethical action is not present. Now Sartre declares that every man is free, that there is no way of his not being free. When he wants to escape his destiny, he is still freely fleeing it. Does not this presence of a so to speak natural freedom contradict the notion of ethical freedom?” (Beauvoir 1976:24) What would choosing to will one’s self free mean if we are originally free? Does not this seem to lead to a contradiction? This objection, she argues, is not a valid one, because freedom is not attached to us the way, the branches, leaves or fruits of an orange tree are attached to it. “Every man is originally free, in the sense that he spontaneously casts himself into the world” (Beauvoir 1976:25). Existence in the world necessitates action and interaction with other freedoms. One may well escape assuming others’ freedom, treat others as things and avoid seeing how their projects need others in order to have a meaning, yet they cannot escape their natural freedom in doing so; they would only escape their ethical freedom. As I will explain in the next chapter, this is how the distinction Beauvoir makes between natural freedom and ethical freedom establishes the bond between freedom and ethics, and makes an account of oppression possible in the framework of existentialist ethics (Beauvoir 1976:24).
The distinction between natural freedom and ethical freedom in Beauvoir corresponds to the distinction between ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘freedom of obtaining’ in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre refers to these two modes of freedoms as ‘ontological freedom’ and ‘practical freedom’ respectively (Sartre 2001:460). Freedom of choice or ontological freedom refers to the type of freedom Sartre establishes as the basic condition of being. It is the freedom everyone enjoys by virtue of being a human subject. The notion of freedom Sartre is discussing extensively in *Being and Nothingness* is ‘ontological freedom’. Freedom of obtaining or practical freedom, on the other hand refers to one’s power in her situation in the world of ability to have access to certain means to realize her projects. One may not appeal to this distinction and can simply talk about a distinction between freedom and power. Freedom would refer to ‘ontological freedom,’ whereas power would refer to ‘practical freedom’.

v) The Notions of Transcendence and Immanence:

Beauvoir’s theory of freedom is centered on the terms of transcendence and immanence. For Beauvoir, being human means being free and fulfillment of this freedom requires engagement in constructive activities. The anxiety created by a subject’s being what it is not leads the subject to seek a justification for their existence. Hence, this freedom is also the source of the significations and values, yet this source generates different goals and aspirations in different subjects. The search for a justification for one’s existence leads each individual to a different path, resulting in endorsement and creation of different values. When I freely choose to be a vegetarian, I endorse the value that eating animals is not an ethical action. My choice and my actions supporting this choice stand as a declaration of this value. Beauvoir contends that “Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself” (Beauvoir 2001: 82). If it remains at the level of perpetuating itself then it is no different from “absurd vegetation”. A free
life is the one that reaches beyond reproduction of daily life and surpasses the given world by some type of creation. The subject is not a thing but a project towards the world and the other, “a spontaneity which desires, loves, wants, acts.” (Beauvoir 2004:16) Transcendence consists in those constructive activities, while immanence consists in daily reproductive activities that provide the basis for constructive activities. It is important to note that no subject is ever in a pure state of transcendence or immanence. We all have the capacity for transcendence and are always in danger of falling in immanence. This human condition is associated with ambiguity because of the continuous struggle between transcendence and immanence. Here is how Beauvoir explains transcendence:

[...]the constructive activities of man take on a valid meaning only when they are assumed as a movement toward freedom; and reciprocally, one sees that such a movement is concrete: discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, paintings, and books people the world concretely and open concrete possibilities to men (Beauvoir 2001: 80-81).

As can be seen in the quote above, constructive activities through which one transcends herself leaves concrete marks in the world. They shape the world or contribute to its transformation. In that sense, the products of actions of transcendence, unlike the product of actions of immanence, have usually long lives. Actions of transcendence are also more likely to have an element of self-expression. Actions of immanence, on the other hand, serve maintaining daily life. Housework such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry are some examples of such actions.²

² Beauvoir seems to consider reproduction of species in human beings as an act of immanence in The Second Sex (Beauvoir 2012: 63-65, 474-78). I believe that Beauvoir does not see motherhood as immanence in itself. Rather, the institution of motherhood with all its implications strands women into activities of immanence (Beauvoir 2012: 63, 483, 526, 511). She talks about the burdens of maternity in various sections of The Second Sex (Beauvoir 2012: 35, 62, 96, 126, 757). While she explains the physiological dangers of maternity, she accepts the possibility that maternity can be very advantageous psychologically in a footnote (Beauvoir 2012: 42). Also see Margaret Simons’ interpretation of motherhood in Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, race, and the origins of existentialism (Simons 1999: 78). In an interview, Margaret Simons asks Beauvoir what she meant when she said that “to change the whole value system of society, to destroy the concept of motherhood, that is revolutionary”. Beauvoir responds that she did not mean destroying motherhood, but rather changing the idea of maternity, of maternal instinct and of feminine vocation. She argues that “Because it is through the idea of feminine vocation that one enslaved women to the home [...] it is a trap for women” (Simons1999: 16). Beauvoir also affirms that it is not impossible to be both a mother and be transcendent in spite of the difficult conditions a woman may face (Simons 1999: 17).
Products of actions of immanence are usually consumed quite fast without leading any future production. After hours and hours of cooking a meal is eaten in a short time, the laundry starts to accumulate slowly right after we do it, and the house starts to get dirty the moment we are done cleaning. As Beauvoir puts it, “The clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present” (Beauvoir 2012:451). Products of transcendence, on the contrary, can serve a variety of different functions for a long period of time. For example, a book can be read by thousands of people for centuries. It can “open concrete possibilities to men” by inspiring new ideas. Beauvoir acknowledges that “life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself” however, she strongly condemns the life that is occupied only with self-maintenance; since according to her “if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying […]” (Beauvoir 1976:82-83).

2. An Existentialist Account of Freedom

As I pointed out earlier, Sartre’s account of freedom as presented in Being and Nothingness has been criticized severely. The criticisms can be grouped under two main headings. First is the claim that Sartre’s account of freedom is too absolute and extreme and it does not take into account the external limitations to one’s exercise of their freedom. The charge that Sartre does not consider the influence of other freedoms in one’s freedom is also a subcomponent of this claim. The second criticism is that even when Sartre is talking about the

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3 As I will explain in the second chapter, this account of transcendence and immanence will provide the basis for Beauvoir’s account of oppression which she defines as forcing people to live in immanence and prevent them to explore the possibilities the world opens to them.

Other, his account of the encounter with the Other is always antagonistic and he does not provide us a space for a positive ethics. In what follows, I will entertain those two criticisms in turn.

i) Is Sartre’s Notion of Freedom Absolute and Extreme?

Although Sartre does not emphasize the role of the situation and others’ freedoms on the exercise of one’s own freedom as much as Beauvoir does, he does not totally ignore it either. Freedom, for him, is not an attribute of the subject that can be thought of in isolation. A subject is always in a situation. Since the subject is a for-itself, it is always in the world and being in the world means being in a situation. The subject is inseparably connected with their situation through which it designates its projects. And being in a situation involves many contingencies which eventually leads us to have “this or that point of view” (Sartre 2001:284). This “perpetual contingency” is always unknowable although it appears as “necessary and totally unjustifiable” (Sartre 2001:285). Sartre explains freedom as a paradox. He writes that:

There is freedom only in a situation, and there is situation only through freedom. Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is (Sartre 2001:465).

One’s relationship to this contingency, which Sartre understands as facticity, is reflected in their transcendence. In the section of *Being and Nothingness* “The Body as Being For-itself: Facticity”, Sartre explains the for-itself as a relation to the world. This relation is possible only through the body, since to “exist and to be situated are one and the same” according to Sartre (Sartre 2001:285). We are born into a certain family, language, nation and culture. Sartre considers those elements as abstract structures “which the for-itself sustains and surpasses by its project” (Sartre 2001:499). In another section “Freedom and Facticity: The Situation”, Sartre states five main facts that mainly constitute our facticity which are my place, my past, my
environment, my fellowmen and my death. In a broader sense, our situation in the world is our facticity. As Sartre puts it,

[…] the facticity of freedom is the given which it has to be and which it illuminates by its project. This given is manifested in several ways although within the absolute unity of a single illumination. It is my place, my body, my past, my position in so far as it is already determined by the indications of Others, finally my fundamental relation to the Other (Sartre 2001:503).

It is important to emphasize that all those factors constituting our facticity are already “determined by the indications of Others.” Nevertheless, our previous projects have also contributed to the situation we find ourselves in at this moment. There is always a reciprocal relationship between the self and its situation. In that sense, although our facticity is contingent, it is not random. We are born into our facticity which presents us with certain possibilities. We act on some of these possibilities, while we do not pursue others. Our choices alter our facticity each time we act on a possibility, which in turn reshapes the future possibilities our facticity presents us with. Our facticity is also altered by others’ choices and actions. Taking into account all those factors, facticity can be explained within the scope of our projects, choices and history in its broadest sense. By acting on some of the possibilities presented by its facticity, the for-itself transcends its facticity, but on certain conditions, i.e., oppression, the situation may not allow a possibility of being surpassed by the for-itself. Under those conditions one’s freedom seems to be limited in significant ways.

The subject may be situated under oppressive conditions, yet she may still be transcending it through her projects. We cannot guarantee that she is going to succeed in transcending her situation, since transcendence is not an absolute power the for-itself has. Nevertheless, her facticity does not have an absolute power either. By taking a certain perspective towards their facticity, one chooses their situation in the world. However, Sartre
notes that “…the situation …is an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existent” (Sartre 2001:464). Since freedom is only possible in time and a situation and my free acts contribute shaping my situation—acts of other freedoms also contribute this process by shaping the environment in which I act—it is hard for me to delineate the role of my freedom in the process of creating my situation. My transcendence is always in connection with my facticity and as a result of this connection I create my situation. However, the in-itself is not revealed as it is. The in-itself can only be revealed in the light of projecting freedom and when we become conscious of the in-itself either as resistance or as aid. It is either an obstacle for the projecting freedom or contributory to it (Sartre 2001:464). In that case, encountering resistance is possible only within the scope of one’s freedom. More precisely, something might become an obstacle or not depending on my freely chosen project. Hence, there is no obstacle in an “absolute sense,” since according to Sartre “I realize my situation in so far as I live it and make it be with my being” (Sartre 2001:156). An object which stands as an obstacle to my project ceases out being so the moment I change my project. Although “I am not ‘free’ either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own proper or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits,” all those facts put on meaning through the end I choose by my projecting freedom (Sartre 2001:496).

As I explained in the section on transcendence and immanence, Sartre defines transcendence as this “inner and realizing” negation which both chooses the being of the for-itself while revealing the in-itself (Sartre 2001:156). The in-itself is “illuminated” only by the end freedom chooses to realize. The in-itself refers to the givens in our lives. Some events of one’s facticity are also givens; such as one’s nationality, one’s native language, one’s parents,
one’s height, etc., and can be included here. In that case, the in-itself or some events of one’s facticity can never have a limiting effect on one’s freedom. Although we always encounter resistance and obstacles that are not created by ourselves, these resistances and obstacles put on meaning only through the choices of the for-itself (Sartre 2001:465). Sartre gives the example of a rock which might or might not be considered as “not scalable” depending on one’s project. An individual turns the rock into an obstacle through their choice. For somebody who is passing over the road, the rock may be manifested as beautiful or ugly instead of “scalable” or “not scalable”. This, according to Sartre, shows us that it is our projects that give meaning to the conditions we face in the world and the difficulty that we claim comes from the external objects or subjects which Sartre calls coefficient of adversity arises only from our projects. He also gives the example of a person who chooses to take part in sports and hence faces that their body is weak and argues that if this person has chosen to live in a city and involve themselves in business or intellectual work then their body would not have this quality of being weak.

In the example of friends going on a hike, he examines the person who feels fatigue and pain and eventually decides to quit walking. Sartre contends that this person was free in his choice because they could have done otherwise. Nevertheless he accepts that doing otherwise would have been impossible “without perceptibly modifying the organic totality of the projects which I am” (Sartre 2001:430). What is significant in terms of his theory of responsibility is that this modification is always possible. Therefore, the subject is unconditionally responsible for his choice. All the examples show that, Sartre does not talk about the possibility of coefficient of adversity arising from anything else but our projects in Being and Nothingness. Feelings such as pain and fatigue are presented as part of a person’s projects and never as symptoms of the physical body. As explained previously, Sartre does not consider the body to be separate from
consciousness. However, we do know that our bodies are physical beings in the world obeying physical laws. Our bodies get older, tired, sick etc. In other words, Sartre does not seem to accept that our bodies have limits independent of our consciousness. What happens when we are so tired that we do not have any energy to move our body? Is it still my project that makes my lack of energy an obstacle? What if someone is coming to murder me and I need to run yet I am not able to do so due to fatigue? Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* would not consider my failure in escaping the murderer due to my fatigue as a choice at this point. He would consider it as an unsuccessful end of a freely chosen project.

For Sartre, freedom is not about being successful in our free projects. Our projects may or may not be realized depending on many conditions influencing them. However, even in front of the most unfavorable conditions, we are free in our projections. Hence, although Sartre considers freedom as absolute in the sense above, he does not offer a conception of freedom that has no limits. Sartre’s much debated claim that the French people have never been as free as they were during the Nazi occupation underlies his position that freedom is not about ‘ability’ and ‘power’. For Sartre, our projects are chosen freely. Although he accepts that we may be presented with certain obstacles in attaining our projects, those limitations do not impede one’s freedom. On the contrary those limitations can only exist for a free person who has a project. It is our projecting freedom which reveals in-itself as obstacle. In Sartre’s words “Man encounters an obstacle only within the field of his freedom” (Sartre 2001:464). Depending on my autonomous choices, the world and the objects in it present themselves to me as ‘coefficient of adversity’ or ‘assistance’. By changing my choices, I may alter the way the objects around me present themselves. If I change my goal of baking an apple cake right now, the fact that I am out of apples would no longer present itself as an obstacle to me. As Sartre explains,
In addition it is necessary to point out to common sense that the formula ‘to be free’ does not mean ‘to obtain what one wishes’ but rather ‘by oneself to determine oneself to wish’ in the broad sense of ‘choosing.’ The technical and philosophical concept of freedom, the only one which we are considering here, means only the autonomy of choice (Sartre 2001:483).

Hence, to reiterate, for Sartre being free by no means implies that our projects will be successful. One may fail to attain what they wish, what they strive for; yet this failure could only testify for their freedom. Sartre’s argument in Being and Nothingness seems to be a conclusive argument showing that we are metaphysically free and even external conditions cannot touch upon this very fact of our being. However, the question of freedom leaves us with more perplexing and puzzling questions than one can forecast upfront. One problem, for example, that Sartre failed to address is the problem of internalized oppression as Beauvoir calls it. It is hard to deny that external conditions shape our consciousness and the projects we postulate and undertake. In so far as the subject is aware of the limitations posed on her by her situation her freedom seems to remain intact. Yet, what if the subject is not even cognizant of the contingency of these external limitations? In that case, many projects she could have entertained otherwise become nullified from the outset. Hence, as Beauvoir points out, underestimating the limits external conditions presents for the exercise of one’s freedom may create significant problems when we try to explain and overcome oppression. By giving the due emphasis to the situation, Beauvoir’s notion of freedom provides a more favorable framework to account for oppression. In the Prime of Life Beauvoir recounts a conversation between herself and Sartre that took place in 1940 in Paris:

I maintained that from the point of view of freedom, as Sartre defined it- not as a stoical resignation but as an active transcendence of the given- not every situation is equal: what transcendence is possible for a woman locked up in a harem? Even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several different ways, Sartre said. I clung to my opinion for a long time and then made only a token submission. Basically, I was right. But to have been able to defend my position, I would have

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5 This problem is referred to as the problem of adoptive choice in feminist literature and false consciousness in Marxist literature.
had to abandon the terrain of individualist, thus idealist, morality where we stood. (Beauvoir 1994: 346).

A very similar critique comes from Merleau-Ponty. He accuses Sartre of ignoring the practical limitations especially the oppressed face in their environments. In the section on Freedom in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre’s notion of freedom and accuses him of being a rationalist. He argues that:

> Having built our life upon an inferiority complex which has been operative for twenty years, it is not probable that we shall change. It is clear what a summary rationalism might say in reply to such a hybrid notion: there are no degrees of possibility; either the free act is no longer possible, or it is still possible, in which case freedom is complete. […] ‘It is improbable’ that I should at this moment destroy an inferiority complex in which I have been content to live for twenty years. That means that I have committed myself to inferiority, that I have made it my abode, that this past, though not a fate, has at least a specific weight and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the atmosphere of my present. The rationalist’s dilemma: either the free act is possible, or it is not — either the event originates in me or is imposed on me from outside, does not apply to our relations with the world and with our past (Merleau-Ponty 2002:513)

In the quote above, Merleau-Ponty presents an uncharitable reading of Sartre’s theory of freedom. By emphasizing that for Sartre the free act is either possible or not, he claims that Sartre’s theory of freedom does not take into account the conditions under which the subject is committing the mentioned act. However, the free act is possible for Sartre only at a certain price. When he discusses the example of the person who goes on a hike and feels fatigue and stops at some point, Sartre states that “I have yielded to fatigue […] doubtless I could have done otherwise but at what price?” Sartre is aware of the fact that I am free to choose doing otherwise as long as I am ready to pay the price. He continues “we cannot suppose that the act could have been modified without at the same time supposing a fundamental modification of my original choice of myself” (Sartre 2001:479-80). Sartre is taking into account “our relations with the
world and with our past” in our choices. He is certainly not claiming, as Merleau-Ponty is attributing to him, that the event originates in me and is detached from those relations. I accept that Sartre is not emphasizing the limiting factors of one’s past and environment on their freedom and choices. However, this cannot not lead us to infer that he is ignoring the “the specific weight” those conditions bring about in decision processes.

Merleau-Ponty refuses to see the interplay between the world and the subject in the process of meaning creation and choosing one’s essential project in Sartre’s work. In the *Adventures of the Dialectic* he accuses Sartre of separating the subject and the world and privileging the subject in that relationship. He writes “The subject is not the sun from which the world radiates, the demiurge of my pure objects” (Merleau-Ponty 1973:199). Although Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre illuminates a significant shortcoming of Sartre’s early work—the question of the freedom of the oppressed—Merleau-Ponty reads too much into this shortcoming and attributes certain characteristics to Sartre’s notion of freedom that Sartre does not endorse. As I attempt to show in the following paragraph, a holistic reading of *Being and Nothingness* invalidates Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Sartre.

Beauvoir also intervenes in the debate between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre with her essay “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism”. As Beauvoir argues in this essay, Merleau-Ponty’s misunderstanding of Sartre results from his focus on certain parts of Sartre’s work and ignoring the other parts. Contrary to what she said in the *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir defends Sartre’s notions of freedom in this essay. She argues that Merleau-Ponty creates and attacks a pseudo-Sartre. As Beauvoir argues, Merleau-Ponty’s argument rests on the thesis that “for Sartre, signification is reduced to the consciousness that a subject has of it” (Beauvoir 1989:5-6). Merleau-Ponty takes Sartre as endorsing a type of idealism claiming that consciousness creates reality. However, this
idea cannot be attributed to Sartre because in many places of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre emphasizes that external conditions present real and objective limits to us. As Beauvoir contends, for Sartre significations are “real, objective and opened ad infinitum into the universe” (Beauvoir 1989:5-6). In espousing his idea of interworld, Merleau-Ponty writes “The question is to know whether, as Sartre says it, there are only men and things or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made” (Merleau-Ponty 1973:200).

Merleau-Ponty interprets the Sartrean consciousness as the sole creator of meanings without any encounter with already established meanings. He calls it ‘creative consciousness’—a theory Sartre explicitly repudiates as Beauvoir stresses in her reply.

In his introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses both realism and idealism as untenable theories in explaining the relationship between being and consciousness (Sartre 2001:56-7). He talks about the phenomenon of being which refers to the meaning of the being as it is revealed to consciousness, yet there is always part of the being that is hidden from the consciousness. As Sartre puts it, “[…] the primary characteristic of the being of an existent is never to reveal itself completely to consciousness” (Sartre 2001:56). By stating that neither consciousness can act upon being nor being can act upon consciousness, Sartre refutes idealism and realism in turn. Although there is not a relationship of complete determination between consciousness and being, there is a reciprocal relationship; a relation which seems very similar to what Merleau-Ponty calls interworld in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Adventures of Dialectic*. Here is how Sartre explains the interaction between the world and the consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*:

In *my* world, there exist objective meanings *[significations]* which are immediately given to me as *not having been brought to light by me*. I, by whom meanings come to things, I find myself engaged in an already meaningful world which reflects to me meanings which I have not put into it (Sartre 2001:522).
Sonia Kruks’ critique of Sartrean notion of freedom is similar to that of Merleau-Ponty. Kruks argues that Sartre’s ontology in *Being and Nothingness* does not provide us with a viable framework to explain oppression. For Kruks certain oppressive conditions can reduce a subject to pure immanence, a position in which the subject has no freedom whatsoever (Kruks 1987; Kruks 1995). Kruks favors Beauvoir’s account of freedom contrary to Sartre’s as it overcomes this limitation. As Kruks maintains, Beauvoir presents her account of freedom within the context of the human situation with all its limitations and as surrounded by others in the world, whereas Sartre’s account of freedom does not give the same emphasis to the role of others in experiencing one’s freedom in his early writings. I do not claim that he totally ignores the influence of the situation on one’s freedom as Sonia Kruks does. However I argue that it is important to see that there is a shift in his earlier and later writings concerning how much weight he gives to the situation in discussions of freedom.

In *Being and Nothingness* the notion of freedom is not “materially mediated” and Sartre seem to attribute full freedom to the oppressed subject as well. No matter what the social conditions are, they do not count as explanation of the decision one makes, even though they shape one’s possibilities. However, Sartre’s account of oppression of the Jews presents a more direct influence—which at times can be considered as limiting one’s freedom—of one’s situation on their freedom.

Sartre’s critique of anti-Semitism in the *Anti-Semite and Jew* is based on the assumption that one is necessarily shaped and limited by their situation. The look of the anti-Semite makes the Jew a Jew and through this look the Jew’s being is molded. Sartre goes as far to argue that “if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him” (Sartre 1995a:13). The Jew is destined
to something that he did not choose or contribute to. Relationship of a human being to their situation is explained in a similar vein to *Being and Nothingness* in *The Anti-Semite and the Jew*:

For us man is defined first of all as a being in a “situation.” That means that he forms a synthetic whole with his situation—biological, economic, political, cultural, etc. He cannot be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides his possibilities; but inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it and by it. To be in a situation, as we see it, is to choose oneself in a situation, and men differ from one another in their situations and also in the choices they themselves make of themselves. What men have in common is not a “nature” but a condition, that is an ensemble of limits and restrictions: the inevitability of death, the necessity of working for a living, of living in a world already inhabited by other men (Sartre 1995a:59-60).

Regarding the role of the situation in one’s decisions Merleau-Ponty writes: “The generality of the ‘role’ and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the ‘share contributed by the situation’ and the ‘share contributed by freedom’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 527). The ambiguous character of the interaction between the person and the situation and the impossibility of deciding how much of a decision is originated from freedom following this ambiguity is already what Sartre endorsed in *Being and Nothingness*. As I quoted earlier Sartre explains this difficulty as follows: “These observations should show us that the situation, the common product of the contingency of the in-itself and of freedom, is an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existent” (Sartre 2001:464). This notion of ambiguity that Sartre is trying to develop in *Being and Nothingness* also shows how his notion of ‘absolute freedom’ is neither independent of nor indifferent to one’s situation; freedom can only be thought of in a situation. The responsibility that comes about such a notion of freedom does not refer to being the originator of one’s situation, nor does it refer to one’s power of changing the situation. It simply
refers to one’s having no choice but establishing their self within the situation they find themselves in, in a world where they are in interaction with others. As Sartre states in *Truth and Existence*:

> I have shown that freedom always means assuming our responsibilities afterwards for what we have neither created nor wanted. (That car knocks me down. I couldn’t avoid it. I’m missing an arm. My freedom began there: assuming that disability that I did not create.) But it cannot escape from its condition (Sartre 1995b:46).

As I have shown in the previous sections of this chapter, there is a distinction between freedom of choice and freedom of obtaining in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. The type of freedom Sartre establishes as the basic condition of being is freedom of choice. David Detmer presents an extensive defense of Sartrean notion of freedom based on this distinction. Detmer mentions that Sartre’s critics have failed to notice those different senses of freedom that Sartre ‘repeatedly’ and ‘explicitly’ draws (Detmer 2012:59). Detmer employs an interpretive strategy and claims that although it is not explicit, the distinction between ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘freedom of obtaining’ in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* is a fundamental one which Sartre refers as ‘ontological freedom’ and ‘practical freedom’ (Sartre 2001:460; Detmer 2012:60). As I explained previously, the notion of freedom Sartre is discussing in *Being and Nothingness* is ‘ontological freedom’ and it refers to the freedom everyone enjoys by virtue of being a human subject. Detmer rightly states that Merleau-Ponty misunderstands Sartre when he is labeling him as a rationalist. Sartre rejects this either/or form of rationalism Merleau-Ponty ascribes to him. As I have explained before, for Sartre human action can neither be explained by determinism nor by randomness. Sartre says “we refuse to let ourselves be torn between thesis and antithesis. We conceive with no difficulty that man maybe a center of irreducible indeterminism, although his situation conditions him totally” (quoted in Detmer 1988:90). As Detmer concludes the notion of
freedom in *Being and Nothingness* is very similar to that of Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. He maintains that “While it is true that Sartre’s ontological freedom is either total or non-existent, this does not mean, as Merleau-Ponty apparently thinks, that it amounts either to omnipotence or to a completely ineffective inner freedom” (Detmer 1988:89).

Detmer acknowledges the limitations in *Being and Nothingness*, for example, concerning the absence of an account of a childhood and its influences on the future subject and adds that “this omission distorts Sartre’s treatment of freedom and of responsibility in that book” (Detmer 2009:180). He also admits the common feminist critic of Sartre’s work that the subject in the *Being and Nothingness* is a “mature, fully autonomous, and cognitively well-equipped adult” who has never been a child (Detmer 2009:180).\(^6\)

Although I agree with Detmer that Sartre’s notion of freedom is more nuanced and embracing a distinction between ontological and practical freedom in way that accounts for the certain practical limitations the subject faces as opposed to his critics have been arguing for, I think Detmer is underestimating the results of lack of certain discussions in *Being and Nothingness*. The absence of an account of childhood in early Sartre seems to refer to a perception of insignificance of the topic on Sartre’s part. For Detmer, this change that comes in *Saint Genet* does not refer to a radical break or discontinuity in Sartre’s idea of freedom; it is just an enhancement of it. Nevertheless, Detmer recognizes that the result of this change is “a more balanced and realistic description of freedom” (Detmer 2009:180). Detmer argues against the

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\(^6\) Referring to Sartre’s *Saint Genet* —Sartre’s novel (1952) where he tells the story of the French writer Jean Genet with an significant emphasize on Genet’s childhood (Sartre 2012)— Detmer states that Sartre makes up for this lack later. Margaret Simons, in her work explaining Beauvoir’s influence on Sartre, cites this change as another significant area where Sartre has changed his notion of freedom as a result of Beauvoir’s influence on him (Simons 1999:47). Simons mentions that when Sartre started writing *Saint Genet* (1950), the *Second Sex* where Beauvoir “traces the inhibiting effects of childhood socialization on the development of the young girl’s sense of personal autonomy and self-assertion” had been completed (Simons 1999:49). She also notes that in an interview (Simons &Benjamin 1979) Beauvoir affirms her suggestion that Sartre’s becoming aware of the vitality of childhood experiences in his account of freedom is evidence of Beauvoir’s influence on him (Simons 1999:50).
radical break objection in another book on Sartre, *Sartre Explained*, and defends the argument that Sartre’s notion of freedom does not present a radical break; on the contrary it follows a linear development through his earlier and later work (Detmer 1988:93).

The basic concern of my dissertation is not whether there is a radical break or not in Sartre’s early and late writings. However, in my analysis of oppression in the next chapter—specifically internalized oppression—I will argue that the effect of the social-historical and cultural context is extremely important in discussing the freedom of the oppressed subject. Sartre seems to be blind to different modes of oppression under which the subject’s options become distorted because of the way oppressive condition presents itself. For that reason the absence of an account of freedom in cases of internalized oppression in Sartre is worth noting in my dissertation.

ii) Encouter with the Other: Always a Conflict?

Beauvoir and Sartre both recognize that the subject is always among other freedoms and this has a substantial influence on how one lives her freedom, yet they provide radically different accounts of the encounter with another freedom. They diverge on their visions of what it means for the subject to be among other subjects whose being is also being-free.

Sartre establishes the ontological foundation of the interconnectedness of freedoms early as in the *Transcendence of the Ego* (1937) and states this ontology as the basis of an ethics and a politics “which are absolutely positive” (Sartre 2004b:106). As explained above, one’s relation to the self is always constructed in its relations to others. There is no prior access to the self-independent of its relations to other selves. Sartre claims: “My I, in effect, is no more certain for consciousness than the I of other men. It is only more intimate” (Sartre 2004b:104). He also writes that “And the relation of interdependence established by this absolute consciousness
between the me and the World is sufficient for the me to appear as “endangered” before the World, for the me […] to draw the whole of its content from the World” (Sartre 2004b:106).

