

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOTIONS IN THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis on the phenomenological notions of ethics, which Simone de Beauvoir calls as the ethics of ambiguity. Human beings always face ambiguity in their situations of lived world. As far as one is living the life, the ambiguity is unavoidable in her/his actions. Though one tries to hold on the philosophy of internality, to assert no external things are affecting in defining her/his actions or ethical positions, the ambiguity prevails. Simone de Beauvoir's noted book, *Ethics of Ambiguity* established that ethics could be understood only in real life contexts. This paper is an attempt to see her arguments from phenomenological approach to maintain that her ethics is more phenomenological than existential. This is a study on ethics from a feminist point of view too, to critically approach the absolute moral values of systems of hierarchy as patriarchy that divide human beings as oppressed and oppressor.

### INTRODUCTION

Seeing the moral good as absolute, had been a prominent philosophical way in the modern world. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir refers Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Sartre for deriving her understanding on existentialism, and proceeds to Husserl for defining ethics on her own way. She has elaborated critical points on the existing ethical explanations by philosophers, to expound new forms of ethics. During her existentialist enquiry and ethical interpretations, she wrote on the notions of moral good that are prescribed by the societies. And she found it all as male-centered and thus anti-woman. *Ethics of Ambiguity* is a long philosophical essay written by Simone de Beauvoir and was first published in 1947. This was her first serious philosophical writing written before her famous feminist philosophical work *The Second Sex*, which was first published in 1949.

Being an existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir defined even existentialism as a philosophy of ambiguity. She finds out the point of ambiguity from the time of Kierkegaard. She points out that it was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity, Kierkegaard opposed

Hegel who affirmed the idea of the absolute. But de Beauvoir doesn't get along with the idea of transcendence in existentialism, which was proposed by Kierkegaard. According to her, it was ambiguity that fundamentally defined man (human)<sup>1</sup>, in Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness*, though he has not identified it. She had the critical grudge towards Sartre for not initiating the ethical issues even at the end of his book on being.

Existentialism encloses human in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity. The situatedness of subjectivity of human being was crucial point addressed by de Beauvoir. It was the subjectivity which realizes itself only as a presence in the world while that engaged freedom. De Beauvoir points out Sartre's declaration "human is a useless passion" by trying to realize the synthesis of the for-oneself and in-oneself. She extends that discussion even by making a critique on this attempt that it wouldn't make him the human/man a God. Though it is not clear if the term used in the discussion was really meant for human-man or human beings in general, it is crucial to note her point that one would not offer ethics to a God, but the most optimistic ethics had all begun by emphasizing the failure involved in the condition of human having-to-be in the world. Thus, she comes to refer Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, to assert that moral consciousness can exist only to the extent that there is disagreement between nature and morality. It would disappear if the ethical law becomes natural law. If moral action is the absolute goal, the absolute goal is also that moral action may not be present. This paradox means that there can be a 'having-to-be' only for a being who questions oneself in his/her being. And that is a kind of being, which is at a distance from oneself and who has to be 'that being'. This article looks at her related arguments explained in EoA<sup>2</sup>, though it refers her readings more on Hegel and Sartre than on other modern thinkers for the introductory and interconnecting purposes of analyses on ethics of ambiguity.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF AMBIGUITY

Beauvoir introduces the concept of ambiguity in her book, by discussing it along with the idea of freedom in the first chapter. In the third chapter before conclusion she continues to elaborate the positive aspects of ambiguity which includes five subsections among which the fifth is defining ambiguity. According to her, as far as there have been human being in this world and they have lived, they have all felt the tragic ambiguity of their condition. She gives the preliminary idea about this ambiguity in the first paragraph of first chapter itself, by problematizing the subject/object

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of the book uses the male-centered terms as 'man', 'he', 'him' etc. for which I have used, human, he/she, him/her, unless in quotation.

<sup>2</sup> The book name, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, is written as EoA, as short form in this article.

binary. The human being as an object to the other, is 'an individual in the collectivity' on which he/she depends.

