

## SINGULARITY IN BEAUVOIR'S *THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY*

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ABSTRACT: Though it has gone unnoticed so far in Beauvoir Studies, the term “singularity” is a technical one for Simone de Beauvoir. In the first half of the essay I discuss two reasons why this term has been obscured. First, as is well known Beauvoir has not been read in the context of the history of philosophy until recently. Second, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* at least, *singularité* is translated both inconsistently and quite misleadingly. In the second half of the essay I attempt to demonstrate the importance of this term in *The Ethics*. The will to disclose being is the will to disclose the singularity of the other, whether human, land, sky or painting. Ambiguity, which Beauvoir distinguishes from absurdity in Camus, is an image suggesting this necessarily mutual disclosure of singularity.

“Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life . . .,” writes Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, illuminating one element of the ambiguity to which the title of the work refers: singularity (1947, 13; 1976, 9). This taste in the mouth is necessary to lived experience, and it is lived experience itself. But the same can be said of being a body for others, being available to perception of and for interpretation by dissimilar others. Thus lived experience is necessarily fraught. No record of lived experience is possible without a body and yet no record of lived experience is capable of a finished account of oneself as body, because this body is both lived and for-others. And, to make matters worse, to articulate this tension is always to risk speaking not of an ambiguity which attends every project (which is what Beauvoir is after), but instead of humanity as if it were a homogeneous group (Beauvoir 2004, 106–07; Beauvoir 1947, 139, 238–39; Beauvoir 1976, 112) and in the sort of falsely impartial voice which Beauvoir avoided and deplored throughout her

work. Nevertheless this tension between the lived and the material body, an anxiety as well as a joy-producing one (Beauvoir 1976, 12; 1947, 18), must be affirmed as rich in meanings rather than devoid of reasonableness, in order for incomparable becoming bodies to live well. In this essay, I will spell out the image of singularity, a crucial aspect of ambiguity to which the above quote refers. Though it has gone uncommented on in Beauvoir scholarship, singularity is a crucial term in Beauvoir's oeuvre. After discussing two reasons as to why this crucial term has gone so far unnoticed, in the second half of the essay I attempt to demonstrate its importance in the *Ethics*. The will to disclose being is the will to disclose the singularity of the other, whether human, land, sky or painting. Ambiguity, which Beauvoir distinguishes from absurdity in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is an image suggesting this necessarily mutual disclosure of singularity.

Singularity as a technical term in Beauvoir has gone entirely unnoticed in both English and French language studies.<sup>1</sup> This is first of all because as is well known it is only very recently that scholars have rejected Beauvoir's own insistence that her work was not that of "a philosopher." The bluntness of the title of Michel Kail's 2006 monograph *Simone de Beauvoir philosophe* aims to solidify this rejection of Beauvoir's own articulation of her work as something else. But Kail's is only a recent study in a long list of secondary literature which reads Beauvoir as a philosopher (Le Doeuff 2007; Simons 1999; Bauer 2001) or as a phenomenologist (Kruks 1990; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Arp 2001; O'Brien and Embree 2001; Holveck 2002; Heinämaa 2003; Burke 2012; van Leeuwen 2012; Kruks 2012). There is also a literature reading Beauvoir in the context of philosophy, while attempting to trace her departures from systematicity (Bergoffen, 1997; Heinämaa 2003, 1–20; Keltner 2006; Deutscher 2008). These various studies of Beauvoir's work have coincided with the late 20th century flourishing of feminist philosophy itself, and as Nancy Bauer's work suggests this is no coincidence (Bauer 2001, 4). And yet Beauvoir's work has to say the least a complicated relationship to liberal feminist theory and therefore much of contemporary feminist philosophy produced in the U.S. Attention to singularity as a term might enable ways of reading Beauvoir's work in the context of these efforts to understand Beauvoir's explicit and implicit resistance to philosophy as a systematic representational endeavor.

<sup>1</sup> However, Susan Bainbrigge helpfully writes that Beauvoir "blurs the boundaries of the concepts of 'universel' and 'singulier'" (2004, 165). Bainbrigge's analysis is of the phrase the "universel singulierisé" used by Beauvoir in a 1972 interview. However, "singularity" is a term Beauvoir uses throughout her work, and in my view what she means by universal here is not the universality of a concept. It is the inherent multiplicity of existence.