The role of the other in the construction of subjectivity is presented in the “look” of the other Sartre extensively discusses in *Being and Nothingness*. The ego is established in the relation and opposition of the subject to the other. Hence, Being-with-others is the precondition of the I. Sartre writes: “Nevertheless I am that ego; I do not reject it as a strange image but it is present to me as a self which I am without knowing it; for I discover it in shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look” (Sartre 2001:295). It is only in the objectifying “look” of the other I become aware of this being which is ‘me’. The other puts me in the middle of the world with this look, in a place where I have to decide “what sorts of relations I can enter into with” ‘me’. The ‘me’ that is revealed through the ‘other’s look’ has the characteristics of being ‘indeterminate’ and ‘unpredictable’; and it is the other’s freedom that gives my being this type of indeterminacy and unpredictability (Sartre 2001:295-6). In other words “the Other’s freedom is revealed to me across the uneasy indetermination of the being which I am for him.” Once I become aware of the look of the other my possibilities in the world are reshaped since they can be surpassed by the possibilities of the other. A dark corner, Sartre mentions, can arise as a possibility of hiding for me, yet by the possibility of the other’s illuminating it with his flashlight, I immediately apprehend it as absent (Sartre 2001:297). Although the dark corner still remains as a possible place for hiding for me, the other can surpass it by his possibilities. That is why Sartre argues that “the other is the hidden death of my possibilities” (Sartre 2001:298). With the look of the other, I become aware of the fact that I live in a world where my possibilities are limited, and/or organized by the other. Hence, “I am no longer the master of the situation” (Sartre 2001:299).
In the encounter with the other, I see no other option but taking up all the contingent facts related to me as my life; and by doing so I become responsible for myself. All those actions that I am pre-reflectively conscious of establish a totality that I call “me”. Nevertheless, through postulating the ‘me’ or the ‘I’, I define myself and attribute certain traits and characteristic to myself; an act that apparently betrays my freedom which rejects any fixed determination and consists in nothingness. This seems to show that bad faith is a necessary ontological structure for postulating a self. In other words, it is one of our essential modes of existing in the world with others. Now, I shall continue explaining the influence of others on one’s freedom.

Sartre explains that we live among others and this presents “a real limit to our freedom” (Sartre 2001:500). In my relations with others, my being takes on a new dimension. The others confer a certain meaning upon me from which I cannot escape—such as being a woman, a Jew, a white man etc. Finally, I have to accept the alienating truth that “I am something which I have not chosen to be” (Sartre 2001:500). Sartre explains this process of creation of meaning which alienates and is beyond the subject by appealing to the freedom of other for-itselfs. We live in a world composed of other meaning creating for-itselfs and we are bound to deal with those meanings which have been created before we existed and during our existence in the world. The important question is whether those meanings which arise through other freedoms limit our freedom or not. According to Sartre, those meanings are also a part of our facticity, and in the same way they do not limit our freedom. They may present themselves as coefficient of adversity depending on what our project is, yet they do not have a determining power on what we choose our projects to be. Nevertheless, the relationship of the self to others is always based on conflict in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness; “Conflict is the original meaning of being for-others” (Sartre 2001:364). In trying to reach my transcendence, I seek to enslave the other and the other does the
same. The other is always a rival for my projects. This is presented as an ongoing struggle for the self who happens to live in a world with others. There seems to be no ideal of reciprocal recognition of the transcendences, neither the possibility in early Sartre. Nevertheless Beauvoir says, “In Being and Nothingness reciprocity was not [Sartre's] subject. But that doesn't mean that he didn't believe that reciprocity was the best way after all to live out human relationships” (Simons 1999:57).

Sartre excludes the possibility of treating the other as our equal. He maintains that “we shall never place ourselves concretely on a plane of equality; that is, on the plane where the recognition of the Other’s freedom would involve the Other’s recognition of our freedom” (Sartre 2001:428). Even though the relationship with the other is not necessarily one of a conflict, it is never one of equality either. Sartre describes two possible attitudes towards the Other in Being and Nothingness. The first one is apprehending the Other as subject as manifested in love and the second one is apprehending the Other as object as manifested in hate (Sartre 2001:427-30). In Being and Nothingness Sartre does not mention how and why one prefers one attitude over the other, however, his account of oppression in Anti-Semite and the Jew shows that early Sartre is aware of the role of the material conditions in determining that type of an attitude. The objectifying look is directed towards a group which Sartre calls Us-object in the case of the Jew. Sartre describes the experience of the subject in the Us-object as humiliating, and being alienated and trapped among infinity of strange existences (Sartre 2001:438). In Being and Nothingness Sartre refers to the experience of the workers, and the way they develop class consciousness as the Us-object (Sartre 2001:438). Although Sartre’s ruling out the possibility of reciprocal recognition among two subjects is problematic in Being and Nothingness, this example is significant as it shows the potential of Sartrean ontology and notion of freedom in
giving an account of oppression. As I will show in the next chapter, Sartre develops this account in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and provides a coherent and plausible account of ethics that can address oppression.

In conclusion, Beauvoir and Sartre’s account of freedom as the basic human condition establishes that we create values through our decisions and actions in the world. In this chapter, I have given an exegesis of both Sartre and Beauvoir’s accounts of freedom. I have explained the main concepts they have used to show that human beings are fundamentally free. I have discussed the divergence and convergence points among their accounts of freedom and have shown how both accounts can complement each other to bring about a fruitful account of freedom for an existentialist account of ethics.
CHAPTER II

BEAUVOIR AND SARTRE’S CONCEPTION OF OPPRESSION

“...it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my freedom.

Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 91

In this chapter, I present an existentialist account of oppression based on the account of freedom I established in the first chapter. Being able to explain how oppression works and how it can be avoided constitutes the main motive of developing an existentialist account of ethics for Sartre and especially for Beauvoir. As I stated in the previous chapter, Beauvoir develops her existential ethical account in her three major works which are ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex*. Her discussion of freedom and oppression is interwoven in all these texts. Despite being a firm believer in human freedom as an existentialist, Beauvoir postulates freedom as a potentiality, in human beings. Postulation of freedom as a potentiality in her account allows her to explain how oppression is possible in human relationships. Freedom as a potentiality requires the subject’s will and certain material conditions to be fulfilled for it to be realized. In other words, oppressive conditions may render one’s exercise of freedom futile.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, Sartre analyzes oppression within the context of the Us-object in *Being and Nothingness*, but he does not develop a full account of oppression in that book. For this reason, when I shift to discussion of Sartre toward the end of this chapter, I focus on his later writings, specifically *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1 and *The Anti-Semite and Jew*. I demonstrate that the account of oppression in his later writings is fruitful for
an existentialist account of ethics, especially when combined with the account of oppression provided by Beauvoir.

In Beauvoir’s ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas,’ there is a strong emphasis on the need for recognition in humans in order to exist as a free human being. Contrary to early Sartre, in ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas,’ we see a metaphysical conception of the self who lives in a world with others and who needs to be recognized and recognize others in order to fulfill her transcendence. In the constructive movement of surpassing my past, I always need others as my peers and not merely as my rivals. The subject attributes meaning to existence through her acts. Her acts which connect her to others are never ends in themselves since they open up new projects to be pursued: “it is because my subjectivity is not inertia, folding in upon itself, separation, but on the contrary, movement toward the other that the difference between me and the other is abolished, and I can call the other mine” (Beauvoir 2004: 93).

My interconnectedness with others also prepares the ground for possibility of oppression. Beauvoir contends that “It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful” (Beauvoir 1976:82). In the Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir shows how oppression is possible, and at the same time can be avoided. The reason for the possibility and presence of oppression is the fact that we are all metaphysically free and our freedoms are interconnected. The world is populated with freedoms whose projects come into conflict at times. When we do not recognize others’ freedoms in situations of conflict, we end up oppressing others and hence they cannot exercise their ethical freedom. Oppression is an ever-present problem given our relation to the world and interconnectedness of our freedoms as human beings. However, this is not tantamount to saying that there is no way out of oppressive
relations. One can make ethical choices that address oppressive relations and foster mutual recognition of freedoms.

As I explained in the previous chapter in detail, Beauvoir’s theory of freedom and oppression is centered on the terms of transcendence and immanence. For Beauvoir, the constant struggle of a human being from immanence towards transcendence is marked by the subject’s quest for justification for their existence. The subject creates her own significations and values in this journey. A life that remains at the level of perpetuating itself without changing the world it inhabits is simply of no value for Beauvoir. Since creation of one’s values is the basic condition of existence for an existentialist like Beauvoir, disabling someone from engaging in constructive activities through which one creates and defends her values is the most serious crime one can commit. Oppression is this act of blocking the way to transcendence and forcing a person or a group of people to remain in immanence. Oppressed people are forced into repetitive actions of immanence which leaves no room for their freedom to “emerge into an open future” (Beauvoir 1976:82). She writes,

Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures; their leisure is just about sufficient for them to regain their strength; the oppressor feeds himself on their transcendence and refuses to extend it by a free recognition” (Beauvoir 1976:83).

She claims that oppression creates two types of clans: the oppressors who “enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself” and the oppressed who are condemned to perform repetitive activities without having a say on their time or labor (Beauvoir 1976:83).7 This division can be

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7 It sounds like Beauvoir is overlooking the possibility of intersectional identities in this analysis of oppression. A person maybe both oppressed and oppressor in different parts and times of her life. A male worker may be performing actions of immanence and be oppressed in the factory, yet he may be demanding the similar type of mechanic and repetitive actions of immanence he does at work from her wife at home and oppressing his wife. Nevertheless, I can offer a charitable reading of this distinction and argue that she is talking hypothetically about how oppression works between the oppressed and the oppressor.
considered as overlapping with the division between transcendence and immanence. Those who are occupied with the actions of immanence do not participate in the constructive movement which transforms the world. In cases of oppression, by providing the means for maintenance of daily life, the oppressed transfer their transcendence to their oppressors. It is their labor which allows the oppressor to engage in the constructive movement without being interrupted by daily repetitive actions. Hence, according to Beauvoir, the oppressor surpasses or transcends himself thanks to the resources provided to him by the oppressed. The services a married woman offers to her husband present a good example of a type of a transference. The housewife who chooses or is manipulated or forced to choose being a housewife as her life project is a source of labor to maintain daily life for the husband. In other words, the meaning of a housewife’s life does not emanate from the projects that have the potential to alter the structure of the world. The meaning of her existence is derived from sustaining lives of her husband and children.

Beauvoir’s account of oppression explained within the framework of transcendence and immanence provides us with significant tools to analyze the transfer of valuable resources such as time and physical and psychological labor in an asymmetrical ways between individuals and societies. However, there is a crucial problem in that analysis that Beauvoir seems to have failed to take into account: What if the oppressor uses this surplus time and labor to indulge herself in further immanent activities rather than transcendent activities? Beauvoir’s analysis seems to presuppose that the oppressor always uses these resources for “constructive movements”. We can take the example of use of cheap labor in manufacturing in the underdeveloped countries and the over consumption of these goods in affluent countries. The surplus produced by the oppressed in that case seems to contribute only to further actions of immanence: mere consumption. Another lower scale example is a neighbor in my hometown who used to make his
wife work both at home and outside and take care of the children while he spent idle hours in the kahvehane binge drinking and gambling. These examples show that being an oppressor and enjoying the resources produced by the oppressed does not always mean that the oppressor is engaged in constructive activities. The oppressor may as well choose to engage in activities of immanence, even in a destructive way. Nevertheless, we must concede that Beauvoir is right to claim that the surplus values the oppressor presents to the oppressed can provide the material conditions for activities of transcendence. Whether the oppressor chooses to pursue such activities is a separate issue from the transference of resources via oppression.

As explained above, only actions of transcendence allows one’s freedom to “emerge into an open future”. This is a basic distinction between actions of transcendence and of immanence, since the products of actions of immanence do not endure, whereas the products of actions of persist in time thanks to the actions of other freedoms. I have already transcended my situation the moment I accomplish my project, hence I create another project to surpass the current situation which I have shaped by my previous project. In Beauvoir’s terms “The movement of my transcendence appears futile [vain] to me as soon as I have transcended it, but if, through other men, my transcendence is always prolonged further than the project I am now forming, I could never surpass it” (Beauvoir 2004:135). This is why one always wants to attract attention of others to her projects. Although it is a contingent fact that we live with others in the world, for Beauvoir, it is necessary that others recognize one’s project in order that project have a meaning at all.

As we have established, the fact we coexist with other freedoms in the world is a significant element in Beauvoir’s existentialist account of ethics. The ways in which we relate to and deal with those freedoms determines the ethical stance we take in the world. Hegel’s master-
slave dialectic provides the basic structure in Beauvoir’s account of Othering in *The Second Sex*. She explains the historical process of Othering women within the context of the Hegelian dialectic of the One and the Other (Beauvoir 2012:xxiii-xxiii). Based on Hegel’s master-slave dialectic Beauvoir argues that every encounter between two subjects is bound to start with one of the parties establishing themselves as the One and defining the other as the Other. Through this process the One establishes itself as the essential while positing the Other as the inessential. As long as the part which was defined as the Other does not claim its being as subject, it would not even have the chance the initiate the struggle to become a subject and hence remains the Other.

In general, the relationship between two people or groups ends in reciprocal recognition of the two parts by each other. Beauvoir states that since no subject or group wants to remain the Other, the history of humanity is full of struggles and wars initiated by the othered groups or subjects, such as the so-called Negroes and Jews. Although, this pattern did not take place in the case of gender oppression as Beauvoir declares in *The Second Sex*\(^8\), historical evidence shows that oppression is possible given the human condition, yet can be fought against and avoided as well.

It is obvious that Hegelian master-slave dialectic is an important starting point in explaining oppression in a very general sense, yet, when we consider Beauvoir’s writings in their totality, we see a much more sophisticated account of oppression. The two selves who are in relation negate each other reciprocally. This is the Hegelian master-slave dialectic Beauvoir endorses in her work. This reciprocal negation, which constitutes the basic mode of being in

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\(^8\) In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women as the Other have not claimed for themselves the status of the One yet. She elaborates on the possible reasons of women’s not doing so, and states that the main reasons are: (1) they are not fully aware of their oppression; (2) they have already internalized their oppression. She also discusses some factors that kept women from fighting to establish themselves as subjects instead of remaining as objects such as the biological disadvantages of the female body, lacking definite resources, feelings of dependency on men, and being pleased with her role as the other. Nevertheless, she never rules out gender equality as unattainable. This issue will be discussed in the following pages.
early Sartre, is only the first reaction in the process of encountering the other in Beauvoir’s work. This first reaction is to hate the other since it is “stealing the whole world away from me” (Beauvoir 1976:70). However, after this first reaction the subject recognizes the other as a consciousness independent of herself. This recognition comes with acceptance of the other as a free agent whose subjectivity is independent of the self. The subject realizes that as she sees how her projects depend on others’ approval or disapproval. Her project does not have any meaning when there are no other free subjects recognizing it. In that sense, existence of the others gives meaning to our own existence, because “A man entirely alone in the world would be paralyzed by the obvious realization of the futility of all his objectives; he probably would not be able to bear to be alive” (Beauvoir 2004:110).

Every human relationship may start in a frame of objectification, as depicted in Hegelian master-slave dialectic. However, this may refer to a constantly changing object-subject position of a person which partially produces alterity. We are all both subjects and objects at the same time depending on the relationships we are involved. As we see in the historical examples presented in The Second Sex and the theoretical account presented in The Ethics of Ambiguity, the Hegelian master-slave account, which suggests the annihilation of the other by the subject that encounters the Other, is surpassed by Beauvoir’s account of reciprocal recognition between opposing subjects or groups. For Beauvoir, giving and receiving recognition is one of the necessary conditions of being a human subject. Every human subject needs to be recognized by others in order to fulfill their freedom. Quoting Hegel’s famous phrase “Each consciousness seeks the death of the other”, she affirms that the first reaction to the other is to “hate” them, yet this desire to annihilate the other harms the subject because “Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity” (Beauvoir 1976:71).
In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explains the relation of the self to the other as one of a conflict. Being caught in the other’s gaze, I feel shame and fear. I feel as if I am made into an object, and in order to escape this objectification, I turn the other into an object as well. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, the nature of our relations with others is not always that of a conflict. Sometimes, others take up my project and support it. Every project and freedom demands recognition in order to have a meaning. The subject realizes that as she sees how her projects depend on others’ approval or disapproval. Her project does not have any meaning when there are no other free subjects recognizing it. In that sense, existence of the others gives meaning to our own existence, because “A man entirely alone in the world would be paralyzed by the obvious realization of the futility of all his objectives; he probably would not be able to bear to be alive” (Beauvoir 2004:110). She gives meaning to her life through her projects which can be realized in a world with other people. Therefore, our relationship with others constitutes an indispensable component of our lives. After emphasizing that other freedoms are necessary for my projects and my being to have meaning, Beauvoir argues that this can only be possible when we are equally free. She writes that “The other cannot accompany my transcendence unless he is at the same point on the road as me” (Beauvoir 2004:114). Since, our freedom cannot be actualized in our relations with human beings who are deprived of their freedom; all freedoms in the world are ontologically interconnected.

The ontological interconnectedness of our freedom in the world has ethical implications for Beauvoir. In an interview in the *Yale French Studies* Helen V. Wenzel asks Beauvoir about what she thinks of female genital mutilation in Africa. In her response Beauvoir defines the problem as one of human rights and maintains that it is a problem of Western women as much as it is a problem of African women and requires attention from all over the world especially from
women (Wenzel 1986:15). According to Beauvoir’s account of interconnectedness of freedoms, we have an ethical responsibility for fighting against oppression. In this regard Linsenbard notes that the account of freedom in Beauvoir’s existentialism can be considered as a defense of human rights as well (Linsenbard 1999:151). As Linsenbard articulates the ontological tenets of existentialism make it necessary that one is concerned with everyone’s freedom. The ethical and political claim that female genital mutilation is a problem of all humanity arises out of an ontological precept.

Nevertheless, as discussed above, Beauvoir explains how our dependence on others allows the possibility of oppressive relations. Since we have different interests and projects that frequently clash, it is impossible to work for the freedom of all others at the same time. Our projects may create obstacles for some, while creating opportunities for others. Although those clashes are unavoidable, Beauvoir is very careful about setting the limits to their moral viability in cases where they lead to relations of oppression. She states that if my action cuts off opportunities of some people or creates obstacles to the extent that they are not able to pursue their opportunities or projects, then I am oppressing those people through my project and I am ethically responsible for this “absolute evil.” In The Second Sex, Beauvoir argues that

Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity, this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil (Beauvoir 2012:16).

That is why Beauvoir states that “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (Beauvoir 1976:24). To be ethical is the same as acting on one’s facticity by exercising one’s freedom. Nevertheless, ethics is not limited to the subject’s freedom. Since our
freedoms are interconnected in such a way that we cannot conceive of a subject being free without at the same time conceiving her fellows as free, to be ethical means also to be concerned with Other’s freedom. Therefore, any type of oppression presents itself as an unethical situation. As Beauvoir states; “[…] the oppressor is lying if he claims that the oppressed positively wants oppression; he merely abstains from not wanting it because he is unaware of even the possibility of rejection” (Beauvoir 2012:87). The oppressed might be deluded by the conditions in which oppression presents itself and may not be able to name her situation as oppressive when indeed it is. The same can be the case for the oppressor as well. Imagine a business woman who makes her employees overwork and pays them under minimum wage. She may consider her decision to do so as a justifiable and plausible one, since if she does not act that way she may not be able to compete in the market. Moreover, she may be thinking that she is doing a favor to her employees by providing jobs for them and paying them so that they are able to buy the food necessary to survive, where otherwise they would die of hunger (which might really be the case).

Another way of interpreting being unaware of the possibility of rejection of oppression in Beauvoir is appealing to bad faith and arguing that in the example above both the oppressed and the oppressor are in bad faith. For Beauvoir freedom is usually frightening because it makes the subject face the responsibilities she has. Therefore, the subject tries to escape her freedom by taking her situation as essential and unchanging. Under this interpretation, we would have to accept that the subject is freely avoiding confronting and challenging her oppressive situation. In the following pages of The Second Sex concerning women’s oppression by men, Beauvoir states that “[…] he wants her to be object: she makes herself object; at the very moment she makes herself being, she is exercising a free activity. This is her original treason” (Beauvoir 2012:653). In this passage, Beauvoir seems to argue that woman is freely choosing her oppression.
However, she also accepts the fact that women most of the time lack the resources to claim for their independence. She argues that the experiences women go through teach them that they are dependent on and inferior to men. As a result, “…women on the whole are today inferior to men; that is their situation affords them fewer possibilities” (Beauvoir 2012:xxx). Beauvoir identifies this situation as a vicious circle, a process which starts by treating women as inferior and dependent and ends in bringing the outcome of their being so which legitimizes treating women as inferior. The antagonistic relation between the oppressor and oppressed becomes a relation of complicity in the case of men and women. In this vicious circle, women are not able to demand their status as the essential from men and hence reciprocal recognition among those two parties has not been established yet.

Beauvoir describes this relationship of recognition between the self and the other as generosity. Friendship is another notion she presents through which mutual recognition of freedoms can be achieved (Beauvoir 2012:159-160). Beauvoir posits generosity and friendship as humanity’s highest accomplishment. “It is where he is in his truth: but this truth is a struggle endlessly begun, endlessly abolished; it demands that man surpass himself at each instant” (Beauvoir 2012:160). Generosity consists in maintaining the two freedoms simultaneously in the encounter with the other. First and foremost, generosity involves a perception of the other as similar to myself. The generous person accepts herself/himself as both subject and object in her/his relation to the other and regards and treats the other as such as well. As Beauvoir puts it, “In enlightened, consenting gratitude, one must be capable of maintaining face to face these two freedoms that seem to exclude each other: the other’s freedom and mine. I must simultaneously grasp myself as object and as freedom and recognize my situation as founded by the other, while asserting my being beyond the situation” (Beauvoir 2004:123). The generous person never
avoids her/his and the other’s need to be a freedom and to be recognized as such. And this is all the generous person can do for the other. Beauvoir presents a strong criticism of the idea of generosity as doing something for the other. For Beauvoir, I can do nothing for the other but creating “points of departure” towards where she wants to go. Maternal love is an example of an ethical relation between the self and the other in the sense that the mother creates “points of departure” for the other (the child) and recognizes her child as an end. She says that “The generous man knows well that his action reaches only the outside of other” (Beauvoir 2004:123). Nevertheless, the generosity she is talking about here does not solely mean doing something for others, neither paying off a debt. For Beauvoir, doing so would be demeaning the freedom of the subject, since it turns the subject into an instrument.

As Bergoffen argues Beauvoir’s notion of generosity challenges the idea of the liberal autonomous individual. Beauvoir states that “to generously recognize the other’s otherness is to become responsible for protecting the other from being reduced to the object of an alien will. As generous, I acknowledge the bond of the “we” and commit myself to protect it (Bergoffen 1997:96). Protecting the other from oppression, however, does not literally mean saving the other. It means being attentive to others’ oppression, reacting against it and struggling to provide an environment for the oppressed in which they can overcome their own oppression. Since our actions can reach only “the outside of the other”, we cannot make people will themselves free. Freedom is a project one can undertake only by and for herself (Beauvoir 2004:123). Beauvoir’s account of women’s liberation in the last chapter of The Second Sex, Toward Liberation, explains

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9 Beauvoir’s notion of generosity shows similarities with that of Descartes as it is presented in the Passions of the Soul. There, Descartes posits generosity as a passion which is the main element of a good life. He defines generosity as self-esteem. “(1) knowing that nothing is really ours except the freedom to control our willing, and that we should only be praised and blamed for using that freedom well or badly; and (2) feeling within ourselves a strong constant resolution to use our free will well-to always have the will to carry out what we think is the best course of action” (Descartes 1989:103, 121-22).
how one cannot make the other free. There, Beauvoir tells us that women’s liberation can be
achieved only by women themselves. Nevertheless, this is by no means tantamount to saying that
I have no responsibility towards oppressed groups or people. This only shows the limits of what
I can do for the other. After a close examination of women’s oppression in *The Second Sex*,
Beauvoir argues that discovering one’s self in a totally oppressive condition does not totally
nullify the choices of the subject. Beauvoir strongly emphasizes the fact that whatever the
reasons are, women, instead of fighting for their independence and subjectivity, have been
submissive to men and hence they remained as objects and inessentials (Beauvoir
2012:xviii,xxiii,xxiv). She states that it is women’s choice to remain as objects when she says
“if woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she
herself fails to bring about this change” (Beauvoir 2012:xxv).

Beauvoir presents examples of different cases of oppression in her writings. Of crucial
importance here are the problems that arise in identifying oppressive relations, and deciding on
how to struggle against them in the complexities of daily life. Emphasizing the unique social,
historical, and economic conditions each case has, she provides a specific analysis for each
different case. The two main questions Beauvoir asks in her analysis of the cases of oppression
are whether the oppressed has the consciousness of an oppressed person or group and whether
the situation is serious and urgent. Based on the answers to those questions and depending on the
nature and structure of the oppression in question, there are different strategies one can utilize to
end that oppression. Beauvoir is not unaware of the complexities of ethical questions. This is
exactly the reason she defines existential ethics with the term ambiguity. We are constantly in a
position of justifying our existence, giving meaning to it and choosing among different
possibilities. None of these actions are straightforward. Finding the ethical action at a given
moment is not an easy task at all. Any search for the ethical action ends up in a confrontation with one’s ambiguity.

The notions of ethical freedom and natural freedom, explained in the previous chapter, play a crucial role in Beauvoir’s account of oppression. As I explained there, Beauvoir uses the notion of natural freedom to refer to this possibility of willing one’s self free. Based on this possibility and depending on the conditions the individual finds herself in, she may or may not choose to will herself free or even may not have the option to will herself free although theoretically she has this potential. Beauvoir analyses those options under the notion of ethical freedom. Since natural freedom refers to our ability to act in the world within the limits of our facticity and ethical freedom is overcoming the limits of natural freedom and being involved in the actions which transcends our facticity; natural freedom is the condition of ethical freedom. Here, Beauvoir defines ethics as “the triumph of freedom over facticity” (Beauvoir 1976:44). This distinction between natural and ethical freedom provides a fruitful ground in order to discuss situations of oppression. Given that ethical freedom starts with one’s willing herself free, a serious problem occurs when/if the subject is not given the option to will herself free although theoretically she has this potential.

In the Ethics of Ambiguity, she argues that sometimes people find themselves in situations of servitude and ignorance without having any means of “breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads” (Beauvoir 1976:37). In the following page she gives the example of the women locked up in a harem and states that people in similar conditions cannot even imagine ending their oppression let alone attacking it or being involved in a struggle against it (Beauvoir 1976:38). Bergoffen calls this type of oppression as the oppression of mystification (Beauvoir 1976:105-6). Beauvoir maintains that “mystification is one of the forms of oppression; ignorance
is a situation in which man maybe enclosed as narrowly as in a prison. […] not everyone has the means of rejecting even by doubt, the values, taboos, and prescriptions by which he is surrounded” (Beauvoir 1976:98). Beauvoir’s account of women’s oppression in The Second Sex is based on this concept of mystification. Patriarchal structure tailors certain goals and meanings which happen to constitute a significant part of facticity of women; i.e. becoming wives and mothers, not engaging in serious intellectual or artistic work. Being born into this facticity, women choose or are made to choose to stay in the domain of immanence, instead of transcending the oppressive conditions they find themselves in.

By drawing a line between male and female experience of transcendence in The Second Sex, Beauvoir shows us that women were put in a position which made them much more reluctant to pursue transcendence. As a result of being thrown into a world, where they are expected to act and live as inessentials, women are more likely to give up pursuing transcendence. Independent of her free will, the subject might find herself confined to the contingencies of her life; in that case the downfall spells “frustration and oppression” (Beauvoir 2012:xxxv). Women, according to Beauvoir, are forced to remain in the status of an object. Beauvoir states this in the beginning of The Second Sex when she says “Now what specifically defines the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless discovers and chooses herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (Beauvoir 2012:xxxv).

What is worse, women internalize all those values of the patriarchal structure, and they accept themselves as physically and intellectually less capable than men. Hence, they are less likely to immerse themselves in the projects other than those which are assigned to them within
patriarchal structure. As a result of this internalization process, women start to perceive the world from a patriarchal perspective and eventually they construct themselves in a way patriarchal values require them to be. In Catriona Mackenzie’s terms they ‘turn femininity into a project; they make the sort of choices that, instead of aiming towards transcendence, actually close off their own possibilities” (in Evans 1998:137). The actors of this process of internalization are obviously women; however, by being born to an environment where oppression is already internalized by other female subjects, the female subject finds herself in a position where she experiences oppression as something natural and given, without even being able to pinpoint it. Lacking the consciousness of being oppressed, women comply and serve the oppressor and hence contribute to the perpetuation of their oppression. The ideal way of dealing with these types of situations according to Beauvoir is to help the oppressed raise their consciousness so that they can become aware of their own oppression and their role in perpetuation of this oppression. This is the path she draws for women’s liberation in The Second Sex. Moreover, no human being is ever in a complete state of transcendence, one always has some limitations. Hence, no one can completely liberate the other. One cannot always know the conditions necessary for the freedom of the oppressed to flourish, nor is one always potent enough to provide those conditions.

Some severe situations of oppression, however, require direct and violent intervention. This is especially the case when the lives of people are in danger. In her discussion of the Nazi Youth, she maintains that ideally this misled youth should be re-educated to help them see the mystification of their oppression and make it possible for them to will themselves free. However, she continues “the urgency of the struggle forbids this slow labor. We are obliged to destroy not only the oppressor but also those who serve him, whether they do so out of ignorance or out of
constraint” (Beauvoir 1976:98). The complexity of ethical situations usually does not allow for an ideal solution where every individual gets the recognition they deserve. Beauvoir introduces us the paradox we face in acting against oppression: “no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men” (Beauvoir 1976:99).

Bergoffen attracts our attention to the difficulty of distinguishing between liberating generosity from the “drives of mastery”. She gives the example of the missionary working for the salvation of the African souls and educators saving the Native Americans from their primitive ideas.10 Beauvoir does not ignore this difficulty. Yet, her account of existentialist ethics gives us clear insights about how to determine the proper ethical action in cases of oppression. First of all, my only motivation in helping the liberation of others is that they can start pursuing their own projects. My goal is not make them my slaves or followers of my own beliefs or projects. I need and want the other’s recognition of my projects but this recognition should not be gained out of fear or obligation; it should be a free and genuine recognition. By asking some basic questions about our motivation for liberating the oppressed, we can see whether we are doing it out of the passion of generosity or out of other concerns.

