

Violence and Politics in Beauvoir and Arendt

Margaret Ogrodnick

Department of Political Studies
University of Manitoba
ogrodnick@ms.umanitoba.ca

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Political violence is as intrinsic to the discipline of Political Science as criminal violence

is to Criminology. Yet as Hannah Arendt observes, it is “rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration.”¹ Of course, there is study of wars, revolutions, and civil unrest, but this is generally the empirical and normative analysis of states and political movements. But for the individual, such “macro-analysis” does not settle the question of his/her own acts and ethical stance in regard to political violence. The contours of such an individualistic examination of political violence will emerge in this essay from a philosophical encounter between Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986) and Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975). Both philosophers were stimulated to address the question of violence by their experience of World War II and its aftermath. Beauvoir lived through Nazi-occupied Paris, and Arendt was a German Jewish refugee first to France and then to America. Neither woman is a pacifist and both embed their inquiries in philosophically dense understandings of human agency. Their treatments, however, diverge in the more collectively oriented framework of Arendt’s republicanism and the more individualistic rubric of Beauvoir’s existentialist politics. Both thinkers merit serious consideration in their philosophical treatments of violence and politics, but it will be shown that it is Beauvoir who provides the most elaborate and compelling political ethics for the individual.

Thus, there is good reason for political theorists to turn their attention to Beauvoir’s humanist political philosophy. Beauvoir is currently known to the discipline of political science chiefly through her feminist philosophy in *The Second Sex*, despite the surge of interest in her humanist political philosophy amongst Anglo-American continental philosophers. This essay will proceed by first addressing the political standing of violence in Arendt’s classic texts, and why an individualistic ethics does not emerge notwithstanding her trenchant analysis in other respects. The next and longest step will be to explain how Beauvoir does arrive at an individualistic ethics on violence, an explanatory endeavour that requires embedding in her existentialist ontology of freedom and action. I will conclude by addressing posthumously published writing by Arendt which, in a more fragmentary way than Beauvoir’s work, reinforces the validity of Beauvoir’s political ethics but is less persuasive in attempting an alternative.

Arendt on Violence and Individualism

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p. 8.

As we shall also see with Beauvoir, Arendt accepts the inevitability of human violence. The way Arendt sees it there is no substitute for violence as the final arbiter in an international arena of sovereign states.² And in both private and public life there are circumstances in which violence is the only way “to set the scales of justice right.”³ Where Arendt differs from Beauvoir is in theoretically excising violence from the political. This is the first reason why an individualistic ethics of political violence does not emerge from Arendt’s analysis since even the term “political violence” appears to be a misnomer in her theory. Arendt returns to the ancient Greek polis for the origins of her theoretical distinction between politics and violence. She contends that the household was the realm of violence with its despotism of patriarchs over family and slaves. In contrast, and consistent with Aristotle, the polis was the political realm where matters were settled through verbal persuasion and not through force.⁴ The quintessentially verbal character of politics, and the speechlessness of violence, leads her to characterize violence as a “marginal phenomenon in the political realm.” She further justifies her distinction between politics and violence through state of nature theories which posit a pre-political human condition characterized by violence.⁵ Arendt’s theoretical gulf between politics and violence, however, appears to me as highly contrived. The prevalence of domestic violence in the ancient Greek household did not negate the coercive power of the state (even if Arendt notes that capital punishment was administered by “persuading” the convicted to drink hemlock). Furthermore, Arendt’s confinement of the existence of politics to the internal affairs of the polis, thereby excluding international conflict,⁶ is inconsistent with our usual sense of the political and with Arendt’s supposed fountainhead, Aristotle, who provides a political ethics of war and empire in *The Politics*.⁷ Arendt’s reliance upon the state of nature to buttress her conception of the political as excluding violence is distorting as she fails to acknowledge the coercive and violent capacity of the state in social contract theory. Internationally, all three social contract theorists - Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau - acknowledge the role of the military in national and thus individual security. Domestically they all affirm the coercive nature of the state including advocacy of capital punishment as the most severe penalty. The upshot of

² Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 5.

³ Arendt, *On Violence*, pp. 63 - 4.

⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 26 - 7.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 18 - 19.

⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 12.

⁷ Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (London; Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 79 - 80, 283 - 6, 314 - 20.