The second reason why singularity as a crucial term has gone unnoticed at least in English language studies has to do with how *singularité* is translated. In this essay I focus on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>2</sup> To begin with it is translated very inconsistently. As Joël Janiaud has explained in the context of translating Kierkegaard's *den Enkelte* into French, the sense of *la singularité* poses difficulties for any translator (2006).<sup>3</sup> It's not a straightforward term. Instead it concerns at one and the same time the exceptional or strange as well as the ordinary. And so singularity in Beauvoir will have so far been invisible to English language readers precisely because of the challenge of finding *le mot juste* and sticking to it throughout. This is clear when one considers how many ways it is translated in the *Ethics*: it is translated variously as "individual" (compare

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<sup>2</sup> However, as Susanne Moser has recently shown, freedom in Beauvoir means the mutual disclosure of what Moser herself has named, for the purpose of articulating this notion in Beauvoir, *l'autrété*. But I would suggest that Beauvoir's most common term for what Moser is calling *l'autrété* is *la singularité* (Moser 2008, 240–41).

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of Beauvoir's interest in Kierkegaard, see Heinämaa 2003, 1–20. She attributes Beauvoir's rejection of "idealism and particularism as ideological abstractions" to this Kierkegaardian influence (8). I would agree. However, Heinämaa's footnote supporting this claim that Beauvoir rejects "idealism and particularism" directs the reader to Beauvoir's arguments against essentialism and nominalism discussed by Heinämaa in the fourth chapter of *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*. In this chapter, Heinämaa claims that Beauvoir rejects nominalist and conceptualist views of gender because the duality that she sees is an "evident fact about perception . . . we experience our bodies as belonging to one of these two types" (87). I suspect that the types that Heinämaa refers to here are "men" and "women," and earlier Heinämaa has suggested that *within* these types "every individual woman is a singular stylistic variation of feminine existence" (85). My own view is that the role of the singular is stronger in Beauvoir than this account allows. Beauvoir rejects nominalism in the introduction of *The Second Sex* in arguing that "every concrete human being is always uniquely situated." There Beauvoir goes on to describe the "two categories" in which she's interested as largely about contemporary materiality and style (faces, bodies, smiles, movements, clothes, interests, occupations). She wonders in fact if these are "destined to disappear" (1976 I, 13; 2010, 4). In other words it is not possible to conceive of a person as neutral with respect to sex, gender, sexuality; even the intersexed person is a case of his or her own (1976 I, 29; 2010, 15). Though she returns very briefly to the case of intersexuality in one who identifies as a woman, (to deny to detractors that this person is a "hidden man" in false disguise") (1976 II, 192; 2010, 417), she violently sets aside the case of intersexuality in the introduction, as if this is a uniform category and as if this is not relevant to the project. But later in the book she doesn't set aside instances of nonnormative gender variance in gender identity and expression. My point is that Beauvoir's seeming insistence on two "types" initially in the introduction makes the case to the reader that there aren't just supposedly genderless men. And throughout the book she complicates and diversifies this account in order to think the materialities and styles of her day. For example in the chapter on "The Lesbian" it becomes clear that gender, sex, and sexuality in her view defy (sexist, racist, heterosexist) expectation. Thus singularity refers also to gendered materiality and style, but these are not in fact ahistorically of any two types. Thus in my view the Kierkegaardian critique of both idealism and particularism in Beauvoir becomes a critique of sexist, racist, heterosexist norms, or as Beauvoir puts it, myths.

the English/French: 18/25, 89/111, 104/130), “unique” (107/133), one’s “own” (112/140), and, by far the most common translation, “particularity.”<sup>4</sup>

If it were only a matter of inconsistent translation, that would be frustrating. But the translation of singularity especially as particularity renders it as precisely what Beauvoir argues in the text it is not. Singularity is not particularity. Singularity is a figure for the resistance to conceptuality and categorization of existence. Particularity on the other hand is the concept of individuation within a category. Singularity and particularity arguably offer incompatible modes of appreciation of difference. Singularity is my affirmative alterity with respect to the other, and this alterity is as temporally variable as it is inherently and nondualistically biological. On this view, particularity cannot in fact take account of differences, lived or otherwise.

