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Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Freedom and Absolute Evil

ANNE MORGAN

Simone de Beauvoir held that human experience is intrinsically ambiguous and that there are no values extrinsic to experience, but she also designated some actions as absolute evil. This essay explains how Beauvoir utilized an intrinsic absolute value to ground an action-guiding principle of freedom that justifies her notion of evil. Morgan's analysis counters Robin May Schott's objections that Beauvoir failed to systematically justify her notion of absolute evil and that Beauvoir shifted from a "logic of action" to a "logic of history" when she utilized the concept.

Simone de Beauvoir held that there are no values extrinsic to human choice and experience. If a certain thing or action is to be preferred over some other, the determination cannot be made with reference to a divine decree or "an inhuman objectivity" (1948/1964, 14); rather, such designations can only make sense with regard to the concrete needs, desires, and projects of human beings. Moreover, she held that the ontological status of humans is ambiguous. As Beauvoir explained in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, humans find themselves to be both free to choose their own destinies and unceasingly fettered by their bodily, socially, and historically embedded facticity. The human has no choice but to exist within and mediate between these two modes of its being. Thus ambiguity exists at the very core of what it means to be human.

Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity describes how, despite their ambiguity, humans can give meaning to their lives and how they can live together ethically, each respecting the unique freedom and embeddedness of every other. But of course, every ethical theory must also deal with the phenomenon of wrongdoing or evil in both its lesser and its extreme forms. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and "An Eye for an Eye," Beauvoir locates what she takes to be two of the most extreme

forms of wrongdoing and describes them as absolute evil.¹ In the former text, she discusses the lynching of African Americans in the United States (1948/1964, 146); in the latter, she examines Nazi suppression and annihilation of millions of Jews (1946/2004, 248). Beauvoir also discusses Nazi treatment of Jews in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but she does not term it “absolute evil” there. As I will explain, human freedom occurs on four levels for Beauvoir: one ontological and three moral. I will argue that each instance of absolute evil is characterized by a deprivation of human *moral* freedom on each level on which it occurs (although absolute evil is often accompanied by the destruction of ontological freedom as well). However, if one considers the information presented thus far, the following question quickly presents itself: how can Beauvoir’s ethical analysis, based as it is on the ambiguity of human ontology and action, account for any absolute value, much less the designation of any action as an *absolute evil*? If values that are extrinsic to human choice and experience are philosophically off-limits, and human existence is intrinsically ambiguous, then the claim that there is *absolute* evil appears, on the surface, to be inconsistent.

Robin May Schott recognizes this problem and offers what appears to be the first significant and focused discussion of it in her essay “Beauvoir on the Ambiguity of Evil.” Schott proposes that “the concept of ambiguity that [Beauvoir] explicitly addresses in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* provides a key for understanding her approach to the problem of evil.” However, she also expresses concern regarding the adequacy of Beauvoir’s ethics. Schott states, for instance, that Beauvoir fails to “systematically justify her use of the concept of evil” (2003, 229) and that her emphasis on the ambiguity of evil in human action is irreconcilable with designating some actions to be absolute evil—that is, that Beauvoir shifts from an appeal to the “logic of action” to a “logic of history” when she attempts a justification (236–37, 243). According to Schott, it is in discussing absolute evil that Beauvoir’s “agent-based approach to ethics breaks down” (243).² Schott has thus proposed that there is a substantial problem at the heart of Beauvoir’s ethics and, in so doing, has created a challenge for Beauvoir scholars.