Arendt's definitional exclusion of violence from the political on the grounds of it being speechless is that the topic is removed from "political" analysis and treated as a technical matter: "Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians."⁸ Obviously, an individualistic ethics on violence is not about to emerge from such a definitional foundation.

⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 19.

A second reason for the absence of such a political ethics has to do with the notion of human agency Arendt develops to support her republican ethos. She is concerned by the lack of public commitment in our contemporary world, by the transformation of citizens into private individuals, through the development of an individualism characterized by withdrawal into an “inward domain of consciousness”.⁹ Her antidote is to propose and endorse an individualism that is more publicly oriented and thus more suited in her view to supporting republican activism. She respects and emphasizes the importance of a sphere of privacy to raise children, allow qualities like love to grow, and provide a needed hiding place from the public realm. She also acknowledges the enrichment of our private lives and subjective emotions through the development of the intimate sphere since the eighteenth century. However, she contends that this intensification of our private existence has come at the price of our civic commitments, and even our individualism.¹⁰ In what I would term Arendt’s “public individualism” the disclosure of the world and of self-identity can be attained only through public words and actions. “Reality” for human beings consists in what is seen and heard by others, and thus public self-disclosure is the only way to establish one’s individuality. Self-knowledge includes self-evaluation for Arendt, and judgements of excellence belong to the public realm where persons could distinguish themselves above others.¹¹ Arendt’s public individualism is directed to a revival of civic commitments given that she considers the political realm to be a kind of theatre, in which people speak, act, and are judged, and thereby create their distinct identities. There is a classical nostalgia in Arendt for the high regard in which the Greeks held the political realm. In her view not only did they find life outside the body politic violent and insecure, they also considered the polis to be the quintessential forum for individualism as men had the opportunity to publicly distinguish themselves against their fellows.¹² “To be sure, the *polis*, and the whole political realm, was a man-made space of appearances where human deeds and words were exposed to the public that testified to their reality and judged their worthiness.”¹³ However, from the perspective of this essay’s task to delineate an individualistic ethics on political violence, Arendt’s public individualism seems ill-equipped.¹⁴ For it fosters an outwardness, a preoccupation and vulnerability to external opinions, that is inconsistent with the autonomy required of moral judgement. The need for this moral autonomy is especially compelling in

⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 140.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 38, 50, 71 - 2; *On Revolution*, p. 96, and; Hannah Arendt, “Public Rights and Private Interests,” in Michael Mooney and Florian Stuber, eds., *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 106.

¹¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 48 - 51, 73, 208.

¹² Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 41, 194, 197; Hannah Arendt, “History and Immortality,” *Partisan Review* 24 (1957), p. 18, and; Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, enlarged edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 154.

¹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 103.

¹⁴ Elsewhere I also contest the utility of Arendt’s public individualism to strengthen civic commitment in the contemporary world. See my book, *Instinct and Intimacy: Political Philosophy and Autobiography in Rousseau* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 175 - 182.

circumstances requiring opposition to state violence. Arendt's analysis also lacks another important constituent of an individualistic ethics, an in depth analysis of one's self-relation, a matter that is only superficially addressed in her notion of self-determination through acting and being judged in front of others.

My observations on why Arendt lacks an individualistic ethics on political violence do not negate her profound analysis of violence in other respects, an analysis which proceeds at the macro level. For instance, she provides a useful distinction between power and violence. Power arises when people act in concert; it is dependent on the alignment of many intentions and wills.

The only alternative to power is violence which is distinguished by its instrumental nature. Arendt advises that power is not equivalent to a country's material forces, and while violence can destroy power it can never replace it. Such an analysis can be usefully applied to such large questions as the rise and fall of civilizations, and the surprising outcomes of apparently asymmetrical wars.¹⁵ However, it does not provide an answer to the individual's moral question of what s/he should specifically do in terms of participation or resistance to violence.

Beauvoir's Individualistic Ethics and Political Violence

¹⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp.199 - 203, and; *On Violence*, pp. 44 - 53, 56.

