

# The Attempt to Author the World: How Intellectualism Denies the Individual

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**Although primarily known as a feminist scholar and author of such works as *She Came to Stay* and *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir contributed heavily to French existential thought. The two writings upon which this paper focuses, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Woman Destroyed*, deal with the existential issues involved in human interactions and personal relationships. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, famous as an exploration of the ethical code created by existential theory, begins with a criticism of Marxism and the ways in which it deviates from existentialism. Similarly, the first of the three short stories that make up de Beauvoir's fictional work *The Woman Destroyed* follows the French intelligentsia and their similarities and digressions from Marxist and existential thought. In this paper, I seek to analyze Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of Marxist theory in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and its transformation into the critique of intellectualism found twenty years later in *The Woman Destroyed*. I will investigate Marxism's alleged attempts to constrain the group it wishes to lead and the motivation behind these actions. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the efficacy of fiction as a medium for de Beauvoir's philosophy.**

In her 1947 theoretical work "The Ethics of Ambiguity," Simone de Beauvoir explores the conflicted relationship between existential and Marxist theory and exposes what she perceives as Marxism's major logical flaws. Although she does not determine in this work the ideological origin of these failings, her 1967 short story, "The Age of Discretion," suggests that they result from an attempt to portray social groups in a certain way to support a desired worldview. Through this fictional work rather than her theoretical writings, de Beauvoir more effectively demonstrates the way in which real people grapple with this issue. She does so through the reaction of the story's narrator and her husband, André, to the rebellion of their son, Philippe, who discards his parentally-chosen university career for a more lucrative government position. The characters, especially Philippe's mother, an intelligent woman who allows her emotions to lead her to many irrational behaviors and conflicting views, demonstrate the complexity of de Beauvoir's development of her existential theories. By following the characters' thought processes, she displays with extreme specificity the many elements that contribute to an individual's identity and decisions; unlike Sartre, she does not portray the characters simply as beings who must choose whether or not to accept their freedom of choice. Her exploration of characters' motivations and reasoning in the fictional work "The Age of Discretion" demonstrates more concretely than does her theoretical description the constraints placed upon humans by their

interpretation of environmental conditions.

Marxist and existential theory, in de Beauvoir's mind, share significant ideological commonalities, though existentialism departs from Marxism on the issues that she considers the latter's greatest weaknesses. On a theoretical level, the two schools of thought both reject "inhuman objectivity"<sup>1</sup> and that "certain human situations are, in themselves and absolutely, preferable to others."<sup>2</sup> This reflects their common belief in the existential tenet that 'existence precedes essence,' which denies any values that transcend the individual and evaluates all issues on a subjective, individual basis. According to de Beauvoir, Marxist morality then takes its root in one arbitrary point: the historical perspective of the proletariat; it views history as a class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie that should culminate in a communist revolution. Though existentialism does not take this step, de Beauvoir acknowledges that once Marxism chooses its particular moral perspective, it can assign ethical worth to these 'human situations.' In "The Ethics of Ambiguity," however, she argues that Marxists often contradict this personal morality and act as though their actions were justified by a universal moral code. She does not fault the Marxists for building an arbitrary moral structure, rather for pretending that it is not arbitrary. Here de Beauvoir fails to acknowledge, though, that in order to formulate an ethical structure for any set

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 7.

2 De Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 8.

of people—such as the Marxists’ proletariats—one must necessarily create an archetypal representative that will embody the average perspective of the group. Marxism therefore derives its ethical standards from an idealized version of the ‘necessary’ desires of the proletarian class. Though she identifies this as a personal morality, until her later work in “The Age of Discretion,” de Beauvoir does not address the fallacy inherent in creating one moral code for a group of many diverse individuals and thereby repressing the fact of their individuality.

De Beauvoir also takes issue with the Marxist belief that the proletariat forms its opinions and desires based entirely upon the influences of environmental factors; she considers it a denial of free will. The Marxists use this claim to justify their generalization of the people who make up the proletarian class; if all proletariats must hold the same desires, the Marxist morality built upon these idealized aims of the proletariat applies equally to all members of the proletarian class. In order to force the various members of the Marxists’ target group into an ideal proletarian mold, the Marxists cut off the other options available to these individuals while praising them for making the ‘moral’ choice to strive for the communist revolution they supposedly cannot help desiring. De Beauvoir criticizes the self-deception involved in believing that one both can and should constrain others’ free will to lead them to ‘choose’ a certain political position. The Marxists, she argues, deceive the masses by portraying Marxism as the sole option for the proletariat; it is not only the moral choice but also an inevitability determined by the individual’s proletarian identity. De Beauvoir asserts that Marxists directly oppose the existential belief in ultimate freedom through their denial of the individual’s ability to make a decision independently.