I am sympathetic with Schott’s interpretation of Beauvoir’s ethics and treatment of evil, as the concept of ambiguity certainly does play a central role for Beauvoir. However, I also believe that a different reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is not only possible but also indeed tenable. Thus first I will show that although Beauvoir may not have expressed her notion of evil in a systematic mode, one may nevertheless derive from her work a systematic and *internally* justifiable account of absolute evil. In order to demonstrate this account, I will discuss the structure of Beauvoir’s ethics in some detail. One of the main differences between Schott’s interpretation and mine is that, while Schott emphasizes nearly exclusively the ambiguous or contextual aspects of Beauvoir’s ethics, I maintain that it is useful to understand how Beauvoir also

utilized three levels of human moral freedom to integrate an action-guiding principle. I will argue that it is in reference to the principle of freedom that Beauvoir's systematic treatment of the notion of absolute evil becomes apparent. Second, I will utilize Beauvoir's discussion of lynching in order to show that her use of the term *absolute evil* requires no shift; what Schott takes to be a shift is already accounted for by Beauvoir's phenomenology of human ontology and intentional action.

HUMAN ONTOLOGY

An explicit illumination of Beauvoir's account of human ontology is helpful in understanding her overall ethical theory. If I, as a human being, reflect upon my ontology or my existence, two main facts or characteristics are revealed: (1) intentionality enables one's act of reflection and this reflection itself is carried out by consciousness; and (2) consciousness discloses the object of its reflection, and unless consciousness considers its own intentionality, it is not identical with that which it discloses (1948/1964, 41).³ Consciousness, or the *for-itself*, is then an intentionality that discloses, differentiates, and reflects upon being, or the *in-itself*. According to Beauvoir, it is upon these qualities or capacities that the human "spontaneously cast[s] herself into the world"; it is in virtue of one's intent, desire, and ability to disclose being that one is *ontologically* or "*originally free*" (25, emphasis added). One enters the world in the mode of desiring to disclose being (12); and this initial desire, according to Beauvoir, is the same as a desire for freedom (24).⁴

Amidst the reflection, I, as human consciousness, also find that I am tied inextricably to being. I have a body that appears as an expression of my "relationship to the world" (1948/1964, 41). This body is, for Beauvoir, a "historical idea" or a factual situation (35); but what does she mean by a historical, factual situation? First, I find that I am flesh-and-blood; I require food, water, and other physical necessities. I am a physical object that can be "crushed" (7), and a body that will decay and die. Second, although, as a human, I do not create the world—the world in its physicality existed prior to any human (28)—I find myself situated, along with all other humans (7), in a world where objects are already imbued with human meaning (74). Others have come before and others currently co-exist. They have projected and continue to project social, cultural, economic, and symbolic systems—in short, a historical situation that I now disclose through my consciousness (40–41).

When I disclose being, I reveal the values that humans have already projected upon the earth (1948/1964, 71), but I also affect or create a projection upon the earth through my disclosure. In this way, the other and society are revealed through and inextricably bound to the individual's ontology. I reveal myself as a subject who is both consciousness and facticity, who is "in turn an

object for others” and who is “an individual in the collectivity” upon which I am dependent (7).

As mentioned above, the human is an intentional creature. Each person is a conscious actor, and each person’s actions project a concrete impact upon the world (1948/1964, 41). By choosing actions or projects, I take part in and choose the objects, social meanings, and values that are cast back onto the world as facticity for myself and for others. I necessarily act upon prior facticity that was created by all past human action; I have no other choice. For Beauvoir, past action constitutes present facticity such that it is what is there to act upon in the present. It is a springboard toward the future. But I also actively create the facticity upon which I and others *can* choose further action. As consciousness, I am free to choose the basis of what will become, in the future, my own action; as a factual being, I am constrained by the choices others have made and are making, as well as my own past and present choices. As such, human facticity contains three aspects: (1) what no human has created (the natural objects that humans manipulate in carrying out their projects); (2) what the plurality of past actors have projected (that which is imbued with previous human significance); and (3) what I and coexistent consciousnesses are currently projecting. Each action is part of an ongoing contribution to human facticity. A notion of temporality is then inherent in the ontology of facticity. I utilize the human past and present, in order to project action toward the future. Thus Beauvoir proposes a temporal, interactive relationship between the freedom of consciousness and the facticity in which it is embedded.