In Beauvoir’s account of existentialist ethics, reciprocal recognition takes places not only among individual subjects but also between the individual and social institutions. Hence, the notions of generosity and friendship are applicable to these relations as well. Fullbrook and Fullbrook posit this type of recognition as civic reciprocity. They argue that collective undertakings can have meaning only as long as society recognizes the “unique and irreducible value” of its citizens (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998:112).

10 The assessment of an individual’s or a group’s condition regarding oppression is a controversial topic in the feminist literature.
The main precept of existentialist ethics Beauvoir develops in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* is the ontological connection she establishes between willing one’s self free and willing others free. She argues that “To will oneself free is also to will others free” (Beauvoir 1976:73). She then proceeds with stating that this will is not an abstract formula. For Beauvoir this is not a normative law to be followed. It is a contingent fact that follows from the human condition of being free and interdependence of all freedoms in the world. Our freedoms need recognition from other freedoms. However this recognition has to be an authentic one, not a forced one. My freedom deserves recognition when it opens up possibilities for other freedoms not when it inauthentically closes off others’ freedoms. The latter would be an example of bad faith, an escape form one’s freedom. The type of recognition an oppressor receives from the oppressed, if any, is not a genuine recognition and the oppressor knows that. Hence it logically follows that if I will myself free, I will others free as well. What is unsettling in this argument is why do I need to will everyone free? How much recognition do I need by others? Do I need recognition by those who I do not even know? Can’t I be satisfied with recognition by a few people and still continue oppress others or remain silent to the oppression of people and groups? Those questions have been posed for the purpose of pointing out the inadequacy of existentialist ethics and have been answered by proponents of existentialist ethics.

Thomas C. Anderson, for example, attacks Beauvoir’s claim that when I will myself free, I also will others free. Bob Stone answers Anderson’s criticisms in a three-fold argument. First, he argues that as soon as I give meaning to my own freedom, I need this meaning to be recognized by others. I need justification for my existence and I can only get this from other freedoms. Moreover, in willing myself free, I declare freedom as a value and if I denounce others’ freedoms I would be contradicting my own values. In choosing myself free, I choose
freedom of all. Hence, oppressing others or remaining indifferent to their oppression proves an inconsistency in my behaviors and values. Second, he contends that Anderson fails to grasp the advantages that follow from endorsing others’ freedom and the disadvantages that emerge out of diminishing others’ freedoms. If I undermine others’ freedoms, I cut off my own freedom, since others’ freedoms endorse my freedom. And lastly, Stone maintains that Beauvoir neither proposes an argument for universal recognition by everyone, nor she asserts a need for it.

As Fullbrook and Fullbrook, and Stone argue, freedom is not something to be possessed, because as Beauvoir warns us it is not “a thing or a quality naturally attached to a thing” (Beauvoir 1976:25; Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998:109; Stone 2004:125). It is a way of being for human beings in the world. When I choose it authentically, I also choose others’ freedom and resist acting in bad faith. When I choose it for myself but not for others I simply act in bad faith, since I preclude the justification that would otherwise come from that freedom. I do not follow what naturally comes out of my choice of freedom; that is a world populated by freedoms and their freely chosen projects. Hence, I act against my own values. As Stone argues any freedom implies “ever-widening liberatory struggles against oppression” (Stone 2004:127). Hence, for Beauvoir, freedom and responsibility are always closely linked together. Sartre also conceives freedom and responsibility as interlaced. This connection becomes stronger in Sartre’s Critique as I will explain shortly after. As Robert Bernasconi contends in reference to this linkage between freedom and responsibility “[…] when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men” (Bernasconi 2006:54).

The notion of self in Beauvoir is not something always already exists. Prior to the encounter with the other there is no self whatsoever. According to Beauvoir, we first experience
ourselves as dominated by our situation in our childhood. Only after the adolescence we come to see ourselves as free in the existential sense. In the childhood we are confined with meanings created by others, by adolescents. Only when we become an adolescent we start challenging those meanings and endorse ours. Our freedom is shaped in relation to those meanings (Beauvoir 1976:38-9). Our projects and choices are shaped by others from the very beginning. In *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir writes,

> An individual, I thought, only receives a human dimension by recognizing the existence of others. Yet, in my essay, coexistence appears as a sort of accident that each individual should somehow surmount; he would begin by creating his project in isolation, and only then ask the community to endorse its validity. In truth, society shapes me from the day of my birth and it is within that society, and through my close relationship with it, that I decide who I am to be (Beauvoir 1994:456).

The self is constructed through the projects one undertakes based on those meanings. Moreover, these projects can neither be realized nor take on any meaning without others. Hence, instead of considering the need for others as an egoistic move, we should understand it as a contingent fact of our human condition. For Beauvoir her ethics is individualistic only in the sense that it gives full responsibility to the individual in giving meaning to her existence.

Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence. It is individualism in the sense in which the wisdom of the ancients, the Christian ethics of salvation, and Kantian ideal of virtue also merit this name; it is opposed to the totalitarian doctrines which raise up beyond man the mirage of mankind. But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others (Beauvoir 1976:156).

Hence, promoting others’ freedom promotes my freedom as well. Nevertheless, at times others’ freedom conflicts my freedom, because each consciousness asserts itself as the master and tries
to slave the other and this according to Beauvoir “is the tragedy of the unhappy consciousness” (Beauvoir 2012:159). This tragedy can be overcome by a reciprocal recognition between the two consciousnesses which can be achieved in the form of friendship and generosity as explained previously.

The solution of reciprocal recognition to the early Sartrean problem of irresolvable conflict between two freedoms comes only in the late writings of Sartre. As Thomas Flynn states, the basic difference between early and late Sartre is the transformation of this idea of conflict among freedoms to the idea of reciprocal recognition of the freedoms (Flynn 2009:190). Sartre makes this move based on the argument that our freedoms are ontologically interconnected in the Critique. In the first volume of the Critique, Sartre names the world as it has been shaped by the for-itselfs as practico-inert world. The notion of practico-inert refers to the socially, economically, architecturally, technologically structured world we inherit from our ancestors. We engage in praxis within this practico-inert world. In our dealings with the practico-inert, our actions take different forms. One form is the counter-finality which refers to the actions that create the exact opposite of the intended result. In other words, counter-finality is the event in which one’s action works against itself by creating an outcome that is the negation of the desired outcome. Other two forms of human praxis Sartre talks about are exigency and interest. Exigency can be defined as a necessity imposed by the practico-inert (Sartre 2004a:185-6). Like exigency, a praxis in the mode of interest also arises out of the practico-inert, and always aligns with it but it does not necessarily arise as a demand or necessity.

Although, a praxis based on interest heavily relies on the individual, one based on exigency relies no less on the individual. The only difference would be the representation of the individual as more determined to act upon an exigency rather than an interest. However,
according to Sartre, there would be no metaphysical difference in the individual’s behavior in either case, because, complying with the demands of the practico-inert and acting in conformity with the interests that arise out of the practico-inert requires the same freedom that makes the existence of those exigencies and interest possible. In both cases, the individual can be considered as being in bad faith, since they pursue the projects that are already set for them instead of creating their own projects. Sartre leaves the possibility of responding to these project in different ways open, though he seems to imply that most of the time we choose to act in bad faith rather than acting authentically.

The practico-inert world which constitutes our facticity in a contingent way also helps Sartre explain how our freedoms are interconnected. Practico-inert world is an outcome of the actions of many for-itslefs. It is contingent in the sense that it could have been different depending on the projects, choices and actions of the former for-itslefs. Hence, our freedom always acts on a world which has been shaped and is being shaped by other freedoms. This is one sense, in which our freedoms are connected for Sartre.

Sartre’s argument for the ontological basis of the interconnectedness of freedoms often has been misunderstood. For example, Thomas C. Anderson in his book Sartre’s Two Ethics argues that Sartre occasionally implies that we should will the freedom of all other human beings. He claims that Sartre means that we do not have any responsibility to will the freedoms of those with whom we are not in any connection. He states that it is not clear whose freedoms we are supposed to will. He asks “[…]whether and to what extent I am obliged to promote or even acknowledge the freedom of those whose lives are only minimally linked to mine” (Anderson 1993:77). I disagree with Anderson’s interpretation of Sartre and would argue that Sartre shows that our freedoms are interconnected ontologically and hence we should will the
freedom of all others. Anderson argues that according to Sartre we are entitled to promote freedom of others out of our selfish interests since we need affirmation of our existence and projects by those freedoms.

Interconnectedness of freedoms in Sartre is not necessarily limited to the human subjects we are in relation with. The historical and anthropological analysis of human history and history of oppression in particular in Sartre and Beauvoir shows us that the existential argument for the interconnectedness of freedoms contains all human beings since our actions are possible only in the practico-inert world that is shaped by and through every single action of the people in the world. Praxis of a human being influences, if not determines, another’s praxis with whom the former subject is in no contact with. Therefore, according to existentialist ethics one cannot coherently promote the freedoms of some and not care about others. Doing so would be simply an act of bad faith.

In addition to providing a rich account of interconnectedness of human beings, through the analysis of the practico-inert world Sartre also presents us with a sophisticated account of oppression in the Critique. Sartre’s Critique emphasizes the influence of objective factors on our choices. Those influences mostly present themselves as exigencies. In the Critique, he posits scarcity as the main human condition. He explains how exigencies lead to violent actions in situations of scarcity. As in the example of the mine owner’s violence he contends that “this praxis is precisely that of a being of violence, which means that his free response to the exigencies of the situation can be realized only in the form of oppression” (Sartre 2004a:739). The process of exploitation presents itself to the mine owner as imposition of the outside factors. The mine owner takes the practico-inert world as essential and acts in accordance of its demands that comes in the form of interest and/or exigency. As Sartre contends in the Notebooks for an
*Ethics*, a climate of oppression arises when people in a society act as the mine owner does in this case. He writes “There is a climate of oppression when my free subjectivity gives itself out as inessential, my freedom as epiphenomenon, my initiative as subordinated and secondary, when my activity is directed by the Other, and takes the other as its end” (Sartre 1992:366).

This account of oppression is crucial in terms of showing the potential contributions of existentialism to feminist ethics. By showing that those exigencies condition both the oppressors’ and the oppressed’ actions, or create oppressive types of relationship not necessarily by creating an oppressing group, Sartre’s account of oppression provides us with useful tools to understand the global oppressive structures resulting from neoliberal economic policies current feminist ethicists try to account for. It also emphasizes the responsibility that falls on everyone to question the way their actions—guided by their interests or the exigencies of the practico-inert world—help create or maintain oppressive structures in the world.

Existential ethics has been criticized for not providing any concrete guidelines for ethical action. It is certainly true that existentialist ethics does not provide those guidelines, because it does acknowledge the ambiguity of human condition; however, this is not a shortcoming of the theory; on the contrary it is the strength of it. To begin with, existentialist ethics consists in realizing one’s transcendence in a world populated by others’ freedoms. Others’ freedoms are both necessary for my transcendence and they are a threat. In my interaction with other freedoms I have to protect both my freedom and others’ freedom for the success of my project, and I also have to solve the conflicts that may arise through interaction of multiple freedoms in a given situation where there are limited resources. All these factual conditions create an ambiguous

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11 Beauvoir does not directly talk about limited resources in the encounter of freedoms, however her exegeses of the conflict between freedoms shows us that scarcity is a concept that operates in her account of freedom and oppression. Sartre provides a detailed account of the notion of scarcity in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason.*
situation in which I have to make a choice and act upon it. There is usually no clear choice that stands more ethical compared to others. This ambiguity forces me constantly to question my choices and actions.

It might be helpful to call in the distinction between ethics and morality here. I define ethics as a discipline that occupies itself with questions of authentic ways of being and existing in the world. Morality on the other hand, designates a theoretical system that determines the right and the wrong. Morality, hence, comes with judgment of actions whereas ethics looks for ways to improve human wellbeing as a whole. With this distinction, I am not undermining the importance of morality. We do need principles that tell us right for wrong especially to have a well-running judicial system and society. We want to be able say that rape is wrong and hence the rapist should be punished. However, while in some cases the right and wrong answers to ethical questions are clear and distinct, in many cases the ambiguity of the situation leaves us only with a few different ways of handling the situation that are not necessarily preferable to one another.

Under extremely oppressive conditions, ontological freedom which is defined as a potential quality of human existence becomes suppressed in a way that the oppressed cannot even be held responsible for not acting on it. The free subject who is described independent of the social, economic and cultural structures in early Sartre turns into a subject that is conditioned by all these structures in Beauvoir’s works. In Ethics of Ambiguity, she tells us that some people are oppressed through mystification and ignorance and they cannot accuse them of being in bad faith for not fighting against their oppression, since they do not have the necessary means to recognize their oppression. In The Second Sex Beauvoir talks about women’s lived experiences in detail and she emphasizes the economic and social structures in which those particular experiences
were formed. She explains different discourses which contribute to those economic and social structures that oppress women which are psychoanalytic discourse, biological discourse, and historical materialist discourse and mythical discourse. As a result we see that the subject’s situation is at the core of Beauvoir’s account of freedom and oppression. Beauvoir does not consider this as a failure of the oppressed subject, because this is a condition which is inflicted upon the subject (Beauvoir 2012:16).

Beauvoir’s phenomenological account in *The Second Sex* explains feminine and masculine existence in their becoming. These are not static terms acquired by birth but rather realized subjectivities through the subject’s continuous actions. Women experience the ambiguity every human being experiences in realizing their existence in a different way. In their process of becoming, women already find themselves within a predetermined structure which outlines their process of becoming. For some women this structure does even seem plausible, as Beauvoir states “men find in their women more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed” (Beauvoir 2012:757). As explained previously, recognition stands as a key term in Beauvoir’s theory of oppression. Recognition is the first condition of a meaningful existence. Oppression undercuts one’s freedom and meaning creation through relations with disproportionate or unreciprocated recognition.

As I have shown previously, the project of freedom can be realized only when the person engages themselves in the world. One realizes their freedom in their daily actions. As Beauvoir puts it “man’s project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behavior” (Beauvoir 1976:78). One general criticism of existentialism has been the claim that it does not offer any concrete guidelines for action. This criticism undermines the significant ethical implications the will to freedom in existentialism has. To begin with, this notion of freedom
envisions a world where everyone’s freedom is dependent upon other’s freedom. I cannot realize my project without others. In addition to the material support I need from other human beings, I also need that others recognize my project. Therefore, I need other human beings which have more or less similar capacities to me in order for my project to have any meaning at all. I may oppress some people to realize my project, but still my project is dependent on those freedoms.

Going back to the distinction Beauvoir makes between natural and ethical freedom in the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, in this case, those people’s ethical freedom is diminished, yet they still remain as subjects that have full natural freedom. These people are able to imagine their condition to be different and they may choose the actions that will change this situation. As Beauvoir puts it “one does not submit to a war or an occupation as one does to an earthquake” (Beauvoir 1976:82). Although the oppressed subject is treated as a thing by the oppressor, both the oppressor and the oppressed is always aware of the subject’s not being an object or a thing. If the subject were to be a thing, they wouldn’t carry the same significance for their oppressors.

The relations between the self and the other always involve the process of objectifying the other; however this does not necessarily imply a relation of oppression. For Beauvoir, alterity is a part of human experience. In our daily life, we have interactions with other people sometimes as subjects and sometimes as objects. To be able to act at all, we have to objectify other individuals. In the same vein, while we can be objects at certain times and situations, we are subjects at other times and conditions. Nevertheless, the problem arises when a subject or a group is always objectified and has not some prospect of getting out of this objectification. We can clearly mark those types of objectifications as oppression, since they are quite stable and do not promise any possibility of change in the future. In her analysis of oppression, Beauvoir
focuses on both lived experience and institutional structures that perpetuate oppression. Margaret Simons and Sonia Kruks both emphasize this dual focus in Beauvoir (Kruks 2001:29).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Sonia Kruks argues against the traditional view that Beauvoir shares Sartre’s existentialist notion of freedom in her philosophical works. She claims that Beauvoir’s notion of freedom is much closer to that of Merleau-Ponty. She states that Beauvoir never accepted that “the slave in chains is as free as his master,” since for her, freedom is only possible when there is an embodied consciousness which is necessarily situated in the world with certain limitations. Kruks argues that Beauvoir’s comments on how woman is turned from “being for-itself” into “being in-itself” by her oppressor do not fit into the Sartrean framework in which a human being can never be reduced to pure immanence. According to Sartre, if a person is behaving as if they are pure immanence, they are simply escaping from the burden of their freedom and hence in bad faith.

Beauvoir’s account of internalized gender oppression is a good example of this sort. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir inquiries into the reasons why women chose to remain as others instead of claiming their status as subjects. Among many reasons, she talks about their internalizing their oppression and believing the constructed story that locates them as the second sex. In that case, struggle is not option for a woman contrary to what Sartre would have claimed. In the same vein the worker may not be “able to choose to struggle” if he does not perceive his situation as a type of oppression but just the way the world it is. Nevertheless, Beauvoir speaks of women’s complicity as a form of bad faith, too. She accuses women of fleeing their freedom and responsibility by abandoning themselves in love. It seems that in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir talks of women both as victims of oppression and as free agents who are in bad faith. In Sartre’s account of oppression as it is presented in *Being and Nothingness*, external conditions that form
and limits one’s freedom remain widely invisible in comparison to Beauvoir’s account. Hence, it is true that Beauvoir considers the effects of situation in discussions of freedom and oppression more deeply than Sartre does and this is why I find her account of freedom and oppression more useful for feminist purposes than Sartre’s. Her account remedies this significant invisibility in Sartre. My reading of Beauvoir not only argues for the resourcefulness of Beauvoir’s account of freedom and oppression in comparison to Sartre but also contributes to the already well-established scholarship that reclaims Beauvoir as a philosopher on her own right. However, I do not intend to underestimate the value of Sartre’s Critique for an account of oppression. I suggest that an existentialist account of oppression that draws on both thinkers would be much stronger.

I showed in this chapter how an existentialist account of freedom establishes our responsibility to act against any type of oppression in the world. I also showed that an account of oppression based on both Beauvoir and Sartre has the potential to address the questions of responsibility, internalized oppression, and oppressive structures that may go unnoticed. I discussed the limitations of early Sartre’s account of oppression, and showed how Beauvoir presents alternatives to overcome these limitations by her emphasis on the influence of external conditions on one’s freedom and her account of internalized oppression. I also discussed how Sartre’s account of oppression in the Critique offers valuable insights to talk about current global systems of oppression feminist ethicists try to address.
CHAPTER III
EXISTENTIALIST ROOTS OF FEMINIST CARE ETHICS

In the first two chapters, I developed an existentialist account of ethics based on Simone de Beauvoir’s writings in conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre’s writings. I showed that human beings are metaphysically free and this freedom constitutes the basis of existentialist ethics. I also argued for the strengths of this account in addressing oppression and providing tools to fight against oppression. This account considers oppression to be contingent and thus capable of being demolished. According to this account of ethics, human freedoms are interconnected, and thus willing one’s self free requires willing others to be free as well. Acknowledging and affirming interconnectedness of freedoms stands as the first condition of a genuine freedom. I showed that this brings a moral responsibility to overcome oppression for every subject who wants to attain moral freedom. In this chapter, I show how a Beauvoirian account of existentialist ethics is congruent with feminist care ethics. I call for a richer engagement between these two theories and show that both would benefit from this engagement.

Feminist care ethics has succeeded in establishing itself as a well-developed and well-recognized ethical discipline on its own right. The term “feminist care ethics” encompasses a broad category of literature that includes substantial differences. Although my use of the term might seem to suggest that it is a set of consistent, homogenous and fixed discourses, there is not a general consensus on what it precisely is, nor is there a single source to turn to for a systematic formulation of the tenets of feminist care ethics. In very broad terms, feminist care ethics can be construed as a viable alternative to the popular traditional ethical theories such as deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, offered mostly by male philosophers. Feminist care ethics
criticizes traditional ethical theories for two main reasons: (i) ignoring the private sphere and focusing on the public sphere, which historically has undermined women’s experiences since women have been confined to the home, and (ii) entertaining a priori universal ethical ideals and rules which do not speak to the complexities of the ethical questions people face in real life. These two points are closely related because care, sharing and interdependency have been coded as values that belong to the private sphere as opposed to the culturally masculine values such as independence and mutual disinterestedness, the latter of which constitute the core of universalist ethical theories (Card 1991:81).

Historically and conceptually, care ethics marks the emergence of feminist ethics. Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982) and Nel Noddings’ *Caring: a Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (1984) are the two major initiatory works of care ethics and thus feminist ethics. Both Gilligan and Noddings endorse a specific type of female moral sensibility and reasoning as the basis of feminist ethics and argue that the dominant Western ethical tradition, which mostly is a product of male philosophers, naturally lacks this sensibility. They emphasize the ethical significance of distinctively female experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and lactation and argue that those experiences shape women into ethical subjects that perceive ethics based on relationality and care.

The main tenet of care ethics is the idea that we are dependent on the help we get from others. The implicit metaphysical assumption underlying this claim is that human beings are always in relation with other human beings. Our relation with others is so essential to who we are that, even self-knowledge, for example, can only be acquired through relation with others. Our dependence on others comes in different degrees depending on contingent factors in our lives.
For example babies, children, the very old and the very ill require more assistance from others. In this way, the tenets of care ethics might seem like common sense or common knowledge. However, social, political and ethical systems in most part of the world tend to ignore the fact of human interdependence. Care ethicists highlight and argue for the ethical importance of human interrelatedness and interdependence.

While Gilligan and Noddings’ work constitutes the core of what we call care ethics today, it unfortunately has been used to collapse feminist ethics into care ethics. Misconstruals of feminist ethics as care ethics prevailed for a long time after publication of Gilligan’s and Noddings’ works in early eighties, until feminist ethics expanded its boundaries to include discussion of a variety of topics and to engage in conversations with the mainstream ethical theories. Claudia Card’s work on moral luck and Margaret Urban Walker’s work on Sidgwick’s ethics are two examples of this expansion (Card 2010; Walker 2003).

Although care ethics brings invaluable insights and tools for thinking about ethical action, its initial overemphasis on the experience of women led to a general misunderstanding that it is only about women. This was partly due to lack of discussion of men vis-à-vis care in early versions of feminist care ethics. Jaggar contends that care ethics in general seems to entail that feminist ethics speaks only to women (in Card 1991:94). Walker also emphasizes this tendency to perceive feminist ethics as primarily about women and urges that this perception should be changed. This is because feminist ethics—although it is certainly for women and written mostly by women—is “not about women but about ethics” (Walker 2002:433, italics in original). Walker defines feminist ethics as a way of doing ethics by focusing on the social, economic and cultural distributions of privileges and power. One of the main strengths of feminist ethics is its potential to address the impact of unequal distribution of material and non-
material resources on a global scale based on ontological interconnectedness of people. We are fundamentally part of a plurality and are responsible for evaluating our decisions within the context of this plurality. In that respect, feminist ethics is not only about women but about class, race, ecology, disability and many other domains in which oppression and inequality prevails. Jaggar contends that “feminism’s concern for all women means that feminist ethics must address not only “domestic” issues of racism or homophobia or class privilege but also such international issues as environmental destruction, war and the current grotesque inequality in access to world resources” (in Card 1991:98).

Existentialism has been neglected in feminist ethics and care ethics scholarship even though it presents similar challenges to traditional ethical theories. Existentialist ethics has substantial commonalities with feminist ethics and care ethics regarding their main tenets. Kristana Arp points out some of these tenets by focusing on Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (Fisher and Embree 2010). Arp’s work shows the fruitful potential arising from a union of Beauvoir’s phenomenological existentialist ethics and care ethics. However, Arp’s call generally has not been taken up by feminists. In this chapter, I do so by arguing that feminism and existentialism are congruent and that this congruence is fruitful and should be explored further by feminists.

My work extends beyond Arp’s discussion of the affinity between Beauvoir’s account of ethics and care ethics in two respects. First, Arp limits her analysis to Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, while I take into account “Pyrrhus and Cineas” and *The Second Sex* as two other important sources that shows the alignment between Beauvoir’s work and care ethics. Second, while Arp focuses only on the phenomenological aspects of Beauvoir’s work, I focus on the existentialist aspects of it. Arp recognizes existentialism as a theory developing out of a
phenomenological tradition but does not show the specific existentialist common themes shared between these two ethical theories. For example, Arp does not take into account the whole tradition of existentialism, especially Sartre’s account of existentialist ethics developed through an intellectual engagement with Beauvoir. My analysis, in contrast, hand is informed by an existentialist account of ethics that encompasses both Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s accounts.

My argument unfolds in three steps: (1) I provide a historical overview of care ethics by focusing on Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* and Nel Noddings’ *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. (2) I present a critique of care ethics and discuss its shortcomings in detail. Based on this discussion, I show how existentialist ethics provides remedies for those shortcomings. (3) I also show that there are substantial existential categories in care ethics scholarship by focusing on three main points that stand at the intersection of care ethics and existentialist ethics: the rejection of a priori and universal ethical principles; the interconnectedness of people and the accompanying notion of the relational self (which include the receptive mode of the ethical subject, the emphasis on action, full responsibility for one’s action and the notion of generosity); and the dangers of care work. While the first two points show a strong similarity between existentialism and care ethics, the third point seem to refer to a contradiction between the two approaches. I offer a solution to this contradiction by using the existentialist notions of transcendence and immanence.

1. Care Ethics

   In *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, Carol Gilligan presents her research on the psychology of moral development in men and women. Her empirical work aims to show the incongruent nature of Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory
that establishes women as morally underdeveloped subjects. Instead of a hierarchical difference between how men and women perceive moral situations, Gilligan suggests that men and women take fundamentally different approaches to moral issues (Gilligan 1982). Although it is not an ethical theory per se but a psychological theory of moral development, Gilligan’s work constitutes an important contribution to feminist ethics by challenging the idea of male ethical supremacy. When women and men are asked to resolve hypothetical dilemmas, women tend to engage the concrete details of the situation, bend the rules and try somehow to save the relationships. Men in contrast tend to simply adopt the moral rules they acquired and easily give up on the relationships in the situation.

One of the hypothetical cases Gilligan presents to her subjects is the Heinz dilemma, in which a man needs to obtain a life saving medicine for his sick wife that he cannot afford. Gilligan’s eleven-year-old male subject, Jake, thinks that Heinz should certainly steal the drug, because saving his wife’s life takes priority over the moral principle of not stealing. Gilligan’s eleven-year-old female subject, Amy, on the other hand, thinks that Heinz should talk to the druggist, explain the situation and find an in-between solution. Amy voices her concern that if Heinz steals the drug he may go to jail and not be able to care for his wife anymore or he may not be able to give the drug to his wife properly without the druggist’s advice on how to use it and her wife may still die (Gilligan 1982:29). In this example, we see that Amy is trying to solve the dilemma by maintaining the two relevant relationships in the case: one is between the wife and the husband and the other is between the husband and the druggist. As Gilligan states, for Amy this dilemma is “not a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extends over time” (Gilligan 1982:28).
As can be seen in the example above, Gilligan’s research shows that men and women often have different approaches to moral questions. Gilligan explains this difference based on the mother/child model developed by Nancy Chodorow. According to Chodorow, since women are largely responsible for early child care across the world and different relationships established by the female and male child to the mother recur in personality development (Gilligan 1982:7). Mothers and daughters experience themselves as more alike and continuous as opposed to mothers and sons. This results in boys’ separating themselves from their mothers and daughters’ identification of themselves with their mothers. Consequently, girls develop empathy while boys do not. That is why on Chodorow’s account boys are able to separate in situations of conflict, whereas girls try to find a solution that would sustain the relationship.

Gilligan explains that women tend to perceive morality based on the responsibility produced through interpersonal relationships with others. Men, on the other hand, tend to have a ‘rights’ and ‘justice’ based approach to morality; for them interpersonal relations take place among self-interested equal subjects. Based on those differences, Gilligan suggests that two main different ethical approaches can be detected: an ‘ethics of justice’ and an ‘ethics of care’. As she explains, “Amy’s judgments contain the insights central to an ethics of care, just as Jake’s judgments reflect the logic of the justice approach” (Gilligan 1982:30). Ethics of justice has already been developed and prevalent in politics and philosophy, whereas an ethics of care that contains more powerful prospects for solving ethical problems has been ignored. Hence, Gilligan’s psychological theory of moral development transforms into a potential theory of ethics of care, which is an ethical approach based on interdependency of human beings that rejects the ideal of a self-sufficient and self-interested subject.
Gilligan’s empirical study seems to point out a fundamental difference in how men and women view morality. However, Gilligan later clarifies that she does not consider this difference as implying an essential distinction between genders.\textsuperscript{12} An ethics of justice that represents male view has been the dominant ethical approach in philosophy. Feminist philosophers account for this difference by appealing to the divergent roles and values society and culture assigns to each gender. Nancy C. M. Hartsock maintains that “different psychic experiences both structure and are reinforced by the differing patterns of men’s and women’s activity required by the sexual divisions of labor, and are thereby replicated as epistemology and ontology (Hartsock 1985:240). Different daily activities of men and women result in a different construction of the self. Women are usually taught to and expected to play mitigating roles in situations of conflict in interpersonal relations--be it at home or in work environment. This, as Hartsock puts it, leads women toward “opposition to dualisms of any sort” (Hartsock 1985:242). This discussion provides a plausible social constructionist view explaining why men’s mentalities are more dualistic and combative.

Many critics have questioned the reliability of Gilligan’s findings. Michele M. Moody Addams argues that some of Gilligan’s studies do not rely on representative samples (Card 1991:198). Iddo Landau argues that within-gender differences are larger than between-gender differences. She argues that the empirical studies arguing for a fundamental difference do not present sufficient empirical evidence (Landau 2010:108). Jyotsna Vasudev argues that Gilligan’s study ignores the effect of social, economic and cultural differences on the subjects’ responses to her questions (Puka 1994:241). Landau develops Vasudev’s argument and claims that care

\textsuperscript{12} Gilligan makes some ambiguous claims about the implications of this difference. Although some of her claims make the reader think that she is presenting an essentialist account of male and female nature, in other places she explicitly states that this is not her goal. She later states that she was just highlighting a distinction between two modes of thought rather than “to represent a generalization about either sex” (Gilligan 1982:2).
mentality is more about socio-economic strata rather than gender. In Landau’s view, people of lower socio-economic class carry the care mentality, regardless of their gender. My purpose here is not to vindicate Gilligan’s findings but to show that regardless of the validity of her empirical findings, the ethical theory she extracts from them is cogent and viable and need not be based on gender essentialism. In addition, Gilligan’s care oriented ethics influenced many feminist thinkers which led to the emergence of care ethics as an adequate current alternative to traditional ethical theories. Ethics of care is received in the feminist canon as capable of replacing “the autonomous moral agent who uses reason to understand and apply a set of universal moral rules with the member of a community who responds to others in a caring way that aims to prevent harm and to sustain relationships,” in spite of the problems it contains (Tuana 1992:118). Overall, care ethics scholarship and its critiques encouraged and opened up a space for flourishing of ethical discussions in feminist scholarship in a variety of directions.