Through “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” de Beauvoir explores the aforementioned contradictions and conflicts without reaching a definite conclusion regarding their attraction for theorists. Twenty years later, in “The Age of Discretion,” she provides an explanation: Marxists and other intellectual activists—for propagandistic or personal purposes—seek to author themselves as overwhelmingly admirable characters who liberate or save the noble, tragically oppressed underdogs of society, such as the proletariat or a persecuted social group. In order to preserve their story’s continuity, they must portray the oppressed group as morally superior to the oppressors, a task that necessarily involves denying the group members’ individuality, free will, and subjective moral perspectives. While exploring in this story the origin of the flaws in Marxist theory, de Beauvoir broadens the scope of the topic’s relevance,

as she identifies a tendency for intellectuals to author the recipients of charity as grateful and righteous, often in the face of contradiction by more rational sources.

In “The Age of Discretion,” the narrator frequently blames her violently emotional reaction to her son’s decision to change careers on her moral repugnance at the ‘mercenary’ nature of his new post. Rather than admit that her anger stems from her hurt feelings, the narrator sets the conflict in moral terms, hoping to gain her husband’s support in breaking with Philippe. André, however, chides her: “You are setting it all on a moral plane, whereas it is primarily on the emotional plane that you feel you have been betrayed.”<sup>3</sup> André recognizes that his wife’s sense of betrayal stems from Philippe’s rejection of her designs for his life. Philippe identifies this as well, accusing, “It disgusts you because it goes against your plans.”<sup>4</sup> He recognizes that she defines morality based on her personal values and thus interprets her own feelings as disgust at his having broken some universal moral code. Philippe’s statement reveals a mother whose morality centers around supporting the world she has constructed for herself.

In “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” as well, de Beauvoir identifies this paradox of constructing a personal morality and then applying it to others. Though some Marxists acknowledge that while the Communist Party behaves morally according to the ethics of the proletariat, these ethics derive from an arbitrary historical belief, others frequently make “moralizing speeches”<sup>5</sup> denouncing the evils of capitalism and praising the virtues of communism. Rather than treating their “adversaries”<sup>6</sup> merely as obstacles to achieving the aims of the proletarian revolution, they “condemn them in the name of a moralism superior to history.”<sup>7</sup> These activists follow the same pattern of behavior as the narrator of “The Age of Discretion”—they project their personal choices onto the world and declare their particular moral perspective universal. The Marxists do not feel confident that inciting revolution on the basis of a morality only valid from one perspective provides the solid ground necessary to mobilize masses; there cannot be any doubt as to the rectitude of the party’s position. The narrator approaches motherhood in the same way: if the narrator is to raise a child who will follow her example exactly and justify her life choices, she must impress upon the child a sense that her particular moral philosophy ap-

3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 77.

4 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 58.

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 9.

6 De Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 9.

7 De Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 9.

plies universally.

In order to put forward such universal moral beliefs, one must simultaneously deny individuality. If everyone in a given group *must* hold a certain moral viewpoint, the individual members cannot differ in their personal perspectives. Philippe’s mother reveals through her arguments with her husband the extreme extent to which she denies her son’s individuality while pretending to herself that she approaches the question rationally and with her son’s interests in mind. When André suggests to her that not everyone must pursue a university career, she replies, “It is not a question of everybody, but of Philippe. He is going to turn into a fellow concerned with dubious money-making deals.”<sup>8</sup> At first, she recognizes a semblance of personal morality and approaches Philippe’s case on an individual level. She sets up in the first sentence an expectation that she is going to put forth a case as to why this certain choice is not personally right for Philippe. She instead retreats to generalities in the next sentence, uttering moralizing universals to declare this turn of events ethically wrong in any situation. The fact that she almost immediately refers to Philippe as “a fellow” strips him of his personal identity in the case and turns it back into “a question of everybody” by labeling him as a type of person, rather than an individual. With these expectations of a personalized case built up and immediately crushed, the narrator defends her decision with the statement “[t]hat was not what I brought him up for.”<sup>9</sup> In another contradiction, she inadvertently admits that the morals in question are relative, not absolute, by acknowledging that the moral question is one of following the path picked for him by his mother. The narrator denies Philippe’s individuality, which would lead to the ability—even the necessity—to make personal moral decisions, in order to convince herself that he had only one moral choice: conforming to the role of a dutiful son. The narrator feels that her husband’s belief in individual, personalized ethical perspectives has no place in their parenting of Philippe.

As André argues against his wife’s belief in an objective morality, he reveals a strong conviction regarding determination of individual preferences. In his opinion, universal ethical guidelines prove ineffective primarily because the personal differences that necessitate individual moral standards are predetermined and entirely out of the individual’s control. He feels that one cannot judge another for something he or she did not choose. André describes

his own preference for learning as a “mania[... ]without the slightest moral justification.”<sup>10</sup> In describing the focus of his life in such terms, André betrays a belief in determinism. He declares to his wife: “we could not have done otherwise.”<sup>11</sup> While the emphasis remains on the personal implications of his statement, stressed by the italicized “we,” André’s choice to assert that they “could not have done otherwise” pushes away the idea of having freely chosen this lifestyle. Like the Marxists, he inseparably links personal morality with determinism: because each individual has certain values and desires that are determined entirely by outside factors, no one person’s moral perspective will apply universally or prove preferable to another’s moral perspective. Marxism claims that historical and political factors determine the proletariat’s needs and wants—or, as the narrator of “The Age of Discretion” believes, a child “turns into what his parents make him.”<sup>12</sup>