AMBIGUITY

According to Beauvoir, the human dual existence, as both mind and matter, is the origin of the ambiguity of the human condition (1948/1964, 7). But what is the unique quality that makes a person human for Beauvoir? According to Schott, it is death that “marks us as human” (2003, 231). She argues both that without “death, the relation of humans to themselves and to the world would be profoundly disarranged” and that “death is also that which makes the human condition ambiguous” (230–31). While it is true that for Beauvoir a person is human only in that she is mortal (1948/1964, 82), I would propose that she did not take death to be the defining characteristic of a human. Beauvoir notes that humans share the phenomena of decay and death with plants and nonhuman animals. The difference for humans is that they are conscious of this movement toward death, “which the animal and the plant merely undergo” (7). The fundamental ambiguity resides in the human’s existence as both consciousness and facticity, of which the phenomenon of death is only a part. Our unique form of consciousness sets us apart from that which it discloses. Thus consciousness, with its freedom of choice, is the mode of being that will take precedence over

facticity, although ontological freedom must always be considered within the concrete facticity in which it must function.

THE CONVERSION

The “existentialist conversion” (1948/1964, 14) contains three distinct moments that correspond to the three levels in which consciousness *finds itself to be ontologically free*. These levels are: recognition of the ontological, intentional action, and social interaction. All three moments, taken together, make up Beauvoir’s conception of what is required for moral action. The moments are steps that the human must take in order to be morally free. According to Beauvoir, humans have always existed in this gulf between mind and matter. Most philosophers and ethicists, however, “have tried to mask it.” They have attempted “to reduce mind to matter, . . . to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance” (7). Beauvoir proposes instead that we “assume our fundamental ambiguity” (14). The immediate task then is to understand just what this assumption means and what it entails.

The assumption is part of the conversion, and the latter begins with the ontological reflection upon the existence of humans that I explained above. Beauvoir likens the conversion to Husserl’s *epoché* (1948/1964, 14). Husserl held that if a person brackets, or sets aside, the question of whether the world and its objects exist, she will be led to a clearer understanding of the processes of consciousness (1950/1999, 22–23, 28). Beauvoir proposes an analogous move. If I bracket my preconceived notions about the reasons for human existence and reflect seriously upon human ontology, I will “be brought to the consciousness of [my] true condition” (1948/1964, 14). I must confront the ontology of the human in its ambiguous and temporal aspects. Beauvoir notes that in order to be capable of moral questioning and responsibility, one needs to be aware of how the human will develops “in the course of time” (26). As an epistemic precondition for the conversion, I have to be able both to recognize myself in past action and to see myself in the future (27).

THE FIRST MOMENT OF THE CONVERSION

Now, when confronted with the ambiguity of my own condition, I may choose to flee. I may choose to deny my ambiguity with the attempt to be either fully in-itself or fully for-itself. This is the first point at which the human may experience failure (1948/1964, 23). I have “no means for becoming the being that [I am] not” (11), and I can choose to deny the mode in which I exist. If I assert that I am pure immanence, I deny my own ability to reflect upon myself and the world. If I assert that I am pure transcendence, I will be hard-pressed to explain the existence of the body to which I am attached. Moreover, if I define the

human as exclusively either, I reject any possibility of an ethics (10). I cannot offer a moral imperative to nature; it has no means of heeding. Conversely, if I have no factual tie to the world then I affect no one; as such, any moral command would be empty. Beauvoir maintains that it is only if the human accepts the gulf in being that the notion of an ethics even makes sense. Only if the human is a consciousness who can reflect and question, only if she is an actor whose projected values weigh upon the world, and only if she can fail in some primary sense, can there be a role for ethics (10–11).

