

In Praise of Ambiguity

CHRISTINA SCHÜES

Simone de Beauvoir explains her relation to philosophy in an interview with Margaret Simons: “While I say that I’m not a philosopher in the sense that I’m not the creator of a system, I’m still a philosopher in the sense that I’ve studied a lot of philosophy, I have a degree in philosophy; I’ve taught philosophy, I’m infused with philosophy: and when I put philosophy into my books it’s because that’s a way for me to view the world” (Simons 1999, 93). Beauvoir had an ambiguous relation to philosophy. On the one hand, she observes that the title of philosopher is reserved for individuals who develop philosophical systems. Yet, her sources for her books and philosophical novels are manifold – personal experiences, subjective impressions, and literary or philosophical findings. Beauvoir presents people’s behavior, experiences, and conditionalities in their existential reality, and even in their metaphysical dimension. A philosophy of the closed system knows no ambiguity, but the existence of human beings can only be meaningfully described in recognition of their ambiguities. Therefore, Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “[f]rom the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity” (Beauvoir 2015, 8). By elevating ambiguity to the status of an ontologically basic category of existence, Beauvoir casts it as essential and irreducible.

Ambiguity has not always been granted this position throughout the history of philosophy. Ancient philosophers understood ambiguity as a deficient aspect of language. In his *Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle held that one should avoid linguistic ambiguity and keep rational thinking clear and exact (Aristotle 1877). In the 19th century, Georg Friedrich Hegel emancipated the notion of ambiguity from the discourse of deficiency, describing it as an essential element of aesthetics, such that ambiguity was no longer something to be avoided. If human existence is essentially ambiguous, then one could say, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty does in *In Praise of Philosophy*, that the measure of a philosopher is their ability and willingness to truly address ambiguity. “The philosopher is marked by the distinguishing trait that he possesses *inseparably* the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity. When he limits himself to accepting ambi-

guity, it is called equivocation. But among the great it becomes a theme; it contributes to establishing certitudes rather than menacing them.” (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 4f.) Ambiguity is no longer understood as a linguistic deficit nor, along with Friedrich Nietzsche, as an aesthetic principle of the world, nor, with Ludwig Wittgenstein, as a simple change of perspective on a rabbit-duck illusion. Anyone who is philosophically ambitious must explicitly address ambiguity and understand philosophy as a non-universal ontology between self and other, deception and freedom, immanence and transcendence, and non-knowledge and knowledge, always realizing that human existence is inherently ambiguous. My aim is to show that this irreducible ambiguity is also found in cases of inhibited intentionality and transgressive intentionality. The former traditionally relates to women who have internalized the rules of not taking their space, while the latter is ascribed, for instance, to persons with dementia whose so-called “challenging” behavior may transgress their own space, intruding upon someone else’s.¹

Ambiguity is Irreducible

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, originally published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty removed ambiguity from any category of value and showed that it is irreducible as an ontological category. For him, the meaning of experience or perception does not lie within objects, but is constituted in each case from the interaction and intercorporeality in which human beings participate as sensing beings within the world as a context of meaning. Thus, existence is marked by the *fact* of ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir agree on this conviction. The nature of this ambiguity can be clarified by setting it in contrast with its opposite, the absence of ambiguity. Ambiguity can be eliminated “by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it” (Beauvoir 2015, 8). In other words, ambiguous existence is neither pure inwardness nor pure externality; it neither escapes the sensible world, nor is it wholly engulfed in it. While Beauvoir’s often existentially motivated interest is directed towards historical investigation and concrete observations of experiences and social relations, Merleau-Ponty concentrates his phenomenological investigations on how bodily existence shows itself in its relation to the world as doubly-sensual in different ways. Firstly, I have

a body (*Leib*) and through it, I sense the world. In the innermost part of my ego, sensibility and corporeality delineate existence and place my ego in “a communication with the world more ancient than all thought,” which does not become fully clear to the ego (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 265). Sense constitution does not begin with a specific object, but with indeterminate ambiguous phenomena that depend on the context of perception and are conditioned in a living situation. The “indeterminacy as a positive phenomenon” and ambiguity as a constitutive element in the relationship between humans and the world must be recognized (7). At a certain point in my life, I become conscious of myself and realize that I always find myself in a situation because “I am thrown into a nature, and nature appears not only outside of me in Objects devoid of history but is also visible at the center of subjectivity” (361). My bodily being brings the situation into myself and it brings me into the situation. Birth, each beginning, perception or action situates me in the world and directs me towards the world. My habitualization in society already begins when I am first situated in the world. Thus, secondly, I am directed towards the world because of my historically and culturally formed body, which is, at the same time, an expression of my concrete ego. Since this concrete ego is a bodily one, an anonymity rests in it. This anonymous ego gives me the impression that “one perceives in me,” and pretends to be always already born and situated.