Nel Noddings’ Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education is another highly influential book in care ethics scholarship. In Caring, Noddings criticizes the male-centric approach in ethics and argues that “one might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, justice” (Noddings 2003:1). Noddings replaces those moral principles with caring as an ethical attitude. The difference between Gilligan’s and Noddings’ perspectives of care is that Gilligan does not completely reject the necessity of a set of moral principles. For her there is still an appeal to moral principles yet the subject decides on how to act on those principles based on care approach. In contrast to Gilligan, Noddings establishes the category of care as a fundamental way of being in the world. Every human being has the experience of being cared for to a certain extent, and this experience establishes interconnectedness of human beings as an
ontological category. However this interconnectedness is established through reinstatement of an essentialist conception of femininity, a point which makes Noddings’ approach problematic, as I will discuss extensively in the next section. Noddings states that “an ethics built on caring is characteristically and essentially feminine” which implies that caring is ‘characteristically and essentially’ feminine (Noddings 2003:8). Noddings’ use of the pronoun ‘she’ for the one caring and ‘he’ for the cared for reinforces this interpretation. Noddings’ use of the mother/child model presents a significant divergence from Gilligan’s use of the model. For Noddings, women have a biological tendency to care. Although she states that her account of feminine care ethics does not intend to speak for all women neither does it aim at excluding men, it ends up doing both (Noddings 2003:97).

Noddings provides a detailed account of how caring takes place or should take place. Commitment to care constitutes the core of what Noddings describes as the ethical ideal. The ethical self strives to achieve the ideal self who is both the one-caring and cared-for. Uncaring is a state to be surpassed if one wants to act ethically. For Noddings, it is impossible not to hear the call of others who are in need of care. We may certainly choose to ignore this call but this comes at the expense of departing from our ideal selves. Caring starts with receiving the other. In order to receive the other, I need to be able to see and feel with the other. These are capacities which require me to forget myself and absorb myself with the other’s needs and concerns. Hence, caring always involves engrossment and motivational displacement. In caring for someone I reserve a certain portion of my time and energy at the cost of displacing my interests. Noddings states that “At bottom, all caring involves engrossment. The engrossment need not be intense nor need it be pervasive in the life of the one-caring, but it must occur” (Noddings 2003:17). By focusing on the other, I try to hear their voice and feel their feelings. Only in that type of an
involvement would it be possible to form a conversation in which relevant categories for judgment are disclosed (Noddings 2003:22). In so doing, I establish a receptive and relational contact with the other; which constitute the essential modes of interaction in a meaningful life (Noddings 2003:35).

2. Critiques of Care Ethics

Critiques of care ethics come from many different angles. The main critique, as I will discuss below, is the emphasis placed on care giving activities, which play an important role in women’s subordination and imprisonment in the private sphere. In these fruitful critiques, feminists show the danger of perpetuating in care ethics the patriarchal values and ideals associated with women as the fundamental care provider. Their main goal is not to devalue care per se but to show the social and historical construction of women as care givers and to illuminate a possible unintended outcome of care ethics: providing support to the gendered stereotype of the self-sacrificing women. If one of the goals of care ethics is to establish a gynocentric ethics in response to androcentric ethics, then the emphasis put on care giving activities may turn out to be counter-productive, if not self-sabotaging, since it may pave the way for a patriarchally gynocentric ethics. The relational ethical self-understanding of women can also be explained by the patriarchal conditions that forced women to define themselves as daughters, wives and mothers. Catherine McKinnon articulates this criticism as follows, “Women are said to value care. Perhaps women value care because men have valued women according to the care they give. Women are said to think in relational terms. Perhaps women think in relational terms because women's social existence is defined in relation to men” (MacKinnon 1989:51). As Gilligan writes, “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (Gilligan
1982:17). Hence it would not be a stretch to argue that women’s self-respect is positively correlated to their ability to provide care. That might be the reason why they handle hypothetical moral dilemmas presented to them differently than men.

Another significant problem with care ethics is that it suggests a universal female experience on the basis of the patriarchal paradigm of motherhood. Traditional discourses of motherhood and family have been long criticized by feminists for their compulsory and exploitative nature. Patriarchal societies have failed and still fail to address social, economic and political arrangements supporting child care. This failure, combined with ongoing practice of holding women fully accountable for the sustenance and wellbeing of the family as a whole, produces the outcome of women’s imprisonment to their homes. Because of those problems, some feminists called for alternative models of child care. To give one example, Claudia Card in “Against Marriage and Motherhood” levels considerable criticism toward traditional concepts of family and motherhood and suggests a re-distribution of child care work among community members (Card 1996).

Feminists have criticized widely the use of mother/child model as the ideal for an ethical relationship. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, for example, criticizes Noddings’ care ethics for using mothering as a model and not being sensitive to the implications of doing so (in Card 1991:249). Depending on how it has been developed, this model can be fruitful for feminist ethics, yet as it stands today, this approach is problematic in a variety of ways. First, the mother/child relationship is of a unidirectional nature since the child cannot care for the mother beyond acknowledging the mother’s caring. Reciprocity would not be established with this simple act of acknowledgment. Hoagland rightly claims that such a model does not constitute a viable model of ethical relationship since it fails to produce an adequate notion of reciprocity. Given that in a
mother/child relationship, the mother is not supposed to show vulnerability and demand care from the child, this model reinforces the care-bestowing notion of the female subject and does not encourage women to ask for receiving care. Overall, this model carries a dangerous potential to perpetuate women’s oppression as care givers.

One may attempt to solve this difficulty by arguing that the care giver does not necessarily need to receive care from the cared-for. We care for people who are in no position to respond beyond acknowledging and appreciating the care we provide for them. We also find ourselves in situations where we need care but cannot reciprocate for it. In my first visit to NYC, during my stay in a hostel, one of the women I shared the room with got sick. She was lying on her bed and wriggling in pain. She was by herself and there was no one that can help her. I called an ambulance, went out and got her some medicine to alleviate her pain until the ambulance arrives. I never saw her again. She left me a thank you note and some money for the medicine I bought her on my bed. All she could do was recognize and appreciate my care. She was not in a condition to reciprocate in another way. This is a completely acceptable way of reciprocating for the care provided.

Let’s return to the mother-child model and the question of the limited reciprocity by the child in that model. As long as the mother is receiving care from other people and resources, this is a plausible view. Yet the mother of the patriarchal culture does not only care for the children but the whole family and usually is deprived of channels to receive care—assuming that she has the emotional and physical space to voice her need for care.13 Ignoring the needs of the care giver has directly disempowering effects on the self-esteem and self-respect of the care giver.

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13 In Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self Voice and Mind Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule argue based on empirical research that women usually experience difficulties in expressing their needs and when they do so they encounter the problem of not being heard. They conclude that these experiences contribute negatively to women’s self-esteem (Belenky 1997).
Sandra Lee Bartky makes a compelling argument showing the imbalance in the provision of emotional support in heterosexual relationships that advantages men. She claims that women’s care for men feeds men’s self-esteem whereas the unreciprocated form of this care relationship causes serious ethical damage by diminishing women’s self-esteem because it “confirms for her and, just as importantly, for himself, her inferior position in the hierarchy of gender” (Bartky 1990:109). In sum, collectively these reflections on the mother/child model successfully show the inadequacy of this model for ethical relationships.

Second, this model does not take into account different experiences of different mothers. In maternity discourses, maternal love and care is mostly considered as a pre-given fact stemming from maternal instinct. Hence, the focus is mostly on the unconditional love, unreciprocal giving by the mother and the intimate connection the mother and the child shares. Nevertheless, we do know that some mothers experience conflicting feelings in their caring relationship to their children. As Adrienne Rich explains, a mother may experience anger and tenderness at the same time toward her child and may have to work on balancing those feelings (Rich 1995:30). We also know that some mothers abuse and some others even kill their children. Although Noddings argues that only a pathologically sick mother can do those, it would be an oversimplification to rule out those cases and just focus on the examples that reinforce the ideal of the good mother (Noddings 2003:83). An idealized and romanticized notion of motherhood aggravates the already impossible task attributed to mothers. This ideal haunts almost every mother. Ruddick puts this eloquently, “Many mothers who live in the good mother’s shadow, knowing that they have been angry and resentful and remembering episodes of violence and neglect, come to feel that their lives are riddled with shameful secrets that even the closest friends can’t share” (Ruddick 1995:31). Overall, this approach forecloses a meaningful inquiry
into the variety and complexity of maternal experience and hence should be reassessed before it is fostered.

Third, the mother/child model dismisses a variety of female experiences such as lesbian experiences, single women’s experiences and bisexual women’s experiences. This is why lesbian ethics criticizes care ethics for focusing on heterosexual love relationships and mother-child relationships. Care ethics seems to endorse and perpetuate the primary heterosexist feminine virtues, which are “self-sacrifice, vulnerability and altruism” (Hoagland 1988:100). Lastly, by focusing on the private realm, and the intimate, care ethics ignores the call of the distant strangers. A feminist ethics should be able to address global problems arising out of oppressive social and economic relations across nations.¹⁴

Noddings mentions that men can mother yet her account implies that they would not make “good” mothers. For Noddings men’s approach in care is detached as opposed to the feminine relational approach (Noddings 2003:2). In addition men lack the “natural inclination” whereas “mothers quite naturally feel with their infants” (Noddings 2003:31). A mother would never do what Abraham did; she would have never sacrificed her son even for the sake of god, for “our relation to our children is not governed first by the ethical but by natural caring” (Noddings 2003:43). I find Noddings’ depiction of caring in women as natural highly problematic. The claim is neither supportable nor strategically desirable for feminist ethics. As Tronto also warns us, care may well be “a reflection of survival mechanism for women or others who are dealing with oppressive conditions, rather than a quality of intrinsic value on its own” (in Jaggar and Bordo 1989:184). In her response to her critiques, Noddings retracts from endorsing this claim and apologetically contends that her intention was not to posit a feminine

¹⁴ Global care ethics directly responds this criticism by showing that caring for distanced others is both possible and necessary. See Virginia Held (Held 2006), Joan Tronto (Tronto 1993) and Fiona Robinson (Robinson 1997).
nature but rather to refer to “centuries of fairly stable experience that might indeed induce something like a ‘feminine nature’” (Noddings 1990:26). She attributes her use of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ to a simple inattentiveness and agrees that it might be best to refrain from such language. Overall, although, Noddings account of mother/child relationship maintains and reinforces the traditional masculine/feminine dichotomy and reinscribes the disempowering roles and ideals attached to women in patriarchal cultures, not every account of care ethics is susceptible to same charges.

Even though I am sympathetic to Noddings’ goals of creating an ethics separate from masculine ethics, I believe, as Hoagland argues “in a patriarchal world we need something far more radical than an appeal to the feminine—itself a product of that masculine world” (in Card 1991:256). Caring can be a resourceful category for feminists. However, because of the misogynist history of care, care approaches to ethics may inadvertently maintain and reinforce women’s oppression.

Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Ethics: Toward a Politics of Peace* seems to avoid this charge by emphasizing the activity of caring not as a feminine trait, but as a human trait. To be a mother for Ruddick is “to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and a substantial part of one’s working life” and this is not a gender specific task (Ruddick 1995:17). Women as well as men can become mothers as long as they meet the main needs of a child, which Ruddick lists as preservation, growth and social acceptability. Ruddick does not ignore the fact that the primary task of maintaining the conditions of growth is shouldered by women mothers. She delineates the historical oppressive nature of the ideology of motherhood across cultures. However, she also guides her readers toward imagining a society where maternal thinking can be exercised and mothering can be done by both men and women.
Maternal thinking is a special kind of thinking a person exercises when they are preoccupied with meeting the needs of a child. It involves a continuous state of deliberation toward finding the best possible ways to meet those needs. Hence, in principle, there is no reason why a man would not participate in that type of a practice. In addition, Ruddick also recognizes the fact that women as well as men can refuse responding to a child’s needs and can be abusive. Ruddick is also careful not to sentimentalize motherhood, although she realizes she is heard as “idealizing” mothers (Ruddick 1995:28). Ruddick’s vigilance in using the paradigm of motherhood proves to be significant given the heated reactions in feminist tradition to the possible corrosive effects of using it. As Sarah Hoagland articulates in “Some Thoughts about ‘Caring’,” “an ethics appealing to mother/child relationship must take into consideration both the power in the relationship and the social context of the relationship. Ignoring these will only reinforce oppression through ethics regardless of whether ethics is based on caring or principle” (in Card 1991:253).

Gilligan is also already aware of the feminine as the product of the masculine world. Women mostly feel themselves powerless and unable to carry the responsibility their actions entail. Therefore, they try to compromise for a solution and find rescue in a childlike altruism. She states that “the ‘good woman’ masks assertion in evasion denying responsibility by claiming only to meet the needs of others, while the ‘bad woman’ forgoes or renounces the commitments that bind her in self-deception and betrayal” (Gilligan 1982:71). In order to cope with the feelings of insecurity and get protection, women choose to be “good” by self-sacrifice for others. Gilligan’s account of care ethics does not approve of patriarchal depiction of the female subject as self-sacrificing. Instead she endorses a notion of the ethical subject that has the capacity to exercise choice and act on her own choices. She recognizes that care is bound to remain a
feminine ethic “in the gendered universe of patriarchy” since “caring is what good women do, and the people who care are doing women’s work” (Gilligan 2013:19). Nevertheless, she shows the potential of care ethics to be a universal ethics that applies to all human beings (Gilligan 2013:22).

3. Existentialist Roots of Feminist Care Ethics

Alison M. Jaggar discusses the difficulty of establishing the claim that the Western ethical tradition is distinctively androcentric in her analysis of feminist evaluations of the philosophical cannon. If this claim means that it has been primarily written by men, it is neither true nor philosophically interesting (in Card 1991:90). Hence, Jaggar claims, the main goal of feminists should be uncovering the male biased aspect of Western canon. In the same vein, Iddo Landau argues against the novelty of the ideas brought by feminist ethics and ethics of care in particular. She claims that many Western ethical theories inform ethics of care. Her main examples are Albert Camus’ ethics which calls for an “immediate and nonrational empathy” and Martin Buber’s relational and contextual I-Thou approach. She also cites the moral teachings of the Romantics and existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Gabriel Marcel as being closer to care ethics than justice ethics. I would add to these examples Simone de Beauvoir’s existential ethics, which presents a radical critique of traditional universalist moral theories and endorses a relational and situated ethics. Landau provides these examples to prove that philosophy is not pervasively androcentric. With Landau, I would hold that it is a mistake to reject every assumption, methodology and idea in Western philosophy on the basis of its androcentricity.

Existentialism in general and Beauvoir’s philosophy in particular have been undermined for similar reasons. Existentialism has been considered as an androcentric philosophical theory, in particular Beauvoir has been considered as Sartre’s follower and was refused the status of an
independent philosopher. This led some feminists to overlook the invaluable resources that both existentialism and her particular account of existentialist ethics offer. One of the main changes feminism introduced to political thought is the declaration that the personal as political. Care ethics made significant contributions to this endeavor by showing that care work constitutes an important part of political agendas. As we saw in chapters one and two, Beauvoir’s existentialist phenomenological work situates the individual within a collective whose actions both are influenced by and influence that collective. Hence, the individual is responsible in taking into account the ways in which her actions will have impact on that collective. The personal is political and the political is always ethical for Beauvoir.\(^{15}\) Hence, care work is an ethical issue for both feminist ethics and existentialist ethics.

In the remainder of this chapter, I show the rich resources existentialism provides for care ethics, and I argue that existentialist ethics both methodologically and contextually informs care ethics by discussing three main points that stands at the intersection of care ethics and existentialist ethics: (i) rejection of a priori and universal ethical principles, (ii) interconnectedness of people and the notion of the relational self (which include the receptive mode of the ethical subject, the emphasis on action, full responsibility for one’s action and the notion of generosity), and (iii) the dangers of care work.

(i) Rejection of a priori and universal ethical principles

Care ethics and existentialist ethics reject a priori universal ethical principles that guide action. They both focus on the particularity of actual situations to determine ethical action. The basis for rejecting such principles is ontological. According to care ethics, we exist in the world

\(^{15}\) Most of the examples in The Ethics of Ambiguity are political cases. Beauvoir is certainly not presenting a political theory in that book; nevertheless the situated subject who is always in some political structure cannot avoid making political choices which necessarily fall under the domain of ethics.
as care givers and care takers, and are responsible for goodness of care related actions. It is difficult to define care and show how one is supposed to care for others. It is the subject’s responsibility to do this work and no guidance or assurance is available. Daryl Koehn, who is one of the few feminist thinkers who delineates the existential elements in care ethics, puts this succinctly:

In the care ethic, the moral world is not already “there,” fully formed in its rationality. If the world is to be good, the caregiver must make it so through her acts in accordance with her personal ideal of herself as a caring person. Since no one can specify necessary and sufficient conditions for an act to be caring, the caregiver is finally thrown back upon herself to assess the goodness of her acts (Koehn 2012:22-23).

Koehn argues that this existential dimension of care ethics is lacking in traditional androcentric ethics. Although it is hard exactly to say what she considers the scope of male ethics to be, one would assume Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s existentialisms would fall under its scope. However, the way she describes the core of care ethics above reflects their account of existentialism. Freedom, which constitutes the main value in existentialism, is replaced by care here. However, both accounts take the good of the individual or group as the main goal of one’s actions. Beauvoir writes, “the good of an individual or a groups of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end a priori” (Beauvoir 1976:142). Beauvoir emphasizes that the ethics she is proposing does not provide any recipes for action (Beauvoir 1976:134). For Beauvoir establishing a priori rules of moral action is a useless attempt. Every situation is unique and calls for reinvention of the rules for action. She nullifies every justification that can be drawn from society, history or culture and leaves us with one single precept: “to treat the other […] as a freedom,” just as care ethics provides us with one rule, that is to care for the other (Beauvoir 1976:142).
We can argue that for Beauvoir, one of the most important ways that we should care for others is to care for and help enable them as a freedom. In other words, one cannot treat a person as a freedom without caring for him/her in some respect and vice versa. Thus, caring for another has to include treating them as a freedom. Treating someone as a freedom is not the only type of care, but surely it is one necessary form of care in care’s fullest expression. If I care for another person but do so in a way that does not treat her/him as a freedom, I am only caring for her in a diminished, and perhaps even harmful way. The type of care men provide women with in white middle class heterosexual relationships presents a good example of a diminished way of caring. By treating women as fragile, and unable to protect themselves, men puts women on a pedestal as dependent on them which eventually diminishes women’s freedom.

The rest is to be determined by the context and the situation. Both care ethics and existentialist ethics emphasize that an ethical decision can only be made after a meticulous evaluation of the case in question. Some cases may require the subject to look for or even create alternative solutions that may not be immediately available at the beginning of the inquiry. Gilligan’s ethical subject is sensitive to the peculiarities and complexities of the situation. As we have seen in the two different responses to the Heinz dilemma, Gilligan’s female subject, Amy, refuses to solve the dilemma by simply choosing among the seemingly two possible alternatives. She works on the problem in order to create alternative solutions. Rejection of universal principles in care ethics and existentialist ethics brings about a more involved and more responsible account of the ethical subject. The ethical subject has to go beyond implementing the ethical action prescribed by some universal moral theory and develop and utilize her cognitive abilities as much as possible to arrive at an elaborate solution.

(ii) Interconnectedness of People: The notion of the relational self
One of the main principles of care ethics is its endorsement of a conception of the self as relational. Care ethicists converge on the claim that human beings are ontologically related to each other and posit this aspect of our ontology as the basis of an ethics. Since, ignorance is mostly an active and willful production by the subject in order to maintain relations of power and oppression that confer social, cultural and economic privileges as contemporary race theorists and feminists have shown, the failure to recognize or accept our inherent connectedness constitutes the main ethical failure which presented in a variety of ways in those accounts: racism, oppression, evil etc. (Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

Noddings defines ethics of care as relational and argues that, quoting Martin Buber, “relation is reciprocity” (Noddings 2003:73). For Gilligan, interdependence is a common ontological experience for human beings, since survival for us is only possible when we enter some sort of caring relationship. She endorses the idea of the subject delineated as both care giver and receiver; always interconnected with others. Gilligan writes

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the “real and recognizable trouble” of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment (Gilligan 1982:100).

For Gilligan, moral deliberation should always be “contextual and narrative” rather than “formal and abstract” since the moral subjects are socially and historically situated. Reconstruction of a moral dilemma in its contextual particularity has the advantage of being alert to social contingencies—especially in the form of privileges, and inequalities—that created the dilemma in question.

Gilligan’s account of our ontological interconnectedness is not limited to the relations of childhood. We need to cultivate a variety of relationships with others as we grow up, as well.
Hence, relationships play a fundamental part in the constitution of the self. We experience ourselves as independent as well, yet a self that totally perceives herself as separated from others—as in the case of justice oriented ethical approaches—does not constitute an ideal ethical starting point for Gilligan. Recognition of one’s connection to other people also constitutes the source of moral obligation to others. Gilligan states that in a care based approach to morality “an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response” (Gilligan 1982:30).

The notion of the relational self gains even more significance in discussions of ethics given the increasing circulation of labor and world’s resources usually in the form of flowing from less affluent nations to more affluent ones. Fiona Robinson and Virginia Held are two care ethicists who emphasized the global potential of care based ethical approach (Robinson 1997; Held 2006). The emphasis on the autonomous and independent subject in justice based moralities carry the danger of concealing the effects and consequences of agents’ actions on the global scale. We are all influenced and sometimes advantaged or disadvantaged by international social, economic, political, and environmental decisions and policies. Justice and rights based morality would focus on a just global distribution of world resources; however, one cannot take a viable moral decision without analyzing the hidden interplay between the flow of capital, and poverty and inequality across the globe. This interplay can only be revealed by being sensitive to historical, cultural and economic differences between nations or groups in the globe.

The same contextual sensitivity is at the core of existentialist ethics as well. Existentialist ethics establishes the subject as fundamentally interconnected and interrelated through each one’s freedoms and projects. The subject has an ethical responsibility to analyze her actions within the context of web of relations. Awareness of the need for others in order to realize one’s
projects constitutes the basis for the ethical responsibility to respond to others’ needs to be successful in their projects.

Interconnectedness and relationality in caring bring about four other aspects of care ethics which are also the main tenets of existentialist ethics. These are a certain type of receptivity, importance of actions, taking full responsibility for one’s actions, and the notion of generosity. Receptivity is to be open to see, hear, and feel what the other has to convey me. Receptivity involves both activity and passivity in that while I am opening myself up to the other, I am also letting go of myself and my attempts to control the other. The opening up is active yet neither manipulative not assimilative (Noddings 2003:146). Explicitly drawing from existentialist philosophy, Noddings places the receptive mode at the heart of human existence. She concurs to the existential way of existence which requires a constant awareness and questioning of one’s values and actions within the context of interactions with others. In this process of questioning, Noddings explains, the caregiver sees the demand of the other and remains with two options; proceeding “in a state of truth” which refers to acknowledging the call of the other or denying “what I have received and talk myself into feeling comfortable with the denial” (Noddings 2003:35). Existentialist ethics also requires the ethical subject to be attentive to other’s call and genuinely respond to it. As I stated earlier, for Beauvoir the good of others should be “taken as an absolute end of our action” (Beauvoir 1976:142). Taking the good of others as the main goal of our action implies the ethical necessity to be receptive to others’ call. Refusing to do so would mean being in bad faith which is an unethical stance to take.

Responding to this call inevitably requires some action. Care ethics also entails a moral obligation to act in a way that addresses the demands for care. Caring for someone without being moved for action would not be considered as genuine caring. Noddings maintains that
“We, in caring, must respond: we express ourselves, we make plans, we execute” (Noddings 2003:36). Authentic care signifies existence of a genuine concern for the other’s wellbeing. In addition, we expect this concern to translate into actions that would endorse their wellbeing. This relationship to the other solidified in practical action again reminds us Beauvoir’s notion of interconnectedness of human freedoms and the ethical obligation to endorse others’ freedoms. Noddings reminds us of “our fundamental relatedness, of our dependence upon each other. We are both free—that which I do, I do—and bound—I might do far better if you reach out to help me and far, far worse if you abuse, taunt, or ignore me” (Noddings 2003:49). As I explained in chapter two, for Beauvoir, we need the approval and support of others for the projects we take up. Hence, we demand their support and depending on their response we may do “far better” or “far worse.”

As explained above, Noddings contends that the ethical ideal should be realistic. One may receive too many or too heavy calls for care but may not be able to respond to all of them fully. However, after acknowledging this fact, Noddings still proceeds with claiming that withdrawing from caring for another diminishes the ethical ideal. She gives the example of a woman who kills her abusive husband while he is asleep. This is an ‘ethical’ act for Noddings but only “under the guidance of a diminished ethical ideal” (Noddings 2003:113). Noddings’ account makes it very hard for the one-caring to absent her care from the cared-for. It is always the responsibility of the one-caring to continue their care unless there is a tangible physical danger involved in doing so. This account seems to put a heavy burden on the one-caring and this burden is reminiscent of history of abuse and suffering women had to bear in their close relationships and families. Existentialist ethics offers a significant contribution to care ethics in addressing this dilemma. Since freedom is the basic value for existentialism, any demand or act
that proves to be undermining the other’s freedom or oppressive should be denied. Existentialist ethics puts “limits to responsibility” as Arp phrases it (Arp 1996:42). In the example Noddings gives, the responsibility of the one-caring should end when/if the cared-for no longer respects the freedom of the one-caring.

Others’ infinite demands on us constitute one of the main sources of anguish in our lives. On the one hand, we are fundamentally connected to others and we cannot simply ignore their call; on the other hand, we are tempted to and free to ignore their call. When we do the latter, we immediately turn to reestablish our relatedness. There is an ever present potentiality for both reciprocity and conflict in human relations. We have the potential to treat others as subject or objects and we are susceptible to be treated as such. Therefore, we always work through these questions and constantly decide on how to treat others and assess how others treat us. Hence, the anguish arising out of this deliberation is bound to be a part of our lives. Since our freedoms are fundamentally dependent on others’ freedoms, one cannot simply treat another as an object and avoid feelings of anguish. One justifies her existence in promoting others’ freedoms; “I concern others and they concern me” (Beauvoir 1976:72).

As I have explained in the previous chapter, Beauvoir describes this relationship of recognition between the self and the other as generosity. Sartre on the other hand describes it as “the original structure of authentic existence” and focuses on the activity of gift-giving as a practice of generosity” (Sartre 1992:493-4). Generosity consists in maintaining the two freedoms simultaneously in the encounter with the other. First and foremost, generosity involves a perception of the other as similar to myself. The generous man accepts himself as both subject and object in his relation to the other and regards and treats the other as such as well. Sartre and Beauvoir’s notion of generosity challenges the idea of the liberal autonomous individual which is
criticized by care ethicists as well. A generous recognition of the other’s otherness brings about recognition of one’s responsibility for protecting the other from oppression. This protection takes place in the form of attentiveness to the oppressed, rather than a direct intervention into the other’s life. In other words, I am not responsible for “saving” the other, but I am responsible for reacting against her oppression and struggling to provide an environment for the oppressed in which she can overcome it. While care ethicists do not use the term generosity extensively, caring itself can be understood as an act of generosity in their framework. Both Gilligan and Noddings exalt activities of giving without expecting anything in return. Care ethics fails to bring limits to one’s responsibility towards others. Sartre and Beauvoir’s notion of generosity offers a significant contribution to care ethics by showing that one can only create points of departure for the other.

(ii) The Dangers of Care Work

Feminists began early to notice and scrutinize the historical unequal division of labor and the long lasting social and economic ramifications it brings about. Traditional social-political and ethical theories of nineteenth and twentieth century left the domestic realm outside of their agenda treating it as of little relevance or no relevant at all to ethics and politics. There is invaluable feminist scholarship discussing the (mis)treatment of domestic realm in social political philosophy and ethics. Carol Pateman’s discussion of the marriage contract and private sphere in Hegel points out the in-between stage that private life has in civil society for Hegel it is “both is and is not part of civil society—and women are both are and are not part of the civil order” (Pateman 1988:181). Although family life involves universality to a certain degree, it is an ethical stage to be transcended through participation in public life. Women, having their ‘substantive destiny in the family’ lack the demands of universality and hence can never transcend into the domain of the public life as opposed to men who have “actual substantive life
in the state” (Pateman 1988:176). Alison M. Jaggar discusses Marx and Engel’s theories of labor and states that although Marxism has successfully shown the oppressive nature of sexual division of labor for women, it failed to inquire into its history, implications and how it could be abolished (Jaggar 1983:51-82). Marxism at best presents an inadequate “analysis of the family which centers attention on the necessity of housework for capitalism while failing to give an adequate characterization of the social relations generated by the reproductive role of women” (Mackintosh 1977 quoted in Kaluzynska 1980). Heidi I. Hartmann’s “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union” also presents a feminist critique of Marxist theory for its disproportionate preoccupation with a capitalist analysis of the society at the expense of neglecting a patriarchal analysis of it (Hartmann 1979).