The original human condition involves the possibility of failure. I have a desire to be either for-itself or in-itself, which is a desire for *self-coincidence* (1948/1964, 12),⁵ but I will fail to fulfill that desire if I posit myself as pure transcendence or immanence. However, according to Beauvoir, this failure is itself ambiguous (23), because each of us (at least potentially) has the means of assuming the failure. Consider from where the gulf in being arises. According to Beauvoir, it originates within the human itself. She explains that the human is a “being who *makes* [itself] a lack of being *in order that there might be* being.”⁶ Consciousness is an intentionality that makes itself present to the world, or brings itself into existence, so that it may disclose being. That consciousness brings itself into existence means that its *desire* for disclosure is “not inflicted . . . from without” (11). It is not externally compelled, and thus consciousness lacks both an extrinsic purpose and the means to justify its original appearance in the world. But note that, for Beauvoir, one comes into existence in the mode of *desiring* to disclose being and that this desire is equivalent to a desire for freedom (24). If I take this desire for disclosure/freedom to be my purpose, my reason for existing, then I transform the original failure into a success. If I am content with this situation, then I *assume* my original potential for failure and, in effect, I *coincide* exactly with myself, because I am no longer tormented by a desire to be other than what I am (13). Since in order to succeed in this assumption I must continuously assert the fundamental difference between my free consciousness and that which it discloses, I can only rejoin myself to the extent that I exist within the tension or distance between consciousness and factual being (13).

In order to get at the first moment of the conversion, the reader should consider what has been presented thus far. I am consciousness and embedded facticity and I have an initial desire to disclose being. I also have a desire for self-coincidence, and in order to fulfill this wish I must recognize and accept the ambiguous state of my being. It is in my interest to agree to remain in that state. But I also found that my embedded facticity is inextricably bound to the freedom and facticity of others. Since I inhabit the world with these others who affect me, it is also in my interest to recognize their freedom. In recognizing the other's ontological freedom, I identify the other as one who can potentially coincide with herself as I can. Thus, the first moment of the conversion is the

recognition of the interdependent conditions of my own ontological freedom, and due to my interest in freedom, this recognition compels me toward the epistemic responsibility to coincide with myself and acknowledge the ontological freedom of others.

THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF FREEDOM

Now, according to Beauvoir, this initial turning toward ontological freedom is an acknowledgment that I can justify my own existence only in reference to my initial desire to disclose being—the primary factor that makes one human. She explains that a person who has achieved this first moment of conversion will “not agree to recognize any foreign absolute” (1948/1964, 14), but will realize that one’s existence “asserts itself as an *absolute* which must seek its justification within itself” (13, emphasis added).

In making these statements, Beauvoir has confirmed her notion that no extrinsic absolute value exists; there is nothing outside human choice and existence that compels one toward some particular project or value. The original value was located in the desire for disclosure or freedom. But how is it that this value has come to be seen as absolute? Beauvoir states, both in a passage quoted above and in “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” that that which is absolute will carry within itself its “reason for being”—it will offer its own justification (1944/2004, 90–91). I utilize this notion again below in order to facilitate an explanation of absolute evil; for now, though, consider this definition in conjunction with human consciousness. It is because the ontological freedom of consciousness specifically is the mode of being that finds its own justification within its own functions and desires that Beauvoir holds that freedom is an absolute value. It is *the first justification*. As such, any other justified value is derived from it. It is also contextual. Beauvoir began by describing the ambiguous state of the human, and subsequently located an *intrinsic absolute*.

As the first justification, the absolute value of freedom performs an important function in the conversion. It is the crux of the Beauvoirean argument. According to Beauvoir, one desires the ontological freedom of consciousness; moreover, it is both the defining characteristic of a human and the value basis of human life. In offending freedom, I simultaneously (a) dehumanize myself and (b) cut off my avenue toward future justification. Recall also that my and others’ past actions exist in the present as a springboard for future action. Present actions that offend freedom, then, may restrict options both in the present and in the future. That is, (c) the actions of others potentially restrict my future possibilities, as mine may limit both myself and others. Moreover, as freedom is the fundamental justification of human action, in projecting restrictive facticity for others, (d) I leave myself open to their justified attack. Thus my offense to freedom has an existent or potential harm to me on four counts.