Thus, my being born is transformed into an “anonymous natality” that, in its fundamental anonymity, produces my corporeality in the dramatic tension between I-world-other in the history of meaning (224). In other words, in accordance with intention and subjective execution, the body possesses the existential possibility of understanding sense contexts, because it resides in the world and is part of the world. Being situated in the world and towards the world can be analyzed with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “drama,” by which he means that, as inherently intentional, human existence is always living in the world and is directed towards that world. Thus, his concept of drama illustrates that an existential analysis of bodily being-in-the-world can neither be represented in causal references nor in purely transcendental or everyday descriptive reflection. This drama always remains in its tense double meaning, its ambiguity. Therefore, “drama” should not be reduced to a metaphysical concept but should be considered and shown in its tension as an interpenetration. Later, Beauvoir will take over from Merleau-Ponty the insight

that this interpenetration presents itself as a reciprocal precondition of my existence, which is preserved by my worldly body and my embodied worldliness. As he writes, my “body is existence as congealed and generalized,” which appropriately takes over or transforms the factual situation of my existence; “existence is perpetual embodiment” (169). “‘Transcendence’ is the name we shall give to this movement in which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation” (173). Transcendence here means the existential overcoming of the existing, which, however, would neither be distinct nor unambiguous in its process, nor simply dependent on the mode of thinking.

This relationship of tension and interpenetration of the existential drama between immanence and transcendence cannot be experienced unambiguously, even in its concreteness, because an ambiguity is essential to existence, i.e., a multiple sense is always inherent in it. While Beauvoir contrasts immanence and transcendence and locates women’s situatedness and experience on the side of immanence, Merleau-Ponty rejects an opposition between immanence and transcendence. He gives various examples of “normal” but also “morbid” behavior (120). These examples reveal the conditions by which human existence projects itself into the world and is directed towards the world, while always remaining inhibited by its own bodily immanence, which remains bound not only to a situation, but also to a physical or psychic structure. The “original intentionality” is not simply an “I am directed to...” but an “I can,” an expression which, incidentally, is also mentioned frequently by Husserl. Depending on the situation and level of habitualization, this “I can” is more or less permeated by an “I cannot.” This “I cannot,” or inhibited intentionality, becomes particularly apparent in courses of movement in space, in hesitant looking, grasping, or speaking – in short, when the orientation towards the world, the spatial and interactive world with other people, is inhibited. Inhibited intentionality is an essential aspect of bodily existence, in particular, as the feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young famously pointed out, in “Throwing Like a Girl” (1980), of *female* bodily existence. Yet, as much as intentionality may be inhibited, it may also be transgressive in a way that is difficult for the person herself or for the social context. Bodily intentionality, whether inhibited or transgressive, is formed from birth onwards in intersubjective and social relationships. With birth, a person is exposed and situated in a relationship of belonging “to-the-world” and in various relationships “in-the-world.” Relationships

may permit and support more or less inhibited and transgressive modes of intentionality. First, I will turn to modes of inhibited intentionality in the context of the socialization of women. Then, I will thematize a transgressive form of intentionality that is difficult for those involved because it diverges from socially accepted normal behavior.

Inhibited Intentionality and Difficult Ambiguity

In her works, and especially in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir examines the situatedness of experience and questions its consequences. In doing so, she remains methodologically aligned with phenomenology through her focus on the descriptions of the body and lived experience developed by Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. Women, she argues, are exposed to men and androcentric social norms in their specific situation in such a way that is unfavorable to them.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre used the concept of ambiguity to fundamentally define the human being, who, as Beauvoir quotes, is a “being whose being is not to be, of that subjectivity which realizes itself only as presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others” (Beauvoir 2015, 8). But the free choice propagated by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007) is not a livable reality for women. With this observation, Beauvoir transforms the concepts of transcendence and immanence. Transcendence now no longer denotes, as it did in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, the mode of existence of the subject through which it can freely conceive itself without restrictions of intentionality. Beauvoir observes that, for women, certain practices and styles of upbringing and housework, as well as demands made upon their appearance and behavior, are all predetermined. Influenced primarily by this observation, as well as by her readings of Hegel, Marx, and Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir equates the female sphere of activity with immanence and the traditionally male sphere with transcendence.

