

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 34

Expressions of Negativity: Simone de Beauvoir's Response to Hegelian Freedom

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore Simone de Beauvoir's response to G.W.F. Hegel's formulation of freedom. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes freedom as a two-fold, negative movement of dissolution and construction. She takes up this distinction and argues that both of these negative moments, defined as revolution and creative transformation, are two expressions of human transcendence. However, Beauvoir is very much concerned with situations of oppression in which the existent is forced into a position of immanence. In oppression, or *enforced immanence*, freedom is not annihilated, but it is denied expression in either revolt or creative labor. Addressing this state, Beauvoir describes two other articulations of freedom which do not transform the world in any way. In what I label, "complaint" and "resignation," she accounts for the impotent and empty expenditures of the freedom peculiar to oppressed existents. In complaint, the existent is unable to transform the situation in a positive sense and simply reacts against it; in resignation, the existent merely submits to the given. Through her analysis of complaint and resignation, Beauvoir moves beyond Hegelian optimism by forcing us to face the reality of ineffectual freedoms before we can even begin to speak of the possibility of revolution.

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Introduction

Beauvoir's philosophy of liberation is grounded in the tradition of Hegelian/Marxist theories of revolution and rebellion. Yet, Hegel and Marx maintain a certain historical optimism in the eventual victory of the subordinated over their tyrannizers that Beauvoir does not share. Especially regarding the idealistic confidence of the former, Beauvoir argues that only certain expressions of freedom can lead to concrete change. In order to institute social structures that will admit the fundamental humanity of the oppressed, she argues that it is necessary to destroy the institutions and practices that serve to exclude them from recognition. The dynamic and affirming forces of destruction and creation, so integral to the education of the slave-consciousness in Hegel's narrative, are sometimes denied to those who are not recognized—and therein lies the essential problem to be resolved by Beauvoir's philosophy of freedom. In this essay, I argue that her treatment of certain empty and abstract scatterings of freedom allows her to avoid the pitfalls of historical optimism, and consequently to give a much fuller picture of the damaging effects of oppression.

Beauvoir's liberty is grounded in the Hegelian idea of freedom as a two-part movement of negativity that is both destructive and productive of the given world. She considers this double movement to be the *transcendent* expression of freedom, which can be linked directly to the master-slave dialectic's themes of labor and the fear of death. However, Beauvoir moves beyond Hegel's understanding of freedom as negativity in her discussions of certain *immanent* expenditures of freedom, or what she terms, *empty* and *abstract* liberty. These latter two expressions, while largely (if not entirely) absent in Hegel's master-slave narrative, help her to show how it is that oppressed existents, while being essentially free, are cut off from transforming their world. Thus, alongside the creative and revolutionary thrusts of freedom as negativity, Beauvoir discovers two fundamentally *impotent* expressions in what I label "complaint" (*la plainte*) and "resignation" (*la résignation*). I contend that in Beauvoir's philosophy, freedom (understood as negativity) is *both* transcendent and, when trapped in conditions of subjection, paradoxically *immanent*; this preserves the Hegelian elements of her analysis as well as moves beyond them to account more realistically for situations of oppression.

I begin this essay by tracing Hegel's understanding of freedom as negativity in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As shown in the master-slave dialectic, the foundational lesson that self-consciousness learns is that the essence of freedom is both productive of the self through labor and destructive

of limitation in the absolute fear of death. Beauvoir discovers that this conception of freedom as a two-fold negativity is open to criticism concerning the inherent optimism of the system; for regardless of whether or not the existent is creatively changing the world through work or negating it through revolt, the Hegelian subject *always progresses and advances*.¹ The second half of this essay therefore addresses Beauvoir's attempts to expand the Hegelian freedom of transcendence by supplementing it with her own analysis of freedom in its immanent, i.e., *impotent* forms. The immanent expressions of freedom found in complaint and resignation help us to understand Beauvoir's insistence that even though situations of oppression can actually prohibit transcendence in *both* forms, the freedom of the oppressed does not simply disappear. Freedom still finds a way to be expressed in oppressive situations, but only in empty, abstract, and socially ineffective behaviors.