THE SECOND MOMENT OF THE CONVERSION

Consider what the absolute value of human freedom entails for the individual actor. First, upon reflection, I note that, given the description of human ontology, it is at least partially through my freedom that I project the values and facticity upon which I will achieve future action. It would be then self-defeating to project values for myself that deny my ability to create future values. And the desire to disclose being, the capacity to reveal value projected in the past and present and to affect my own projection of value onto the world, is that which makes me what I am. If I do not project value into the world that respects and accords with my own freedom, I will be paralyzed in the future by the facticity that I have previously projected. Each human finds herself in the same situation. It goes against one's interest to deny one's own freedom. Thus the second moment of the conversion is my recognition of my desire to project into the future, and due to my interest in freedom, this recognition compels me toward the responsibility to will myself free.

THE THIRD MOMENT OF THE CONVERSION

The second moment displays only part of my interest in freedom. It is not difficult to see that I must will myself free if I will experience freedom; however, Beauvoir also maintains that in order to will myself free, I must will freedom for all others as well (1948/1964, 73). The notion is that by projecting restrictive facticity for another, I restrict myself. A defense of this Beauvoiran position may prove difficult and would certainly require more space than is available here. As such, I will be content to touch upon a line of argument that might be utilized in such an endeavor.

Now, Beauvoir is concerned with the fact that others have criticized existentialism for lacking a "principle for making choices" (1948/1964, 10). She wants to show that the existentialist conversion, a moral turn toward human freedom, will help "discover a principle of action whose range will be universal" (23)—in that it will apply to all humans in an *interdependent* way. It is then important to note that the ontology of the human is not just a description of a multiplicity of individuals who are "separate existants"; rather, humans are "at the same time . . . bound to each other" (18), because the projection of one becomes the potential basis upon which any may act.

Consider what the effect will be if I will myself free but also will that the other should have a restrictive facticity. Reflect upon a situation in which a husband wills open-ended freedom for himself, but also wills a restrictive factual situation for his wife. He wants to exist within a situation in which he has a choice between many different kinds of jobs, but he is concerned that if his wife has the same kinds of opportunities, her choices will limit his.

Note that the husband is acting from previously projected facticity. Perhaps he learned in his youth that different activities are well suited to different genders or that, as I heard multiple times in my youth, women who work outside the home take wages away from men, the appropriate breadwinners. Since such facticity has been widely projected, the husband must react to it in one way or another. If he is going to reject it, he will need to make a concerted effort to overcome previous projections; he will fight against common belief and run the social risks (in this case, teasing from peers, receiving emasculating comments, and so on) associated with shunning accepted practice. In the scenario under consideration, the husband chooses the easier route and acts in accordance with previous projections. He thus wills that his wife should have a limited education and that she should only have the option to work inside their home. He projects values that demarcate some kinds of tasks as masculine—those he wants to reserve for himself—and other tasks and projects as feminine. He feels that he has successfully marked off his territory, but *now he has to defend it*. He has to keep projecting values that differentiate his tasks and himself as masculine, lest his wife might wish to participate in the tasks he wants to reserve for himself. Since he cannot cease from projecting these particular values, he does not have an *open-ended future*. He has, in effect, restricted his own facticity by willing that his wife's opportunities should be restricted.

The harms inflicted on the wife—the blatant disregard for her personhood and the restriction of her freedom and concrete possibilities—are obvious. But how has the husband offended his own freedom? First, her ontological freedom is of the same type as his; in restricting her, he projects values that denigrate his own freedom as well as freedom in general. He dehumanizes both of them (and all other humans). Second, since freedom is the first justification (all other justified values are derivative), he cuts off any possibility of a foundation for his actions. He simply has no justification. Third, as noted above, he restricts his own possibilities, because he cannot cease projecting certain masculine values (unless he takes steps to will freedom for the wife). For Beauvoir, freedom requires an open-ended future (1948/1964, 31, 60); if he has willed himself into a corner, he is no longer free.

