

10. The Imperative of Authenticity

Existentialism is the theory that we ought to recognise and respect the human freedom encapsulated in the slogan 'existence precedes essence'. It is, as Sartre points out, a form of humanism that grounds all moral value in the structure of human existence, rather than in human achievements or potential for achievement (EH: ref). But this ethical theory stands in tension with the theory of human existence that it refers to. For to say that existence precedes essence is, as we have seen, to say that the reasons we encounter in the world reflect the values at the core of our projects, which we have chosen and can change. What reason could there be, therefore, that requires us to endorse any particular value? How could there be reason for everyone, irrespective of their existing commitments, to undertake any particular project, such as the project of authenticity?

One strategy for answering this question is to argue that inauthenticity has implications that are disvalued by the inauthentic individual no matter what their other projects are. Fanon and Sartre pursue this strategy primarily with the psychoanalytic aim of uncovering and countering sources of distress. In this context, they aim only to derive what Kant describes as a 'hypothetical imperative', an imperative to undertake some means to an end that one already has. The goal is to overcome the distress, the means is conversion to the project of authenticity. Sartre wants to derive a moral conclusion from the same considerations, because he thinks that the distress he diagnoses is a necessary consequence of inauthenticity. But this strategy cannot succeed, as we saw in chapter 9. For it can at best provide reasons for authenticity that might be outweighed for an individual by contrary reasons that are grounded in their projects. And its conclusion only rules out commitment to the idea that people have fixed natures, which does not seem to set much constraint on permissible behaviour.

Existentialist eudaimonism therefore fails as a moral position. The imperialist entrepreneur who subjugates thousands of people in pursuit of their own goals, for example, might reasonably conclude that the benefits from continuing this practice

outweigh any benefits of giving it up out of respect for human freedom, or might conclude that authenticity only requires that they are aware that the people they subjugate have no fixed natures. Beauvoir offers an alternative route to the imperative of authenticity. She aims to derive it not from the internal contradictions of the project of inauthenticity, but rather from the structure of human existence itself. If this argument succeeds, the imperative will be not hypothetical but categorical. It will apply to all creatures whose existence precedes their essence, irrespective of their existing projects. And it will require them to value human freedom, not merely to recognise it.

1. A Kantian Moral Cogito

In her works of the 1940s, Beauvoir rests her moral philosophy on this claim that the imperative of authenticity follows from the nature of human existence. More precisely, she argues that the fact that we freely adopt values that shape our experience entails that we ought to treat this feature of human existence as objectively valuable. She occasionally asserts this entailment without explanation (MIPR: 189; EA: 57-8). She does sketch an argument for it in her essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but so briefly that she can seem to be offering nothing more than a series of unsupported assertions (EA: 71-2). This explains why Iris Murdoch, in her review of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, criticised Beauvoir for providing no argument for the claim that the imperative of authenticity follows from the existentialist conception of human existence (1950: 127). Beauvoir does clearly indicate, however, that these remarks in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* are intended to summarise the argument of her earlier work *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (EA: 71). To identify her argument for authenticity, we need to turn to that work.

If the summary in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* obscures the argument by being too concise, its full statement in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* obscures it by being nowhere near concise enough. This short book, first published in 1944 and unavailable in English until 2004, is written in the style of the classical French essay pioneered by Michel de Montaigne. Her argument is regularly illustrated and substantiated by references to literature and examples from medieval European politics, the development of Western art, the postulates of classical physics, and the tensions in Christian theology. There is no clear summary of the overall sequence of thought to ensure that its message is properly conveyed, though there is a liberal sprinkling of anecdotes, witticisms, and aphorisms to keep the reader entertained. It can read like an iteratively digressive stream of consciousness. It can seem, that is to say,

like a breathless rush to expound a host of novel ideas without the editorial discipline required to ensure coherence and clear overall direction (Sandford 2006: 12, 18).

Yet we should take seriously Beauvoir's claim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, published only three years later, that this essay presents an argument for the imperative of authenticity on the basis of the idea that existence precedes essence. If we read *Pyrrhus and Cineas* with this in mind, we can find in its pages such an argument that deserves serious attention in moral philosophy. This argument parallels in the moral domain the structure of the argument Descartes develops for the possibility of knowledge. It begins from a premise that the reasoning subject must accept. Descartes begins his argument with the claim 'I think', which he argues cannot be doubted by the thinker (1984: 16-17). It is a common criticism of Descartes that he is only really entitled at this point to the premise 'there is thinking' or 'there are thoughts' (e.g. Nietzsche 1998: § 17). Beauvoir's parallel opening premise could not be subjected to a similar objection, since her argument begins not with the thought that I value things, but with the thought that some things are valuable.