Similar to slaves, she writes in 1947, in many civilizations women are submitted to a situation, “to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truth created by the males” (Beauvoir 2015, 40). The body “is” a situation, she writes in regard to gender, because “in the position I adopt – that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty – [...] if the body is not a *thing*, it is

a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (Beauvoir 2010, 68).

The body does not simply have a context, but is born into a situation of immanence. “The world is first present to the newborn only in the form of immanent sensations” (331). But then, through processes of naturalization, normalization, norming, and socialization, the girl or boy is brought forth and will live its embodied gender – as Judith Butler will also write later in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). The body is not simply a biological object, but the subject of experience in its immanence and inhibition. And this experience begins at the “scene of birth,” where gender shows itself and the path of naturalization, normalization, and standardization begins (Cavarero 1997, 211).

Beauvoir’s claim that “[o]ne is not born, one rather becomes, a woman” means that femininity and womanhood are based on one’s upbringing and socialization, which constitute the meaning of gender difference (Beauvoir 2010, 330).² One becomes a woman with and through her sensations and experiences. However, Beauvoir’s conception cannot simply be reduced to a sex/gender distinction or to the socialization of female roles. The “female” nature (sex) does not simply underlie her gender; nature is interpreted and values are attributed to it. Accordingly, Butler clarifies that gender is not natural, but naturalized. This naturalization is hidden under the supposed reality of gender. In temporally and bodily habitualized performative acts, gender is objectified in a historical and social discourse (Butler 1988, 531). In her various writings, Butler, like Beauvoir, places particular emphasis on social performance. The prenatal attribution “It’s a girl!” already naturalizes the girl’s “girlishness” through the normative power of linguistic attributions. As Butler writes, “The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (Butler 1993, 8). This normative power operates in different areas – each in its own specific way – yet it is always powerful and effective. Beauvoir investigated this effectiveness with recourse to Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the lived body and the primordial structures of existence, which, as the primordial structures of experience, determine our relationship to the world. The body thus does not simply have a context, but is lived bodily as the subject of experience.

In contrast to Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Beauvoir makes the political claim that social oppression divides the genders into two classes – the oppressor and the oppressed. For the oppressed, the possibility of tran-

scendence is always negated by oppression. Inspired by the phenomenological style of asking “how,” Beauvoir explores three questions, each touching on the theme of experience, the body, gender difference and sexuality. These questions are not new but may be posed anew by each generation – how has “feminine reality” been constituted, or how is gender difference experienced? (Beauvoir 2010, 38). How has woman been defined as Other? Furthermore, if woman is defined as Other, how can the world be described from the woman’s situation as it is presented to her? Whoever approaches these questions will – as Beauvoir wrote in 1949 – understand where “the Woman’s drama” lies that she – the woman – encounters (37). Whereas Merleau-Ponty used the notion of “drama” for the general description of bodily existence in the world, Beauvoir concretizes this concept to bring out the situation of women. She stylizes this drama as a conflict between the claim of the subject, who grasps herself as essential with a male prestige, and the situational imposition that constitutes her – the woman as “Other” – as inessential and object.

Beauvoir describes the lived experience of becoming woman as a *woman*. She meticulously traces and reconstructs the sensations, feelings, and experiences undergone by women on the basis of the situation imposed upon them, even where they are unaware of these feelings. This kind of self-description replaces the description of others, which often turns out to be an attribution of others. Descriptions of what “one” does, accepts, or avoids, disclose the situations *through* and *in* which women and their sensations are formed. Social practices – in Beauvoir’s context, those of the 1950s – cause boys and girls to be treated differently, and girls, accordingly, are standardized, normed, and treated as girls. Under the gaze of the Other, they experience the “drama of every existent – that is, the drama of one’s relation to the Other” in a formative way that can lead to “abandonment,” “anguish,” or even “contented passivity” (31f.) By using stories from everyday life, literature, and psychology, Beauvoir describes what is experienced or suffered in terms of bodily attributions, influenced in terms of disappointments, or expected in terms of activity or passivity. The woman “learns” how to be a woman, and even to “feel” like one.