Nevertheless particularity is the translation most often employed, as in the following passage in which Beauvoir considers the very basic question of what obligations I can have to someone who is unlike me, someone in whose political life I act but whose existence is not reducible to my own. In this passage, Beauvoir is also describing the way in which existentialism differs from Hegelian ontology, in which particularity “appears only as a moment of the totality in which it must surpass itself”:

Whereas for existentialism, it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, *singular* men projecting themselves toward their own ends from situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself (1976, 17–18; 1947, 24, emphasis added, translation altered)

Hegelian “particularity” does not convey the irreducibility or the irreconcilability that characterizes agency, opening up possibilities determined through temporally located and relationally negotiated desire. Beauvoir makes the same point again later in the text in a section entitled “The Antinomies of Action” in which she criticizes the subordination of each person to the collectivity in both “fascist ideology and Marxist ideology,” both of which she takes to be iterations of Hegelian ontology and social philosophy:

The essential moment of Hegelian ethics is the moment when consciousnesses recognize one another; in this operation the other is recognized as identical with me, which means that in myself it is the universal truth of myself which alone is

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<sup>4</sup> I’m including here translations of singularity in its noun as well as adjectival form: 17/24, 29/38 (twice on that page), 30/39, 107/133, 112/139–140, 118/147, 122/151, 125/156, 144/179. Note that Beauvoir does use the term *l’individu*. But a passage on 122/151 demonstrates that Beauvoir is articulating a theory of the individual as singular. Thus to translate “singularité” as individuality again makes it very difficult to understand how she means to speak of the incommensurability of lived desires of bodies.

recognized; so *singularity* is denied, and it can no longer reappear except on the natural and contingent plane. . . . (1976, 104; 1947, 130, emphasis added, translation altered)

It is of course this natural and contingent plane on which the ethics of ambiguity resides. But this ethics commits me to a politics. The truth of Western liberal societies is to be found in the oppressions of the “Highway, the Economy, the French Empire” (1976, 50; 1947, 65). These aspire to the “rationalistic necessity of the continuous” to which I will return below (1976, 50; 1947, 65). The so-called inevitable good of the homogeneous political collective isn’t and shouldn’t be comforting to one who loses her sense of self or anticipates losing her life today.

One of the specific ways in which we see singularity articulated is in Beauvoir’s affirmation of political discontinuity. For example, Richard Wright’s affirmation of the concerns of black communities, his refusal to forget these for the sake of a white nationalism during World War II is an illustration of someone who judges it “necessary to maintain the tension of revolt against a situation to which one does not wish to consent at any price” (1976, 89; 1947, 111). Singularity as the discontinuity within already imagined political groups is integral, in other words, to any decolonizing political and ethical endeavor that would be worthy of this name. But it is very clear that for Beauvoir discrete individuality as separation and independence is a gesture in bad faith. Thus the affirmation of antinomy should appear in any abstract consideration of the political status of solidarity. Beauvoir’s own response, in lieu of a too-abstract resolution, is both that relational singularity is to be affirmed and that “justification is always to come,” suggesting an openness which further articulates the necessity of the will or desire to disclose being (1976, 50; 1947, 65).

Because singularity has been so far obscure in readings of the *Ethics*, it has been an unnecessary struggle to articulate Beauvoir’s treatment of the question of the limits of responsibility in the disclosure of being. Without singularity, and if it is the case that I know what I need, then already I know what the other needs. And if that’s the case then perhaps there is no limit to what I should do on behalf of the other. In this unnecessary confusion the importance for Beauvoir of existential indecision becomes oddly synonymous with unethical disengagement. This anxiety over how to handle Beauvoir’s inadequate appraisal of indecision leads I think to the interesting conclusion of Kristana Arp who ironically finds that Beauvoir teeters on the edge of demanding too much ethically. This is interesting because it is so far from the usual worry that Beauvoir and other existentialists espouse an amorality that cannot help but represent or become a political apathy. Arp rejects this claim that in Beauvoir anything goes (as Beauvoir herself attempts to do). But she

also concedes to Anne Whitmarsh that there may be some reason to find in Beauvoir an ethics in which the individual must be constantly fraught with “angst-ridden guilt” (Beauvoir 1976, 21; Beauvoir 1947, 21; Arp 2004, 161).<sup>5</sup> This dispute suggests that Beauvoir’s work vacillates between two pictures of ethical agency. On the one hand the ethical life is one of constant keeping-to-oneself out of indecision, and on the other hand it is one of colonizing involvement in the life of the other. And without singularity, part of this reading makes sense. After all, if the other’s desires are comparable to my own, if not in fact my own, then won’t it always be the case that I know and therefore have a perfectly clear responsibility to do something on his or her behalf? Isn’t intervening on behalf of others a constant imperative?