Devaluation of private life in the philosophical scholarship delayed the much needed reconsideration and reassessment of unequal division of labor in the family that assigns most of the care work to women. Susan Moller Okin rightly posits that theorists of justice failed to see the significance of unjust and unequal distribution of paid and unpaid division of labor within the family (Okin 2008:149). Okin’s detailed analysis of implications of gendered division of labor in the family for women lays bare the causal relationship between this division of labor and underrepresentation of women in higher social, economic and political sites and global poverty of women (Okin 2008: 149). Thanks to those and many other feminist thinkers (Friedan 2013; Gavron 1966; Oakley 1974; Comer 1974; Gardiner, Himmelweit, and Mackintosh 1975; Foreman 1977), unpaid female labor at home first made visible and then brought into theoretical discussions of political economy and philosophy.

Given this historical picture, feminists felt the urge to address the political and ethical issues arising from absence of care work in philosophical discussions of justice. I see two main
different streams of feminist thought involved in this project. One stream focuses on the repetitive nature of care work and its regressive effects on women and argues for an equal distribution of it, and the other stream appraises care work as the source of distinctively feminine values and carves out a theory of ethics based on those values. Feminist care ethics belongs to the latter, and the critique of care ethics which I discussed in this chapter came from the former.

At first sight, Beauvoir’s approach to care ethics would seem to align with the first stream. However, as I will show shortly, Beauvoir’s relation to care ethics is more complicated than this first glance reveals. Beauvoir’s notions of immanence and transcendence allow us to have a very rich discussion in care ethics regarding the nature and value of care work, as I will show below. This is so even though feminists have criticized Beauvoir for holding to the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. They argued that Beauvoir glorified male activities while she undervalued maternity and domestic work as uncreative activities. Most of them considered this dichotomy as borrowed from Sartre and claimed that it is an inadequate framework to analyze the female condition (Lloyd 1993; Hartsock 1985; Leighton 1975). Some feminists did not consider the dichotomy as Sartrean but they still insisted on its inadequacy in explaining female oppression. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, for instance, claims that this dichotomy is not Sartrean but Hegelian and Marxists and argues that it is problematic because it renders motherhood and domestic labor as immanence, “i.e., as non-creative and non-productive, as not being projects, and thus as not creating value” (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996:239). Charlene H. Siegfried also criticizes Beauvoir for her devaluation of female biology and overvaluation of transcendent individual (Haddock Seigfried 1985:223). She argues that from an evolutionary biologist’s perspective, female species would be valued more than the male species because of
their contribution to successful reproduction. For Siegfried, Beauvoir’s preoccupation with transcendence prevents her from seeing any value attached to reproductive activities.

Care constitutes a wide range of our lives and comes in many different forms. In order to show the fruitful conversation between care ethics and Beauvoir’s account of existential ethics, I focus here on reproductive care, which historically has been provided at home by women. In my discussion I also will refer to it as domestic work. This type of care work has transformed in significant ways however; it still fails to be adequately addressed in economics and philosophy. First of all, domestic work mostly has transformed from unpaid labor into being paid labor and second, especially in wealthy nations and for the affluent populations of most of the nations it now is being provided by women of less affluent states. Arlie Russell Hochschild coined the term ‘global care chains’ by drawing on Rhacel Parrenas’ work to explain this flow of labor capital from less affluent nations to more affluent ones (Hochschild 2000:41). Global care chains allow women of more affluent countries to participate in paid work and sometimes even to compete with men in well-paid and high status jobs, but this freedom comes with the price of enslaving women of poorer nations (Weir 2008:166).

Despite this change in the way domestic work is performed, there are three important ways in which it still remains the same: (i) domestic work is still considered as being of low value compared to other work (ii) it is still mostly done by women (iii) it is still considered to be mainly the responsibility of the wife or the mother in the house. Finding a nanny or a cleaning lady, introducing her the tasks to be performed and evaluating her performance is still done by the woman in that house, which designates the woman as the responsible person for domestic

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16 Dependency care is the care provided to those who are completely dependent on the care giver in order to maintain their daily activates is one of those forms. For further discussion on dependency care see (E. Kittay 2002, and E. F. Kittay, Jennings, and Wasunna 2005)
work. This requires the woman to have more flexible working hours or to have a less ‘serious’ job, because in case of any problem, she would have to take up the work that is supposed to be done by the cleaning lady or nanny. Hence, being bombarded with those responsibilities, women still hesitate on taking greater challenges and responsibilities in their work places. This prevents them from being on a competitive edge with their male colleagues. This fact constitutes one possible explanation for the persisting pay gap between men and women across the world.

Alison Jaggar and William L. McBride find a correlation between relegation of housework to women and its perception as being of low value (Jaggar and McBride 1985:187). Jaggar and McBride suggest that maintaining a sharp distinction between reproduction and work (production) has been harmful to the fight against women’s oppression. They rightly point out the inconsistency in reproduction’s being crucial for the survival of human race and its undervaluation. They argue for a re-conceptualization of reproductive activities as production in order to “bring them into the realm of politics, to make them available both for political criticism and for political reconstruction” (Jaggar and McBride 1985:196). They also criticize Beauvoir’s valuation of production over reproduction and her idealization of ‘the male principle’ such as transcendence, reason and productivity (Jaggar and McBride 1985:191).

How should one address the tension between valuing care on the one hand and holding to the transcendence/immanence dichotomy on the other? The answer is that reading Beauvoir retrospectively in conversation with feminists who endorsed a care based approach to ethics, and especially with Noddings, sheds some light on the dangers of idealizing care work and implying —as Noddings did—that it is feminine. As I have shown above, the idea of caring as a distinctively feminine trait has been debunked by feminists. I agree with care ethicists that caring is a value that can provide a strong basis for an ethical theory and that care should be considered
as a fundamental value for human existence that is not restricted to the female domain. Nevertheless, I propose that care ethicists should be cautious in their treatment of care work given the oppressive connotations it carries in its historical context. Beauvoir is deeply attuned to these oppressive connotations and this attunement leads her to focus on the negative aspects of care work.

To begin, when Beauvoir says care related tasks are activities of immanence she does not simply dismiss them as redundant. She is aware of the positive potential in caring, yet she does not emphasize it. Hence, I do not consider Beauvoir’s seemingly degrading treatment of care work as necessarily contradicting care ethics. In what follows, I present two arguments in support of compatibility between Beauvoir’s treatments of domestic care work and care ethics. In my first argument, I show that there is an implicit value attributed to care related activities in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. In my second argument, I show that the distinction between immanence and transcendence in existentialism operates as a helpful theoretical tool for addressing oppression. I argue that Beauvoir’s analysis of domestic work within the framework of transcendence/immanence dichotomy is still useful today. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that bringing existentialist ethics into conversation with care ethics may help collapse this dichotomy by showing us that there are many activities which carry elements of both transcendence and immanence.

In chapter two, I discussed Beauvoir’s treatment of care work as immanent. Examples showing the immanent nature of care oriented activities are abound everywhere in *The Second Sex*, but especially in the section “The Married Woman” (Beauvoir 2012:439-523). She describes the wife’s work within the home as repetitive and uncreative. However, we must read Beauvoir’s use of the transcendence/immanence dichotomy here within a historical context. What Beauvoir
is attacking in *The Second Sex* are the immanent activities undertaken by women in the traditional heterosexual family. She considers the house in that sense a site of confinement and oppression. She discusses housework as a Sisyphean type of torture because of its ever ending repetitive nature. She writes,

> Few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty and torn again. The housewife wears herself out running on the spot; she does nothing; she only perpetuates the present; she never gains the sense that she is conquering a positive Good, but struggles indefinitely against Evil (Beauvoir 2012:474).

Beauvoir emphasizes how relegation of the wife to house work and caring activities help the husband flourish and transcend. The husband has his needs met mostly by his wife at home and hereby he both is content and has the necessary time to be engaged in activities of transcendence. This shows that activities of immanence are essential to activities of transcendence. In other words, they provide necessary conditions of transcendence. Although this argument seems to attribute a secondary value to activities of immanence, it actually shows their essential and indispensible nature. Care ethicists also refer to a similar argument in showing the essential nature of care work. Virginia held explains the human infant’s need to be cared for in order to survive and states that because of that reason “Care is probably the most fundamental value of all” (Held 2004:147). Without care, we cannot talk about society, economy, politics, etc., because we would not have human beings who would create those institutions to begin with. In the same vein, without activities of immanence, we cannot talk about activities of transcendence. Thus there is no contradiction between care ethics and the primacy to transcendence over immanence in existentialism.

Nevertheless, there is still a difficulty in categorizing caring relationships with respect to activities of transcendence. The most fundamental value for care ethicists is care while for
existentialist ethics it is pursuing freedom which is tantamount to pursuing acts of transcendence. In that case what status do caring relationships have in an authentic and meaningful life, according to the existentialist ethicist? I claim that caring relationships also are of utmost value for existentialist ethics. Existentialist ethics requires both parties of a caring relationship to be freely engaged in their projects. Both individuals should be pursuing authentic activities and realizing their freedom for their relationship to be meaningful at all. Beauvoir’s critique of the woman in love reveals the danger of establishing a relationship to the world through love of another person. In the “The Woman in Love” in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir contends that “[…] love for the woman is a total abdication for the benefit of a master” (Beauvoir 2012:683). For women, love itself is a project and they devote themselves completely for the loved one. Women also devote themselves for their children, which again Beauvoir finds problematic. Nevertheless, she accepts that “maternal devotion can be experienced in perfect authenticity”, but adds that this rarely happens (Beauvoir 2012:556). Mostly, mothers who devote themselves completely to their children and do not seek any other means of self-realization in the world outside of home—which Beauvoir calls the unfulfilled woman—end up dominating their children in order to compensate for their frustrations (Beauvoir 2012:556). One’s fulfillment of her projects constitutes the precondition for a healthy love and caring relationship. Such relationships have a primary role in a transcendent life. She maintains that “Existentialists are so far from denying love, friendship, and fraternity that in their eyes the only way for each individual to find the foundation and accomplishment of his being is in these human relationships” (Beauvoir 2004:200).

Beauvoir’s own statements concerning motherhood are ambiguous and confusing at times. She primarily does have a negative perception of motherhood, but a careful reading of *The
Second Sex reveals the social and historical reasons for her negative perception of motherhood. In the concluding chapter of The Second Sex, for example, she writes “there is still one female function that is still almost impossible to undertake in complete freedom, and that is motherhood” (Beauvoir 2012:735). Read alone, this quote lends full support to the claim that Beauvoir considers motherhood as intrinsically immanent and as hindrance to women’s freedom. However, when we read a few sentences further, we see that Beauvoir says “if this [motherhood] burden is a heavy one, it is because, inversely, social norms do not allow the woman to procreate as she pleases: the unwed mother causes scandal, and for the child an illegitimate birth is a stain; it is rare for a woman to become a mother without accepting the chains of marriage or lowering herself” (Beauvoir 2012:735). As can be understood from this quote, Beauvoir’s main problem is not with motherhood per se but with the oppressive historical structure of heterosexual marriage. In her description of division of labor in antiquity, she states that “because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new” (Beauvoir 2012:73). Men, on the other hand, create the space and time for creative and meaningful activities by redoubling the weight of domestic work onto women.

When we look at what Beauvoir says about motherhood with historical lenses, we see that she refers to the occupations that are historically tied to motherhood such as changing diapers, feeding the baby, and cleaning after the baby. We can conclude that Beauvoir does not necessarily consider motherhood as an act of immanence. If we define transcendence as activities that produce durable things, motherhood can hardly be called an act of immanence. But this point leads to the question of why existentialism values transcendence over immanence? It is
difficult to dispute the central role transcendence plays in Beauvoir’s ethics. For existentialism, transcendence constitutes the justification for human existence. The main task of the individual in existential ethics is to give meaning to her life by engaging herself in projects through an active interaction with the world that goes beyond perpetuation of life. By exalting transcendence, Beauvoir seems to exalt some activities which historically happened to be performed by men over historically female activities. In that respect, feminist critiques of transcendence/immanence dichotomy as masculinist initially seem compelling.

Provided that domestic care work is still a site of class and gender oppression, however Beauvoir’s use of transcendence/immanence dichotomy continues to be extremely relevant in addressing issues of gender inequality and feminization of poverty. First of all, contrary to critiques of the transcendence/immanence dichotomy, I argue that exalting transcendent activities does not necessarily mean overvaluation of male activities. Iris Marion Young forwards this concern when she criticizes Beauvoir for not questioning “the value of the activities through which men compete with one another and achieve recognition. Power, achievement, individual expression, rationality, mastery of natural processes are for her as for the patriarchal culture she criticizes, the most human values” (Young 1985:175). Young’s criticism seems plausible if we accept that Beauvoir considers those activities intrinsically valuable, but I claim that she does not. Beauvoir values those activities as long as they are expressions of free engagement with the world. These activities have shaped the world historically. Beauvoir is an existentialist. She thinks that values and beliefs are socially and historically constructed by individuals. Men who have had the time and resources to be involved in transcendent activities have set the prevalent values of Western world as such. However, their engagement with the world could have ended in creating a different set of values. What is important for Beauvoir is
that women’s interaction to the world and their ways of giving meaning to world have been limited by their relegation to home and domestic activities. In this analysis, Beauvoir is not providing an ethical account of the values created by men’s interaction with the world. She is only trying to give an account of women’s limited participation in meaning making activities that have shaped the world through history.

Another problem Young finds in Beauvoir’s devaluation of housework is that it undermines the experience of many women who “devote themselves to caring for house and children as a meaningful human project” (Young 2005:138). The immediate response to such a criticism, which Young herself acknowledges, is that women mostly do so because they do not have any other outlet to create meaning for their lives. Young also discusses homemaking as an activity that cannot be reduced to housework and that stands in between transcendence and immanence if one were to use Beauvoir’s dichotomy. After explaining the idea of home as a site of meaning making and part of one’s sense of identity, she claims that there is a world making meaning in some types of homemaking such as decoration and preservation of the house (Young 2005:139-141). Young rightly describes transcendence as “the expression of individual subjectivity” in Beauvoirian existentialist framework. In that case, dusting a painting or a picture can be considered as preservation of the meanings attached to these objects. Hence, dusting might an expression of subjectivity. This expression of subjectivity is even more manifest in the case of migrants who furnish and decorate their houses in a way that reflects their cultural identity (Young 2005:144).

This brings us to an important problem that arises with use of the transcendence/immanence dichotomy, which is that some of our activities incorporate elements of both immanence and transcendence. Some daily activities fall under both categories and do not allow
us to maintain this dichotomy. Care work for example can be creative and transcendent as well as mundane and immanent. Andrea Veltman identifies four characteristics of transcendent activity based on Beauvoir’s description. They are as follows: producing something durable, enabling individual self-expression, transforming or annexing the world and contributing to the constructive endeavors of the human race (Veltman 2004:123). Based on these characteristics, cooking by trying different recipes, developing them and inventing new ones can become a creative and non-repetitive caring activity. Nevertheless, no matter how creative and self-expressive I am in my cooking, I cannot produce something durable. Hence, cooking falls in between transcendence and immanence. On the other hand, most of the work the factory workers perform produces a great deal of durable objects, while that type of work lacks both self-expression and creativity. The fact that there are many activities which fall in the gray zone between transcendence and immanence does not negate the fruitfulness of this dichotomy as a theoretical tool, especially in accounting for situations of oppression. As I explained in the previous chapter, no human being ever lives a life of full transcendence or immanence. We are always torn between transcendence and immanence. And most of our activities involve elements of both transcendence and immanence.

In conclusion, I argue that both existentialist ethics and care ethics have rich resources to address oppressive practices we are facing today. The notion of the self as relational and interconnected as opposed to the autonomous and self-interested subject allows us to see that we are responsible for oppression. Care related activities constitute an important part of the work load that is performed by the disempowered. As feminists have shown, relegation of care related activities to women has also historically contributed to women’s oppression. By valuing the idea of giving generously, existentialist ethics also values care. However, existential ethics sees the
potential danger in relegating a person or a group to care work. Therefore, the problem with care ethics is not the nature of care work \textit{per se} but the historical consequences of relegating women solely to that type of work. The transcendence/immanence dichotomy endorsed by Beauvoir and Sartre helps us see this danger in a historical context.
In this chapter, I continue my aim of showing how Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics relates to and informs contemporary accounts of feminist ethics in the Western continental feminist canon. As indicated in chapter three, to date only a few scholars have emphasized this connection. One of them is Karen Vintges, who argues that although Beauvoir’s philosophy “already encompasses all the elements of contemporary feminism—so much so that it can be taken as its paradigm,” it still does not get the attention it deserves (Vintges 1999). Ann V. Murphy also discusses underestimation of the influence of The Second Sex on contemporary feminist theory (in Mussett and Wilkerson 2012). In what follows, I turn to Judith Butler’s feminist philosophy, analyzing it as a contribution to feminist ethics that is influenced by Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics. In the first section, I show how Beauvoir’s account of agency as an ambiguous becoming reverberates in Butler’s theory of gender performativity developed in her early writings. I consider Butler’s theory of gender performativity to have existentialist roots based on the existentialist perception of the subject as a becoming that never coincides with itself. In the second section, I discuss how Butler takes on some basic ethical questions which Beauvoir already accentuates in her writings. I focus on three main points of intersection between the two philosophers, which are vulnerability and interconnectedness, violence and inevitability of ethical failure, and finally the ambiguity and opaqueness that come with situated ethics.

\[17\] I consider Beauvoir’s account of ethics as both existentialist and feminist. However, my focus here is on the existentialist elements rather than the feminist elements. My effort to show Beauvoir’s relevance to Butler’s ethics contributes to my larger project in which I show the congruence between existentialist ethics and feminist ethics and call for a deeper engagement between the two theories.
1. Judith Butler’s Theory of Gender Performativity and the Problem of Personal Agency in Butler and Beauvoir

*The Second Sex* presents an existential phenomenological analysis of women’s lack of freedom and oppression as a universal problem. In addition to analyzing women’s current situation, Beauvoir’s book also stands as a feminist manifesto. It promotes the idea of women’s liberation and offers prescriptive guidance for carrying out changes in the situation of women. In the last section of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir radically argues that it is impossible to “free” women from patriarchal oppression; only women can achieve their emancipation. Beauvoir confers a considerable degree of personal agency to women in overcoming gender oppression. In addition to being a situated and embodied being, for Beauvoir woman is a subject who constantly transfigures herself and has the capacity to transcend the given order of the things.

The problem of personal agency under oppressive conditions emerges often in contemporary feminist scholarship. The move from the independent, fully self-contained Cartesian ethical subject of traditional ethics towards a more interdependent and socially constructed ethical subject received serious critiques from some feminists. Mario Moussa discusses the postmodern critiques of subjectivity and asks “if it is therefore true that nothing like an autonomous Cartesian “I” exists, then how is it possible for the political agent to instigate action?” (Dallery, Scott, and Roberts 1992:255-6) For Moussa, if we cannot formulate a self that exists independent of social construction, then we cannot claim any political action to be generated by the subject. Ann Ferguson asks “If personal identities are socially constructed by gender, race and ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, how are social change and moral responsibility possible?” (Ferguson 1997:116) Linda Alcoff also argues for the impossibility of any feminist politics if gender were to be a social construct (Alcoff 1995: 43). Susan Hekman presents a more sophisticated
articulation of the problem by pointing out to the reluctance among feminists to accept the constituted subject, in spite of their deep interest in the question of how social, cultural, political, and discursive structures shape the female subject (Hekman 2004). This problem seems to present an insurmountable dilemma in modern feminist scholarship, because the socially constructed subject is often depicted as devoid of agency. On the one hand, feminists are trying to come up with an account of oppression that explains how a variety of structures such as social, political, etc., contribute to maintain oppression by manipulating the subjects to act in accordance with the demands of the oppressive structures. On the other, they are trying to formulate a theory of liberation, where the oppressed has some awareness of the oppressive structures and the agency to change those structures. Nonetheless, Beauvoir’s account of self offers substantial resources for solving this dilemma. Butler takes up those resources and develops an account of self that is both free and socially constructed. The main ethical and political question that guides both Beauvoir and Butler’s theory of subjectivity is the possibility of emancipation. They both acknowledge that the very conditions of opposition to the oppressive social order are contained within the contradictions in the intelligible forms of existence imposed on its subjects by hegemonic structures. My goal here is certainly not to erase the meaningful distinctions and divergence points in Butler’s and Beauvoir’s thinking. I aim instead to show that some of the complex questions in feminist ethics have already been prefigured by Beauvoir with valuable potential solutions.¹⁸

¹⁸ See Moya Lloyd’s Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics (Lloyd 2007:37), Diana Coole’s “Butler’s Phenomenological Existentialism” (Coole 2008), Alan D. Schrift “Judith Butler: Une Nouvelle Existentialiste?” (Schrift 2001), and Geoff Boucher’s “Judith Butler’s Postmodern Existentialism: A Critical Analysis” (Boucher 2004). Butler acknowledges Beauvoir’s influence on her theory of gender performativity in her 1986 essay titled “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex.” In addition to pointing out the distinction between gender and sex, Butler credits Beauvoir for another major contribution to feminist theory; that is her emphasis on the role of the subject as the active participant in the process of acquiring a gender (Butler 1986a). Also see Butler’s “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault” (Butler 1987).
For both Butler and Beauvoir the possibility of radical social and political transformation is threatened by accounts of the subject with limited or no agency under oppression. While their accounts of personal agency do not give up on the idea of social construction, they do not strip the subject of her autonomy. Beauvoir shows that the ethical ambiguity of the human condition stems from the truth that the subject is never fully socially constructed nor is it fully autonomous. As I will detail below, Butler echoes Beauvoir when she argues that the subject’s being socially constructed and having personal agency does not constitute a straightforward contradiction. Being born into a certain situation and being shaped by it does not necessarily rule out the subject’s freedom to respond to that situation in different ways. However, neither of those philosophers denies the intricate interplay between personal agency and the influence of social structures on the subject; nor do they dismiss the notion of socially and historically constructed subjectivity as incapable of providing a proper ground for emancipatory political action.

There are multiple ways that feminists have grappled with seeming tensions between personal agency and social construction. On the one hand, some feminists have argued that the claim women choose “becoming women” may lead to victim blaming and feelings of guilt and inadequacy in some women who were not able to stand up against the enforcements of the patriarchy (Frye 1985; MacKinnon 1983). However, as I will argue using Butler and Beauvoir, we can conceive of an account of responsibility that does not necessarily imply that the doer is blameworthy for her choice and action. On the other hand, perceiving women as victims of the patriarchal system who have no personal agency leads to more serious problems; such a view leaves no way out of patriarchal oppression. In addition to this strategic purpose, we also run into a theoretical difficulty when we deny agency to the oppressed. If we say women have no option

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19 For a detailed account of how assuming full responsibility to women under patriarchal oppression may work negatively see Susan Wendell’s “Oppression and Victimization; Choice and Responsibility” (Wendell 1990)
but to obey the demands of the patriarchal culture, then we cannot explain the behavior of women who have chosen to rebel against those demands.

This overview brings us to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which understands gender identity as a continuous dynamic process that is shaped historically and culturally. Butler first introduced the notion of gender performativity in a 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” two years prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*. The article mainly discusses the relationship between phenomenology and feminism, yet it also presents the concept of performativity as a crucial one for a theory of gender. In this essay, Butler sets her task as showing that gender identity is “a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler 1988:520). Expanding on Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir’s phenomenological theories of the body, Butler argues that the body is a site of meaning construction and materializing possibilities. Gender is constructed through a variety of actions which according to Butler bears resemblance to performative acts within theatrical contexts (Butler 1988:521). Although the possibilities one realizes by their actions are constrained and to some extend determined by social, cultural and historical conditions, every subject presents a unique combination and permutation of these possibilities and hence has her unique style of performativity. The peculiarity of performativity for each subject facilitates emergence of new possibilities both for the subject itself and other subjects since acts are shared experience and collective action for Butler (Butler 1988:525). Nevertheless, there have always been cruel punishments for the one who dares to perform unwarranted improvisations (Butler 1988:531). Performing a gender, therefore, is always an originative act in spite of the social, cultural and historical impositions and limitations.
The distinction between performativity and expressivity is also an important point made in Butler’s 1988 essay. Butler criticizes Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of expressivity within the context of a gender theory. She argues that phenomenology presupposes the agent prior to its acts. According to theory of expressivity, what is expressed represents something of the pre-existing self. Hence, expression of gender would imply that the self is already gendered prior to its performances of gender. Therefore, Butler concludes that phenomenological theories of expressivity are essentialist in general and can be considered as gender essentialist with respect to gender theory. She states that “this implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known[...]” (Butler 1988:528).

Butler directs this criticism to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, and exempts Beauvoir from it.20 She argues that Beauvoir reinterprets the phenomenological tradition by rejecting the idea of gender as a stable identity (Butler 1988:519). For early Butler, Beauvoir’s concept of gender is consistent with understanding it as a performative act that is created perpetually through one’s acts. The reality of gender is dependent on these continuous acts (Butler 1988:527). We cannot talk about gender prior to these acts of performance. Talking about expressivity of gender, as Merleau-Ponty and Husserl allegedly lead us to do, implies the existence of gender identity prior to these acts of performance. For Butler, “gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self’” (Butler 1988:528). That’s why she claims that feminist theory should go beyond an “expressive model of gender” (Butler 1988:529).

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20 Whether Merleau-Ponty and Husserl’s phenomenology deserves this charge is a discussion beyond the scope of my dissertation. Silvia Stoller argues that the phenomenological notion of expressivity does not necessarily presuppose the existence of an essence prior to expression. Stoller argues that Butler’s theory of performativity and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression both reject essentialist theories. (Stoller 2010:108-9)
Such an account coincides with Beauvoir’s account of female subjectivity under patriarchal oppression in *The Second Sex* discussed at the beginning of this section. Beauvoir considers the female subject as both constructed by the patriarchal oppression and active agents who have the capacity to perpetuate or change patriarchal oppression. As Butler puts it,

By scrutinizing the mechanism of agency and appropriation, Beauvoir is attempting, I believe, to infuse the analysis with emancipatory potential. Oppression is not a self-contained system which either confronts individuals as a theoretical object or generates them as its cultural pawns. It is a dialectical force which requires individual participation on a large scale in order to maintain its malignant life (Butler 1986a:41).

For both Butler and Beauvoir the category of gender is beyond the dichotomy of voluntary choice versus determinism. In addition to ontological reasons, these philosophers also have ethical and political motivations to postulate such a theory of gender. Individuals are products of social, historical, and cultural conditions as much they are producers of them. As I will explain in the following parts of this chapter, both Beauvoir and Butler’s main goal is to develop a viable ethical theory that can adequately address oppression as an ethical and political problem.

In her 1988 essay, Butler not only distances herself from the phenomenological idea of expressivity, but also from some versions of post-structuralism. She argues that gender “is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some poststructuralist displacements of the subject would content” (Butler 1988:526). Going back to the analogy she draws between gender performance and theatrical performance, Butler maintains that even though there is a script for the subject, it
could be interpreted in many different ways. In the same vein, the play cannot be performed solely based on the text, there always has to be some interpretation by the performer.

In addition to *Gender Trouble*, the concept of performativity plays an important role in *Bodies that Matter*, *Undoing Gender* and *Excitable Speech*. In these books from the 1990s, Butler historically analyzes gender performativity as regulated by a system of compulsory and reproductive heterosexuality (Butler 2011:150). Nevertheless, the ontological status of this gendered body is limited by the acts it performs. For Butler “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 2011:45). Hence, femininity and masculinity are not natural attributes for men and women; they instead result from certain practices. In order to support this claim, Butler discusses the example of drag.\(^{21}\) Butler recalls that in her younger years while watching a drag queen in a gay bar, she realizes that drags “could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would” (Butler 2004:213). In performing femininity in a male body, drag not only complicates the idea of heterosexual coherence but also shows that gender is construction. Butler writes that “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency” (Butler 2011:87). This also shows us that gendered meanings can be subverted and proliferated or, to put it in Butlerian terms, what drag does creates serious gender trouble.

Beauvoir takes up gender in a very similar way in *The Second Sex*. She shows a variety of ways in which one becomes woman. The sections ‘The Narcissist’, ‘The Women in Love’, ‘The Lesbian’, and ‘The Mother’ are examples of different ways women choose to perform their genders. Nevertheless, ‘The Lesbian’ seems to be the one that troubles the category of gender the

\(^{21}\) Butler originally discusses the drag example in *Gender Trouble* and comes back to it in *Undoing Gender* in order to clarify how she used it as an example after the criticisms she received.
most. For Beauvoir a lesbian life could be lived in a variety of ways. As Butler puts it, for Beauvoir as well “the body is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” (Butler 1988:521). Gendered bodies present a variety of “styles of flesh” and some of these styles are in the form of gender-bending performativity in Butler’s terms (Butler 2011:190).

Beauvoir ends the chapter, Sexual Initiation, which is right before the section, The Lesbian, as follows “Not all women agree to give their sexual problems the one classic solution officially accepted by society. Thus must we envisage those who choose forbidden paths” (Beauvoir 2012:416). The lesbian life is a choice and to make this clear Beauvoir starts the next chapter, The Lesbian, by dismantling the stereotype of the lesbian as having short hair, wearing a hat and lacking feminine characteristics as a result of a hormonal problem (Beauvoir 2012:417). The Lesbian, Beauvoir tells us, is not lesbian as a result of her hormonal abnormality, but simply as a result of her choice of how to live her body and sexuality. Hence, it is wrong to assume that only “masculine” women are lesbian and all “feminine” women are heterosexual. Their sexuality is independent of their anatomical structure; it is a chosen performance.

Butler acknowledges Beauvoir’s influence on her theory of gender performativity in her 1986 essay titled “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex.” Beauvoir’s famous declaration “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” stated one of the most significant distinctions in feminist theory, that is, the distinction between sex and gender. Beauvoir tells us that gender is an acculturation taking place as the body interacts with social and cultural norms. In addition to pointing out the distinction between gender and sex, Butler credits Beauvoir for another major contribution to feminist theory, which is her emphasis on the role of the subject as the active participant in the process of acquiring a gender. As is well known, for Beauvoir, one is
not solely passively rendered a woman, but rather becomes a woman. This implies a contribution from the subject in the making of their gender, rather than a simple imposition of the cultural norms. As Butler puts it, “Gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense gender is a process of constructing ourselves” (Butler 1986a:36). Butler defines this process by using existentialist terminology such as a “project” and by using Sartrean terms such as assuming “a certain corporeal style and significance.”