Are these three harms experienced by the husband of the same magnitude as those experienced by the wife? Of course not. He will experience greater power, opportunities, and income; she will likely experience dependency. But the harm to himself need not be of the same practical import to be existent. On the philosophical level, the consequence to him is immense: (a) he dehumanizes himself, (b) negates any justification for his actions, and (c) effectively restricts, even if to a lesser extent, his own freedom. Point (b) suggests the fourth type of harm that is at least a potential outcome of his actions. Since his actions are without justification, (d) he leaves himself open to justified suppression, carried out in the interest of freedom, by the wife and/or anyone else who is

affected (potentially, all of us). Beauvoir's theory does not entail sympathy, or even necessarily mercy, for a person who wills restrictive facticity for another (unless sympathy and/or mercy are avenues, in context, that enable freedom). Rather, on her view, our interest in freedom may require that he be fought (1948/1964, 136). Our humanity and the only means by which action may be justified may demand it.

Thus, according to Beauvoir, human facticity is interdependent in such a way that if one will exist within a state of freedom, then one must will freedom for all others as well. To attempt to will freedom for the self alone is as destructive as willing a restrictive future for oneself. The two actions potentially have the same effect. Humans share their facticity in a communal and interdependent way. That is why, for Beauvoir, the "me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship" (1948/1964, 72). Both relations are inherent to the human ontology. The fact is that others are my concern, as I am theirs (72). Thus, the third moment of the conversion is my recognition that humans are factually interdependent, and due to my interest in freedom, this recognition compels me to will all others free at the same time that I will myself free.

THE PRINCIPLE OF FREEDOM

Beauvoir's analysis thus far reveals a fourfold conception of human freedom. The first level is ontological freedom, and upon it, the three moral levels are derived in the conversion. Each moment of the conversion is precipitated by recognition of some crucial aspect of the human ontology; one is then compelled, due to one's foundational interest in freedom, to accept the respective ontological, personal, and/or social responsibility. The human is a factually embedded ontological freedom; thus she has an epistemic responsibility to coincide with herself and to recognize the freedom of others. The human has the desire to disclose being and project signification onto the world; she thus has a responsibility to will herself free. She also desires to enact free choice among a plurality of actors, each of whom is potentially affected by and affects her choice; thus she has a responsibility to will all humans free.

At each level of this triad, Beauvoir appeals to interest in order to extract the human's responsibility from her freedom. Beauvoir wants to establish that being concerned with others, from a stance regarding one's own interest in freedom, is distinct from egoistic ethics. The charge of egoism cannot apply in the case of Beauvoiran ethics, because each freedom is so intermingled with every other, that each human shall have to consider the freedoms of others, if she wants to be morally free. When projects conflict, which they undoubtedly will, some humans will, on occasion, acquiesce to the will of others in order to accommodate the plurality of actors. Moreover, if the human is acting out of

love and friendship, she may do so happily. The reader should also note that at each level of moral freedom or at each step along the way toward truly moral action, Beauvoir appeals to the ambiguous context in which the human is located. An emphasis on context and ambiguity is never lost.

However, Beauvoir has specifically stated that she is moving toward a principle by which to guide action (1948/1964, 10, 18, 23). She says, for instance, that everyone should be concerned about the freedom of others and help them achieve their freedom (60, 61). However, I do not find what I consider to be a fully formed principle spelled out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Toward the end of the book, Beauvoir does specify that “the precept will be to treat the other . . . as a freedom so that [the other’s] end may be freedom” (142). I take this statement to be the fullest explanation of the principle, and I propose to modify it thus: *one should recognize the ontological conditions of one’s own freedom and that of others, and act so as to treat oneself and other humans as freedom so that each human’s end may be freedom*. As this formulation specifically addresses each level of freedom, I shall take it to express Beauvoir’s purpose.

HUMAN WELL BEING

Now, the ontology of the human and the principle of freedom, when taken together, perform two important functions. First, they enable a notion of human well being against which one can compare and evaluate the factual situations of different humans. An entirely unharmed human will be able to view herself and others as free actors who are responsible and accountable to each other. She will exist in a situation in which all her physical needs are attainable (she will have food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and so on), and she will be educated regarding the knowledge that humans have cumulatively amassed (1948/1964, 82). She will experience physical and economic security. In other words, the existent social, cultural, economic, and symbolic systems will acknowledge her unique existence as an individual among the plurality of humans. She will be able to act in a way that is commensurate with the principle of freedom.