A concomitant inhibited intentionality draws on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of motility, in which intentionality is anchored as an “I can.” In contrast, female bodily existence simultaneously holds its engagement in a socialized and self-imposed “I cannot” (Young 1980, 146). Girls experience

themselves physically as less active and space-taking, thus as more fragile and inhibited. Based on this observation, in line with Beauvoir, Young states that women occupy less space than would be physically possible for them and that female bodily existence is “self-referred” and thus lived “as an *object*” (151).

By illuminating an ambiguous transcendence, Young reveals a sexist oppression in contemporary society where women are physically and emotionally disabled. They are disabled, for example, by education and gazes, by being discouraged from physical activity and encouraged toward seated play, and by all that accompanies them since birth. Women learn to live their bodies as objects, dangerously exposed to the world, which is why they themselves cannot move openly and transcend themselves. This not only has consequences for a woman’s restricted movement in space but also for her sense and sensitivity of herself. Beauvoir brings out a dilemma that does not just lie in female consciousness but in her situation and relationship with men. Beauvoir refers to the Kinsey Report which states that “wives, more conscious of themselves, are more deeply inhibited” (Beauvoir 2010, 226). Whereas with Merleau-Ponty, a general concept of inhibited bodily intentionality can be discussed, Beauvoir points to the specific forms of socialization and situatedness of women which leads to the “ambiguity of the feminine attitude: the young woman both wants and rejects pleasure” (ibid.). Thus, Beauvoir goes even further than Young in her descriptions of the female range of movement in space by referring to very different typical cases of female ambiguities. Furthermore, by referring to “two transcendences” (849), Beauvoir has, on the one hand, laid the foundation for her studies in which women are described in their objecthood and passivity. On the other hand, she is also concerned with the emancipated woman who resists the role of passivity imposed on her, who works and demands to be creatively active like a man. Thus, she describes women as playing “both sides,” because they demand “old-fashion respect and modern esteem, they rely on old female magic and emancipatory rights” (850). In response, men fight back. And therefore, Beauvoir is not surprised, he is also “duplicitous” when he demands loyalty from the woman and at the same time treats her with mistrust and hostility (ibid.). The situation remains precarious for her because “she does not stand in front of man as a subject, but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity” (ibid.). In order to understand the situation of female existence, whose relationship to freedom and self-determination is highly

ambivalent, the recognition of existential ambiguity is central. At the same time, some persons who are strongly imposed upon by normalizing and often institutional regimes respond not with inhibited intentionality but with transgressive intentionality. They tend to transgress a given space and a particular situation. The next section thematizes how intentionality may not just be ambivalent because of forms of inhibition but also because of forms of transgression.

Transgressive Intentionality and Difficult Ambiguity

Taking Beauvoir's basic methodological approach of describing a situation and the living experience of a person, her sensitivities, and inner conflicts, we can also explore the environment and societal mechanisms for those who seem limitless and who transgress normal and normative borders with their behavior. Beauvoir focuses on modern society's regime and how it "successfully" installs "normal" behavior and feelings in women and the elderly. In the following, I consider another group of people who live outside of society and yet inside of institutions, namely, those who require care and demonstrate "challenging behavior." The term "challenging behavior" is used primarily in psychology in relation to people with mental, developmental, or learning disabilities (Emerson 1995).

The attempt to define challenging behavior leads to the observation that it does not only involve a single person. "Challenging" behavior presupposes someone who is challenged by that behavior. Certainly, there is a person who, for various reasons, tends to behave in a way that is considered difficult. This behavior is also always embedded in a certain social and institutional practice that is already shaped and normed. What is considered challenging behavior has to do with the caregivers, the social environment, and what is considered normal within a social context. The phenomena of "challenging behavior" and the responses registered to it are historically contingent, usually socially explosive, and personally difficult – as well as challenging as a philosophical theme.

The clinical gerontology and dementia researchers Jiska Cohen-Mansfield and Colleen Ray report cases of challenging behavior which show that the environment and context influence forms of intentionality and behavior. Here are two very different cases depicting various interactions between the patient, other people, the situation, and the environmental setting:

Mr. E. was in a nursing home and was bothered by a female resident who was vocal and would ask Mr. E. why he looked at her. Mr. E. grabbed her by the neck in a choking gesture, possibly in order to keep her quiet. Feeling unable to handle this situation, the home sent Mr. E. to acute care. In the hospital, he had his own room and did not bother anyone. Therefore, he was discharged back to the nursing home, with a report that he was calm and content. In the nursing home, he was placed back with the vocal resident and the previous episode and its consequences re-occurred. Following three such episodes, the home refused to take him back from acute care. Mr. E. was, therefore, sent to a regional behavioral unit with many vocal and aggressive residents where his aggression is continuously triggered, which results in chemical restraint, followed by functional decline and no improvement in behavior. (Cohen-Mansfield and Ray 2014, 1)