Butler is aware of the fact that Beauvoir does not want to reduce gender to cultural imposition or to a completely voluntary performance. If we take gender to be solely cultural imposition, we face the danger of seeing it as inscribed upon our bodies uniformly by patriarchal structures. If we take it to be a voluntaristic act, then we severely downplay the social patriarchal structures contributing to the making of gender. We can see a variety of ways in which gender is reproduced and this can only be explained by personal agency; thus Butler poses the question “In what sense do we construct ourselves?” (Butler 1986a:36-7) Butler argues that Beauvoir reconciles gender as a ‘project’ with gender as a ‘construct’ through her notion of ambiguity in her account of ‘becoming’. For Butler, Beauvoir presents a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice in her understanding of gender “as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms” (Butler 1986a:37).

Butler expands this discussion by searching for the roots of Beauvoir’s use of the verb ‘become’ in Sartre’s ‘exist.’ Butler argues that Sartre’s inapprehensible natural body transcribes into Beauvoir’s always already gendered body in The Second Sex. Butler states that,

The transitive form of 'exist' is not far removed from her disarming use of 'become', and Simone de Beauvoir's becoming a gender seems both an extension and a concretization of the Sartrian formulation. In transposing the identification
of corporeal existence and 'becoming' onto the scene of sex and gender, she appropriates the ontological necessity of paradox, but the tension in her theory does not reside between being 'in' and 'beyond' the body, but in the move from the natural to the acculturated body (Butler 2011:39).

As discussed in chapter one, for Sartre, the body is a medium of existence and it is surpassed in the subjects’ struggle to transcend itself. For Beauvoir, the process of becoming a woman shows how a woman starts experiencing her body as her gender. However, there is no point where a woman –or a person- experiences herself as pure body-sex- independent of their gender. Sartre talks about the natural body but only in so far as to show that it is beyond the grasp of consciousness. Hence for Sartre, the natural body is “inapprehensible” (Butler 2011:39). In the same vein, Butler argues, Beauvoir uses the sexed body as a heuristic device that helps us explain gender.

Butler’s theory of performative gender has been criticized for being a voluntarist theory. Elspeth Probyn, for example, takes Butler as saying that gender construction is a totally voluntary act. Hence, Probyn argues that according to Butler’s theory of gender performativity “we can have whatever type of gender we want […] and that we wear our gender as drag” (Probyn 1995:79). Vicki Kirby also points out the drag example as an unfortunate example since it implied that “different subjectivities could be chosen or tailored, to suit changing individual fancies” (Kirby 2006:86). Sara Heinämaa rightly rules out those critics by showing the context in which Butler presents gender to be a choice and performance. In Gender Trouble, Butler endorses Michel Foucault’s critique of the Cartesian subject. This endorsement is also present in her 1986 essay on Beauvoir. Heinämaa argues that, far from adopting a voluntaristic conception of gender, Butler argues against it. According to Heinämaa, Butler sees Beauvoir as a Sartrean
voluntarist, which is why Butler criticizes Beauvoir for her use of free will and consciousness detached from the body (Heinämaa 1997:22). While Heinämaa is correct that Butler is not a voluntarist, Heinämaa’s intervention into the debate is somewhat unhelpful because her reading of Butler on Beauvoir is incorrect. Contrary to what Heinämaa claims, in her 1986 essay Butler does not see Beauvoir as a voluntarist. In other words, Butler’s 1986 reading of Beauvoir essentially aligns with Heinämaa’s reading of Beauvoir even though Heinämaa contrasts their two readings.

Heinämaa’s reading of Butler as using a voluntaristic conception of gender can be easily seen the in the quote below;

If Simone de Beauvoir's claim is to have cogency, if it is true that we 'become' our genders through some kind of volitional and appropriative sets of acts, then she must mean something other than an unsituated Cartesian act. That personal agency is a logical prerequisite for taking on a gender does not imply that this agency itself is disembodied; indeed, it is our genders which we become, and not our bodies. If Simone de Beauvoir's theory is to be understood as freed of the Cartesian ghost, we must first turn to her view of bodies and to her musings on the possibilities of disembodied souls” (Butler 1986a:37).

However, Butler does not consider Beauvoir as a Sartrean voluntarist. She does not consider Sartrean voluntarism as adopting a Cartesian notion of free will, either. Butler uses Sartre’s notions of ‘prereflective choice’ and ‘quasi-knowledge’; the knowledge refers to the tacit choices we make partially consciously to explain the sense in which Beauvoir considers gender as a choice. Taking on a gender is a project that is rarely open to reflective consciousness. Becoming a gender is a tacit project which is both “impulsive and mindful” (Butler 1986b:509). We do
interpret the social and the cultural world around us and position ourselves as belonging to a certain gender through a variety of acts. Some of them seem to be important, such as choosing a same or different sex partner, and others seem small and insignificant, such as sitting with legs closed or open wide on a bus.

Butler herself does not criticize Beauvoir for using an existential notion of free will, or a voluntaristic framework as Heinamaa argues. On the contrary, she finds the existential framework Beauvoir endorses in *The Second Sex* to be empowering. She mentions Michele Le Doeuff and other feminists who accuse of Beauvoir for resurrecting “a classical form of voluntarism which insidiously blames the victims of oppression for ‘choosing’ their situation” and argues that theirs is a misusage of the existential doctrine of choice (Butler 1986a:40). The empowering character of the existentialist doctrine of choice stems from space opened up for personal agency in situations of oppression. Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, for example, shows us that oppression is not a necessary but a contingent condition. Both the oppressor and the oppressed contribute to the perpetuation of it. Beauvoir’s historical, anthropological, and economic analysis of patriarchy shows the complexities of the origin of gender oppression. Victims of gender oppression are in no way blamed for ‘choosing’ their situation in the sense that they create it. However, as Butler appreciates, Beauvoir undertakes the task of showing how patriarchal culture and norms are maintained or sometimes rejected by daily actions of individuals. Beauvoir gives us the example of the women who do not put a lot of emphasis on their monthly periods as opposed to some women who choose to give too much meaning to their periods and let it affect their work performance. These examples show us the variety of ways the subject can take up a gender role without being reduced to total determinism or voluntarism as both Butler and Beauvoir’s accounts of the subject contend.
Butler agrees with Beauvoir that gender oppression does not cause the female subject to be a woman in a certain definite way, although it does influence the way the female subject constructs her identity. The female subject enters a dialectical relationship with patriarchal culture, norms, and behaviors and performs her gender in a way that is shaped by her choices. Through this interaction the subject interprets her gender. As Butler puts it “The anguish and terror of leaving a prescribed gender or of trespassing upon another gender territory testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation as well as to the necessity that there be an interpretation, i.e. to the essential freedom at the origin of gender” (Butler 1986a:42).

Motherhood is another good example, which shows the role of personal agency in gender performance. Beauvoir refuses the idea of motherhood as a natural instinct, and argues that it is a cultural construct. Some women do not take up the role of motherhood; in other words they do not ‘choose’ to be mothers. If we take gender as directly imposed upon the subject by culture and society, we cannot give an account of those examples.

Likewise, for Butler “construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency” (Butler 2011:201). The external forces that contribute to our construction are both external and internal to us. In other words, they form the foundation of who we are, while at the same time they condition our behavior. Our possibilities emerge from the workings of these forces which at the same time subject us to themselves. For Butler agency is “implicated in subordination” (Butler 1997a:17). She argues that the subject exceeds these external forces; yet this does not mean that the subject escapes them. Thus, the relationship of the subject to these forces is “painful, dynamic and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come is a crossroads that rejoins every step by which it is traversed, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency” (Butler 1997a:18). Here, Butler implicitly operates within the framework
of existentialist notion of freedom. The subject is never a self-identical phenomenon. It always exists in the directional mode of intentionality. The subject is always in the process of surpassing itself as it thrusts itself toward new projects. The subject is always between already realized projects and projects yet to be realized.

In spite of Beauvoir and Butler’s focus on the gender problem, their main concern ultimately is the human and the question of the ethical and political conditions in which a human can flourish. Nevertheless, their account of gender is informed by their answers to those questions. In that respect, I argue that Beauvoir and Butler’s philosophical stance share more commonalities than even Butler herself acknowledges. Butler argues that “What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the “human” and the “livable”” (Butler 2011:xxiii). In a similar fashion, in The Second Sex Beauvoir shows the limitations normative gender structure has on both the male and the female subject. In strictly defining the roles of men and women, patriarchal structure drastically narrows down their options, and hence limits their freedom. Some lives become immediately not “livable” for them because of their gender. In an interview Butler states that “human being is always about becoming. […] This is not just a question of a private struggle with the self, but of the social terms by which identities are supported and articulated” (Reddy and Butler 2004:116). Therefore, both Butler and Beauvoir are mainly concerned about the becoming of the subject within social, political, cultural and historical conditions.

Butler states that she is committed to “a problematizing suspension of the ontological” (Butler 1990:105-6). She is interested in questioning the construction and circulation of ontological claims. She refuses any type of essentialist notions concerning human nature and
conceives of the subject as a potentiality. She also recognizes Beauvoir as committed to the same task. She claims that for Beauvoir “any effort to ascertain the ‘natural’ body before its entrance into culture is definitionally impossible, not only because the observer who seeks this phenomenon is him/herself entrenched in a specific cultural language, but because the body is as well. The body is, in effect, never a natural phenomenon” (Butler 1986a:46). She states that “Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects, and, hence for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject” (Butler 2011:16).

2. Existentialist Dimensions of Butler’s Ethics

In this section, I show Beauvoir’s continuing relevance by presenting a detailed study of Judith Butler’s late writings and discussing the ways she takes on some basic ethical questions concerning vulnerability, violence, and ambiguity that Beauvoir already has accentuated in her writings. Existentialist elements in Butler’s early writings have already been discussed in feminist and philosophical literature. However, influence of Beauvoir’s existentialism on Butler’s late work has been almost entirely neglected in contemporary debates. In pursuing the existentialist dimension of Butler’s late work, I show both the congruence between Beauvoir and Butler’s ethics and the fruitful resources existentialism offers for solving questions of ethics in current continental feminist scholarship.

Butler also recognizes Behavior’s influence on Irigaray and argues that Beauvoir’s dialectic of master-slave as reformulated within non-reciprocal gender asymmetry prefigures Irigaray’s concept of masculine signifying economy. I specifically focus on Undoing Gender (2004), Giving an Account of Oneself (2005), Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, and Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (2009).

Ann V. Murphy’s “Ambiguity and Precarious Life: Tracing Beauvoir’s Legacy in the Work of Judith Butler” is the only work that traces Beauvoir’s legacy in Butler’s late work. Murphy shows the connection between Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity and Butler’s notion of corporeal vulnerability in Frames of War (Murphy 2012).

Among a few feminist thinkers who have made significant contributions to feminist philosophy by utilizing these fruitful resources are: Kimberly Hutchings (Hutchings 2007), Debra Bergoffen (Bergoffen 1997), and Ann V. Murphy (Murphy 2012).
between Butler and Beauvoir’s ethics; their accounts of: (i) vulnerability and interconnectedness, (ii) violence and inevitable ethical failure, and (iii) situated ethics which bring about opaqueness and ambiguity. In the first section, I explain how in the work of both Butler and Beauvoir the inevitable interconnectedness of human beings situates us as vulnerable beings in the world. In the second section, I explain how for Butler and Beauvoir violence emerges as an ever present potentiality in human interactions because of vulnerability and interconnectedness. I also discuss inevitability of ethical failure in human actions. In the last section, I argue that Butler follows and furthers Beauvoir’s efforts to establish an ethics based on generosity which comes with mindfulness of our ambiguity and opacity.

1. Vulnerability and Interconnectedness

Vulnerability is one of main themes discussed in depth in a variety of Butler’s publications. *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Precarious Life* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) and *Frames of War* (2009) all deal with the theme of vulnerability to different degrees. This is significant because vulnerability is used by feminist ethics as the main defining characteristic of being a human through which the ethical urge is felt. As discussed in chapter three, feminist ethics of care also is based on the definition of human being always already vulnerable. Although how much and how long we need care is contingent upon many factors, every human being is dependent on the care of others, sometimes completely and sometimes partially. As embodied beings in the world, we are aware of our need for other human beings and this awareness shapes our relations with others in many respects, mainly ethical. We feel an ethical urge to respond once we receive the call of the other for care. This call sometimes comes from people we know, who are around us and sometimes from people on the other side of the world, people that we do not know at all. In both cases, we are ethically challenged and drawn into questioning ourselves
to see what we can do for the other. Sometimes those demands can be conflicting. We may find ourselves in the middle of too many demands for attention and care. Given the limited resources, time and energy we have, we have to assess the urgency and severity of the demands we receive. As I emphasized in chapter two, these conditions constitute the ambiguous character of ethical and political choice in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Vulnerability, for Butler, is a primary human condition that cannot be avoided in any condition; it precedes the formation of the self. Vulnerability to others may create space for very different responses and experiences ranging from care and compassion to violence and abuse. Butler argues that “It would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how humans suffer from oppression without seeing how this primary condition [vulnerability] is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied” (Butler 2004:31).

Butler’s acknowledgment of the potential for violence in human relations—a potential which is inevitable due to the interconnectedness of human beings echoes Beauvoir’s analysis of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Beauvoir states the need for others as follows: “we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others” (Beauvoir 1976:67). There is the need for the others on the one hand, and there is the “separation and multiplicity of existents” which raises serious problems the most malicious of which is oppression (Beauvoir 1976:67). Interconnectedness of our freedoms combined with the material and bodily limitations of our existence may produce moments of conflict even when one uses others as means to the fulfillment of their projects. Vulnerability that comes with our interconnectedness may lend itself to possible situations of violence. Hence, violence and oppression are potential conditions in human relations. Beauvoir maintains that “it is this
interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful” (Beauvoir 1976:82).

Butler also explains violence and oppression in the same vein. She writes that:

[…]we are vulnerable to those we are too young to know and to judge, and hence, vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives at the other (Butler 2006:31).

This inevitable interdependency among human beings has been articulated fully in Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas.’ In ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’ she states that violence is neither necessarily an evil, nor can it be eliminated completely; “we are condemned to failure because we are condemned to violence” (Beauvoir 2004:138). We can never escape being subjected to some type of violence or being treated as an object although we experience ourselves as subjects as well. Relationships with others always carry the possibility of opposition and violence. In that sense evil is an irrevocable part of human existence. As Beauvoir puts it, “If division and violence define war, the world has always been at war and always will be; if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely: there will never be any other future” (Beauvoir 1976:119). One way of dealing with this reality is to deny it and another way of dealing with it is to accept this tragic condition of being a human; it is our inevitable ambiguity. Existentialist ethics gives “a real role to evil” and goes with the second way (Beauvoir 1976:34).

In *Precarious Life*, Butler considers the interdependency endorsed by Beauvoir in a global context, among communities and nations. She analyzes the new global form of political violence which presented new forms of economic and social exploitation that abuse
interdependency of the global communities. The social context that emerged from the neoliberal
global capitalism radically transformed the social, political, and cultural experience of distant
communities across the globe by diminishing their sense of local security. The intensity of global
trade and interaction is almost erasing self-sufficient local economies and creating a much more
interdependent economic structure. This whole structure is centered on domination of global
capital and renders many communities on the globe potentially vulnerable. Butler states that:
“Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political
solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized
fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war” (Butler 2004:29). Butler’s work talks about
ethics and politics together, and does not consider them as separate domains. Although Beauvoir
mostly focuses on ethics in her work, the reader can easily detect her political agenda between
the lines.26

2. Violence and The Inevitable Ethical Failure

Contemporary debates on political violence in feminism ignore the rich resources Beauvoir’s
work offers on the topic.27 Hutchings rightly observes that one reason for Beauvoir’s dismissal in
those discussions is the wide reception of her work as existentialist rather than feminist.
Beauvoir is certainly an existentialist philosopher but she is also a feminist philosopher. In
addition, as I have been arguing in chapters three and four, Beauvoir’s work can help build
important partnerships between existentialist ethics and feminist ethics.

A significant point of intersection between Butler and Beauvoir’s accounts of ethics is
their understanding of violence as a universal phenomenon, which leads them to form an ethics

26 Sonia Kruks’ Politics of Ambiguity extensively discusses the political implications of Beauvoir’s work (Kruks 2012).
27 There are very few feminist thinkers who have written on the relevance of Beauvoir’s discussion of political violence in
feminist ethics. See Kimberly Hutchings (Hutchings 2007), Debra Bergoffen (Bergoffen 1997), and Ann V. Murphy (Murphy
2012).
demanding universal concern for the other. They both argue that we have a responsibility to fight against oppression of others even if we do not know those “others” at all. In her interview with Wenzel, for example, Beauvoir declares female circumcision to be a human rights issue that concerns everyone around the globe. As Margaret Simons states, Beauvoir directed much of her energy toward the issue of violence against women (Simons 1999:5). However, her account of violence and oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* shows that she is concerned with all forms of oppression. Similarly, Butler in *Frames of War* maintains that we are dependent on “people we know, barely know, or know not at all. […] These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitutive obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who “we” are” (Butler 2009:14).

Violence can emerge in different forms. In Beauvoir’s thought we see two different form of violence; one is violence in the form of oppression and the other is violence in the form of resisting oppression. As Kimberly Hutchings states, we can talk about two main camps within feminist thought concerning their approaches to violence. Although both camps have serious reservations about the use of political violence, one camp sees a meaningful distinction between oppressive violence and violence that fights oppression. This approach provides a legitimate ground for the use of violence when it is aimed at abolishing some oppressive condition. The second camp does not accept such a distinction and rules out any type of violence as deplorable. They consider violence to be incompatible with feminist ethics. Beauvoir and Butler firmly belong to the first camp. For Butler and Beauvoir, possibility for violence is a constitutive aspect of being a human because of our fundamental vulnerability arising out of interdependency. When exposed to violence, especially systemic forms of violence supported by well-established
institutions as in the case of colonial violence in Algeria, the use of counter violence to end violence would be ethically justified for Butler and Beauvoir.

The uncertainty of receiving help and care when needed, the possibility of receiving harm or violence rather than support and unwillingness or inability to provide help and care when we are asked present ethical failure as an ever present condition in our lives both for Butler and Beauvoir. We are often confronted with our limitations. When we adopt a project involving helping an oppressed group, for example, we do not know the results of our project for sure. A project which intends to liberate a certain group may end up aggravating their suffering. Moreover, our project may fail to take into account possible negative consequences such as harm caused to other parties while helping a certain group. These possibilities should never be considered as deterrents from action. For Beauvoir, they are unavoidable parts of any ethical action. The responsibility of the ethical individual is to accept and acknowledge this ambiguity because “without failure, no ethics” is possible (Beauvoir 1976:10).

Just as Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics is based on the inevitability of failure, Butler’s account of ethics is also based on the acceptance of failure. Beauvoir’s subject who is always already transcending herself through her projects never coincides with herself. Butler also considers the subject as becoming and argues that the expectation of remaining selfsame through time is a very hard norm to satisfy. Butler’s subject also faces the dilemma of changing over time while having to present herself as selfsame. When the subject obeys the norm to be selfsame at every instant and struggles to present herself as such, she expects others to do the same as well. Butler considers this norm as incurring ethical violence upon subjects because:

For subjects who invariably live in a temporal horizon, this is a difficult, if not impossible, norm to satisfy. The capacity of a subject to recognize and become
recognized is occasioned by a normative discourse whose temporality is not the same as a first-person perspective. This temporality of discourse disorients one's own. Thus, it follows that one can give and take recognition only on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself, that one undergoes a de-centering and "fails" to achieve self-identity (Butler 2005:41-2).

Butler proceeds by asking if a new sense of ethics could emerge from that inevitable ethical failure. Her answer is positive. She suggests such an ethics is possible only if we would be willing to acknowledge the limits we face in knowing and presenting ourselves. However, this opacity remains at the heart of this new sense of ethics because “To acknowledge one’s own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency” (Butler 2005:41-2). The first condition of being an ethical subject for Beauvoir is to accept our inherent ambiguity in every type of relationship we have in the world- relationship with the self, with others or with the world, which comes with our exercise of freedom. For Butler, vulnerability and precariousness are notions that we do not easily recognize and accept. Mostly, we prefer acting as if they do not constitute the basic condition of life. Beauvoir says the same things for the notion of ambiguity. Instead of owning our ambiguity, we tend to choose to ignore it. It is the ideal of full accountability and lucidity that produces an ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity. For both Butler and Beauvoir the very first condition of ethics is undoing this ignorance.

3. Situated Ethics: Opaqueness and Ambiguity

The idea of an art de vivre in Beauvoir’s The Mandarins expresses an ethics without an appeal to abstract moral rules, an ethics that tries to overcome the ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity. Since the self is always situated in different conditions in the world, which do not
admit of straightforward solutions, a universal morality is of no use according to Beauvoir. Hence, the ambiguous character of the human condition has to be the source of moral values. Ethics is a way of being in the world. It is composed of the values we assign to the world through our choices that endorse not only our freedom but also others’ freedom under ambiguous conditions. Being ethical for Beauvoir does not mean to follow a set of pre-established abstract universal rules. On the contrary, it is to denounce all such rules and to continually create one’s own and assume responsibility for the self-created moral codes; because “[…]one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all the previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; is the rejection of every principle of authority” (Beauvoir 1976:142). The main difficulty involved in such an act of rejection is giving up the comfort and assurance we enjoy through ignorance of vulnerability and ambiguity. We strive to feel and present ourselves as complete and coherent in order to avoid the feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Ethical practice requires a constant questioning of the self, a practice which never allows the subject to feel stable, complete and coherent.28 We think that our actions and values should present a coherent picture and we ignore the fact that this picture is never done, but is always changing. As Bergoffen puts it “I cannot enclose myself within myself” (Bergoffen 1997:48).

Beauvoir presents the notion of ambiguity in a descriptive manner, as an inescapable human condition. Butler’s presentation of precariousness shows significant resemblances to Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity. Butler defines precariousness as “an irrefutably generalizable condition”; it is simply what everyone is exposed to by virtue of being human. (Butler 2009:22).

28 Karen Vintges argues that Beauvoir’s autobiographical work represents her own art of living. Vintges maintains that Beauvoir questioned her own conduct and shaped herself as an ethical subject through her diaries, letters and the five volumes of her autobiography (Vintges 1999:139).
However, Butler engages in a deep analysis of the unequal distribution of precariousness through the globe and calls for a more equal redistribution of it. She maintains that “… there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable”” (Butler 2006:32). Our limitations are also present in our projects concerning others. When we adopt a project involving helping an oppressed group, we do not know with certainty the results of our project. A project which intends to liberate a certain group may end up aggravating their suffering. We throw ourselves into such a project based on our ethical values about the subject and the available information at hand. Our project may fail to take into account possible negative consequences such as harm caused to other parties while helping a certain group. These possibilities should never be considered as deterrents from action. For Beauvoir, they are unavoidable parts of any ethical action. The responsibility of the ethical individual is to accept and acknowledge this ambiguity.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler discusses the notion of the “I” as the center of the ethical discourse in Adorno and questions the possibility of the “I” “that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence” (Butler 2005:7). She then proceeds to provide an account of the “I” within the matrix of social conditions. One of the main claims of *Giving an Account of Oneself* is that it is impossible to give a full account of oneself, because any account of the self would have to be formed within a matrix of social norms, and any account requires recourse to a normative structure as its reference point. Here is how Butler explains the conditions of impossibility of full accountability:

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There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my partial opacity to myself. Lastly there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. The last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place (Butler 2005:39).

For Butler, this fact constitutes the core of an ethics, an ethics based on humility and generosity, since acknowledgment of the impossibility of a self that is completely transparent to itself creates a disposition to humility and generosity.

Beauvoir’s ethics is also grounded on the notion of generosity. Generosity consists in maintaining the two freedoms simultaneously in the encounter with the other. It implicates recognition of the other despite her/his ambiguity and as similar to myself. The generous person accepts him or herself as both subject and object in his relation to the other and regards and treats the other as such as well. As Beauvoir puts it, “In enlightened, consenting gratitude, one must be capable of maintaining face to face these two freedoms that seem to exclude each other: the other’s freedom and mine” (Beauvoir 2004:123).

Butler explores the notion of accountability by drawing on Althusser’s notion of accountability as interpellation (Butler 1997b:33). I am expected to provide an account of myself when I am called upon. Given the difficulty of giving a coherent account of the self, I find myself as exposed to a great risk, a risk which incites me to pretend as if I were fully aware of
my acts and can provide a rational story of why I acted in a certain way. Further, my account is informed by the assumption of my full knowledge of proper ways of conduct. I am expected to provide a clear, unambiguous, coherent, and reasonable account of myself. Butler claims that this enforcement upon the subject to present herself as if she is transparent is a kind of ethical violence. Providing that sort of an account is certainly easier for those who already conform to the social and cultural norms. Hence, a political system based on that type of accountability privileges those who conform to the norms and puts those who are already marginalized in an underprivileged situation. Butler states that

What is striking about such extremes of self-beratement is the grandiose notion of the transparent ‘I’ that is presupposed as the ethical ideal. This is hardly a belief in which self acceptance (a humility about one’s constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition towards the limits of others) might find room to flourish (Butler 2005:80).

According to Butler, our self-opacity implicates our capacity for recognition as well. A new ethics emerges from our acknowledgment of our “shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves” (Butler 2005:42). When we recognize that we are different from how we present ourselves in a given discourse, in other words when we are humble enough to see our imperfections, we give up on expecting others to do the same and provide a full account of themselves; we attend to others’ limitations and understand their imperfections, as well. Butler also seems to suggest that there are two ways of responding to our inherent incoherence and ambiguity; one is to constantly escape from it, and the other is to accept and embrace it—the former way corresponds to being in bad faith and the latter to being authentic in existentialist ethics. Although we tend to do the first rather than the latter, this flight from our incoherence and
ambiguity is not possible at all. Moreover, it harms the authenticity of the ethical subject. The subject is only trying to avoid punishment and its injurious effects in her effort to offer a coherent account of herself; the subject’s sole concern is to project an acceptable image of herself in order to invalidate any criticism and blame and evade their consequences (Butler 2005:16). Denying one’s incoherence and ambiguity is tantamount to denying one’s vulnerability. It is to present oneself as an enclosed being that is protected from any harm that may arise out of interpersonal relationships. This is a kind of self-violence according to Butler, because “one is compelled and comported outside oneself” (Butler 2005:28).

One intricacy of Butler’s account of non-transparent self which Butler herself recognizes, as well lies in the limitations concerning responsibility for one’s actions. Her account of the non-transparent self seems to remain short of providing a theoretical basis for responsibility and justification for action. If the self is never fully transparent, does that mean that the self can never be fully responsible for her/his actions? Although Butler does not answer this question directly, her account of the non-transparent self seems to create problems for her ethics. She asks “Haven’t we, by insisting on something non-narrativizable, limited the degree to which we might hold ourselves or others accountable for their actions? (Butler 2005:83) Butler generates a theory of accountability out of her notion of the opacity of the self. In Precarious Life, Butler revisits the question of responsibility and argues that we do not need a fully-fledged account of agency to move us into action. She contends, “If you saw me on such a protest line [asserting and defending the rights of indigenous women to health care, reproductive technology, decent wages, physical protection, cultural rights, freedom of assembly] would you wonder how a postmodernist was able to muster the necessary “agency” to get there today? I doubt it. You would assume that I had walked or taken the subway” (Butler 2006:48).
Beauvoir, on the other hand, overcomes this difficulty by her critique of bad faith and the notion of authenticity. By invoking a prediscursive reality for the embodied subject, Beauvoir secures the subject a domain in which she/he can account for herself/himself. Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity in no way diminishes one’s responsibility in front of oppression. On the contrary, the person assumes responsibility despite the ambiguities surrounding both herself/himself and the situation to be acted upon. Contrary to Butler’s notion of the non-transparent self, Beauvoir’s notion of the ambiguous self seems to lend itself more easily to self-analysis and critique.

Although the secondary literature in feminism, existentialism and ethics rarely links them, Beauvoir’s and Butler’s accounts of ethics present salient lines of connection. Both Beauvoir and Butler situate ambiguity and vulnerability as irrevocable conditions of human existence and both emphasize the need for an ethics that acknowledges these conditions rather than one that evades or denies them. Each of them recognizes the potential for violence in human interactions and again instead of denying this potential, they each argue for an ethics that admits it. Existentialist ethics does not hide the failures, violence, and evil that lies at the heart of our existence; on the contrary it highlights them and looks for ways to deal with them. For Beauvoir this is why it is “the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place” (Beauvoir 1976:34). This existentialist dimension also is present in Butler’s work. Both Butler and Beauvoir’s accounts of ethics aim at uncovering our responsibility in a world where it is impossible to eliminate oppression, evil and violence. As my analysis of Butler’s work shows, the possibilities of existentialist ethics have not been exhausted yet, and further engagement with it by continental feminists might prove to be very productive.
CHAPTER V
Existentialist Feminist Ethics without Borders

The expansion of the feminist theory and feminist ethics I have explained and defended in my dissertation finds its ultimate expression in the global feminist practices that embody the urgency of the global problems. The three ethical theories I have discussed and woven together in my account—Beauvoir’s existentialism, feminist care ethics, and Butler’s ethical theory—have the common strength of calling people into action regardless of their proximity or connection to problems that require urgent attention. All these theories situate the subject as a global agent, the actions of whom both influence and are influenced by the globe. In locating the subject as a global agent and showing that she has responsibility for standing against atrocities taking place all around the world, these three theories address a significant issue that stands as an obstinate obstacle in front of ethical action and that has not received its due attention in ethics scholarship: the issue of indifference. Usually, the likelihood of reacting to maltreatment of an individual and/or group is paralleled with how much we are affected by it. When such events do not touch our lives, we choose simply to ignore them and remain silent about them even though we acknowledge wholeheartedly that such maltreatments are terrible and should be terminated immediately.