I have to accept this premise, according to Beauvoir, because it is an essential structure of human existence that the individual values the ends they pursue. This is, as we have seen throughout this book, the basic ontological claim of existentialism: existence precedes essence; the individual's behaviour is ultimately explained by their pursuit of values that they have set for themselves. From the first-person perspective, those ends appear phenomenologically to be valuable and are treated in practice as valuable. If staying alive is one of my projects, then it seems to me in my unreflective experience that my life is valuable and I treat it as such. Just as Descartes does not need to specify what it is that I think, or what those thoughts are about, Beauvoir does not need to specify what values I accept in the initial premise. All that is required is that I accept that my ends are valuable. And I do accept this, she thinks. Although I can reflectively decide that nothing is valuable, my unreflective experience and action cannot embody this nihilism. 'I live, even if I judge that life is absurd, like Achilles always catching up with the tortoise despite Zeno' (P&C: 100; compare EA: 55-6).

Just as Descartes aims to derive an objective conclusion from his subjective starting place, so Beauvoir aims to derive the conclusion that I ought to treat the basic ontological structure of human agency as objectively valuable. Descartes does not merely want to establish that knowledge is possible, however. He wants to show *how* it is possible,

thereby establishing which beliefs are knowledge. Beauvoir's conclusion sets similar constraints in the realm of value. The imperative of authenticity requires that we do not treat as valuable any ends that conflict with the value we ought to place on human agency (P&C: 137-8; MIPR: 189; EA: 71).

This outcome closely resembles one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative, the injunction to treat humanity, or rational agency, 'whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (1997: 4:429). Kant defines an 'end' as something valued for itself, a 'means' as something valued for its contribution to an end. Some ends are subjective, on Kant's view, having their value only because they are pursued as ends. But humanity is an 'objective' end, having its value irrespective of whether anyone recognises it (1997: 4:428). Beauvoir does not indicate this similarity in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, where her only comments on Kant's ethics argue that it is incapable of providing practical advice in a world where people are opposed to one another's ends (P&C: 127, 131, 138). However, she soon comes to acknowledge the similarity between her underlying theory and Kant's formula of humanity (MIPR: 189; EA: 17, 33). But before reconstructing her argument for this Kantian conclusion, it is worth seeing why her argument itself is Cartesian rather than Kantian.

2. From Subjective Ends to Objective Value

Kant has been read as arguing in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that the imperative to treat rational agency as an end in itself can be derived directly from the idea of rational agency as the capacity to pursue ends. As a reading of Kant, this is mistaken. He is clear that he does not intend to establish any moral imperative in the part of the book containing these comments (G: 444-5). The first section of the *Groundwork* analyses the concept of moral goodness to show that it is the concept of obedience to a categorical imperative. The second analyses this concept of a categorical imperative in order to show what such an imperative would be if there were any. The statement of the formula of humanity occurs in this second section. His argument there is intended to show that if there is any categorical imperative, then it can be stated as the formula of humanity. It is not an argument that there is any such imperative. The argument that we are subject to the categorical imperative is in the third section of the book and does not explicitly refer to the formula of humanity.

Despite this, it is worth considering an argument for the formula of humanity that has been assembled from Kant's comments in the paragraphs surrounding it in the second section of the *Groundwork*. For this argument resembles Beauvoir's: both begin from the idea of rational agency or human existence as the capacity to set and pursue ends; both aim to establish the objective value of that capacity. The argument derived from Kant's comments, however, does not succeed. The reasons for its failure will help us to see the strengths of Beauvoir's argument. Rather than consider every variation of the neo-Kantian argument, we will focus on the version that has received the most attention, the one propounded by Christine Korsgaard. Her initial statement of it argues that the value my ends have depends on my setting them as ends, which entails the value of my capacity to do so, and since this value does not depend on any subject's attitude towards that capacity it is an objective value rather than a subjective value (1986: 196-7; see also 1997: xxii).¹