She uses the term 'object' here though she used the term 'subject' in her explanation for ambiguity in existence. The human being can exist as a sovereign and unique subject, amidst the universe of objects, at every moment by grasping the non-temporal truth of own existence. One can exist as 'nothing' between the past which no longer is, and the future which is not yet there. She breaks then this idea of Sartrean being and nothingness, by explaining the ambiguity that can arise when analyzing the human existence in a broader sense. Even when one can be seen as a sovereign subject, we see one is an object to the other objects in the world at the same time. De Beauvoir says, philosophers have been masking this issue though they might have thought about it. But it is visible in the later philosophizing as phenomenology, where the time consciousness is given prominence.

De Beauvoir held the phenomenology of time in the process of defining her ethical theory, and postulates that ambiguity is quite expected in human existence in the life world. She denied the philosophies that didn't accept the lifeworld and lived experiences as real. As a feminist philosopher she has elaborated it in her later book named *The Second Sex*, to explicate how the woman could never be free from the lived world while defining her ethics. She criticizes major Indian philosophical systems in which the life and death are denied, by making everything as illusion and truth as Nirvana. The Western philosophical inclination towards bringing in the concepts of an absolute and transcendence was also a futile exercise according to de Beauvoir. Because, ethics also becomes the same kind of escaping from the real life-world, or yielding to eternity for such philosophies. She thinks that for Hegel also it was no different from knowing and throwing oneself in the face of the Spirit and then the individual is lost in the collective. She talks against the Western modern enterprise of reducing mind to matter or matter to mind, or merging them too. As per her opinion these theories never solved the real-life issues of existence of human being. This is how she embraces existentialism as a philosophy of ambiguity, and tries to explain ambiguity as still more serious concept.

## AMBIGUITY, FREEDOM AND LIBERATION

In this process of defining ambiguity, de Beauvoir talks first about the concept of freedom with reference to modern philosophical perspectives. Even though different philosophers conceived human being as a free entity, there is a direct or indirect link drawn towards an absolute. This is the point where she differs as a modern philosopher. Existentialists and the most rationalist philosophers did the same mistake of justifying the absolute making use of the rationality itself. De Beauvoir as an existentialist, we could also observe her as breaking the then existed dominant

existentialist incapability to override the absolute. Though the dominant existentialists don't talk about God or Brahman or anything that people worship, as the absolute, they don't break the notion well or don't find sufficiently suitable other epistemology or ontology to solve the issues of everyday life. This is the point where de Beauvoir embraces phenomenology as a methodology and starts analyzing about lived experiences.

According to de Beauvoir, a being who makes himself/herself a 'lack of being' cannot be accepted as attaining freedom. She says Sartre's 'Being' which would make such 'lack of being' in order that there might be being, is a failure but still ambiguous. This existentialist ontology doesn't give the hope to surmount the failure. The passion, which de Beauvoir counts to surmount the failure of being, is a 'useless passion' for Sartre. And that's why he suggests the lack of being as a solution for having the absolute Being, which is a vain attempt to find something like to be a God. In the thoughts of de Beauvoir, there exist no absolute value before the passion of human being, in relation to which one might distinguish useless and useful. A genuine human being cannot accept any foreign absolute and thus cannot escape from the lived realities.

De Beauvoir is also crossing Hegel's Spirit, which is the absolute to which the being might transcend. To exist genuinely is not to deny the spontaneous transcendence but not to lose oneself in it. To attain truth or absolute, one must not dispel the ambiguity of his/her being, but accept the task of realizing it. The surpassing through the negation of negation, suggested by Hegel is taken as a conversion by de Beauvoir. And she says, the existentialist conversion should rather be compared to Husserlian reduction (Beauvoir, 1948:14). According to her the phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism and any possibility of failure by refusing to set up absolute as the end toward which one's transcendence thrusts. This is in connection with freedom with all ambiguities but not being suppressed with one's instincts, pleasures, pains and passions. In this project the mode of reality in the external world is not denied. A woman who faces the issues of oppression being in the lived world cannot surpass her secondary position to transcendence, without facing the lived experiences in the world. She is explaining this woman-issue in detail later in her book *The Second Sex*. Though she doesn't exactly expound the women's life-world aspects and issues of freedom of oppression here in this book, she asserts that the freedom is to face the realities in lived experiences with the ambiguity involved in it. Freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world. Thus, the liberation of a human being is embodied in definite chosen behaviors and actions. The ethics lies in the possibility of freedom for the embodiment of such a chosen life of all human beings.