Mr. F. has repetitious episodes in which he screams. When Cohen-Mansfield asked whether he could be in pain, the staff responded, “This is the way he is.” As Cohen-Mansfield and Ray write, “Since he has been on the unit for so long, they accept the behaviors and stop inquiring about their triggers and origins. Repetitive vocalizations are so distressing to hear, yet staff has normalized them. The staff did not see any need for action” (Cohen-Mansfield and Ray 2014, 1).

Challenging behavior can be verbal, physical, aggressive, or non-aggressive. It need not be described as only one or the other. In other words, the observer may have an effect on how the behavior is described. It is part of the concept of challenging behavior that someone is challenged, be it by loud complaining, persistent shouting, screaming for help, insults, scolding, physical beating around the head, hurting others or themselves, restless running around, knocking, or efforts to run away.

Different explanatory models distinguish various causes of these behaviors and are linked to different therapeutic approaches:

- A The *Biological Model* is focused on neurotransmitters. Correct medication is required.

- B The *Behavioral Model* (Trigger Model) is focused on details or single elements that (presumably) trigger certain behaviors, e.g., a closed door triggers one's banging against it. A change of the condition, e.g., open doors, is suggested for such a patient.
- C With the *Environmental Vulnerability/Lower Stress Threshold Model*, the external circumstances and environmental factors of patients are analyzed in a broad way. Challenging behavior may imply, for instance, that a patient needs less stimulation, or perhaps even more stimulation if the patient's environment has become profoundly boring to that person.
- D As the name suggests, the *Needs Model* focuses on the needs or (possible) interests of patients. Many patients, especially those affected by dementia, have difficulty caring for their own needs. They often do not know how to explain their needs, which can sometimes be difficult to integrate into the context of a care facility (e.g., sleeping until nine o'clock, followed by a coffee in bed, etc.). Thus, certain behaviors (such as restlessness, aggressiveness, etc.) may compensate for these unmet needs (Cohen-Mansfield 2013).

These cases and models show how someone's embodiedness and the interactions between a person and her environment may substantially impact the various ways in which she is intentionally embedded in her context, as well as how modes of intentionality and behavior may be influenced by particular circumstances. Likewise, these cases also show that the routine of normalization habituates the associated individuals, e.g., the caretakers in this case, as well as the institutionalized practice. Processes of normalization and naturalization may not "successfully" impact the needs or vulnerabilities of particular persons and so, their way of being remains in the ambiguous existential state of transgressing the "wrong" situation. However, if it is always possible to tranquilize someone then this has a very high price, namely, to kill the ambiguity of existence and to inhibit intentionality to the rudiment of depletion. Ambiguity is a constitutive element in the relationship between human and the world; it is central to existence and lived experiences. Its liquidation is destructive to human life and philosophically uninspiring.

Acknowledging ambiguity allows the introduction of a cross-disciplinary approach of, for instance, medical humanities, political theory, empirical analysis, and phenomenology. The phenomenological approach to both inhibited and transgressive intentionalities brings out the lived

experiences of the person affected in her particular situation and social structures. How people respond to these experiences, and their consequent actions, depends upon the perceptual and evaluative views of the observers. These views may be inspired by different bio-medical, psychological, or social perspectives and prejudices. Thus, it is the task of phenomenological investigation to shed light on the central ambiguity of human existence and on the manifold perspectives of cross-disciplinary approaches. As Beauvoir clearly states, the “fundamental ambiguity of the human condition” means that the future will always be open to the possibilities of “opposing choices,” the “flight from the anguish of freedom,” or a life lived with its adventures and meaningful moments (Beauvoir 2015, 116).

Notes

- 1 I dedicate this text to Veronica Vasterling who has shown that interrelating the work of Arendt, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty enriches phenomenological and hermeneutic research.
- 2 Luce Irigaray criticizes Beauvoir with regard to the question of what role psychoanalysis should play. Out of this criticism she formulates the thesis: “Je suis née femme, mais je dois encore devenir cette femme que je suis par nature” (Irigaray 1992, 168). The assumption of different given structures points to substantial differences between the two authors, especially when it comes to questions about culture and society.

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