Various objections have been raised against this argument. For our purposes, the most important is that it cannot establish the objective value of rational agency in general. If I accept that the foundation of the value of my ends must itself be valuable, then I am led only to the value of my own rational agency, my own capacity to set and pursue ends. Korsgaard claims that it is incoherent to value one's own rational agency but not other people's (1986: 196). She does not say why, but perhaps her thought is that the capacity to set ends is the same in everyone and it is incoherent to treat cases differently that are in fact the same. However, it is incoherent to treat cases differently only when they are the same in the relevant respect. If the value of my rational agency is established on the basis that it grounds the value of my subjective ends, then my rational agency is different from everyone else's in the relevant respect. Nobody else's capacity to set ends grounds the value of my subjective ends. It is perfectly coherent to value my rational agency as the ground of my subjective ends without valuing other people's rational agency.

¹ Sartre's comments on the inconsistency of bad faith in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* have been read as suggesting an argument like this (Poellner 2015: 238). But, as we saw in the last chapter, the most this kind of argument could show within the framework of Sartre's initial form of existentialism is that we ought to value our own projects, not that we ought even to recognise our freedom over those projects.

Alternatively, perhaps Korsgaard intends to be arguing that if I recognise the grounding of the value of my own subjective ends in my own rational agency, then I must also recognise that the value of other people's subjective ends is grounded in their rational agency (see 1996: 123; 1997: xxii). But this would assume that I recognise the value of other people's subjective ends. This assumption fails to recognise the subjectivity of subjective ends. Korsgaard treats subjective ends simply as conditional values, so that what makes a subjective end subjective is that its value is conditional on it being willed (see 1996: 123-4). But this is not what it is for value to be subjective. Kant rightly defines a subjective end as something that 'has a worth *for us*' (1997: 4:428). My subjective ends are valuable to me, so their value can be used in an argument intended to lead me to some conclusion. But other people's subjective ends are only valuable to them. (They may coincide with my subjective ends, but that does not mean that I value them as other people's ends.) So I do not need to accept the value of other people's subjective ends as a premise.

Any attempt to derive the value of rational agency directly from its structure as setting the value of ends will be caught in this dilemma. Either the premise refers only to the value my own ends have for me, in which case the most it can establish is the value of my own capacity to set that value. Or the premise refers to the value of all subjective ends, in which case I can reject its claim that other people's subjective ends are valuable. Kant himself does not fall foul of this dilemma, because he does not try to derive the objective value of rational agency directly from the capacity to set ends. His argument for the objective value of rational agency rests on the argument in the third section of the *Groundwork* that we are subject to moral imperatives.² We are not concerned here with identifying which interpretation of Kant is correct, but we are now in a position to see clearly the problem that Beauvoir's argument in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is trying to solve: how can an argument reach the conclusion that rational agency, rather than simply my own rational agency, is objectively valuable, if the only starting premise that I must accept is the value of my own subjective ends?

² In her most recent paper on the formula of humanity, Korsgaard no longer attempts to derive it directly from the value of subjective ends. Instead, she develops a reconstruction of Kant's argument that rests on the third section of the *Groundwork*. Specifically, she rests it on that claim in that section that I am rationally committed to treating my own rational agency as legislating value in a shared kingdom of ends (Korsgaard forthcoming, § III).

3. A Reconstruction of Beauvoir's Argument

Beauvoir aims to establish the imperative of authenticity on the basis of the structure of human existence. Her argument is therefore distinct from Kant's, which combines an argument that any categorical imperative must be expressible in the formula of humanity with an argument that we are subject to a categorical imperative. But it is also distinct from Korsgaard's, for two reasons. One is that it begins from a proper recognition of the subjectivity of the individual's subjective ends. This is what makes Beauvoir's argument distinctively Cartesian: it starts from a premise that the reasoning individual must accept, according to her theory of human existence. The second is that Beauvoir's argument does not aim to derive the objective value of human existence directly from this premise. Rather, she proceeds via the axiological concept that Kant deploys in his formula of humanity but which Korsgaard ignores in formulating her argument: the idea of a means. Something is valuable as a means, according to Kant, if it is required for some valuable end (1997: 4:428). I might value exercise as something that contributes causally to good health, for example, or value a free press as an essential constituent of democracy.