## AMBIGUITY, ACTION, ANTINOMIES

It is evident that according to de Beauvoir human being's freedom should be embodied in definite actions in concrete realities. Then there may arise such a situation that the realities in the lived experiences of human beings would bring forth the ambiguity in actions. But the ambiguity shouldn't prevent one from actions as per her opinion. It shouldn't be leading one towards the level of withdrawal from actions of life as well. The antinomies of action for liberation is unavoidable according to de Beauvoir. She brings forth the paradoxical issue faced by the oppressed while acting for liberation, though the examples of which are more expounded in her later book *The Second Sex*, to talk about women's oppression. In revolting, the oppressed may be metamorphosed into a blind force to do violence to the oppressor. This is the antinomy of their action to liberate themselves, but the oppressed cannot withdraw action thinking that freedom of the oppressor is denied by their action. De Beauvoir suggests the ethics that the oppressor himself/herself should have to denounce oppression instead of exercising their will to power, if the oppressor was aware of the demands of his/her own freedom (Beauvoir, 1948:96-97). Thus, she clearly solves the issue of antinomies in actions against oppression.

In the discussion of actions for liberation of oppressed, de Beauvoir also brings out the issue of subjectivity and objectivity. If the oppressed think about the reconciliation of all freedoms, including that of the oppressor, as part of the virtue or ethics, they cannot act for their freedom. The subjectivity of that moral/ethical agent by definition, escapes our control and then it will be possible to act only upon their objective presence. They were treated as objects of oppression by the oppressors, and so the revolting action would only be able to consider the oppressor as an object to be defeated. Here in rebellion the oppressors are to be treated only as things and the oppressed may become masters, tyrants and executioners through violence (Beauvoir, 1948:97). Thus, she solves the issue of subjectivity and objectivity in the definition of her ethics and that would seem to be out of the idea of ambiguity in a sense. And it blooms out into the socio-political realm of ethical practice.

Beauvoir says, the genuine freedom would imply the recognition of all human beings, right to live their freedom, and therefore their entitlement to self-realization. But this reconciliation and self-realization is possible only by conversion of the oppressors. And we can see this self-realization is different from the idealism put forward by both Indian and Western thought systems. They are crossed by her by saying that, rejection or renunciation would be needed only when an absolute is presupposed. Along with this critique, the claim of the absolute value in ethical thinking is questioned by her through a phenomenological stand point. She thinks human being is always "infinitely more than what he would be if he were reduced to being what he is (Beauvoir, 1948:102)". The problem according to her perspective is that the tyrants forget this fact and take

the trick to enclose the others in the immanence of his/her facticity. Criticizing Hegel, de Beauvoir proclaims that the future cannot be the fusion of immobility of being and its transcendence. For her the future is the definitive direction of a particular transcendence and it is so closely bound up with the present. She draws support from Heidegger who considered future as a reality which is given at each moment in the lifeworld. Thus, de Beauvoir makes a call for embracing the lifeworld with all its existential dilemmas along with the ambiguous ethics on our actions, to go on to future from the present and past.

### AMBIGUITY AND ABSURDITY

The actions in the lives of human beings should find meanings in the lived present, but not in mythical histories according to de Beauvoir. But she doesn't deny the past too. She thinks the issues in the past should be taken as real instead of embracing the notion of absurdity. She wonders when we would end our practice of condemning actions as criminal and absurd. The practice of taking the actions as criminal or absurd while it doesn't work well, is very common among humans. There are possibilities that human beings would well understand the problem of our own actions and the actions of others, though it might face ambiguity in taking the ethical stance. De Beauvoir addressed this issue in detail to define the ethics as ambiguous rather than absurd.

In the lived experiences human beings always feel they face absurdity, and it could be a defense mechanism to count it as absurd. Absurdity is an idea used by people at times of crises, which is a term used with much importance in dominant philosophies of East and West. But de Beauvoir held the point that ambiguity would be the unavoidable condition in human life, especially in crises and it shouldn't be confused with absurdity. She says, "To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won. Absurdity challenges every ethics, but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence. Thus, to say that action has to be lived in its truth, that is, in the consciousness of the antinomies which it involves, does not mean that one has to renounce it (Beauvoir, 1948:129)". By saying this, she declares that renouncing our life of actions in the name of absurdity is not good. And she establishes the primacy of the nature of ethics as ambiguity with a phenomenological approach. Providing a realistic foundation required for ethical action, would prove to be meaningful in phenomenological analysis, since the discussion of lifeworld pertains.