I. Hegel on Freedom as Negativity

The centrality of freedom and negativity in Hegel's systematic philosophy is unquestionable. Unlike Kant, Hegel claims that reason, rather than falling into antinomies, is in fact capable of *uniting* opposing metaphysical claims into higher and more complete truths. Far from being a mere annihilation of difference, Hegelian synthesis is actually the preservation of difference in a higher unity. This is what Hegel means by the term *sublation* (*Aufhebung*) which he describes in the *Phenomenology* as exhibiting "its true twofold meaning which we have seen in the negative: it is at once a *negating* (*Negieren*) and a *preserving* (*Aufbewahren*)" (PS, 68; [PG: 94]). Sublation, therefore, involves an alteration and an overcoming of the given that both preserves and destroys what has come before. This is the nature of progress, and it is fulfilled through a negative movement that is both transformative and destructive of limitation.

The movement of the dialectic as negativity is the driving force in freedom coming to know itself as such. For Hegel therefore, negativity is at the heart of truth in general and since the truth of Spirit is freedom, negativity is thus at the heart of freedom. The negative is that force which operates in all development and change and consequently all progress. This is no more obvious

¹ Even when Hegel moves from the analysis of master and slave into the seemingly abstract freedom of stoicism and skepticism (both of which can only deny or negate the world in some way) there is still a spiritual progression and thus education of freedom.

than in the *Phenomenology* where Spirit develops by its own self-negation, or mediation of its immediacy. In other words, Spirit's activity is not imposed upon it from the outside, rather, it is itself the basis for its own development. In this light, Hegel's Spirit must not be understood as a thing, but as a freely issuing-forth, *negative process* of positing otherness and overcoming (yet preserving) that otherness in a new shape of truth. He writes:

The content, in accordance with the *freedom* of its *being*, is the self-alienating Self, or the immediate unity of self-knowledge...The distinct content, as *determinate* ... is its own restless process of superseding itself, or *negativity* (*Negativität*); therefore, negativity or diversity, like free being, is also the Self. (PS, 490-1; [PG: 588])

The content of the absolute subject is thus the free, restless process of negativity: negating the self, negating the original negation by removing the alienation and moving into a new stage of development.² Spirit, as subject, is the absolute negativity of setting up and overcoming otherness. In a word, Spirit is the process of its own self-surpassing. Clearly then, Hegel conceives the essence of freedom to be a process of negation; put in a different way, the *essence of freedom is negativity*. I now turn to the foundational moment of freedom's education in order to underscore the progressive and therefore necessarily *optimistic* formulation of freedom as negativity.

II. Freedom and the Master-Slave Dialectic

The master-slave dialectic plays such a significant role in Hegel's *Phenomenology* because it is pivotal to what he understands self-consciousness to be in its most basic form. The lessons learned about negativity in this passage are carried through up to the emergence of Absolute Knowledge. As such, the magnitude of the fear of death and the role of work cannot be overemphasized in Hegel's account of the passage into and out of the master-slave dialectic. Based upon the above discussion of freedom as negativity, we can now see how this conception in Hegel actually has two distinct and equally necessary moments: a

² This movement of negativity is nothing less than the free movement of the self-relating, or self-conscious subject: "this 'I' = 'I' is the movement which reflects itself into itself ... this identity, being absolute negativity, is absolute difference" (PS, 489; [PG: 586-7]).

constructive moment as seen in the formative activity of labor, and a destructive moment, as seen in the experience of absolute fear in the face of death. In existentialist terms, both moments are *transcendent* expressions of freedom in the sense that the experiences of production and destruction illuminate the true doubled nature of freedom as negativity. As such, both are necessary in subject formation.

Hegel explains that in laboring on the material world, the slave comes into its true nature (PS, 118; [PG: 153]). In other words, the slave becomes conscious of itself as a force of negativity that forms, shapes, and changes the world. As Hegel says, “work forms and shapes the thing” and in turn, educates the consciousness that is forming and shaping its world (*ibid.*). It is crucial that Hegel refers to work as a “*negative* middle term” in which the slave’s subjective negativity takes on an objective existence (*ibid.*) because it accentuates the idea that negativity is the central force even in creativity. Labor, which is “arrested Desire” (*gehemmte Begierde*) (*ibid.*) is the expression of sublation that preserves difference even as it overcomes it. Because the slave is involved in the transformation of the environment (and in turn, subjectivity³) labor is still fundamentally an expression of freedom as negativity. Labor therefore both creates the world *and* the consciousness of the laboring existent; it is thus creative, formative activity. However, Hegel also reminds us that in addition to formative activity having a positive significance in labor, it also has “the negative significance of *fear* (*Furcht*)” (PS, 118; [PG: 154]). Freedom, in other words, in order to be made explicit to itself, must also experience a *purely* negative moment—i.e., a moment of utter dissolution in which all self-identity dissolves in the face of *absolute* negativity, or death.