More precisely, Beauvoir's argument proceeds via her concept of a 'point of departure' (*point de départ*), something that is valuable as a potential means irrespective of whether it is ever actually deployed as a means. This idea is required, she argues, in order to make sense of the value that we accord our ends. For in pursuing our ends we accord that value to those ends, not to our pursuit of them. This means that we value the end being achieved. Once the end is achieved, argues Beauvoir, any value it has must reside in its being a potential means, a 'point of departure', for further ends. This value as a potential means rests on the capacity to use it as a means, which is the capacity to set and pursue ends, but it does not rest on any particular instance of this capacity. An achieved end is a potential means for anyone pursuing a relevant end. The value of a potential means therefore derives from the value of rational agency or human existence in general, a value that human existence therefore has irrespective of whether anyone recognises that value.

This reasoning can be clarified by setting it out as a sequence of numbered propositions. The opening premise is:

(1) Some ends are valuable.

Beauvoir considers each of us to be committed to accepting this premise, whether we are aware of it or not, because we do in fact treat some ends as valuable in action. This is the nature of the projects that shape our experience. The second premise clarifies that to treat an end as valuable is to treat its value as attaching to that end, rather than to my pursuit of it:

(2) It is incoherent to treat an end as *valuable* and as *valuable only because I treat it as valuable*.

To try to bring something about is to treat it as valuable. It may be valued as a means to an end or as an end. But nothing could be valued as a means unless something is valued as an end (P&C: 112). On reflection, it can seem to us that our ends seem valuable to us only because we pursue them as ends. But this reflective thought threatens our commitment to those ends. It does not clarify the kind of value the end has, but rather makes the end seem arbitrary and unjustified. It is this reflective threat to our values that Beauvoir considers to be the experienced problem of absurdity, as we saw in the last chapter. The third premise draws out an implication of this point that we treat our ends themselves as valuable:

(3) To treat an end as valuable is to treat the achievement of it as valuable.

To treat the achievement of an end as valuable is to treat the achieved end as having some property that makes it valuable. This cannot be that it is an end, since once it is achieved it is no longer pursued. If there is to be something valuable about this end, then it must be that adding it to the world would be valuable. What could make this valuable?

(4) An achieved end is a 'point of departure' for other ends; a potential means.

(5) The existence of a potential means is necessary for a subjective end that requires that means.

(6) An achieved end, therefore, is valuable.

If the reasoning up to this point is correct, then it shows that to treat an end as valuable commits one to treating the achievement of that end as valuable, which commits one to the idea that its value lies in its being a potential means for other ends. But this value,

Beauvoir argues, requires that the capacity to use the achieved end as a means is itself valuable.

(7) This value of an achieved end depends on the capacity to set ends for which it is a means.

(8) The capacity to set ends (human agency) is thus valuable.

Since proposition (8) is intended to follow logically from the commitment to the value of one's ends, a commitment that according to existentialism we cannot avoid, the argument this far aims to show that we ought to treat human agency as valuable. Finally, the argument then concludes that this value of the structure of human existence must be an objective value, rather than a subjective one:

(9) This value does not depend on human agency being pursued as an end.

(10) Therefore, human agency is objectively valuable.

From the fact that we do treat our own ends as valuable, then, Beauvoir has argued to the conclusion that we ought to treat human existence, or human agency, as objectively valuable. If this reasoning is right, then the imperative of authenticity, the requirement that we all value the basic structure of human existence, follows logically from the very structure of human existence itself. This ambitious argument is very subtle, however, and not all of its commitments have been elucidated in this reconstruction, so the next three sections of this chapter will clarify it further.

4. The Commitments of Beauvoir's Argument

We are likely to misunderstand the implications of Beauvoir's argument if we fail to keep in mind that it is only an argument, which Monty Python rightly defined as a connected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition (Chapman et al 1989: 87). Beauvoir's argument, that is to say, is an epistemic device. It is intended to lead the individual from the value they place on their own ends to the imperative to treat human existence as objectively valuable. It is not an attempt to trace the contours of the metaphysics of value. The step from one proposition to the next is intended to articulate a relation of logical implication, not a relation of metaphysical dependence. The argument does not claim, therefore, that the value of an end depends on it being able to become a

potential means once it has been achieved. Neither does it claim that any end that can become a potential means is thereby valuable. So the argument is not subject to the objection that some ends cannot become potential means or the objection that some morally disvaluable ends can become potential means.