Second, the two factors mentioned above offer a concrete (contextual) and principled way to understand the phenomenon of absolute evil. Recall that the principle of freedom is based on the absolute value of human freedom, and that what is absolute carries its own justification. For Beauvoir, human freedom is the first and only absolute value. It justifies itself. What can it mean then to discuss absolute evil? It is not that absolute evil justifies itself; rather, it is that, when compared to the absolute value of human freedom, actions that Beauvoir calls absolute evil have no justification whatsoever. Moral freedom exists on three levels; hence that which has no justification will offend, thwart, and/or deprive human beings of moral freedom on each level that it is manifest.

LYNCHING AND ABSOLUTE EVIL

The lynching of African Americans is a clear example of an offense against moral freedom. Recall that, according to Schott, Beauvoir is unable to justify her use of the term *absolute evil* with regard to lynching. Schott maintains that Beauvoir shifts from an appeal to the “logic of action” to the “logic of history” when she attempts the justification. First, one should note that Schott is not clear about what she means by the “logic of history.” She refers to Beauvoir’s statement that lynching “represents the survival of an obsolete civilization, the perpetuation of a struggle of races which has to disappear; it is a fault without justification or excuse” (Beauvoir 1948/1964, 146).⁷ I assume that it is Beauvoir’s reference to an “obsolete civilization” that prompts Schott’s objection. In order to counter Schott’s position, I will explain Beauvoir’s statement within the context of what I have presented thus far.

African Americans who lived in the post–Civil War South existed within a very restrictive facticity. When one compares their situation with the notion of human well being described above, one could hardly assert that African Americans were well situated to recognize themselves as freedom. The values projected throughout the history of slavery had created an environment in which African Americans were viewed as intellectually and morally inferior. The economic situation was such that they could barely provide for themselves and their families. Even after slavery was abolished, they remained economically dependent upon Southern whites. In most cases, they were denied an education. In short, whites denied African Americans the means to see themselves as free actors—their ability to view themselves as ontological freedom was deeply offended prior to any act of lynching. Amidst this oppressive factual situation, white vigilantes took it upon themselves to hunt down and hang individual blacks for alleged crimes.

Consider the vigilante’s act. This actor may or may not have been in touch with the conditions of his own ontological freedom; however, but he enacted willful, intentional action (based upon the prior facticity that devalued African Americans) in order to destroy the ontological freedom of the African American. In addition to completely cutting off the African American’s freedom, it is unlikely that the African American could see himself as a free actor during the lynching. His only choice would have been to desperately try to escape. Lynching thus successfully prevents the African American from enacting his freedom on any level. Consider also the projection of value that is cast back upon the facticity of the situation. With each lynching, the whites became surer of the value that held blacks in an inferior position; even the white’s facticity became further solidified into a situation that encouraged him to view himself not as free, but as a person whose task was to beget further violence. The abject condition in which the black person was thrust confirmed that he was indeed

inferior. Thus each lynching made the next easier to justify. With each lynching, the African American community was further denigrated. The acts projected denigration. Moreover, all African Americans had to live in fear that they, a family member, or a friend would be next; the ability to see themselves as free actors with an open-ended future was cut off. The result is that the lynching further solidified the facticity that enabled and encouraged all the actors to deny the subjectivity of African Americans. Freedom was thus deprived at every level on which it occurs. Thus the act of lynching is an absolute evil: "It is a fault without justification or excuse."

Did Beauvoir appeal to a "logic of history" to make this justification? It does not appear so; but by what justification did she call this "an obsolete civilization"? Consider the notion of temporality that is described in the human ontology. Past and present actions are springboards by which one enacts future actions. That which is obsolete has no future use. To call this civilization obsolete, then, is to say that it has no future use with regard to the absolute value that is human freedom. Allowing lynching to occur casts facticity upon the world that has no function regarding the human good or well being. As such, it "has to disappear" in order for any human to act morally, in accordance with the principle of freedom, in the future. No shift to the "logic of history" is present in Beauvoir's justification; or, if one prefers, the "logic of history" is accounted for in Beauvoir's ontology of human action.