## ETHICAL ACTION, AMBIGUITY AND THE OPPRESSED LIFEWORLD

Beauvoir's ethics establishes the responsibility of being in the life world, not only as a valuable choice but also as the genuine freedom. The moral freedom is in order to create the space for an authentic morality capable of being realized within the situational relationships which is the characteristic of the human condition. Then, there could be a mention of the methodology of intersubjectivity in this kind of argument. Though de Beauvoir doesn't use that term of intersubjectivity directly to explain her stance on ethics in the life-worlds, there are readings that discuss whether she meant intersubjectivity or not. The subjectivity that she takes up cannot be seen identical as of the Enlightenment subject or the pure subject of modernity (Kruks, 1992). She explains it as a situated subject in concrete lifeworld. If we look at her ethical theory expounded in the book *EoA* from a phenomenological perspective, we could definitely see that it was also about intersubjectivity in ethics of lived experiences. As Margaret Chatterjee puts forward in her book *Lifeworlds and Ethics*, intersubjectivity is the condition for the possibility of life-worlds (Chatterjee, 2007:9). She says, Husserl has been attentive to this problem of relation between one subject and another subject. How could one center of constituting activity constitute another center, becomes an issue in the lifeworld (Chatterjee, 2007:27). Husserl finds a way of transcendental intersubjectivity as the condition of life-worlds, to solve this issue in-between conceiving the ideas of 'I' and 'we'. For Simone de Beauvoir, such an idea of transcendence is not acceptable and she has criticized it while referring Hegel too. Though it is not clear if she took the lifeworld as the condition for intersubjectivity rather than taking intersubjectivity as the condition for lifeworld, she sustains the freedom as possible within the intersubjective lifeworld. She tries to explain this ethical stance with the concept of ambiguity in ethics while people act in the life-worlds.

In the second chapter of *EoA* de Beauvoir states how the stages of ethical development in people while one goes on and fails to attain moral freedom. To understand what she meant by moral freedom, we should see her differentiation of moral and ethical freedom. According to her, the freedom of human being is the 'freedom in power' at one stage/kind of human life. It is of economic or material freedom. This is the kind of freedom that people would feel since they hold enough money and material to act in life according to their will. This has nothing to do with choices of action and liberation of us and others. For example, this kind of freedom is there for men in the patriarchal world. The men who are in power due to property and superiority ascribed to them in a patriarchal world system will always exercise freedom. They as the oppressors don't need to feel any ambiguity in thinking about ethical freedom. But the oppressed only think on it and they have only one solution- to deny the harmony of that mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude her. De Beauvoir doesn't talk about the patriarchal world system and the gender oppression directly here in the book *EoA*, but she puts examples of class oppression and slavery

forms. She is explaining about the revolt of a human being against the tyrants to prove as a free human (Beauvoir, 1948:82). And her book *The Second Sex* gives the best examples for this to be the revolt of a female being against the patriarchal world, to prove as a free human. Men would not need to choose such actions of freedom to prove himself in the patriarchal world, since he could enjoy the freedom in power. Women who have power would choose to revolt against the power structure to be free.

The other stage of freedom is the moral freedom (ethical freedom) in choosing to act for liberation of all according to de Beauvoir. And this ethics is ambiguous too since it would see the problems in our lifeworld. Whitmarsh assumes that the responsibility to oneself and others that Beauvoir conceives as moral freedom to entail, leads one to feel a constant sense of guilt (Whitmarsh, 1981:46). The feeling for other's freedom could definitely cause a kind of guilt if one takes a freedom that would hurt the other's freedom. The problems of all kinds of hierarchy including patriarchy would be addressed with such an ethical freedom. According to the analysis of Kristina Arp in this regard, 'Actually Beauvoir supplies no law of freedom here or elsewhere. But she does make the Kantian move of basing the positive precepts of her ethics on an enquiry into the conditions of human freedom. In order to be fully free according to her a person must take on certain responsibilities to herself and others' (Arp, 1999). De Beauvoir was very much influenced by Kant to identify the positive concept of freedom with morality, which was much analyzed and criticized by later feminist philosophers.