Addressing the similar convictions held by Marxists, de Beauvoir argues in “The Ethics of Ambiguity” that free will remains present despite André’s refusal to acknowledge it. She states, “It appears evident to us that in order to adhere to Marxism[... ]even a Marxist needs a decision whose source is only in himself.”<sup>13</sup> She reflects this sentiment in André’s deterministic portrayal of his life. Though André, due to varying influences and experiences, may incline towards a certain activity or lifestyle, he *chooses* his reaction to the outside factors. André independently accepts discovery as a desire toward which he will direct his energy. He could very well have ignored this feeling and have focused on more lucrative careers or have half-heartedly pursued science as a hobby. Like de Beauvoir’s hypothetical proletariat who can seek revolution through becoming a Marxist or just as easily find a “dull comfort” in remaining obedient to capitalism, André cannot claim that his outside factors constrain his will completely.<sup>14</sup> Despite his claim that he centered his life around knowledge “without the slightest moral justification,”<sup>15</sup> de Beauvoir argues, André must have evaluated his ‘mania’ and made some judgment of its worth to him. Though he rightly identifies that he does not believe in universal moral value attributed to learning, André does make a personal moral decision in accepting and pursuing

8 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 31.

9 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 31.

10 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 31.

11 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 31.

12 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 46.

13 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 8.

14 De Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 8.

15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 31.

his love for discovery.

De Beauvoir argues that Philippe's parents, and other such intellectuals, use this denial of free will as yet another way to constrain individuals and present a desired outcome as the only choice for the group or person they seek to control. Philippe experiences this through his mother, later accusing, "Everything I ever wanted to be[...]they were all mere whims according to you."<sup>16</sup> Philippe's mother dismisses his expressions of free will as misguided because they do not tend towards the goal she has chosen for him—becoming a professor. The narrator denies Philippe's other wishes with the justification that he does not truly desire these 'whims.' In this way, she believes, she protects him from his own foolish free will, just as de Beauvoir's earlier Marxists exercised a similar bad faith in making the proletariat's choices: "[I]f the individual were not constrained by the external world[...]there would be nothing to defend him against his whims."<sup>17</sup> The narrator characterizes this act as "a victory over him [Philippe] and for him."<sup>18</sup> The narrator and the Marxists here express the same sentiment: that there is one proper want for Philippe/the proletariat (learning/class elimination). In order to prevent whims from spoiling the pursuit of this want, his mother/the environment must provide constraints to eliminate free will and determine his wants. If the Philippe/the proletariat were to possess free will, the story would be threatened. This conflicts, of course, with reality; Philippe demonstrates that he *can* choose, just as the proletariat does not always pursue a communist revolution. It likewise contributes to the paradox present in the intellectuals' authoring of their story. They desire Philippe and other individuals they 'help' to choose the 'right' path without appearing forced to do so. In order to constrain individuals without losing the semblance of a moral decision, they portray the choice as one in which only one *real* moral option exists. Although reality forces the narrator to accept that Philippe *can* choose a lucrative job instead of the life of an intellectual, she retains her ability to condemn this as an uninformed or immoral decision, depending upon which strikes her fancy.

The narrator of "The Age of Discretion" concludes her conflict with her son in an unexpected way: she simply becomes apathetic. As her strained relations with André relax and he falls back into his normal, predictable pattern of behavior, the narrator finds herself caring less and less about Philippe. She describes, "I listened to

André's voice, calm and convincing[...]and something melted inside me. For the first time I thought of Philippe with no anger."<sup>19</sup> She does not resolve any of the feelings she held about Philippe or have any personal revelations; she merely draws back into the comfort of her reassured role with André. She admits that she grows "indifferent" because "André was suddenly so near to me that the picture of Philippe was blurred and indistinct."<sup>20</sup> Her mental image of Philippe, which she has until this point used to picture him in an ideal sense and remind herself of the abstract Philippe she desires, begins to fade as her interest in controlling his life fades. The image of André eclipses Philippe's when André returns to fitting the narrator's idea of him. She no longer cares to author Philippe; she has André. Instead of attempting to learn how to interact with her son based on his real personality, instead of the one she projects, the narrator remains committed to authoring her world and rejecting that which does not fit.

De Beauvoir here goes beyond her earlier discussion of the flawed thinking of Marxist theorists—she now shows the peculiar way in which such intellectuals deny the existential truths of free will and individuality in order to promote a worldview that they personally desire. De Beauvoir completes her critique of the intellectual attempt to author the world in this work of fiction, adding a plethora of nuanced observations of the way in which authorship figures into individuals' lives on a more realistic than theoretical basis. Her descriptive style of philosophy so pointedly focuses on the individual and avoids theoretical generalizations that fiction proves the medium most apt for realistically investigating the personal way in which people interact with the existential concepts about which de Beauvoir theorizes.

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16 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 58.

17 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 11.

18 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 27.

19 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 81.

20 De Beauvoir, *Woman*, 81.