The unquestioning confidence and all-powerful activity that this image suggests is in fact quite different from Beauvoir’s view when singularity is taken into account. Beauvoir writes: “morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (1976, 165; 1947, 183). But Beauvoir’s point here is not to celebrate a solipsistic self-questioner who never acts. The point is that there can be no ethical formulae. “Ethics does not furnish recipes,” she writes, “any more than do science or art” (1976, 166; 1947, 134). The upshot is that for Beauvoir colonialism (and I think it is clear neocolonialism and eco-imperialism) is just as dangerous as the liberal individuality of the passionate man and the adventurer both of whom flatly deny their obligation to the other. To intervene on behalf of the other can be just as problematic as believing that I have no obligation to do so.

All of this will I think be far more intuitive if singularity—my affinitive alterity with respect to the other—is given attention. I now want to turn to articulating not what is wrong with the sense conveyed in the English translation of the *Ethics* but instead to the claim that the will to disclose being is only properly understood if it is the singularity of the other that the will to disclose being reciprocally supports. My claim is that singularity is necessary for an adequate understanding of both ambiguity and the will to disclose being. Ambiguity is a figure for the mutuality of disclosure of singularities.

Authentic freedom discloses the other as other, not the other as I would prefer that she be. Existential freedom in Beauvoir is a word for ubiquitous becoming: without an origin or an end, with the necessity of symbiotic

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<sup>5</sup> Arp considers that Blomart in Beauvoir’s *The Blood of Others* would be a character who might lend credence to such a view, but Arp cites Elizabeth Fallaize who finds that by the end of the novel the reader has a sense for Blomart’s unreliability as a narrator. Instead, Arp argues that responsibility in Beauvoir is a social matter. As Arp puts it, “But one must keep Beauvoir’s constant focus on the interconnections between individuals in mind when unfolding the consequences of her statement here” (Arp 2004, 162). Thus Arp ultimately conveys the importance of the point that Beauvoir’s agents are not isolated and identical individuals who desire on behalf of a common humanity.

disclosure of “strange, forbidden” others (1976, 12, 67; 1947, 18, 85). The will or desire to disclose being (*vouloir dévoiler l’être*) thematically and grammatically inserts into the violent and both officially and informally colonizing “will to be” (*vouloir d’être* or *volonté d’être*) the necessity of disclosure, which for Beauvoir is synonymous with carnal, lived and living becoming (1976, 12–13; 1947, 17–18). The will to disclose being is the acknowledgement that desire is necessary to alteration. But this disclosure also must be affirmed as something between agencies. Beauvoir writes,

I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone, and I remain at a distance. But it is also by this distance that the sky and the water exist before [*en face de*] me. (1976, 12; 1947, 17–18)

The distance that Beauvoir describes here between herself and the sky echoes the distance between desiring and being which characterizes the will to disclose being. Only a few lines down on the same page she writes, “I cannot appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains strange, forbidden [*étranger, interdit*], but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph” (1976, 12; 1947, 17–18). The same words that Beauvoir uses to describe this snowfield as strange and forbidden, she will use to describe the other as human. I will return to this passage, but here it is crucial to note that it is not necessarily a human other’s other in tension with whom disclosure must be affirmed (1976, 12; 1947, 17–18).

Relinquishing identity with the sky and water and snowfield means for Beauvoir the welcoming of a creative and self-critical power. Singularity does in one sense mean a “limitation of power” on the part of myself and others, she consents. But authentic power is to be found in desiring singularity, in desiring the specific irreconcilable initiations of concrete projects toward specific, local goals. Beauvoir writes, “It is the singularity of the project which determines the limitation of power [*pouvoir*], but it is also what gives the project its *content* and permits it to be set up” (1976, 29; 1947, 38, emphasis added). It is not until much later, in the chapter simply entitled “Ambiguity [*L’ambiguïté*],” that Beauvoir makes it clear that this power which constitutes one’s project is necessarily collaborative, although not in a Hegelian sense as I’ve tried to make clear. Beauvoir makes this point by distinguishing ambiguity from the notion of absurdity in Camus.

“Ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. 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” (1976, 129; 1947, 160). This is surely a response to Albert Camus’ claim in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that life is “lived all the better if it has no

meaning,” though little has been written on it (1983, 53; 1942, 78).<sup>6</sup> What is at stake in Beauvoir’s distinction between absurdity and ambiguity and in her rejection of absurdity is the relationality of singularity. This rejection of absurdity is crucial for understanding singularity and the will to disclose being and their relationship to ambiguity.

In order to arrive at the significance of Beauvoir’s rejection of absurdity, allow me to start over. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* begins with the claim that philosophers have always tried to deny one or the other aspect of a complex situation: either the livedness *or* the bodies (the “natural and contingent,” 1976, 104; 1947, 130) insofar as they are objects in the world for and among others. It is often argued that ambiguity in Beauvoir is found in being both, as Sonia Kruks has recently put it, a “material existent” and “an embodied subject” (Kruks 2012, 33). Beauvoir herself does not use the language of “embodiment” because it is not the case that lived experience is embodied. It is “existence made body”; having that incomparable taste in my mouth, with which the essay you are reading began, while at the very same time being one in the “immense collectivity” (1976, 9; 1947, 13). In other words I am at one and the same time a body and a lived body (Al-Saji 2011). Beauvoir’s concern is precisely that philosophers have tended to split what *isn’t* in fact split within my life. The mind-body problem on the other hand grows out of an effort to deny myself as a body. But fixating here as Sonia Kruks does—on the tension *between* my “material existence” and my lived experience of this—makes it sound like Beauvoir is in fact rearticulating a new version of the mind-body problem, when that isn’t at all the problem she is concerned with, even on Kruks’ own reading. Kruks’ way of putting it earlier is I think much closer to the point: “man *is* thing, body, as well as consciousness” (Kruks 1990, 91). As Kruks rightly points out and as I have also demonstrated above, relationality in Beauvoir’s ethics is not a Hegelian conflict of similar, transparent consciousnesses. Kruks quotes the passage in *The Second Sex* which in fact echoes a passage in the *Ethics* to which I will turn below in which Beauvoir writes that each does and should remain for the other an *other* (Kruks 2012, 45; see also Deutscher 2008, 56). In my view, it is this correct reading that gets to the heart of what Beauvoir means by ambiguity: it is being at once singularly bodied, for others, constantly becoming and living that body. The

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<sup>6</sup> Though she is not at all interested in absurdity in Camus, Cherlyn Higashida argues that Lorraine Hansberry draws on the work of Beauvoir in her own existential rejection of the sort of individualistic existentialism that Hansberry rejects in Camus and others (Higashida 2008). Gail Weiss argues that Camus’ absurdity and Beauvoir’s ambiguity (as well as Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility) represent different interpretations of Husserlian indeterminacy and so cannot be collapsed into one response to Husserl; however her emphasis is on how these share a common inspiration in Husserlian indeterminacy (Weiss 1995).



ambiguity is also *between* myself and others for whom I can only ever be something to look at. This is not because we are each incapable of taking into consideration the inner life of the other; it is because what we take into consideration is gathered inevitably externally. I simply cannot be you, and you cannot be me. And yet we do have such incredible power to constitute each others' lives. As Beauvoir writes,

In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light: the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men. (1976, 9; 1947, 13)

And so right away it is clear that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* will think these seemingly opposing elements together—not ultimately as paradoxical but as inseparably lived in ambiguity. The paradox only appears when one tries to express systematically this inseparability. This is the ambiguity that philosophers have tended to conflate by focusing on either a universalizing/externalizing view of life which has no lived experience or a universalizing/interiorizing view of life which has no body.