As I have suggested, Beauvoir does provide an individualistic ethics on political violence. Unlike Arendt, her perspective on the political includes violence, and her philosophy of the self is sufficiently inward and autonomous to support an individualistic ethics. Arendt and Beauvoir did not comment upon each other's works. The closest Arendt comes is a short essay on "French Existentialism" that addresses Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. This essay is a good place to begin explicating Beauvoir's individualistic political ethics and its stance toward political violence. Arendt identifies the human experience of "absurdity" as a common element of existentialist thought, understood as the misfit between the reasoning human being and a world which cannot be explained.¹⁶ Arendt goes on to observe that while absurdity is the starting point for both philosophers, Camus persists with "a philosophy of absurdity" while Sartre works towards "some new positive philosophy and even a new humanism."¹⁷ For Beauvoir "absurdity" is less a starting point, than a perfunctory point of dismissal in her own humanist political ethics.¹⁸ For her the crucial, existentialist key to the human condition is not "absurdity" but "ambiguity." After all, Shakespeare told us that life is "a tale told by an idiot" centuries ahead of Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus."¹⁹ In Beauvoir's existentialism "it is possible for man to snatch the world from the darkness of absurdity, clothe it in significations, and project valid goals on it."²⁰ Her existentialist ethics proceeds from her conviction that human existence is not absurd but ambiguous, that meaning in action is elusive and hard fought but still possible: "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."²¹

In Beauvoir's existentialist ethics this ambiguity is fundamentally a problem for individuals and not for collectivities. In her existentialist ontology there is an original lack in the

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, "French Existentialism" in *Essays in Understanding 1930 - 1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p. 191.

¹⁷ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Beauvoir characterized herself and Sartre as the "intellectual couple" in her autobiography, *Force of Circumstance* (Trans. Richard Howard, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964). During her lifetime in France Beauvoir was sometimes dismissed as Sartre's sidekick, "*La Grande Sartreuse*" (Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990)). Nevertheless, their respective philosophies swim in the same intellectual waters but are still distinct. A well-developed secondary literature has established Beauvoir's own philosophical originality *vis à vis* Sartre. See: Michelle Le Doeuff, *L'étude et le rouet: Des Femmes, de la philosophie, etc.* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and; Kristina Arp, *The Book of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

¹⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A Simons, et. al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 209.

²⁰ Beauvoir, "What is Existentialism?," in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 326.

²¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 129.

being of humanity and correspondingly no absolute reasons for living. The individual, however, can choose a positive affirmation for existence through his/her own passion and will. The resulting values, projects, and ends are not absolute, but they do have meaning in the eyes of the choosing individual. Thus, nothing external to the individual can validate his/her existence.²² To unconditionally submerge oneself in a “Thing” - a job, a cause, a revolution, a party, a church - is the mark of the “serious” person and is self-defeating for it denies this inevitably subjective process of affirmation and reaffirmation.²³

Although individuals are thrown back on themselves to justify their own existence, for Beauvoir this ontological condition is also coeval with human freedom. She contends there is a “natural” or “original” freedom in the sense that each individual “spontaneously casts himself into the world.” This active immersion in the world is inseparable from the ambiguity of human existence, from the struggle for self-defined meaning in the absence of anything intrinsic and absolute in life. It would be absurd if one cast oneself into the world at random, but on the contrary “human spontaneity always projects itself toward something.” The issue for one’s existential health is whether one is prepared to assume one’s particular engagement in the world reflectively, and not to flee from the freedom and anxiety of self-chosen ends. Thus, our natural freedom is given to us, but it is still each person’s choice to embrace a “genuine freedom” of self-defined significations and values. This is what Beauvoir means by willing oneself free.²⁴ The will to reflectively assume one’s life as a self-defined project is not enacted in discrete moments, but “is realized as a unity in the unfolding of time.” One constructs an existential life narrative by integrating the past into the unity of a project which one continues to confirm and enact.²⁵

While the child lives in a world of ready-made values given authoritatively by adults, the adolescent notices contradictions and weaknesses among adults. The adolescent assumes his/her subjectivity through the crisis of realizing that s/he is a “prey to freedom,” that it will be left up to him/her to decide and choose.²⁶ Beauvoir observes, “the misfortune which comes to man as a result of the fact that he was a child is that his freedom was first concealed from him and that all his life he will be nostalgic for the time when he did not know its exigencies.”²⁷

²² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 11 - 15.

²³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 45 - 8, 117.

²⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 24 - 6.

²⁵ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 26 - 28.

²⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 35 - 6, 38 - 40.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 40.

It is at this cusp of consciousness about our freedom to choose that moral freedom is a possibility. Beauvoir's existentialist ethics does involve relations to others, but ontologically it is fundamentally about one's relation to oneself. Willing oneself free by assuming the subjectivity of one's choices amounts to willing oneself moral. Our natural freedom - or original spontaneity - is not a moral condition. As individuals we must raise ourselves to the level of moral freedom by responding to our lack of absolute reasons for being by willing subjective reasons which we find motivating but do not allow to become so engulfing as to deny the lack in our being.²⁸ There are possibilities here for moral failure. For instance, a person morally fails by immediately and chronically contesting and dissipating the validity of the self-chosen project through "laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice."²⁹ A different possibility is the moral culpability of the "serious" person who escapes the tension of the self-founding of the project by refusing to acknowledge that s/he subjectively, freely established it. To be serious is to annihilate freedom by losing oneself in the values and ends of some Thing (cause, philosophy, revolution, party, etc.) deemed absolute but which has no certitude beyond the subjective affirmation of its adherents.³⁰ Acknowledging both these possibilities for moral failure, Beauvoir sums up what it means to realize oneself morally:

Freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. An end is valid only by a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end. But this will implies that freedom is not to be engulfed in any goal; neither is it to dissipate itself vainly without aiming at a goal.³¹

To define morality by the relationship to self is not solipsistic in Beauvoir's ethics, for how we morally fail in relations with others follows from our moral failure in regard to ourselves. The individual does not exist alone but in a condition of a plurality of particular persons; what is at stake morally is their freedom as the source of values in the world. What defines the human situation is the existence of others who are also free to confer meaning on the world through the projection of their respective ends.³² This freedom is necessary to everyone since "only the subject can justify his own existence; no external subject, no object can bring

²⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 24 -6, 32 - 4.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 26.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 26, 45 - 8, and; "Pyrrhus and Cineas" in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 99.

³¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 70.

³² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 17, 71, 91.

him salvation from the outside.”³³ The intersubjective implications of the moral failing of the serious person’s self-relation becomes evident. The serious person refuses to acknowledge that s/he is subjectively establishing the value of his/her end, and denies the freedom of others to do the same. Put in action this denial becomes dangerous as other people’s freedom and physical well-being are sacrificed to the serious person’s end which is elevated to the status of an “inhuman idol.” A prime example is the colonial administrator’s denial of the values and life ways of the natives, but anyone from military men to revolutionaries can seek to sacrifice the freedom and lives of others in reverence to their own ends.³⁴

³³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 106.

³⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 49 - 51.

Beauvoir observes that some people are so circumscribed by economic, social or political circumstances that they cannot exercise their freedom. This can be the experience of slaves as well as women in some civilizations who can only submit to the laws, traditions, gods, etc. created by men. But once there is a possibility of liberation, Beauvoir contends that it is an abdication of freedom for such persons not to take advantage of it and raise themselves to a real moral life. Accordingly, her feminist philosophy is distinguished by an analysis of how women are sometimes in complicity with their secondary place.³⁵ Her existentialist ethics never loses track of personal responsibility, but is highly cognizant of other people as real limits to our moral possibilities. Oppression for Beauvoir means being cut off from the possibility of reaching positively into the future towards one's self-defined goals. Nature does not oppress us, only people do because they can recognize our freedom. Morality requires that the freedom of others be respected and even more positively that they be helped to free themselves. This is not an empty platitude, it enjoins concrete action.³⁶ As Beauvoir puts it, "Man is free; but he finds his law in his very freedom."³⁷ This injunction to promote the freedom of others is not a loss to one's own freedom for another person's liberation opens up new possibilities not just for that person but to others including oneself.³⁸ Further reasons are rooted in our intersubjective condition. On an individual level, Beauvoir enunciates a similar recognition as does Arendt on the macro level in her aforementioned understanding of power as springing up where people act together through the combination of their wills.³⁹ In Beauvoir's analysis everyone needs other people to be free because we are "necessitated by them" in the sense that we require others to understand the objects we found, or to recognize them as good, and true understanding and recognition can only be freely given.⁴⁰ Furthermore, if my project is not to become inert, I need others to also carry it forward. In general, when I consider my own prospects for "transcendence" - or disclosure of myself through my self-determined projects - I must strive to create a situation in which others can accompany and surpass me in my endeavours.⁴¹

³⁵ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 37 - 8, 47 - 8.

³⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 60, 73, 81-2, 91, 156.

³⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 156.

³⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 86.

³⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 200 - 1, and; *On Violence*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas" in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 128 - 9, 138.

⁴¹ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas" in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 135, 137.

Setting aside the question of the philosophical merit of Beauvoir's existentialist ontology that humanity is characterized by a lack of being that each of us must subjectively fill, this ontology certainly reflects a sociological reality in contemporary Western society as described by numerous commentators. We no longer draw our purpose in life from larger cosmic or social orders but instead turn inward to determine our identity and purpose. As described by Charles Taylor, in this "individualism of self-fulfilment" ... "everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value."⁴² Or as Peter Berger observes, in the contemporary world social roles and stable institutional fabrics no longer suffice to provide self-identity: "Inevitably, the individual is thrown back upon himself, on his own subjectivity, from which he must dredge up the meaning and the stability he requires to exist."⁴³ Such observations lead to the conclusion in the West that we really do not have to study existentialism to all be existentialists now. The question, however, is whether such a self-reflexive and self-creating individualism can provide an adequate ethics. The answer is negative to Alasdair MacIntyre who associates the Sartrean separation of individuals from their roles with the liquidation of the unity of life and the possibility for the exercise of virtue.⁴⁴ More generally, and without specific reference to existentialism, he criticizes the "individualism of self-fulfilment" only amounts to a culture of narcissism and moral relativism.⁴⁵ Whatever the cultural medium through which people lapse into selfishness and moral deficiency, we have seen that Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy is both individualistic and socially responsible. It is individualistic because it finds value in the individual as the ground of being, the source of meaning in the world. It is socially responsible because respecting and promoting the freedom of others is the analytical adjunct to one's own freedom. Beauvoir concludes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with this synopsis of her self-defining and socially responsible individualism:

Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence. ... But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is

⁴² Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 14. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 177 - 8.

⁴³ Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour," in Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 155.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 204 - 5.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 4, 13 - 14.

defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others.⁴⁶

In building her political ethics on a subjective individualism that turned out to penetrate so deeply into contemporary consciousness, Beauvoir's ethics has added motivational appeal and intellectual resonance with her reading audience.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 156.

Beauvoir's ethical analysis of political violence is shaped by the value her ontological individualism finds in every person, and the concomitant responsibility to reject oppression. Arendt is dismissive towards Machiavelli and his "insistence on the role of violence in politics."⁴⁷ Beauvoir's does not comment on Machiavelli. Nevertheless, her depiction of the political world is Machiavellian in accepting the inevitability of violence and, contrary to Arendt, in understanding the intrinsic connection of violence to the political.⁴⁸ Like Machiavelli and Arendt, Beauvoir presumes that the international arena will always be plagued by opposing interests and violent clashes.⁴⁹ Beauvoir's political discourse becomes distinctly more Machiavellian and less Arendtian, however, in her judgement that "crime" is necessary to humanity's liberation - a reality she does not euphonise.⁵⁰ And Beauvoir clearly aligns herself with Machiavelli contra Arendt by giving the nod to Saint-Just for understanding that "all authority is violence," and by concurring with his remark that "No one governs innocently."⁵¹ Nevertheless, once we see this violent Machiavellian universe sketched, Beauvoir's analysis is distinctly existentialist. Despite the necessity of violence, it is morally disturbing to her in a way that is given and guided by her existentialist individualism. The moral dilemma of politics stems from the inability, in the interest of human freedom as an end, to always recognize the absolute value of individuals as self-determining subjects and thus as ends in themselves. Consequently, "It is not possible to act for man without treating certain men, at certain times, as means."⁵² The subjectivity and freedom which gives individuals absolute value cannot be reached and controlled through violence, only the corporeal presence can and the result is to treat them as objects.⁵³ And this is a failing since the only truly moral response would be to act on the interiority of oppressors and their supporters by converting them. However, in a realist ethics reeducation is not always possible, as disturbingly exemplified in the wartime shooting of Hitler youth.⁵⁴ When persuasion fails there is only the resort to force in self-defence. But in that circumstance the other becomes a loss to myself; s/he is acted upon like a thing without freedom, and I give up on the possibility that s/he could recognize and contribute to my actions as valid.⁵⁵ If one, or a few, or even many persons in a world of billions seem dispensable, Beauvoir reminds

⁴⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 38 - 9.