29 The title of this chapter was inspired by Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s book Feminism without Borders
In contrast, the existentialist feminist ethics I developed in my dissertation condemns normalization of the maltreatment of people and considers such indifference to be a primordial threat to the possibility of leading an ethical life. From an existentialist point of view, acting as if maltreating people is a normal event or as if we are not responsible for it and cannot do anything to change it is an attitude of bad faith. For this reason, existentialism strongly condemns this attitude as inauthentic.

To live an authentic life, then, requires constant reflection on one’s actions in a world where an overwhelming number of cases of maltreatment takes place every day. As one can imagine, this is a difficult task both physically and emotionally. Being involved in an uprising, even for a short period of time, I have seen that such an involvement requires a considerable amount of energy, time and psychological resilience. My experience of participating in the Gezi Resistance in the summer of 2013 in Turkey showed me that speaking up and protesting for vulnerable and precarious lives becomes a difficult decision knowing that in doing so my body also will become equally vulnerable and precarious. Governments and power structures have long used the implementation of fear in reactionary subjects as a successful device for deterring them from action. Under conditions of conflict, governments usually resort to the harshest means to prevent an uprising. Given the fear that accompanies putting oneself on the spot where surveillance strategies are advanced and sophisticated, raising your voice for an injustice is not an easy decision to make even if you are fully aware of the emergency of the situation and feel yourself responsible to respond to it.

This is where global resistance might form a meaningful leverage against the oppressive practices of a certain government. Reactions of the distant observer who remain outside the circle of a power structure might have a strong practical influence on the course of events when a
government is implementing brutal practices to silence its public. By participating in the discussion, the distant observer helps spread news globally, which eventually can create public opinion about the event that may eventually force the government to take a step back. This has been the case, for example, for Gezi Resistance.

Nevertheless, overcoming one’s indifference and getting involved in such debates is not always a common practice. In addition, finding the right type of intervention is not an easy task. The existentialist feminist account I am offering in this body of work provides strong theoretical tools to overcome this impasse and to think of appropriate and plausible ways of intervention. First, my account argues that intervention in such cases is necessary and brings the notion of global responsibility to the fore both in theory and in practice. Second, it provides us with guidelines for intervening in a positive way without harming the people one is trying to help, since depending on the manner it is implemented, intervention might bring about positive or negative results. I contend that an existentialist feminist intervention in a global cause should follow the following tenets in order to be classified as an ethical intervention: (i) it should start with a thorough understanding and a careful analyses of the situation including the social, economic, cultural and historical background of the group in question, (ii) it should aim not for “freeing” the oppressed groups from their oppression but to create the situation for them in which they can decide for their own future and fight their war against their oppression, (iii) it should respect the values—be they religious, social or cultural—of the group and should not impose its own values on them, (iv) it should perform a self-critique that shows how the group intervening might be contributing to the perpetuation of the oppression directly or indirectly.

In this chapter, I argue that Beauvoir’s political writings and activism present a continuity with her ethical writings by way of showing in her actions how a person should resist the
oppression of others. I closely analyze Beauvoir’s intervention in the torture of Djamila Boupacha, an activist in the Algerian Independence movement who was detained and tortured by the French army in Algeria. I contend that Beauvoir’s intervention in the Boupacha case embodies all these four tenets and evidences a kind of feminist intervention that is exemplary. Hers was a critical intervention that produced positive results.

1. The Question of Intervention

The question of intervention is a delicate topic that has long been discussed in feminist literature. In an article published in 1982, Leila Ahmed chastises Western feminists for their readiness to accept the ideas and beliefs of their culture concerning the situation of women in the Middle East. Ahmed shows that Western feminists perpetuated the ethnocentric assumptions of their own cultural superiority. More importantly, in this article Ahmed invites Western feminists and Americans in particular to examine the relationship between the Western military action and control, and the increasing instability in the area. She observes that,

And of course it is of no conceivable interest to Americans that what is going on now in the area is a direct result of Western – and more recently of specifically American – action, and that American activities have been bringing about, far more directly than an Ayatollah or religious reader, the most widespread and vigorous revival that the Muslim world has known in over a thousand years. And never mind too, that societies which thirty, forty, and even fifty years ago had introduced laws granting greater rights to women are now revoking them, or under pressure to revoke them (Ahmed 1982:522).

Alison Jaggar’s “‘Saving Amina’ Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue” presents a similar critique. The article focuses on a particular example of Western intervention in Africa to ‘save’ Amina Lawal, a divorced Nigerian Woman with a baby outside marriage. Lawal was sentenced to stoning to death for adultery according to the Sharia law in 2002. The intervention was in the form of a petition under the name and logo of Amnesty International asking the recipients’ electronic signature to help preventing execution of the sentence. The petition
backfired and put Lawal’s situation at more risk due to misrepresentation of the certain facts such as falsely representing the execution of the sentence as imminent (Jaggar 2005:55). In response, two Nigerian human rights representatives, Ayesha Imam and Sindi Medar-Gould, circulated an email to end the petition. Similar to Ahmed’s concerns above, Imam and Medar-Gould expressed their discomfort with the somewhat ignorant and careless Western attitude toward the East. In the e-mail they stated that “There is an unbecoming arrogance in assuming that international human rights organizations or others always know better than those directly involved, and therefore can take actions that fly in the face of their express wishes.” (Quoted in Jaggar 2005:55).

Based on Amina’s case, Jaggar points out significant flaws within these types of feminist interventions and the general feminist discourse on non-Western women. She criticizes the bifurcation of culture from economics and politics and argues that reducing the injustices to women in poor countries to local cultural practices prevents feminists from fully understanding the causes of these injustices. She suggests that these cultural traditions should be situated in a broader geopolitical and geo-economic context (Jaggar 2005:62). She states that “Contemporary processes of economic globalization, regulated by the Western-inspired and Western-imposed principles and policies of neoliberalism, have significantly affected the situation of many poor women in poor countries” (Jaggar 2005:62-3). Emphasizing the negative impacts of neo-liberal global policies of the West on women’s poverty in non-West, Jaggar invites us to consider the close relationship between poverty, its influence on women and the effects of Western global economic practices on perpetuating and exacerbating poverty in the non-Western world.

Ahmed’s and Jaggar’s articles both point out a common and continuing orientalist tendency among Western feminists in their involvement with the women’s rights issue in the
East. Western feminists usually perceive Eastern women as victims of patriarchal oppression who lack agency. They are usually perceived as ignorant, irrational, and backward and in need of salvage from these conditions to which they are subjected by uncivilized men of the East. Such a perception of the East and Eastern women necessarily leads to actions that do not take into account the cultural, religious, ethnic multidimensionality of women’s experiences in the East. Another problem with this type of perception is that it ignores the link between economic, social, and political problems of certain non-Western regions and their repercussions for women, and the Western military and political interventions in those regions motivated by economic interests. Hence, we can talk about the two main patterns that make Western feminist interventions in the East problematic: (i) Western feminists’ lack of understanding of the cultural and religious values, codes and beliefs of non-Western women and ruling those values immediately out as oppressive, and (ii) Western feminists’ failure in recognizing their being beneficiaries of a global system which contributes to political and economic instability in those regions and the direct impact of this situation on women’s condition. Here, I argue that any type of intervention that is inattentive to these two points is doomed to failure and cannot be regarded viably as feminist.

The question of privilege is closely linked to the question of intervention. Scholarship on privilege has shown that privilege emerges as an outcome of a systematic structure that creates benefits for one group at the expense of denying the same benefits to another group. Moreover, these benefits are mostly acquired though exploitation of one group by the beneficiary group. Feminism emerged as a movement disclosing the historical systemic exploitation of women by men. This exploitation provided men with certain privileges women were not able to enjoy. However, in the last decades, feminists have started to discuss privilege and oppression from an intersectional perspective. Nowadays, particularly white feminists critically discuss their
privileges such as race, class, heterosexual, and first world nationality privileges and possible forms of exploitations they might be contributing to through enjoying these privileges. The term privilege is used in feminist discourse to denote “structural differentiations that variously affect the life chances and well being of large groups, and that do so in ways that produce morally unacceptable differences in their levels of well being” (Kruks 2005:180). As Kruks points out in her analysis of privilege, privilege usually goes unnoticed and the foremost necessary condition of overcoming privilege is “to disclose the truth about it” (Kruks 2005:181).

Disclosing the truth about privilege becomes particularly necessary and urgent in cases of intervention. The question of intervention is still on the agenda in feminist literature and seems to remain so in the future as we witness a variety of discussions concerning the conditions of women in non-Western countries and how they can be ‘saved’. Hence, Ahmed and Jaggar’s point should be taken seriously and discourses of Western feminist interventions in the East should include a full discussion of the privileges Western part of the world enjoy due to a global political and economic system that exploits the resources of the East. In what follows I present Beauvoir’s intervention in Boupacha case and discuss the ways in which it sets an example for current feminist practices concerning Western intervention in the East. I argue that Beauvoir’s intervention represents a practical implementation of the ethics she endorsed in The Ethics of Ambiguity and The Second Sex. I disclose the existentialist dimensions of her intervention and show how these existential elements compliment the feminist aspects of it. I suggest that Beauvoir’s intervention is based on the main existentialist tenet of freedom, our responsibility for others’ freedom, and most importantly the limits to that responsibility.

As I explained in detail in chapters one and two, Beauvoirian existentialism considers freedom as the most fundamental element of an ethical life. In order to exercise my freedom, I
need other freedoms to interact with. That is why I have a responsibility to foster other people’s freedom, as well as mine. Nevertheless, one can only render herself free and no one else. One can at most help others to a certain extent to gain their freedom. So, for Beauvoir, Boupacha and Algerian people did not need saving due to their supposed lack of agency. Rather, they simply needed to have the space and freedom to decide for their own. Beauvoir respected the fact that in spite of the colonial oppression they had been facing, Algerian people could put their existential responsibility into practice in order to free themselves from oppression. Beauvoir’s attitude toward the Algerian case seems also to align with Jaggar’s suggestion that the first step in any type of Western intervention should be “taking our own feet off their neck” (Jaggar 2005:75).

2. Beauvoir’s Intervention in Djamila Boupacha’s Detention and Torture

Beauvoir’s political writings have not received the attention they deserve. In spite of the central role she played among French intellectuals in the case of Algeria, her writings on the war have been overlooked by many Beauvoir scholars. There are very few scholarly articles discussing or making reference to her Les Temps Modern articles—which still remain untranslated into English—or the coauthored book on Boupacha. Deirdre Bair considers Beauvoir’s involvement in the Algerian independence movement as incidental. Bair argues that Beauvoir simply was “following Sartre everywhere” (Bair 1986:156). However, looking at Beauvoir’s writings, her leading role in the Boupacha case, and her participation in numerous protests at the time, one has to admit that she is an important figure in the decolonization movement. Moreover, the Algerian war was not the first political event that influenced Beauvoir’s writings although it is the one that influenced her work the most. Before the Algerian War, there was World War II which Beauvoir discussed in her several writings30. In her

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30 Ethics of Ambiguity (1947), Pyrhus and Cineas (1944), “An Eye for an Eye,” (1946), and “Moral Idealism and Political Realism” (1945).
Introduction to the collection *Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, Margaret Simons argues that Nazi occupation of France helped Beauvoir to come to “a new awareness” concerning the interconnectedness of people (Simons 2004:8). Simons notes that after this political experience, the notion of interdependence became central to Beauvoir’s ethics.

Hence, one can argue that Beauvoir’s involvement in political movements dates back to 1940s. However, the Algerian War not only influenced Beauvoir’s writings, but also her actions. She became actively involved in the movement to end the French colonialization of Algeria. For example, she signed the Manifesto of 121, which stands for “The Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the War in Algeria.” The manifesto was published on September 6th, 1960 and condemned French colonial rule and its violent actions in Algeria.

The battle of Algeria, Algeria’s war of independence from France, started in 1954 and continued until Algeria gained its independence in 1962. French-Algerian police and French army in Algeria used torture as a systemic device to retain the Algerian colony during the Algerian War. As the insurgency became stronger, recourse to torture also increased in order to collect intelligence and prevent the expansion of the movement (LeSueur 2001a:161). Although torture was prohibited by the French law, in practice it was not only being tolerated but also being encouraged. In addition, the French government used strict censorship to prevent practices of torture from becoming public. Nevertheless, they could not silence the voices of certain people who have been tortured. Henri Alleg’s book *La Question (The Question)* 1958 is a well-known example of this sort.

Alleg was a French journalist—editor of the communist newspaper Alger républican—who supported Algerian independence. He was arrested for providing support to FLN on June 10, 1957. He underwent torture for one month during his detention in El-Biar prison. Alleg wrote
about the methods of torture used by the French military in detail based on his firsthand experience. His torture account was smuggled from the prison and was published in February 1958. The book has been banned by the French government after selling 60,000 copies in two weeks (LeSueur 2001a:167). Jean Paul Sartre wrote an article on March 6th 1958 on *L'Express* condemning torture and praising Alleg’s courage and fortitude in resisting torture. The government seized the journal issue, yet the essay continued to be circulated and later became the preface to the English translation of the book. The article exposes the systemic use of torture in Algeria and emphasizes that “everyone from M. Lacoste (Minister Resident for Algeria) to the farmers in Aveyron, knows this is so, but almost no one talks of it” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:xxvii). Mentioning the silence during the Occupation, which was excusable since France “was being gagged” by the Germans, Sartre expresses his bewilderment for the inexcusable indifference to the Algerian torture cases. The preface stands as a manifesto condemning the practices of French military forces in Algeria.

After the case of Alleg and many others that have not become public, the case of Djamila Boupacha constituted one more link in a chain of torture cases on the French scene. Despite the condemnation of torture by public intellectuals, the protests took place against the revealed cases of torture and the proclamations of the government officials that deployment of torture in Algeria came to a halt, here was another case of torture, in its most brutal form. Djamila Boupacha and her entire family were arrested on the night of February 10th 1960. The French paratroopers were looking for two pioneering members of the Algerian resistance team Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). After finding some letters written by these FLN members, the French

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31 Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Francois Mauriac and many other leftist French intellectuals have published testimonies of soldiers along with numerous declarations that criticize and denounce the use of torture in Algeria by French military in various journals such as *L'Express, Esprit, Témoignage Chrétien* and specifically *Les Temps Modernes* during 1958-62.
paratroopers interrogated Boupacha to get further information on the whereabouts of these two FLN members. She was subsequently beaten, raped and subjected to intense torture for several days by the French army. Boupacha was a twenty-two year old Algerian woman who joined the Algerian resistance team FLN after learning that Muslim women were denied their certificates that would allow them to receive further education.

Gisèle Halimi, Boupacha’s lawyer, reached out to as many intellectuals as possible in order to make the case public. She contacted a French journalist Francois Mauriac and pleaded with him to write about Boupacha in his column. Halimi contends that Mauriac wrote about Boupacha even though his remarks were “deceptively mild” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:63). Not being content with Mauriac’s column, Halimi decided to approach Beauvoir, who was able to reach a wide audience as a public intellectual, for help. Halimi filled Beauvoir with all the details of Boupacha’s case, including the horrendous torture scenes. She recounts that “she said ‘yes’ to my appeal for her help as though it was a matter of course, and then the two of us began to work out the most effective method by which public sympathy could be aroused” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:65).

Their plan consisted of an article to be published by Beauvoir and then a book to be co-authored by Halimi and Beauvoir. Beauvoir wrote an article entitled as “Pour Djamila Boupacha”32 which appeared on Le Monde on June 2 1960. The essay created considerable disturbance in public that the French military in Algeria confiscated the entire edition (Slaughter 1997:425). Contrary to the evasive nature of the Mauriac column, Halimi found Beauvoir’s article strong both in terms of revealing the details of the case and in its ability to “batter insistently at the reader’s conscience” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:65). The main goal of the

32 The title of the article alludes to Jacques Vergès and Georges Arnaud’s manifesto “Pour Djamila Bouhired” which has again been written in 1957 in defense of a FLN member who had been tortured by the French army (Surkis 2010: 39)
article was to reach French metropolitan public. The essay criticized the numbness and indifference in France on the side of public against torture cases and it was successful in shedding light on the phenomenon of numbness in front of structural and systematic atrocities that call for immediate intervention and reaction.

The attitude of indifference constitutes the main theme of Beauvoir’s *Le Monde* article. She starts the article by stating that “the most scandalous part of a scandal is that we get used to it” and calls for the French public to intervene in the situation (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:194). In the article, Beauvoir also calls for an investigation concerning the conditions under which Boupacha admitted to have planted the bomb in a university restaurant. She contends that rejection of this demand by the French officials would directly imply their admission of the torture practices by the French army. She proceeds by urging French public to step out of their indifference for Boupacha’s tragedy. She implies that if they continue to maintain their indifference, they become as guilty as the torturers. She writes, “When the government of a country allows crimes to be committed in its name, every citizen thereby becomes a member of a collectively criminal nation” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:197). Beauvoir’s style in the article was direct and clear. First, she identified the main injustices and problems with her detention and torture such as the use of torture to make Boupacha admit to a crime she did not commit, the Algerian officials’ efforts to hinder Halimi’s defense in any possible way, and the coercion of the witnesses to confirm Boupacha’s crime. Second, she urged the French officials to take the simple and straightforward steps that would remedy the situation to some extent as exemplified in the call for investigation I talked about above.

Beauvoir’s involvement in the trial of Boupacha continued after the publication of the *Le Monde* article. Beauvoir encouraged Halimi to write a book accounting Boupacha’s story and
lent her name to that book. The book titled as *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked French Liberal Opinion*, was published in 1962. Halimi writes, “it [the book] would both form a weapon in the immediate struggle, an instrument for disseminating the truth as widely as possible, and also constitute a pledge for the future” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:170). In addition, Beauvoir organized a political action committee—Djamila Boupacha Committee—for the purpose of keeping alive the attention her article and the book created in French public. Finally, Beauvoir’s account of the Boupacha case and the Algerian War in her memoirs *Force of Circumstance* shows the extent of her political and emotional investment in the idea of a free Algeria. The book can be read as informative writings documenting the war. It also supports the idea that in addition to saving Djamila Boupahca’s life, Beauvoir’s efforts aimed mostly at revealing the evil in structural and systemic colonial violence and failing to stand up when such violence happens.

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the difficulties involved in joining an uprising or an insurgency movement in order to end some type of oppression through my experience in the Gezi Resistance. The physical vulnerability such an involvement brings about can be overwhelming at times. Beauvoir was not exempt from these difficulties when she decided to support the insurgency actively. Both Halimi and Beauvoir received threats for their involvement in Boupacha’s trial. The day after the seizure of *Le Monde* the day Beauvoir’s article appeared, the newspaper declared in the front page that the seizure was solely due to Beauvoir’s article. Beauvoir became a target for the supporters of the colonial system on all fronts. She was aware of the challenges her involvement implicated, however, she decided to take the risks involved. She recounts that she accepted co-authorship of the book with Halimi in order to “share the responsibility” (Beauvoir 1965:614).
Beauvoir’s Attitude Towards Boupacha’s Social, Cultural and Religious Values:

As I explained above, an understanding of the social, cultural and religious values of the group to be intervened in should be essential for feminists in any type of intervention. In this section, I discuss Beauvoir’s approach to Boupacha’s values by closely examining her account of Boupacha’s torture in her various writings. I show that Beauvoir’s intervention did not intend to impose Western values or her own values on Boupacha or Algerian people. On the contrary, her actions testify how seriously she takes Algerian people’s values.

A significant aspect of Beauvoir’s intervention in the Boupacha case was her mindfulness of her limits and of her status as an outsider. To begin with, Beauvoir’s Le Monde article presented the case from the perspective of the victim, Boupacha. In Force of Circumstance, she stated that “I limited myself, more or less, to transcribing Djamila’s own account of the affair” (Beauvoir 1965:500). Beauvoir did not interpret Boupacha’s situation from her own perspective. She remained faithful to her conditions and values as much as possible. In addition to showing the systematic use of torture among French Army, the article talked about Boupacha’s rape and what it meant for her as a young woman in a Muslim society. Beauvoir indicated that Boupacha was a virgin in her Le Monde article, a detail which disturbed the editor of Le Monde. She was then asked to remove it from the article yet she refused to do so. This detail was important for Beauvoir because it was important for Boupacha. As Halimi and Boupacha attest, Beauvoir remained very true to Boupacha’s story. She not only tried to understand Boupacha’s experience in its own concrete situation but also avoided any value judgments concerning her experience.

Let’s read how Beauvoir detailed Boupacha’s torture story in the article:

Djamila was transferred to Hussein Dey, where three harkis, two Army men and three plainclothes police inspectors put her through the Third Degree. They affixed electrodes to her nipples with Scotch tape, subsequently applying them to her legs, face, anus, and vagina. This electrical treatment was interspersed with
blows and cigarette-burns...Djamila Boupacha herself states what in fact took place: ‘I was given the most appalling torture of all, the so-called “bottle treatment”. First they tied me up in a special posture, and then they rammed the neck of a bottle into [me]33. I screamed and fainted....” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:195)

Boupacha’s rape was covered extensively in the book, as well. Boupacha has lost her virginity as a result of the rape and her loss of virginity exacerbated the traumatic experience of rape she had undergone. The customs of Boupacha’s culture required a young girl to be virgin by the time of marriage. Hence, Boupacha was upset about losing the prospect of getting married as we see in her outburst to Halimi when she says “Do you think any man would want me after I’ve been ruined by that bottle? Our customs are very different from yours. A young bride must be a virgin” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:75). During their conversations on the topic, Halimi tries to convince Boupacha that losing her virginity may not be worse than losing a leg or an arm, to which Boupacha responds by saying that “that wouldn’t be so bad” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:75).

What is important for my analysis here is Beauvoir’s presentation of the value Boupacha attributes to being a virgin as a Muslim woman. She writes about it as objectively as possible and makes no comments about it. We know Beauvoir’s views on the topic from her discussions of virginity and women’s repressed sexuality in many different sections of The Second Sex. She also mentions the discourse of virginity within the context of religion there. For example, in the section on “History,” she explains how monotheistic religions—she particularly mentions Christianity and Islam—value women only as virgin and chaste and otherwise treat her with “the

33 In the Le Monde article Beauvoir uses the word “vagina” here since this is how Boupacha recounts the story. However the editor replaces the word “vagina” with “belly.”
most absolute contempt” (Beauvoir 2012:89). However, in the case of Boupacha, she talks about it as a legitimate concern of a young woman.

As a Muslim young girl, Boupacha’s virginity played an important role in publicizing the case. It is impossible not to notice that Boupacha’s virginity got much more coverage than did her political activism in Beauvoir and Halimi’s efforts to garner public attention. By focusing on the rape, Beauvoir and Halimi transformed Boupacha’s legal case to embody the broad issues of gendered sexual violence and racialized colonial violence. Boupacha’s case became the symbol of the political fight for both women’s liberation and Algerian independence. The feminist rhetoric Beauvoir and Halimi used in publicizing Boupacha’s case worked perfectly well for appealing to conscience of the French public.

Through their emphasis on sexual violence during the case, Beauvoir and Halimi depicted the Algerian War from an angle of French male oppression on colonized women. The sexualized aspect of the colonization became more apparent in how the French officials reacted to the claims of Boupacha’s rape. Maurice Patin, president of the Committee of Public Safety in Algeria responded, “You claim that she was a virgin. But, we have photos of her, taken in her bedroom: she is between two FLN soldiers with guns in hand, and she’s holding a machine gun (Beauvoir 1965:504) Patin’s response seems to imply that Boupacha’s involvement in the FLN as an active member is at odds with her being a virgin.34 Hence, Patin was hinting that Boupacha was not a respectable woman deserving the attention of French officials.

It would be naïve to argue that Beauvoir’s sole motivation to bring Boupacha’s virginity forth was showing how much it meant to Boupacha. As many feminist scholars have argued,

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34 Making implicit or explicit remarks about the questionable situation of chastity of women joining the resistance movements seems to be a common strategy by states. Many Turkish officials made similar remarks concerning female members of the Kurdish resistance movement since 1980.
Beauvoir focused on Boupacha’s virginity because told from that perspective the story had more chances of appealing to French public (Kruks 2005; Murphy 1995; Quinan 2014). Beauvoir’s goal was establishing a connection between Boupacha’s virginity and the honor of France. She was sending the message that what the French military was doing in Algeria in the name of French people was irrevocably destroying liberal French values. Boupacha’s upbringing was already compatible with those values. Hence, it did not take long time for their appeal to gain sympathy and support from a wide French public. Halimi and Beauvoir used Boupacha’s pictures in Western clothing and the co-authored book also had a sketch of Boupacha by Picasso. As Murphy states, emphasizing the Frenchness of Boupacha by representing her as a young, middle class Algerian girl who got her education in France was a strategy to make Boupacha more acceptable to French citizens (in Simons 1995:288). The members of the Djamila Boupacha Committee followed the same strategy in their testimonies given on behalf of Boupacha and emphasized that the violation of Boupacha’s virginity by the French army is at the same time violating the honor of France. André Philip, a member of the Djamila Boupacha Committee, wrote in his témoignage:

> The campaign initiated on behalf of Djamila Boupacha derives part of its importance from the fact that her case is the very symbol of that corruption of ends by means which threatens to destroy our country utterly; it is the very honour of France which has become tarnished in the treatment of this girl, it is the values which define France in the eyes of the world that the torturers are destroying (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:237).

Other testimonies referred to Boupacha always as a girl and never as a woman. They highlighted her youth, her torture, and her loss of virginity and abstained from references to her connection to FLN or any sort of political activism.

(ii) Beauvoir’s Critique of Colonialism and Self-Critique as a Colonizer
Beauvoir’s political involvement in the Boupacha case goes beyond the efforts of a French intellectual woman whose sole purpose is saving the life of a twenty one year old FLN member. Whether or not Beauvoir was genuinely interested in saving Boupacha is a question I will discuss later. Here, I would like to say that in the case of Boupacha, Beauvoir condemned the entire colonial system. Her target was not simply the individuals who tortured Boupacha, but the entire system that perpetuated colonial violence in Algeria. In this section, I first show how Beauvoir criticized the colonial system as unethical and violent and then I discuss how she situates herself within the colonial system as a beneficiary and colonizer, and what type of responsibilities she assumes on this basis.

Beauvoir’s analysis of the Boupacha case in her introduction to the coauthored book with Halimi goes beyond revealing the ethical problems with the torture practices prevalent in the French army. It also is a thoroughly political critique of colonialism as a system. By presenting a discussion of the reasons advanced by French officials to justify Boupacha’s detention and inhumane treatment by the army, she shows the reader that Boupacha is only an example among many torture cases. Beauvoir writes, “there are no ‘abuses’ or ‘excesses’ here, simply an all pervasive system.” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:19) Beauvoir emphasizes the systematic nature of the use of torture in Algeria in Force of Circumstance, as well. She observes, “torture was being used as the normal and indispensable method of obtaining information; it was no matter of “incidents,” of isolated excesses, this was a system” (Beauvoir 1965:367). To show how well-established the use of torture is, she mentions the pronouncement made by the church on the legality of torture (Beauvoir 1965:383). In order to show the connection between torture and the colonial system, Beauvoir and Halimi quote Alleg “Djamila Boupacha is proof personified that
torture has not been brought to an end by the Gaullist regime, that torture can only end with the end of the colonial war whose poisonous fruit it is” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:207).

Beauvoir is right in assuming that the real reason for ignoring and even encouraging the resort to torture is the colonial attitude of the French government, which thoroughly rejected the idea of an independent Algeria. Minister of the Interior François Mitterrand’s reaction to the FLN uprisings in 1954 represents this attitude clearly: “Algeria is France. And France will recognize no authority in Algeria other than her own” (LeSueur 2001b:28). The Djamila Boupacha Committee met with M. Patin who was the President of the Committee for Public Safety. In the meeting Patin states concerning the Boupacha case that “there might have been excesses” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:96). He also expresses his anger about Beauvoir’s Le Monde article, which “has distressed the officers out there [Algeria] considerably”. Patin’s words about Boupacha also reflects the French officials’ determination to keep Algeria as a colony. Beauvoir writes, “For reasons affecting its own interests, and nobody else’s, the army is determined to keep Algeria a slave-state –even though the Algerian people would rather die to the last man than give up their hope of independence.” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:20).

Patin says of Boupacha that she is “not a nice girl at all” […] she wants independence for Algeria” (Halimi and Beauvoir 1962:99). He also adds that Boupacha and her family had “no love of France”. Algerian people’s “love of France” was the main theme utilized by the French officials in their propaganda against the resurgence movement in Algeria. They claimed that the movement was a result of an “Islamic conspiracy” (Beauvoir 1965:337).

As my discussion above attests, Beauvoir’s writings on the Algerian War between late fifties and early sixties reveal a useful critique of colonialism in general and French colonialism in particular. Within the context of my dissertation, I find them important as they reveal Beauvoir’s
willingness to objectively see and understand the political and economic structures the colonial system creates and perpetuates in the world. Her identity as a white French middle class woman who opposed the war made her situation even more complex. She contends that “I am an accomplice of the privileged classes and compromised by this connection; that is the reason why living through the Algerian war was like experiencing a personal tragedy” (Beauvoir 1965:652). Now I will examine how Beauvoir resolves this complication by a thorough self-critique and active participation in the decolonization movement.

At first, Beauvoir’s feelings of guilt led her to inactivity and depression. Although she was highly sensitive to the suffering of the Algerian people, these feelings paralyzed her instead of moving her into action. She did not know how she could contribute to the struggle. She wrote: “I needed my self-esteem to go on living, and yet I was seeing myself through the eyes of women who had been raped twenty times, of men with broken bones, of crazed children: a Frenchwoman. . . . I wanted to stop being an accomplice in this war, but how? (Beauvoir 1965:369) She was able to bring herself to action only after a long period of time. Looking retrospectively, she attributed her inaction to “timidity and vestiges of mistaken beliefs” (Beauvoir 1965:371) In a sense, she presents a critique of herself for acting in bad faith for a long time after the war has started. She chose to ignore the suffering inflicted on Algerian people on the name of France, in her name.