It may well be, for example, that I value listening to music as an end, but my regular achievements of this end cannot be used by anyone as a means to a further end. My love of music might be used as a means by musicians who aim to make money from their art, of course, but perhaps no particular event of my listening to music can, once it has been completed, be used as a means. Yet I might have aimed at bringing about that event as an end. Beauvoir's argument does not deny this. All that is required for the argument is that some end that I value would become a potential means once it is achieved. Neither is Beauvoir's argument committed to the idea that an end that cannot become a potential means is not truly valuable, or is absurd. For the conclusion of the argument is that we must treat human existence, the setting and pursuit of ends, as objectively valuable. This conclusion is perfectly consistent with the idea that the ends we pursue are valuable because they are expressions of that objectively valuable structure of human existence. The argument is consistent, that is to say, with the metaphysical dependence of the value of ends on the value of the capacity to set and pursue them.

The conclusion of Beauvoir's argument does set a constraint on the value of ends, however. For it entails that we ought not treat an end as valuable if it is incompatible with the objective value of human existence. This rules out ends that involve killing people, because this is the destruction of something objectively valuable. It also rules out the suppression of what is objectively valuable in people, their capacity to set and pursue their own ends. Slavery is an extreme form of this suppression, but any form of coercion or subordination is a failure to respect this objective value. Beauvoir's argument, therefore, entails that our ends must respect the existence and autonomy of any human agents affected by them. Yet this does not restrict the ends that the reasoning subject can treat as valuable in order to accept the opening premise. At that stage of the argument, all that matters is that the reasoning subject takes some end to be valuable. If doing so leads to the conclusion that the end ought not be taken as valuable, then it is the end that needs to be rejected, not the argument's conclusion.

Although the conclusion sets this constraint, the argument should not be read as concluding that I should respect the value of humanity, or rational agency, in order that my ends will be valuable. Because the problem of absurdity plays a significant role in Beauvoir's articulation of her argument, she can seem to be recommending morality as an antidote to absurdity. Read in this way, Beauvoir's argument aims to establish the hypothetical imperative 'to avoid absurdity, respect the value of humanity'. This would seem an objectionably egotistical basis for morality (Sandford 2006: 19). It would also allow one to evade the constraints of morality by taking up the ironic attitude that it does not matter whether one's own ends are truly valuable. But this reading mistakes the logic of the argument. The conclusion is the categorical imperative that you ought, irrespective of your own aims, to respect the value of human agency. This is not argued to be a means to establishing the value of your own ends. The argument is that this categorical imperative is logically implied by the value that you do in fact place on your ends.³

The argument as a whole can be stated as a conditional. If you are an agent that pursues ends and treats them as valuable, then you ought to treat this kind of agency (whether in your own person or in anyone else) as objectively valuable. But this is not a hypothetical imperative. In a hypothetical imperative, the antecedent refers to some end that you might or might not pursue, such as 'if you value your health, then you should take regular exercise'. In the conditional statement of Beauvoir's argument, the antecedent refers only

³ Beauvoir seems to have read her own argument in this mistaken way. In two volumes of her autobiography, written more than a decade and a half after *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she chastises her younger self for thinking that the individual 'should hammer out his "project" in solitary state, and only then ask the mass of mankind to endorse its validity' and for placing 'a search for the meaning of life' at the core of her ethics, adding that 'to look for reasons why one should not stamp on a man's face is to accept stamping on it' (PL: 549-50; FC: 77). These criticisms, which target the argument of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* both directly and indirectly as the philosophical basis of the moral essays she published soon after it, read *Pyrrhus and Cineas* as recommending a respect for humanity on the grounds that it gives one's own life meaning. If we read it more sympathetically, however, her argument seems intended to establish not that stamping on people's faces threatens the meaning of one's own actions, but that stamping on people's faces is categorically unacceptable behavior from a human agent.

to the kind of creature that is subject to the imperative. The fact that the argument can be expressed as a conditional statement, that is to say, simply reflects the fact that the imperative of authenticity applies only to agents that value their own subjective ends. Only things that exist in the way that we exist, only things whose ontological structure is our form of agency, are required to treat that form of agency as objectively valuable. For those subject to the requirement, however, the imperative is categorical.