⁴⁸ By Beauvoir's autobiographical account, her consciousness about political violence was generated by her experience of the second world war. She relates that during the war the world turned revealing another face which could never be turned back: "Violence and injustice were let loose, with every kind of folly, scandal, and horror." (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, Trans. Peter Green [New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1962], p. 473.) Her political interests and activities in respect to French colonialism in Algeria did nothing to dissipate her violent image of the political world. (See Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*.)

⁴⁹ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 5, and; Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 119.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 155.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 108.

⁵² Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 189.

⁵³ Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" in *Philosophical Writings*, pp.189 - 90, and; "Pyrrhus and Cineas" in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 124.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 96 - 8.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 136, 138.

us of the degradation to all people of not recognizing in each one their intrinsic value: “If a man is an ant that can be unscrupulously crushed, all men taken together are but an anthill. One cannot, therefore, lightheartedly accept resorting to force. It is the mark of a failure that nothing can offset.”⁵⁶ Beauvoir’s final scruple about violence is the effect it has even on justified perpetrators: the evil which divides the world into the oppressors and oppressed is carried into the hearts of the oppressed as they themselves become oppressors and executioners in their struggle for freedom. All told, Beauvoir justifies violence in the cause of freedom, but not without moral misgiving: “A freedom which is occupied in denying freedom is itself so outrageous that the outrageousness of the violence one practices against it is *almost* cancelled out.”⁵⁷ The dream of moralists who want to act politically and approve of themselves is impossible: “To come down to earth means accepting defilement, failure, horror; it means admitting that it is impossible to save everything; and what is lost is lost forever.”⁵⁸

Given the necessity of political violence, and our consequent moral failing, Beauvoir contends that to a “scrupulous heart” political problems are not just difficult but unsolvable.⁵⁹ Yet to abstain is also to act and so she articulates an ethics of action that does not supply moral “recipes,”⁶⁰ but does offer guidance from her existentialist perspective on the individual’s value and autonomy, and the contingency of our subjectively determined ends. Her existentialism rules out a person being subordinate and expendable to the collectivity such that s/he has nothing to lose in political violence, but only a self-surpassing to gain through the collective cause. To Beauvoir there is no cause outside what is affirmed by concrete persons including soldiers. Therefore, the individual cannot be turned into nothing vis à vis the state, and his sacrifice in losing his plans and life cannot be negated. The necessity of affirming the value of persons taken one by one is evidenced, after the unspeakable violence of people dying by the million, in the trials of the massacrers.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” in *Philosophical Writings*, p.138.

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 97 (my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 190.

⁵⁹ Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” in *Philosophical Writings*, p.138.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 134.

⁶¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 103 - 8.

Because political violence is inevitable Beauvoir contends that attributing irreducible value to the individual still does not spare the moralist horrible choices. Political violence is typically justified on the basis of a means/end calculus, but this is not absolutely clarifying. Even if the end is deemed necessary the means are always contingent leaving room for moral questions like: “why this bloody revolution instead of slow reforms?”⁶² Furthermore, the means/end calculus is a sliding moral scale since only victory and not defeat make the death and destruction worthwhile. There is also the concern of raising any cause to the status of an unconditioned end. Beauvoir reminds us of the one existentialist certitude that the only supreme human end is freedom which alone determines the worth of other ends. But even this certitude about freedom leaves moral quandaries since one freedom must sometimes be sacrificed to another.⁶³ Thus, the only possible ethical stance towards political violence is constant questioning and this attitude marks the person of good will.⁶⁴ “In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself.”⁶⁵ What must be avoided is the tranquillity of the serious who annihilate their subjectivity by submerging themselves in some “Future-Thing;” thus, they suspend this questioning moral attitude at the peril of violent treatment of others justified in service of their end.⁶⁶ At an even lower level are what Beauvoir calls the “sub-men” who are too apathetic to be engaged in their own subjectively determined projects and become violent tools for other people’s ends:⁶⁷