The ambiguity as I read it is only in part the lived body and this same body in the world as an object (including as an object for and among others). Beauvoir is of course in part concerned to affirm the insurmountable “for” of each singular person, each child. But as she explains in the second section of the *Ethics* (in which this title-less chapter in the French I hope can now be seen as very badly titled in the English translation “Personal Freedom and Others”), fundamental to the affirmation of one’s own temporal being is affirmation of what he or she tends toward, which she herself will never be. This is the sky, the land, the snow field (1976, 12; 1947, 17), the worker (1976, 90; 1947, 113), the politically dispossessed by “Highway, the Economy, the French Empire” (1976, 50; 1947, 65), the loved one (1976, 67; 1947, 85), the child (1976, 141; 1947, 175) with whom I may or may not have anything in common. To love another person authentically in fact is to love him/her in this “alterity and in that freedom by which [s]/he escapes” (1976, 67; 1947, 85). Beauvoir explains that it is precisely in such renunciation of control or renunciation of imposition of one’s own desire on a “thing or object” that there may be that being which one is not, both in the sense of temporality and change and in the sense that I am not myself even temporally or changefully the thing or object with which I become. This is another way of speaking about the relationality of disclosure. Beauvoir claims, “It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the other is disclosed as other” (1976, 67; 1947, 85). In other words, there is only disclosure of the other as other; to

seek to control the other as if we are the same or as if the other is an extension of myself is to exercise the will to be.

Beauvoir subtly shifts from speaking of a loved one in this passage, which recalls an earlier one in which the “loved” one is the sky and a snow field, to speaking again of a thing or an object. One can exercise generosity on behalf of a thing or object so long as one affirms that it is not possible to do so on behalf of the thing or object “in its independence and its separation, for the thing does not have positive independence” (1976, 67; 1947, 85). I express generosity toward land, painting, and a statue “insofar as they appear . . . as possibilities open to other men.” Here it is tempting to read land is a medium through which I open up possibilities for other people, instead of something to which I express generosity itself. She does after all clearly neglect to differentiate between the ways in which my life biologically depends on the agency of land as opposed to how I might be affected by a painting or statue. But in the final lines in this paragraph, Beauvoir writes, “Passion is converted to authentic freedom, only if one destines one’s existence to other existences through the being—whether thing or man—at which he aims, without hoping to entrap it in the density of the in-itself [translation altered].” “In-itself” as a human desire functions very similarly to “the will to be,” in that both are self-refuting desires not to desire at all. The in-itself in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* is likewise in lived experience a certain valuing mode, a desire which seeks the elimination of its own idiosyncratic desire and thereby the elimination of that of the other. It desires the other as something I can control, as someone without a desire that exceeds my own. And so Beauvoir’s claim in this passage, nearing the end of the second section of the *Ethics*, is that authentic freedom is generous in affirming the other, whether thing or man, as other than myself and incapable of being reduced to my own desire.

Beauvoir does not explicitly affirm ecological entanglement, but I would argue that ultimately what she is speaking of is ecological entanglement, ethical relationships beyond the human. In other words, the entanglement of singularity (in keeping with the very image of singularity as resistance to a conceptuality of existence) implicitly originates in the affinitive capacity of bodies themselves—including the fact that they are lived. Without this claim, that it is singular and affinitive bodies in which mutual dependency originates, it is impossible to understand how at one and the same time she defines authentic freedom as first the symbiotic reliance of singular wills to disclose being on how each regards the other “whether thing or man” and second the necessity of affirming our mutual separation in doing so. And so freedom is fundamentally relational and the other must be affirmed—if one’s relationship is to be authentic—in his, her or its singularity or mutually affinitive alterity. “Thus we see,” Beauvoir writes, “that no existence can be validly

fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others. The idea of such a dependence is frightening, and the separation and multiplicity of existants raises highly disturbing problems” (1976, 67; 1947, 85). There is no inherent meaning in this; there is only the located mutual dependence of singularity. And so this is why what to do in each moment is and ought to be affirmed as a matter of indefinite questioning; my next step is not inevitable and as a lived agency I live this noninevitability.

This image of ambiguity as an irreducible tension, no less between worlds of sense and between lived bodies than between their material becoming as bodies, provides a way of addressing a concern in Penelope Deutscher’s reading: whether Beauvoir must in fact abandon ambiguity selectively and so winds up with an “unambiguous ethics of ambiguity” in *The Second Sex* (Deutscher 2008, 58; Kruks 2012, 53). Deutscher writes, “Hasn’t something gone badly wrong in an unambiguous, an aspirationally ‘honest’, unequivocal depiction of the equivocal (2008, 56–57)?” Sonia Kruks writes that Beauvoir is “well aware” of this paradox of “asserting as an absolute value the value of ambiguity in politics” (2012, 53). I would agree that Beauvoir’s insistence on antinomies in ethics is one site of ambiguity, but if we see *this* ambiguity as growing out of the relationality of singularity, of the tension which can be articulated and expressed even in moments of generous political and ethical commitment, then the paradox eases (which is not to say that it evaporates). In other words, ambiguity is affirmed even in moments of conviction insofar as it affirms politically crucial discontinuity. As I have discussed above, Richard Wright’s resistance to white nationalism is an example of affirming ambiguity in this sense (1976, 89; 1947, 111).