It might seem, therefore, that one can reject the argument by rejecting the ontology of human existence that motivates it. Beauvoir's aim in this argument is to show that the existentialist theory that the reasons we find in experience are shaped by the values we freely adopt and can replace entails that we ought to treat the capacity to set ends as objectively valuable. But the existentialist theory of the origins of reasons does not appear among the premises of the argument. The reasoning subject led through the argument is not asked at any point to accept the existentialist theory of agency. Rather, the role of that theory is to substantiate the claim that the reasoning subject must accept the opening premise. But this does not mean that the best way to persuade someone that they do in fact have ends, goals that they value in themselves, is to argue for the full existentialist conception of human agency. The best way might rather be for that person to reflect on what they care about. If the existentialists are right, this person should come to see that they do have ends that they consider valuable in themselves.

5. The Value of a Potential Means

Beauvoir's argument aims to establish the objective value of a potential means as a step on the way to the value of humanity. We should treat a potential means as having objective value, rather than subjective value, because we should see its value as dependent only on its possibility of being deployed as a means, not on the actuality of anyone in particular deploying it as a means. The argument holds this objective value to be implied by the value of my achievable ends: because I am committed to these being valuable once achieved, I must accept their being valuable as potential means. At this point, however, an objection might be raised that would parallel the objection against Korsgaard's argument that we considered in section 2. Why should I accept that an achieved end is valuable as a potential means in general, rather than simply as a potential means for me? If the value of my achieved end were dependent only on it being a potential means for my own subjective ends, then a potential means would have only subjective value and the most the argument

could establish would be that I ought to treat my own humanity or agency, rather than humanity or agency in general, as objectively valuable.

To accept this alternative, however, would be to undermine the argument's opening premise that some ends are valuable. For this conclusion would set only minimal constraint on the ends that I could adopt. It would preclude there being any value in ends that killed me, enslaved me, or impaired my ability to set and pursue my own ends. But within that constraint, anything that I willed would be equally valuable. The problem here parallels one horn of the famous Euthyphro dilemma, which points out that if there are no constraints on what God can proclaim to be good, then God's proclamations are arbitrary rather than valuable (EA: 41). Perhaps that problem can be resolved by appeal to features of God, but the parallel problem for existential ethics could not be solved in that way. The idea that just about any end would be valuable if I were to pursue it as my end seems incoherent. For it would not matter whether I achieved any particular end, because I could instead simply replace it with just about any other possible end. This is not to treat my ends as valuable, but to accept that they are arbitrary.

In itself, this does not show that my ends are indeed valuable rather than arbitrary. If accepting the value of my ends in the initial premise could be shown to entail that my ends are in fact arbitrary, then we would have to accept that the initial premise was mistaken. If we indeed cannot live except by treating our ends as valuable, then we would have to conclude that life is absurd. Beauvoir's argument shows, however, that the initial premise does not entail this conclusion that undermines it. For we do not need to account for the value of the potential means in terms of our own agency. We can instead understand it as valuable as a public potential means. Beauvoir's argument leads from here to a conclusion that is consistent with the premise that some ends are valuable. If her argument is successful, therefore, the reasoning subject working through the argument should accept at that stage of the argument that the value of their own achieved ends consists in these ends being potential means for rational agency, or human existence, in general.

It might be objected, however, that the value of my achieved end as a potential means for other people does not require the value of human agency in general. For the value of a potential means might instead consist in the possibility of its being deployed by other people as a means towards ends that I foresee and value. Perhaps, that is to say, its value might be conferred by my subjective ends, but imply the value of other people's agency in

bringing about those ends. The most we could conclude from this would be that other people's agency is valuable when it might be deployed to further my own subjective ends. I would be required to value the agency only of people in a position to further my subjective ends. Indeed, if the value of other people is determined by their role in bringing about my own subjective ends in this way, then their value would not rule out killing, enslaving, coercing, or subordinating them whenever doing so would be expedient to furthering my own ends.

Beauvoir obviates this objection by pointing out that a potential means can be used for purposes incongruent with my ends. 'Everything that comes from the hands of man is immediately taken away by the ebb and flow of history', she writes, 'and gives rise around it to a thousand unexpected eddies' (P&C: 109; see also P&C: 117, 135). An achieved end cannot be valuable only as a potential means to my ends, since its potential to defeat my ends would cancel out this value. But this does not mean that its value is conferred by the ends to which it is put by other people. For this would lead to an infinite regress: if a necessary condition of the value of some end is that it be used as a means to some further valuable end, then the same necessary condition applies to this further end, and so on. An infinite chain of necessary conditions could not be fulfilled, so no ends or means could be valuable; our 'transcendence', or pursuit of ends, 'would be dissipated in time's elusive flight' (P&C: 106; see also P&C: 112). For these reasons, according to Beauvoir's argument, the value of an achieved end must consist in its *possibility* of being deployed as a means, which entails the value of the capacity to use it as a means.