[The sub-man] realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of. In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements organized by the fanaticism of seriousness and passion ... those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from among the submen.⁶⁸

Contemporary theorists of the modern identity emphasize the risk of meaninglessness and anomie in the contemporary Western world where individuals are thrown upon their own subjective devices to establish the content of their self-being. Beauvoir warns us of an even more ominous risk in the sub-men and their escape from the anxiety of self-founding through refuge “in the ready-made values of the serious world ” and the “verbal outbursts or even physical violence” that mask their real indifference and lack of subjectively founded reasons for being.⁶⁹ Beauvoir did not evade the reality of a hierarchy among human beings in their moral development, with her existentialist framework clearly spelling out the criterion of evaluation. She concludes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with a succinct statement of the highest moral stance her book was intended to explain and support: “If the fusion of the Commissar and the Yogi were realized, there would be self-criticism in the man of action which would expose to him the

⁶² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 109.

⁶³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 111, 113, 145.

⁶⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 133.

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 134.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 45 - 50, 117.

⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 42 - 44.

⁶⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 44.

⁶⁹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 44.

ambiguity of his will, thus arresting the imperious drive of his subjectivity and, by the same token, contesting the unconditioned value of the goal.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 154.

As explained above, in Arendt's classic texts she does not set up the problem of the political in a way that is conducive to the development of an individualistic political ethics. In a posthumously published collection of writings entitled *Responsibility and Judgement* she does explore this question although not as systematically or as originally as Beauvoir. Without the philosophical embedding that makes Beauvoir's conclusions so persuasive, Arendt nevertheless affirms them. In considering that "moral norms" can be changed like table manners, as exemplified under the Hitler regime, Arendt advances the greater ethical reliability of habitual doubters and skeptics.⁷¹ Arendt also concurs with the foundation of Beauvoir's ethics in a person's self-relation. Arendt contends that "[m]orality concerns the individual in his singularity," and that it ultimately depends on self-determined criteria of right and wrong.⁷² However, Arendt's observations do not lead into a philosophically compelling individualistic ethics. She rejects conscience as a helpful faculty of moral determination for the standard reason that conscience may simply be the experience of guilt enforcing social conformity. Instead, she suggests another moral limit which is whether I can live with myself.⁷³ This perhaps has an intuitive plausibility but no more so than conscience which also concerns my self-feelings. Arendt advances that the validity of this criterion of living with myself has demonstrated validity in the Socratic formula that "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong."⁷⁴ However, this Socratic argument depends on an objective criterion about the necessity for happiness of a particular kind of justice or harmony in one's psyche. Such a universal principle is incompatible with Arendt's belief in the "'subjective' criterion of the kind of person I wish to be and live together with."⁷⁵ Finally, the criterion of living with myself may be a helpful guide in the refusal to engage in unjustified political violence. But since even morally justified, political violence leaves a horrible taint on one's psyche, it misses the subtlety of Beauvoir's assessment that there is no hope of a definitive reconciliation with oneself.⁷⁶ Thus, although Arendt takes a stab at an individualistic political ethics, it is not nearly as philosophically satisfying as that of Beauvoir.

I shall end with an interesting observation made by Arendt. She suggests "our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company ... this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present."⁷⁷ Such an approach uncovers another source for moral deliberation

⁷¹ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), p. 45.

⁷² Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, p. 97.

⁷³ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, pp. 97, 107.

⁷⁴ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, p. 100.

⁷⁵ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, p. 111.

⁷⁶ Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 190.

⁷⁷ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, pp. 145 - 6.

on political action and violence through Beauvoir's autobiographies and fiction. Her autobiographies address her moral reflections and experience as a French citizen in respect to nationalism, international war, and colonialism.⁷⁸ In fiction, and specifically through her novels, *The Blood of Others* and *The Mandarins*, she found her favourite medium for expressing the ambiguity of political life.⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*; *Force of Circumstance*, and; Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, Trans. Patrick O'Brien (Great Britain: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974). I have made a small start on the political-philosophical analysis of Beauvoir's autobiographies in my article, "'Philosophizing the Self: Political Ethics and Autobiography in Simone de Beauvoir,'" in *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, Vol. 21 (2004 - 2005), pp. 123 - 32.

⁷⁹ Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 270.

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