The second part of ambiguity then is crucial: I am not the other and affirming the other as other is necessary for authentic disclosure, one that thinks the agency of the other joyfully as something beyond my control. Rosalyn Diprose rightly argues following Debra Bergoffen (1997) that for Beauvoir freedom in the encounter with the other requires putting one’s own body at risk. This body at risk is a generous body, generous in Diprose’s own sense: a body always already opened to the other (cf Beauvoir 1976, 67; 1947, 85). Diprose writes that this erotic generosity in Beauvoir “is creative in transforming the other’s embodied situation, and hence existence, through a self-metamorphosis that, if we set aside Beauvoir’s motif of unity, does not reduce the other to the self” (Diprose 2002, 87). However, what Diprose laments as “Beauvoir’s motif of unity” takes too seriously one half of the ambiguity I am outlining, that of the mutual *dependence* of mutually strange freedoms. As Diprose herself points out, “Generosity belongs to those who would be opened to others without viewing the other’s alterity . . . as necessarily having ‘hostile implications’ ” (ibid.). Beauvoir agrees.

This theme of the other as other is crucial for understanding why lived experience is necessarily fraught in Beauvoir, a claim with which I began; it is always lived in concert with others in whose freedom I am both a factor and externally so. Affirming this relationality of singularity, and keeping the political commitments that flow from this affirmation, is the ethics of ambiguity. Crucially there is no inherent, shared project that would allow us to know what it is like to be each other or what such political commitments will have to look like. Thus ambiguity is this potentially affirmative temporal give-and-take that mutually constitutes my singularity. But this temporality does not have the security of teleology or the delusion of progress. Beauvoir writes, in the section that ends immediately prior to the one entitled “Ambiguity”:

The tasks we have set up for ourselves and which, though exceeding the limits of our lives, are ours, must find their meanings in themselves and not in a mythical Historical end. But then, if we reject the idea of a future-myth in order to retain only that of a living and finite future, one which delimits transitory forms, we have not removed the antinomy of action; the present sacrifices and failures no longer seem compensated for in any point of time (1976, 128; 1947, 159).

Beauvoir thus preliminarily proposes that there is meaning only in the present, and that this might mean that there is no “compensation” for present “sacrifice and failure”. But it is at precisely this point in the book that she turns to a juxtaposition of ambiguity and the absurd. So I suggest that the reading of Albert Camus’ notion of absurdity plays a formative role in the relationality of the will or desire to disclose being in Beauvoir.

Beauvoir writes, “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,” while an ethics of ambiguity is precisely Beauvoir’s interest (1976, 129; 1947, 160). This is a response to Camus, for whom life is lived all the better if one affirms that it has no meaning at all. Absurdity as Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is between “that nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute” and the response of silence from, the failure of meaning in the cosmos (Camus 1983, 17; 1942, 34). As Leo Stan notes, the absurd emerges through the encounter between a mind looking for meaning and a world that inevitably disappoints (2011, 70). Humanity is not absurd. Neither is life, and neither is the cosmos. The absurd is instead found in the confrontation of the desire for clear, uncontroversial meaning and the cosmos which thwarts this (Camus 1983, 21; 1942, 39). But suspicion of this confrontation, suspicion of the absurd is as eerily intimate to lived experience as platitudes about the “meaning of life” are commercially familiar. As a nest of

questions they are the “worm . . . in man’s heart,” which erupts without provocation (1983, 5; 1942, 19). The Sisyphus of the title is the mythical one the gods had condemned to “ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight,” over and over and over again *ad infinitum* (1983, 119; 1942, 163). This is due to both Sisyphus’ passion and his torture as “the absurd hero”:

one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands (1983, 120; 1942, 164–65).

It is the moment at the top of the mountain, the pause at the top, the point at which Sisyphus all alone, able-bodied and human, must watch his work come undone—that is the moment in which Camus is interested.