6. Why The Argument Could Not Be Shorter

Two interpretations of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* attribute to Beauvoir shorter arguments for the objective value of human agency in general. Both are grounded in comments that she makes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and both are encouraged by her rather ambiguous summary in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (EA: 71-2). One is the argument that my ends can be valuable only if they are carried forward by other people (Arp 2001: 25; Sandford 2006: 17-18). This is primarily based on Beauvoir's claim towards the end of her essay that my actions will 'fall back on themselves, inert and useless if they have not been carried off toward a new future by new projects' pursued by other people (P&C: 135). However, she is not here contradicting her earlier rejection of this idea as requiring an infinity of necessary conditions. Rather, this statement is the opening stage of a brief dialectical argument that

draws together points already made with the aim of establishing that to treat an achievable end as valuable is to treat its achievement as the creation of a potential means for other people (P&C: 135-6).

The second shorter argument that has been attributed to Beauvoir is focused not on the potential of my own ends to be deployed as means by other people, but on the role that other people already play in my pursuit of my own ends. There are two parts to this interpretation. One is that the world is already replete with the products of other people's projects, which I can deploy as means to my ends (Arp 2001: 64). 'The house that I did not build becomes mine because I live in it', as Beauvoir puts it (P&C: 94). The other is that the ends I pursue are inherently social: their meaning is conferred on them by other people (Arp 2001: 64; Tidd 2004: 35). 'The writer does not want only to be read; he wants to have influence', Beauvoir writes, and the 'inventor asks that the tool he invented be used' (P&C: 132). According to this interpretation, other people's capacity to pursue ends is valuable because it provides means and meaning for my own ends. However, as we have already seen, an argument that holds humanity to be valuable only in the pursuit of my own ends would not rule out killing, enslaving, coercing, or subordinating other people whenever doing so would be expedient to furthering my own ends. It would not rule out, as Beauvoir points out, a selective respect for only those who do further my ends (P&C: 130-1). It therefore would not reach the conclusion that Beauvoir is trying to establish.

A third shorter argument would combine elements of Korsgaard's argument for the formula of humanity with one of the considerations against accounting for the value of a potential means in terms of one's own subjective ends. This hybrid argument would not be concerned with the value of a potential means, but would instead proceed from the value of subjective ends directly to the objective value of humanity. If the value of my end depends on my pursuit of that end, this argument would run, then my end is valuable either because it is willed by a rational human agent or because it is willed specifically by this rational human agent. But the foundation of the value of the end cannot be specifically my agency, since this would lead to the conclusion that my ends are arbitrary rather than valuable, for reasons that parallel one horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. So my subjective end is valuable only because it is pursued by a rational human agent, which establishes the objective value of rational human agency in general.

However, we should not accept the opening premise of this hybrid argument. Beauvoir's argument itself provides reason not to accept that my subjective end is valuable only because I pursue it as an end. For her argument rests on the claim that it is incoherent, from the first-person perspective of the reasoning subject, to consider an end valuable and to consider its value to consist in my pursuing it as an end. The intuitive plausibility of this claim, which forms premise (2) in the reconstruction of her argument in section 3, is substantiated by the point that parallels one horn of the Euthyphro dilemma: if the value of an end is not constrained by anything other than my pursuit of it as an end, then the end is arbitrary rather than valuable. Beauvoir's argument begins from the recognition that I must accept, indeed do accept, that some ends are valuable. I cannot accept, therefore, that the value of these ends consists in my pursuing them.

This point does not contradict the idea that subjective ends can be valuable as expressions of human agency, because this idea is compatible with there being other constraints on the value of subjective ends. If we accept the conclusion of Beauvoir's argument, that is to say, then we must accept that subjective ends incompatible with the value of humanity, ends that involve killing, enslaving, or coercing people, for example, are disvaluable. It follows from this that the value of an end does not consist in it being willed by the person pursuing it. For some ends that people pursue are disvaluable in these ways. But we can still hold that ends compatible with the value of human agency are themselves valuable as expressions of human agency. If Beauvoir's argument as reconstructed in section 3 is sound, then we can accept that our ends can be valuable in precisely this way. All of this is also consistent with the further claim that some of our ends are valuable as providing potential means for expressions of human agency.