According to that moral stance, a free will and a will under moral laws are identical. It could be seen as the moral freedom is the conscious affirmation of ontological freedom. But moral freedom by de Beauvoir is different, since it is attained by identifying ambiguous situations in the life world. For de Beauvoir it is the ethical freedom and it is the way of taking actions by choosing to do it for the liberation of us and others. Though the terms as 'moral' and 'ethical' are confusing in the translation of the text from French to English, we could decide to understand it as not the so-called usage of 'the moral' in its sense of cultural usage. Anyhow, her point was that the ethical actions would necessarily involve ambiguity while done in freedom, since the powers in life-worlds would try to appropriate it from various aspects. To identify this and continue to revolt against it by choosing free will actions with all its ambiguity, would give it a positive possibility of liberation of the oppressed. Holding such a point, de Beauvoir raised a main objection against existentialism that the precept 'to will freedom' is only a hollow formula and offers no concrete content for action (Beauvoir, 1948:78).



## CONCLUSION

According to Simone de Beauvoir, there is an ethics, only if there is a problem to be solved. With this statement she invokes Hegelian displacement to understand ethics, but draws a critique on the idea of *aufheben*, which could be understood as transcendence or rejection. She asserts the importance of being in the world instead of rejecting it, and accepting the ambiguity involved in it instead of counting it as absurd. This ambiguity is the aspect which gives us optimism to deny failure, and understand it as an unavoidable ambiguity in taking ethical stance at times in lived experiences. It seems to be more feminist than the existing masculine notions of escapist ethical stances, while we analyze her ethical theory. She asserts that one should not abstain from actions though the actions may involve antinomies. The paradox that the action against the oppressor would entail the interference into the oppressor's freedom, should generate the ethics of ambiguity too. She suggests one shouldn't take it as freedom as far as the oppressor is not taking ethical stance to be sensitive to the freedom and rights of the oppressed while exerting power. This gives importance to the need of fight and protest for freedom and rights. But one cannot deny the fact that there could be lived experiences of ethical dilemmas which one cannot face anymore in a fighting spirit even ambiguously. Probably then the step of transcendence of that particular lived experience or renouncing of the related lived world, would be the only solution for attaining peace in life at the moment where one is tired of fighting with the oppressor.

In the attempt of understanding ethics and its ambiguity, de Beauvoir criticizes Sartre for not coming to the issue of ethics until the last part of his book *Being and Nothingness*. It is a disclosure of being, defined by Sartre, that there is no original relationship or attachment. This lack of being, gives the success rather than failure for him according to de Beauvoir and she blames then there is no need to have ethics too for such a being. This issue was taken up by de Beauvoir especially because she thought the women's perspective on ethics would differ from that of men. It is because she thought the experiences of women in the lived world are different from that of men. One cannot conclude that her take on the intertwined ambiguous ethics and life-world experiences were only related to women. But it is about the whole human kind, which most of the philosophers used to avoid or misinterpret.

The male-dominated existentialist schools in the history of philosophy, is being questioned by de Beauvoir for it being insensitive to the ethical stance. She brings out the Hegelian negation of negation, regarding the 'being' which is 'lack of being', to re-establish the positive. But she would think it as a conversion rather than Hegelian surpassing. To exist genuinely is not to deny the spontaneous movement of transcendence, but only to refuse to lose oneself in it and to set up the 'absolute' towards which the transcendence is directed. This existential conversion is compared to Phenomenological reduction by de Beauvoir. Husserlian reduction prevents the error

of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external world of life instincts. It prevents any possibility of failure by considering one's choices and passions in connection with the freedom which projects them. Such an existential ethics developed by de Beauvoir, entails the phenomenological foundation of ethics and that works in tandem with the actions for liberation of people when engaged in concrete life world situations of existence. This kind of ethics proposed by Simone de Beauvoir facilitates the freedom of the oppressed from a feminist point of view too. It is to critically approach the absolute moral values of systems of hierarchy as organized through class, caste, religion and gender, that divide human beings as oppressed and oppressor.

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