What a torment would hope be if it meant that in that moment Sisyphus believed, over and over again that that moment of torture and struggle was the ultimate climax, only to be disappointed again and again. This is why Camus rejects hope. He decides that joy in the moment, in the multiplicity of moments, is where life can be “most lived.” As Camus puts it, the “most living, not the best living” offers the present-orientation of one who can face the absurd—not to accept it or tame it but to live with the thrill and therefore the joy of the unpredictable. Hope is too future-oriented, too implicitly narrated. Similarly, no narrative of Don Juan could present Don Juan as Camus characterizes him; Don Juan demonstrates that “the more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows” (1983, 69; 1942, 99). Don Juan does not go from woman to woman in quest of an all-consuming love; Camus writes, “But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest.” Don Juanism is thus the movement from moment to moment without narrative and without hope, but with joy.

Though she does not overlook the heteronormative, ableist masculinity of Don Juan, Beauvoir similarly rejects “the idea of the future-myth” and Hegelian, Comtian, and nationalist versions of progress. However she argues that I must act with a located, lived sense of a “living and finite future” (Beauvoir 1976, 128; see also Olkowski 2010, 68). While for Camus the future itself is a myth without which we can reject hope altogether, for Beauvoir the living and finite future allows for an ever-altering horizon from which I affirm that the disclosure of my singularity is a result of collaboration and there is only action in collaboration (1976, 90; 1947, 113) and with respect to which meaning in the present cannot be eliminated (1976, 122; 1947, 152). Ethical

action in ambiguity, as opposed to sheer and discrete struggle, invokes a contextual justification, the absolute assessment of which is always indefinitely postponed, a justification as she puts it which is always to come. In fact, we don't have to choose between either "the contingent absurdity of the discontinuous" or the "rationalistic necessity of the continuous" (1947, 152; 1976, 122). For Beauvoir, Camus has chosen the contingent absurdity of the discontinuous, and it is this isolated present in which "every Don Juan is confronted with Elvira" (Beauvoir 1976, 60; 1947, 77). But other political contexts in which Beauvoir is interested here are just as crucial: colonizing Europeans are oblivious to the needs of the people whose land they take and whose lives they quite literally uproot (consider Beauvoir 1992, 106) and authoritarian regimes flourish in the myopia of the very people who face the absurd. Camus describes absurdity as something which re-engages me in the life of the other; facing *nothing*, facing the absurd reacquaints me with the bizarre overdetermination of pain and shame. Beauvoir's suggestion is that this heightened awareness of absurdity can at best be only an engagement *in tandem* with the other. Clearly she agrees that I do not share the lived world of the other, but the problem with absurdity is that in it neither are our lives understood to be generously involved. For Beauvoir, your freedom makes for the singular content of my own, and the absurd and the very image of the absurd hero as these are articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* obscure this fundamental point. Whether Beauvoir's assessment can apply fairly to all of Camus' work is unlikely. But her articulation of the relationality of singularity rests on this reading: Camus makes too much of my solitude. For him it is only in solitude that I *then* or secondarily reach out to the other.

Ambiguity on the other hand is an image of my singular freedom which is only disclosed by means of the other, who I am not. Thus while Beauvoir and Camus are quite close in their rejection of futurity and hope as motivators of a life well-lived without meaning, for Beauvoir a "finite future" remains which is lived in the present, a bodily present inextricably shared with the other as other. For Beauvoir there is no absurd hero because no one, no thing, and presumably no animal, has as she puts it positive independence. Instead singularities—lives lived and dynamically bodily—are relationally disclosed.

My aim here has been to articulate the importance of singularity in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. I have only suggested that the term is crucial for Beauvoir's oeuvre. In order to gesture in this direction I'll close with a passage from the late work *La Vieillesse* (1972, 399–400; 1970, 422). Beauvoir explains there that the writer writes from singularity (here it is translated as "uniqueness") rather than with an interest in ontology, which would aspire to being a systematic account of the world. Philosophy, the search for totalizing meaning, for Beauvoir is the unambiguous flip side of Camus' absurdity (the

neutrality of the cosmos in the face of the desire for meaning), both of which as I have discussed she criticizes in *The Ethics*. But it is systematic philosophy that mistakes singularity for a piece of a more or less finished cosmology. Writing, however overwhelming, is driven by something else. Writing as the expression of singularity does not “claim to deliver knowledge, but to communicate *what cannot be known*: sense lived in its being in the world” (1972, 399–400; 1970, 422, emphasis added).

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