7. An Existentialist Kantian Ethics

The core claim of existentialism is that the values that shape our experience and behaviour are ones that we have freely chosen and can replace. This is what the slogan 'existence precedes essence' means, as we have seen throughout this book. It can thus seem to entail that there are no objective moral values that restrict the permissible choice of projects. Beauvoir's argument in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is a particularly sophisticated response to this reading of existentialism. It does not simply aim to establish that existentialism is consistent with a moral imperative that can both constrain and ground the value of our own ends. It aims to establish this moral imperative by a chain of logical implications from

a premise that the reasoning subject must accept. It aims to establish the imperative of authenticity on the grounds of the same subjective valuing that the critics of existentialism interpret as precluding any objective value.

Beauvoir's argument, that is to say, presents a sophisticated solution to the problem of establishing the objective value of human agency when the only opening premise that the reasoning subject must accept is the value of their own subjective ends. Her strategy is to argue that this opening commitment entails that I must think of my subjective ends as having an objective value once achieved. It is this value as a potential means, rather than as an actual means, that provides the bridge from the subjectivity of the value of my own ends to the objective value of human agency in general. The categorical imperative of authenticity, that we must value the structure of human agency as the setting and pursuing of ends, is claimed to be established not as something external to my projects that I must respect, but as an implication of my projects, whatever those happen to be. If the argument is successful, Beauvoir has shown that the imperative of authenticity is 'self-legislated', meaning that its authority derives from the agency of the individual who is subject to it, even though it does so irrespective of that individual's choices.

It is therefore no threat to the individual's autonomy. Rather, as Kant argued, if an imperative is legislated by the structure of agency, then the individual is not truly autonomous, not fully self-governed, unless they accept the authority of that imperative (1997 4:440-1; see Reath 1994: §§ 3-5). Against the idea that an individual's authenticity consists in their pursuit of whatever ends they set for themselves, Beauvoir's argument is that authenticity requires one's ends to be constrained by the imperative to respect human agency. Failure to obey this categorical imperative is inauthentic, because it is a failure to act in a way that is consistent with one's own structure as an agent. This is not to say, however, that there is some prior imperative that we must behave in ways that are consistent with our structure as an agent. The conclusion of Beauvoir's argument is not the hypothetical imperative that we should respect other people's agency if we want to be consistent, or that we should do so if we want to be authentic. The argument's conclusion is a categorical imperative: we ought to respect human agency. If the argument is right, this imperative is implied by the structure of our agency, so we cannot be authentic or consistent unless we obey it.

Beauvoir argued in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that this imperative requires us to strive for the conditions people need in order to exercise their agency fully. Respecting the value of humanity requires aiming to ensure 'health, knowledge, well-being, and leisure' for everyone 'so that their freedom is not consumed in fighting sickness, ignorance, and misery' (P&C: 137). She accepted that this moral outlook was limited by dilemmas in which one cannot respect the agency of everyone concerned, arguing that sometimes we are 'condemned to violence' (P&C: 138). There are situations, that is to say, in which it is not possible to keep our hands clean and our conscience clear (P&C: 127; MIPR: 189-90). But later she saw this problem as a decisive objection to the ethics she had built on the value of human agency. She described *Pyrrhus and Cineas* as containing 'a streak of idealism that deprived my speculations of all, or nearly all, their significance' (PL: 550). She wrote that of all her books, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* 'is the one that irritates me the most today', in part because the morality it articulates is 'as hollow as the Kantian maxims' (FC: 75-6).

It is unclear, however, whether these comments concern the foundation of her earlier moral philosophy or the particular practical ethical claims that she made on the basis of that foundation. 'I was in error', she writes, 'when I thought that I could define a morality independent of social context' (FC: 76). This could be a rejection of the idea of an abstract categorical imperative of authenticity defined and established independently of the agent's historical situation. Or it could be the claim that the practical implications of that imperative cannot be defined independently of the agent's historical situation. Rather than take her own later rejection of her moral philosophy at this stage of her career as a reason to reject it ourselves, therefore, we should assess the structure and implications of her argument for the imperative of authenticity ourselves. We have seen that it is a distinctive argument that withstands the analysis we have subjected it to. It promises to establish the categorical imperative of authenticity, perhaps with the further implication that we should treat as valuable any human endeavours within the constraints of that imperative. For these reasons, the argument deserves careful attention in contemporary moral philosophy.

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