Beauvoir compared her experience of the Algerian War to German Occupation. She recounted that she was feeling the same unpleasant emotions however this time something was different: “Yes, I was living in an occupied city, and I loathed the occupiers even more fiercely than I had those others in the forties, because of all the ties that bound me to them” (Beauvoir 1965:384-5). In addition, Beauvoir assumed more responsibility than any other French citizen
because she was a public intellectual who could appeal to a variety of people through her writings. As Kruks rightly points out, in addition to the material privileges Beauvoir enjoyed a kind of epistemic privilege accorded prominent French intellectuals (Kruks 2005:190-1). As we read in *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir carefully elaborated on the ways in which she could help the resistance. Beauvoir considered remaining indifferent to the atrocities around her as equal to being actively involving in committing these atrocities. After ruling out the option of joining underground forces since she considered herself to be not “a woman of action” but “a woman of letters,” she decided she could best serve the Algerian cause as a writer (Beauvoir 1965:461)

Beauvoir’s account of Algerian War in her *Force of Circumstance* shows the central role she attributes to the atrocities of the war in her life, activism, and writings. She states that “It was not of my own free will, nor with any lightness of heart, that I allowed the war in Algeria to invade my thoughts, my sleep, my every mood” (Beauvoir 1965:365). She places Algerian War at a different place in comparison to Indochina, Madagascar, Cap Bon and Casablanca where she was able to regain her calmness. To Beauvoir, Algerian case constituted a major life-altering event where she had to reexamine her relation to not only to herself but also to her country and the whole world. Recounting how she reads on trial files accounting for torture cases, she writes that “That, perhaps, is the final stage of demoralization for a nation: one gets used to it” (Beauvoir 1965: 367). Beauvoir describes the secrecy about the atrocities in Algeria as a deliberate project that owes its success to the explicit or implicit participation of the whole country, including the media. In spite of not considering herself as a woman of action, as the insurgence movement became stronger and so did the retaliations, she felt the responsibility to intervene by all possible
means. She reported her uneasiness with being an accomplice of French people she “couldn’t bear to be in the same street with” (Beauvoir 1965:368-9).

It is important to note that Beauvoir includes herself in the French public when she accuses them of passivity in front of the violence their government uses in Algeria. She provides an account of how she deals with her feelings of guilt in *Force of Circumstance*. Critical of French people’s indifference or justifications to vindicate the French occupation and torture, Beauvoir still describes herself as “an accomplice of these people I couldn’t bear to be in the same street with” (Beauvoir 1965:369). She writes, “This hypocrisy, this indifference, this country, my own self, were no longer bearable to me. All those people in the streets, in open agreement or battered into a stupid submission—they were all murderers, all guilty. Myself as well. “I’m French.” The words scalded my throat…” (Beauvoir 1965:384)

Beauvoir’s account of her responsibility in particular and the responsibility of the French intellectual in general in the Algerian war presents an honest critique of herself and the French intellectuals as the beneficiaries of the colonial system. Beauvoir finds herself in an insurmountable contradiction that circumscribes all French intellectuals who maintain two conflicting identities at the same time, which is being both the beneficiaries of the colonial system and its critiques. In discussing her privilege as a white middle class French intellectual she explains how she indirectly benefits from the gains of the colonial system: “I exploit no one directly; but the people who buy my books are beneficiaries of an economy founded upon exploitation” (Beauvoir 1965:652). On the other hand, as an opponent of the colonial system and supporter of the insurgency she was labeled as anti-French—which she accepts as she was no longer able to bear her “fellow citizens” (Beauvoir 1965:368).
Beauvoir thus was both French and anti-French at the same time. Nevertheless, as we see in her case, when faced in a genuine manner this contradiction may be productive and confrontation with it can constitute a significant step of intervention. Moreover, an authentic encounter with this contradiction emphasizes a special responsibility on behalf of the beneficiary to take some action in order to end oppression because she/he is directly or indirectly contributing to it. As I discussed earlier in my account of Ahmed and Jaggar’s articles, Western feminist interventions are facing a serious impasse for failing to recognize and understand this contradiction. Hence, I argue that Beauvoir’s autobiographical writings during the Algerian War can shed light into the question of Western intervention.

Intervention is a very delicate topic and criticisms abound from both the opponents and proponents of the cause. So has been the case in Beauvoir’s intervention in the Algerian war and the Boupacha case. She received criticism not only from French officials and nationalists but also from people who supported the Algerian resistance35. One serious criticism came from Halimi. Halimi considered Beauvoir’s involvement in the Boupacha case emotionally distanced. She wrote, “I expected a sister in arms, I discovered more and more an entomologist” (Halimi 1990:294). Halimi expected Beauvoir to meet Boupacha and could not understand why Beauvoir did not do so despite the several opportunities Halimi created for her. Halimi’s remarks in her autobiography seem to imply that Boupacha was not important for Beauvoir as a person and she did not have any emotional connection to her. She stated, “Djamila was one victim among thousands, a ‘useful’ case in the battle against torture and the war” (Halimi 1990:301). We know that Halimi was involved in Boupacha’s case in every respect and in a very emotional way. It is

35 Although not directed to Beauvoir, Fanon criticized French intellectuals for not doing their best for Algeria, and for being worried about the honor of the French state more than they were worried about the torture and rape of Algerian girls. He writes, “The gravity of the tortures, the horror of the rape of little Algerian girls, are perceived because their existence threatens a certain idea of a French honor” (Fanon 1967:71). Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays. New York: Grove.
understandable why she finds it strange that Beauvoir did not prefer meeting Boupacha in person.

As I stated above, Beauvoir’s intervention in Boupacha case had broader implications than making her torture known and creating a public for her. Hers was a struggle to condemn the whole colonial practices of the French nation. Keeping that in mind, it will be easier to understand why she refused to meet Boupacha. To begin with, Halimi was right that for Beauvoir, Boupacha’s torture case was one of the countless cases of torture that exemplified the determination of the French government in keeping Algeria a colony. Halimi was also right to argue that Beauvoir used the case in order to show French people the illegitimacy of the practices of the French army. However, Halimi may not be right that Beauvoir did not care about Boupacha as an individual. Beauvoir cared about Boupacha’s freedom.

As I discussed in chapter three, there are different forms of caring and Beauvoir’s account of existentialist ethics emphasizes an essential dimension of caring: caring as treating someone as a freedom. In cases where we do not have a personal connection to the individual or group in question, caring for them by treating them as freedoms might be the only and best way of practicing care. Later versions of care ethics—especially global care ethics thinkers criticized early versions of care ethics for their sole focus on proximate others and neglect of distant others (Tronto 1995:111-2; Robinson 1999:31). Global care ethicists provided valuable accounts of the global potential of a care based approach, nevertheless, they mostly focused on the global power structures that create relations of dependence across the globe (Robinson 2013:133). They also addressed issues of global inequalities arising from the global flow of capital and human labor. Held, for example, discusses the harmful effects of extreme mobilization of human labor on women and other marginalized groups and sates that women has been the victims of
globalization and the pass-on approach where care work is passed on from men to women and from affluent nations to poor nations (Held 2004).

Despite those valuable contributions, global care ethicists’ accounts remained short of explaining how we should care for distant others. Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics might contribute global care ethics by way of offering a new interpretation of caring as treating people as freedoms. Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics shows us that we have responsibility to treat others as freedoms. This account is enhanced by Sartre’s description of the practico-inert world I explained in chapter two. By acting in accordance with the interests and exigencies presented by the practico-inert which perpetuates the already existing systems of oppression created by humans through history, we fail to account for the role our actions play in feeding oppressive structures. Although existentialism considers its subject as responsible for any type of oppression in the world, both Sartre and Beauvoir would agree that one has to choose her/his battle. Their political activism also aligns with this idea. Based on their dedication to help Algerian resistance, and Beauvoir’s discussion of her role in the French colonial system, one can argue that they considered being beneficiaries of a system that is based on exploiting others’ freedoms to bring about a stronger responsibility. Such a notion of responsibility, however, did not imply or require any emotional closeness to those people. As Beauvoir’s attitude in the Boupacha case exemplifies caring for someone does not need to take the form of a close emotional relationship.

It would be wrong, however, to argue that there were no emotions involved on Beauvoir’s end, though these emotions were not directed to particular individuals. Beauvoir’s emotional investment in that cause is evident in her account of the Algerian war in Force of Circumstance, where she recounted that the war in Algeria invaded her “every mood”. (Beauvoir 1965:365). Her emotions presented themselves as directed towards three sources: the colonial system,
oppressed and systematically tortured Algerian people, and herself. Considering the vital role emotions play in a caring relationship in accounts of care ethics, absence of emotional involvement with the tortured Algerian people on Beauvoir’s side seems to present a contradiction between Beauvoir’s account of existentialist ethics and care ethics. Instead of reading this as a contradiction we may consider it as a potential contribution of Beauvoir’s account of existentialist ethics to care ethics, as it establishes our responsibility to care for those to whom we do not have any emotional ties. Boupacha belonged to a group of oppressed people who were fighting for their liberation. It is true that Beauvoir considered Boupacha case always within the context of the French colonial system. Hence, as Halimi says Boupacha is no different from other Algerian people who have been tortured by the colonial rule. Beauvoir feels equally responsible for other people who have been tortured and killed by the French army. The colonial rule found its expression not only in Boupacha case but in every torture case. Beauvoir’s goal was to make the Algerian people’s experiences visible to French public. Ursula Tidd writes in her article “The Self-Other relation in Beauvoir’s Ethics and Autobiography,”

A sustained example of the construction of autobiographical space for the Other is Beauvoir’s account of the Algerian War in *Force of Circumstance*, in which she attempts to transcend her ‘situation’ as a bourgeois Frenchwoman and seeks to represent the Algerian perspective. While she can never have the experience of being a colonized Algerian subject to French rule, she provides a historical account that creates space for the experience of the Other, for example, Djamila Boupacha (Tidd 1999:171).

Hence, I argue that Beauvoir’s not attributing special importance to Boupacha case in comparison to other torture cases is consistent with her ethics. Going back to Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics, we are responsible for people we do not know at all, too. Their freedom should concern us as much as freedom of those who we know. In that case, what moved Beauvoir for action was not her closeness to Boupacha, she did not need to be close to her. Her
ethics provided her the framework for acting to help distant others. Helping Boupacha was certainly one of her goals yet it also served her broader goal of unveiling the colonial agenda of France in Algeria. By doing so, she could contribute ending the colonial system which was the cause of all these torture cases.

Beauvoir’s analysis and critique of the French colonial rule in Algeria in her writings about the Algerian war (1954-62) presents a continuity with the existentialist ethics she develops in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir exemplifies the concept of the serious man by appealing to the “colonial administrator” (Beauvoir 1976:49). Accepting the values given to him as absolute truths, the serious man justifies every action that fosters these values without any questioning. In the same vein, the colonial administrator is able to sacrifice the freedom and lives of so many natives who are “incompetent, lazy and clumsy” for the sake of maintaining his colonial rule (Beauvoir 1976:49). Furthermore, the colonial administrator presents the colonial rule as a divinity that serves well-being of the both the colonized and the colonizer. Later in *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir recounts stories of French officials emphasizing how much Algerian people love France and are happy under its rule.

Beauvoir’s account of the indifference of French people in her *Le Monde* article also aligns with the concept of the adventurer in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The adventurer remains complacent with all the values, regimes, and rules that defend his privilege. He is also ready to sacrifice the lives of others for maintaining his privilege. The adventurer mistakenly thinks that he can “assert his own existence without taking into account that of others” (Beauvoir 1976:61). Hence, he finds no offense in being an accomplice of the regimes that annihilates others’ freedoms. For Beauvoir, “favorable circumstances are enough to transform the adventurer into a dictator” (Beauvoir 1976:62). Beauvoir interprets the political implications of indifference in the
case of Algerian war in a similar way. She argues that being a silent spectator of the atrocities committed in the name of France is tantamount to being an active participant in these atrocities. The main excuse the adventurer could use was being ignorant of the atrocities and Beauvoir’s main goal in publicizing all the information she could get about torture in general and Boupacha’s case in particular was to invalidate this excuse.

Beauvoir’s condemnation of violence in the context of Algerian War and her account of violence as an inseparable part of human condition seem to create a conundrum. In what follows I address how these two accounts are compatible. To begin with, in Beauvoir’s situationalist ethics, there is no action that can be secured as inherently right or wrong. An action is to be evaluated on the basis of the material conditions in which it was performed. Yes, violence exists in our lives and a violent action is subject to scrutiny within the context of its situation just as any other action is. It might be difficult to determine whether a particular action of violence is justified or not upfront since “failure and success are two aspects of reality which at the start are not perceptible” (Beauvoir 1976:129). There is no a priori justification of violence even when the end seems to be highly valid, desirable and plausible (Beauvoir 1976:148). Beauvoir gives the example of U.S.S.R where the sacrifices and crimes in the name of socialism were abound and argues that a Marxist should never assume that his recourse to violence is justified a priori by its ends (Beauvoir 1976:146-147). In spite of her affinity with Marxism, Beauvoir criticizes such an attitude and labels it as an act of bad faith. She contends that “[…] the characteristic of the spirit of seriousness is precisely to confer upon it by raising the Thing or the Cause to the dignity of an unconditioned end” (Beauvoir 1976:111).

As I explained above, the French colonial system used violence as a means to keep Algeria a colony at all expense. Colonial system was the “unconditioned end” and the colonizers conferred
it an utmost dignity. For Beauvoir, however, colonialism is a system that is inherently violent and racist. The main justification of colonialism has been the discourse of improving the lives and well-being of the colonized people. French officials also used the same rhetoric and argued that France was the friend of the Arabs, and that Arabs also loved France and wanted to be a part of France. This justification would constitute the most problematic aspect of the colonial system for Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics. Beauvoir emphasizes in her writings that Algerian people should have the right and freedom to choose for themselves. Colonialism is an evil system because it is established upon the idea of undermining the freedom of the colonized subjects. As I argued in the previous chapter in my discussion of the congruence between Beauvoir’s and Butler’s approach to violence, in such cases, counter-violence to end a colonial system is ethically justified according to Beauvoir.

Butler and Beauvoir’s approaches concerning the use of counter-violence in the case of Algeria would align, so does their ideas concerning our responsibility towards distant others. As I explained in chapter four, they both argue that our responsibility to fight against oppression is not diminished in situations where we do not know those “others.” They both establish this responsibility on the basis of our universal interdependence. They do not appeal to emotional connections to justify this responsibility. (Butler 2009:14). In addition, Beauvoir’s attention to the physical suffering of Algerian people during the war is reminiscent of Butler’s critique of unequal distribution of precariousness in the world. Using Butler’s terminology, Boupacha belong to a group of people the lives of which did not qualify as “grievable.” In Force of Circumstance, Beauvoir explains in detail how accounts of French officials render the lives of Algerian rebels unworthy or less worthy than the lives of French people. Beauvoir’s strategy in

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36 As can be seen in her accounts of the colonial system in Force of Circumstance, “Pour Djamila Boupacha”, and the coauthored book with Halimi.
presenting Boupacha as a modern girl who embodies French values instead of a “barbaric Arab” aimed at helping French public to see her life as “grievable” again.

Despite these similarities, the divergences between Beauvoir and Butler’s notion of accountability are apparent when we analyze it within the context of Beauvoir’s intervention in the Boupacha case. In the previous chapter, I presented an analysis of Butler’s account of the opacity of the self vis-à-vis Beauvoir’s ambiguous self. I discussed how both thinkers rightly put into question the possibility of a sovereign self that wholly coincides with itself. As I explained in this discussion, one of the key achievements Beauvoir’s theoretical contributions to Butler’s ethics would be the potential for responsibility and action despite the ambiguity of the self and the conditions. When we analyze, for example, how Beauvoir holds herself accountable in the case of Boupacha we see that the accountability originates from her efforts to give a comprehensive account of herself as a privileged French woman. It is interesting to see how Beauvoir struggles as she tries to give an account of herself in the wake of the Algerian war. Her whole identity is shattered so much that she has hard times defining herself or nurturing feelings of belonging to her country. However, despite these ambiguities involved in the situation, she takes serious risks and acts in a way she believes to be authentic and ethical.

Beauvoir’s approach to the aftermath of the Boupacha’s trial also deserves some attention here. Thanks to Halimi and Beauvoir’s efforts, Boupacha was finally released from prison in 1962. In her autobiography, Halimi recounts that Boupacha wanted to stay in France to get further education. However, FLN members order her to go back to Algeria and they force her to do so (Halimi 1990:320-22). Halimi called Beauvoir to ask her to intervene again in order to prevent Boupacha’s return to Algeria under compulsion. Beauvoir’s response to her request was simply negative. Beauvoir thought that neither she nor Halimi-two French women- had the right
to intervene in the internal affairs of the FLN. For Beauvoir, Boupaicha willingly chose to become a member of FLN and she had to obey its orders. Beauvoir’s French identity, which forced her to intervene at the beginning of the Boupaicha case, now was constituting the main reason for non-intervention. Beauvoir seems to be aware of the ethical difficulties involved in intervening in the workings of an organization that played a vital role in liberating colonized Algeria.

In this chapter, I showed that in spite of the risks involved in intervention, Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics—cognizant of one’s facticity, abilities and limits—urges us to overcome our indifference in front of atrocities. I also showed that Beauvoir’s intervention in Djamila Boupaicha case provides a good example of an existentialist feminist ethics practice in intervention. To begin with, it was a successful one as it helped ending her subjection to torture and annulled her death sentence. The exemplary aspect of the intervention, however, stems from the way Beauvoir approached the question of intervention more than its successful results. I showed that Beauvoir’s intervention is mindful of both the legitimacy of the values of the culture in which she is intervening and of her own identity as a French middle class woman who benefits from the political and economic system that exploits the group she is trying to help. Moreover, I showed how the Boupaicha case exemplifies the way our responsibility goes beyond the scope of proximate others.
CONCLUSION

In my dissertation, I have established existentialism as a viable ethical theory and showed that it informs contemporary accounts of feminist ethics. In addition to my focus on Beauvoir’s work and her account of existentialism, I also included the writings of Sartre because of his lifelong intellectual partnership with Beauvoir and because of the potential contributions of his writings for a feminist ethics. Existentialism has been surpassed by continental philosophies influenced mostly by poststructuralism. Poststructuralism took over from existentialism both academically and in terms of popular public discussions. A quick look at some poststructuralists’ works reveals that their criticism directed towards the humanism of Sartrean version of existentialism that is based on Sartre’s *Existentialism is Humanism* (1975) (Derrida 1985:109-35; Foucault 2001:541-2). While I defended the continuing relevance of existentialism, I acknowledge the compelling criticisms poststructuralists have leveled against existentialism especially the criticism referring to its being a humanistic philosophy. Although beyond the scope of my dissertation, this issue remains a possible topic of further investigation.

It is important, however, to note that not every form of existentialism is susceptible to this criticism. I would single out Beauvoir’s existentialism, even though some feminists criticized her “humanistic existentialism” for operating on a universal masculine discourse. In ‘Women’s Time,’ for example, Julia Kristeva presents a detailed critique of humanist feminism with specific references to existentialist feminism. She considers humanist feminism to be
indifferent to differences and accuses of Beauvoir for using a universalistic spirit of Enlightenment Humanism endorsing this indifference:

Western socialism, shaken in its very beginnings by the egalitarian or differential demands of its women (e.g., Flora Tristan), quickly got rid of those women who aspired to recognition of a specificity of the female role in society and culture, only retaining from them, in the egalitarian and universalistic spirit of Enlightenment Humanism, the idea of a necessary identification between the two sexes as the only and unique means for liberating the “second sex” (Kristeva 1981:20).

The discussion of Beauvoir’s existential feminism in my dissertation proved these criticisms to be misguided. Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism is in no way blind to differences. On the contrary, her version of existentialism provides us with a theory of oppression that takes into account a variety of differences such as race, gender, and class. In comparison to other existentialists Beauvoir’s existentialism presents a more comprehensive account of intersectional oppressions as it does not leave aside the category of gender as other existentialists do, i.e., Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

Beauvoir’s humanism is very much attuned to the dangers of the production of the category of the “human” by the powerful. As I discussed in chapter five, she challenged the categorization of Arab people by the French colonial rule as “barbaric.” Her self-critique also showed how dehumanization of Arab people in Algeria justified the humanity of the French people. French colonialism justified its existence through the argument that Arab people were less human due to their deficiencies and inadequacies. This discourse also justified the maltreatment of the members of the Algerian liberation movement. Beauvoir puts human at the center of her existentialist philosophy, however, she does not entertain an exclusionary definition of the “human” that leaves out certain groups of people out of the category of “human.” As discussed in chapter five, a similar discussion is presented in Butler’s Frames of War. There, she
criticizes the torture of inmates at Guantanamo within the context of maltreatment of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States justified by their deviance from the human as the norm. Butler considers this issue in *Precarious Life*, as well. She takes issue with the unequal distribution of precarity in the world and explains how this unequal distribution is regulated by a Western discourse on the scope and definition of being human. She writes

> It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a “Western” civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human” (Butler 2006:91).

Hence, my analysis of Beauvoir’s political writings on Algeria can be even read as a critique of a certain type of humanism poststructuralists such as Butler reject. Beauvoir’s criticism of the ideal of the human and her awareness of its political implications seems to vindicate existentialism with regard to the charges of humanism.

After this discussion, now I turn to a presentation of the main points I established in my dissertation. In the first chapter, through an analysis of Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s works, I have presented the main principles of an existentialist ethics. I showed that human freedom constitutes the basis of existentialist ethical theory and explained the responsibility that is accompanied by this notion freedom. I discussed how all human freedoms are interconnected in an existentialist ethics and explained that this interconnectedness implies that a person is responsible not only for herself/himself but for every human being.

In chapter two, I explained that oppression is a contingent fact that can be adequately addressed within the framework of an existentialist account of the interconnectedness of human freedoms. Based on the distinction between ontological freedom and ethical freedom made in chapter one, I showed that being simultaneously free and oppressed do not contradict each other.
I discussed the strengths of Beauvoir’s account of oppression by drawing from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, and ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas,’ and argued that her account of oppression provides us with better approaches to address issues of internalized oppression and the severe limitations imposed on the subject in practicing her/his freedom compared to the account of oppression presented in early Sartre. I also showed the transition in Sartre’s account of oppression in his late writings. Drawing from Sartre’s *Critique*, I showed that an oppressive system may present itself as an inevitable condition imposed by the practico-inert world. I argued that Sartre’s analysis of oppression in the *Critique* provides helps us understand the oppressive structures arising out of the global circulation of economic resources.

After explaining the account of existentialist ethics I develop based on Beauvoir and Sartre’s writings, in chapter three I brought this account into conversation with feminist care ethics. I explained care ethics by drawing from Gilligan and Noddings’ writings. I followed with a discussion of critiques of care ethics. I showed that early care ethics thinkers, especially Noddings, were already informed by existentialist writings and that the basic principles of care ethics and existentialist ethics presented significant overlaps. Finally, I argued that existentialist ethics, specifically when considered along with Beauvoir’s feminist interventions in *The Second Sex*, has resources to address essential challenges presented by early treatments of care ethics because of their emphasis on care work. For example, I presented a discussion of care work within the context of existentialist notions of transcendence and immanence and showed that existentialism helps us see the dangers in overvaluing care work and endorsing a theoretical framework that considers care work as feminine. I also presented potential problems with a paternalistic notion of care and showed that Beauvoir’s notion of treating someone as freedom considered as a way of caring can offer solution to this problem. Drawing on the discussion of
Beauvoir’s notion of freedom and oppression in the first and second chapters, I showed that the most authentic way of caring for someone would be helping them to create the necessary and sufficient conditions under which they can realize their own freedom.

In the fourth chapter, I again argued for the relevance of existentialist ethics in contemporary feminist ethics. I focused on Butler’s early and late writings and pointed out the existentialist elements in both. As for the early works of Butler, I discussed her notion of gender performativity in relation to Beauvoir’s notion of the self as becoming. I showed the interplay between voluntarism and determinism in both thinkers’ notions of subjectivity and argued that they share a congruent notion of subjectivity that considers the subject as simultaneously the product and producer of her/his situation. Referring to the potential limitations of Butler’s notion of opaque self for agency and responsibility, I claimed that Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguous self proves to be more suitable for a theory of oppression.

In their introduction to Badiou’s *Infinite Thought* Justin Clements and Oliver Feltham referring to the problem of agency in poststructuralism write that “[…] the critiques of poststructuralism have had an easy pitch: all they have had to do is to accuse the poststructuralist of robbing the subject of agency. If there is no self-identical subject, then what is the ground for autonomous rational action?” (Clemens and Feltham in Badiou 2003). My analysis of Butler’s notion of subjectivity in comparison to Beauvoir’s account of subjectivity showed the legitimacy of the poststructuralist critique of the self-transparent subject. However, I also presented the limitations of such an account and showed how Beauvoir’s account can complement it in productive ways. Hence, my dissertation showed that the opposition between poststructuralism and existentialism is not as stark as it is believed. The limitations a poststructuralist account of agency could be overcome by the account of subjectivity that existentialism offers.
My focus on the late writings of Butler aimed at showing the similar ethical and political concerns she presents with existentialist ethics. I discussed her analysis of central themes in her ethics such as vulnerability, violence, and opacity and showed that despite certain divergence points, her analysis presents considerable affinities with Beauvoir’s analysis of these themes. By doing so, I showed that contrary to the common perception of Butler, her later work is not distanced from existentialist philosophy.

In the fifth chapter, I showed how the potential contributions of existentialism explained in chapters three and four can be seen in Beauvoir’s political activism. After a presentation of a detailed analysis of Djamila Boupacha’s detention and torture case, I explained Beauvoir’s struggles to fight against the French colonial rule in Algeria in a variety of venues such as writing in newspapers to publicize the use of systematic torture by the French army in Algeria, to leading and joining street protests and finally establishing a committee to closely observe Boupacha’s trial. Of central importance in my dissertation was Beauvoir’s self-critique regarding her role as a French middle class intellectual in the French colonial regime and the Algerian War. My discussion of Beauvoir’s self-critique aimed at showing how an existentialist perspective would help Western accounts of feminism address the issue of their privilege and the role this privilege may play in perpetuating economic and cultural oppression in third world countries. Finally I argued that by treating Boupacha and Algerian’s as freedoms who should have the right to self-determination and clearly stating the links of her privilege to the colonization of Algeria, Beauvoir’s intervention in Boupacha case stands an authentic practice of intervention that can set up an example for feminist ethics.

As discussed in the Introduction, there are very few works discussing Beauvoir as a political thinker. My dissertation contributes to these limited discussions on Beauvoir’s political
writings and activism. The scholarship that situates Beauvoir as a postcolonial thinker is even more limited (Murphy 1995; Golay 2007). Although my dissertation does not pursue this thesis, it considers Beauvoir to be a postcolonial thinker and provides considerable evidence to do so. My analysis of *Force of Circumstance* and other writings of her about the Algerian war reveal the impact of Beauvoir’s writings on creating a public for Boupacha and raising French consciousness about the scope and severity of the consequences of the colonial rule. Another derivative accomplishment of my dissertation is showing the connection between Beauvoir’s political writings and her writings on ethics such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas,’ and gender such as *The Second Sex*. Rereading her work on ethics and gender under the light of her political writings would reveal the latent political potential in these works.

Such a reading reveals traces of the idea of intersectional oppression in these works, as well. Beauvoir’s critique of colonial oppression through her writings and activism on the Boupacha case addressed intersection of three different structures of oppression: gender, race and class oppression. Hence, we can say that the expansion of feminist theory to address all forms of oppression rather than focusing on gender oppression alone seems to be already present to some extent in Beauvoir’s work especially in *The Second Sex*. As Kathryn Gines’ points out in her essay “Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy: A Case for Black Feminist Philosophy,” there are certain limitations of the comparison between racial oppression and gender oppression Beauvoir presents in *The Second Sex*. Gines observes that “The race/gender analogy often codes race as black man and gender as white woman, neglecting the woman of color (Gines 2010:36). Gines’ analysis shows one serious implication of Beauvoir’s (and other feminists’) neglect of gendered racial oppression women of color experience, that is the historical focus on the oppression of white women which culminated in ignoring oppression of
women of color (Gines 2010:36). Gines’ discussion of the shortcomings of Beauvoir’s account of intersectional oppression in *The Second Sex* makes a compelling case for the need for black feminist thought in the continental philosophical canon. Nevertheless, analyzing Beauvoir’s earlier works, i.e., *The Second Sex*, in connection with Beauvoir’s later writings, especially her political writings on Algeria would present a more complete picture of the theory of intersectional oppression Beauvoir endorses. My dissertation shed some light on the strengths of Beauvoir’s account of intersectional oppression based on her writings on different periods.

My discussion of Beauvoir’s critique of her own privilege in *Force of Circumstance* demonstrated the relevance of Beauvoir’s political philosophy bears today. However, a closer examination of her account of privilege by including her recently published essays such as ‘Right-Wing Thought Today’ where she criticizes Western eurocentrism and her reports from Spain, the United States and Portugal – ‘Four Days in Madrid’ (1945), ‘Poetry and the Truth of the Far West’ (1947), ‘Portugal under the Salazar Regime’ (1945)- where she provides an in-depth analysis of the social injustices of her time on a global scale would illuminate this relevance and her potential contributions to discussion of oppression in feminist ethics further. These writings demonstrate Beauvoir’s commitment to the political issues of her world. In addition, they show that she developed her account of existentialist ethics with close engagement with the oppressive structures she observed first hand all around the world.

The main theme Beauvoir discusses in ‘Four Days in Madrid,’ ‘Poetry and the Truth of the Far West,’ and ‘Portugal under the Salazar Regime’ is the luxury life style enjoyed by the upper class in opposition to the lower classes which cannot afford even the most basic needs for survival. Although the focus of her analysis is class oppression, she closely observes women and comments on how they experience poverty in these essays. Another core theme in these essays
and also in ‘Right-Wing Thought Today’ is the strategies used by the ruling class to obscure their privilege. Hence, a further analysis of these texts would help us see a more comprehensive picture of the resources Beauvoir’s existentialism presents for discussions of oppression in feminist thought.
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