This description of absolute evil answers Schott's charge against Beauvoir. It also provides an example from which one may infer how Beauvoir conceived of evil in general. If freedom is the human good, or that which enables the human to carry out its purpose of disclosing being, then evil exists only in reference to that good; evil is always a deprivation of human freedom. Evil acts occur when a human fails to uphold one of the responsibilities to freedom. It may be enacted willfully or not. In general, willful action entails a greater evil, because in this case the actor has seen himself as a freedom capable of intentional action. He failed to see in turn that the other is a fellow subject. If the actor carries out an evil act, but does not know of, or is not fully aware of, the conditions necessary for his own freedom and the freedom of the other, then, while the act is still evil, it is less so. In this case, the actor has not seen himself as a freedom, and this step is a prerequisite to acknowledging the freedom of another. Evil may be enacted in a variety of ways; after all, humans have free choice. Given this context, it is perhaps helpful to view freedom and evil on a continuum. Freedom is at one extreme; absolute evil at the other. The actions at either end of the continuum will be easier to identify. Actions that fall in the middle have an ambiguous character, as this is the point at which different freedoms have to be weighed one against another.

While Beauvoir's system of ethics has the ambiguity of human ontology as its core, it is nevertheless based upon principle—namely, the principle of freedom.

Moreover, it is in reference to freedom that Beauvoir's systematic treatment of the notion of absolute evil becomes apparent. The reasoning that justifies her use of the term is built into her ethical system; thus, her use of it requires no shift. According to Beauvoir, all human action requires justification and freedom is, on her view, the foundation of each. Evil exists only with regard to freedom and actions that offend freedom on every level in which it is manifest may only be called absolute evil.

NOTES

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1. As Schott points out, in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes the oppression of women as an absolute evil, whether the oppressive situation is inflicted or consensual (2003, 233; and Beauvoir 1952/1993, liv). While my analysis of Beauvoir's notion of absolute evil is applicable to this case, I do not discuss it here.

2. Schott is also concerned that Beauvoir's utilization of the master/slave dialectic, in order to analyze social conflict, is "inadequate to account for how human beings create extreme situations of evil such as that of genocide" (2003, 236). In a forthcoming *Hypatia* essay entitled "Beauvoir's Ethics, the Master/Slave Dialectic, and Eichmann as a Sub-man," I will respond to Schott's view and contend that Beauvoir's account is not only adequate but that it also has much in common with the qualities that Schott finds to be preferable in the work of Ervin Staub (1989; in Schott 2003, 236). That essay will utilize Beauvoir's discussion of the Nazi treatment of the Jews.

3. For Beauvoir, disclosure is a dual activity. When I disclose the world, I simultaneously reveal it and contribute "to reinvesting it with human signification" (1948/1964, 41).

4. A problem of some consequence becomes apparent at this point in Beauvoir's ethics, because her definitions of disclosure and freedom do not appear to point to one and the same thing. That is, while every action is disclosure (revealing something of the world and contributing to further signification), every action need not originate from freedom (consciousness and choice). The latter acts seem to be a subset of the former. Some actions, for instance, have their origin in biological, hormonal, and/or conditioned responses (Deacon 1997, 434; Geary 2005, 202–4), and it would certainly be odd to depict these actions as free (deriving from choice). This problem is significant because, as I explain below, Beauvoir's argument hangs on the notion that the desires for disclosure and freedom are one and the same.

5. The desire for self-coincidence is the desire to escape the ambiguity at the center of the human condition. I may wish to be or to melt into the landscape that is before me (Beauvoir 1948/1964, 12); I may try to deny my factual existence, and assert that I am only and purely consciousness; alternately, I may try to simultaneously be both

for-and-in-itself, in much the same way that humans have described the being that would belong to the perfect deity (10).

6. Here, Beauvoir says she is quoting Sartre.

7. See Schott 2003, 231, 237.

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