In the battle for recognition, the slave (in discerning the real possibility of the loss of its life) experiences true terror. Hegel explains, “this consciousness has been anxious, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with fear (*Angst*); for it has experienced the fear (*Furcht*) of death, the absolute Master” (PS, 117; [PG: 153]; translation modified).⁴ In its confrontation with the possibility of its own nonexistence, the soon-to-be slave experiences a substantial lesson regarding the nature of self-consciousness. The experience of this ultimate fear is actually an

³ Hegel concludes that “Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own” (PS, 118-19; [PG: 154]).

⁴ This experience of fear leads Tadeusz Gadacz to argue perceptively that “the master is not the master of the slave, but the master of death. Likewise, the slave is not the slave of the master, but the slave of death.” Gadacz, “Freedom as Reconciliation,” 177.

insight into “the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *in (an)* this consciousness” (PS, 117; [PG: 153]; translation modified). Hegel explains that through the fear of death, the slave experiences the *truth* of self-consciousness in the form of an existential moment of absolute negativity. Instead of objectifying its negativity by transforming the limitations of its world, the fear of death is an experience of the slave’s utter loss of the world. The radical possibilities of this moment lie in that it is the impetus for utterly novel, revolutionary activity because limitation as such has been removed.

Through work and fear, the slave experiences the two sides of freedom—explicitly as the negative movement of forming, shaping, and creating the material world, and implicitly as the dissolution of the self, the melting away of the given and as a radical break with the status quo. These two moments are integral to freedom and are necessary for the attainment of self-consciousness—both on the level of the individuals living this dynamic, as well as on the level of Spirit coming to know itself. This is why the master-slave dialectic plays such a crucial role in the *Phenomenology* and consequently, in Beauvoir’s Hegelian approach to the different expressions of freedom.

III. Beauvoir’s Critique of Hegelian Freedom: Situation and Oppression

I now turn to Beauvoir’s adoption of 1) Hegel’s conception of freedom as negativity, 2) her consequent belief that *transcendence* is expressed in both the creative moment of work and the destructive moment of revolt, and 3) her development of a conception of immanent, or what she calls, *negative* or *abstract* freedom. This latter form accounts for the empty expression of freedoms who are oppressed—those peoples and groups for which Hegel’s dialectic cannot account.

Sonia Kruks, in her essay, “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom,” explores the advances made by Beauvoir over Jean-Paul Sartre on the existence and effects of oppression on human beings.⁵ The problem with

⁵ The freedom espoused by the early Sartre is a freedom devoid of social context in that it pits the lone individual against the given world and the hostile others who want to steal this world away. Regarding the individualism rampant in *Being and Nothingness*, Kruks contends, “Sartre cannot account adequately for the existence of ‘collectivities,’ of ‘general types,’ or of such a generality as ‘woman’s situation.’ There is in his work a radical individualism that amounts to a

Sartre's early philosophy lies, as Kruks locates it, in his inability to account for oppression except on a practically irrelevant level. She argues that Beauvoir's philosophy, although not specifically constructing a philosophy of freedom in direct confrontation with Sartre's, "quietly challenges" him on the basic assumption that all existents are equally free. Based on Beauvoir's astute review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in *Les Temps Modernes* (1945) Kruks claims that Beauvoir "implies an account of human freedom that is much closer to Merleau-Ponty's than to Sartre's: it implies that there are degrees, or gradations, of freedom—and that social situations modify freedom itself and not merely its facticity or exteriority."⁶ Whereas Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* that freedoms are always equal regardless of the situation of the existent, Beauvoir explores the impact that given conditions have on the *expression* of freedom and argues that from this perspective, not all freedoms are equal.

In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944), Beauvoir writes, "I am not first a thing, but a spontaneity that desires, loves, wants, acts" (PC, 16) and consequently, "what is mine is thus first what I do" (PC, 17).⁷ Beauvoir here asserts two central points about freedom. First of all, she agrees with Hegel concerning the essence of freedom lying in activity rather than in a static definition or predicate of a subject. In addition, Beauvoir emphasizes that what belongs to me and, in a sense, *defines* me is not what I am but what I *do*. Freedom is thus not a property of a concrete soul or mind, but transcendent activity itself.⁸

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) Beauvoir moves on to explicitly reject Hegel's conception of the Absolute and the progressive thrust of history, yet she remains committed to his understanding of freedom as self-determination and negativity. In this work, Beauvoir acknowledges that freedom and ethics can be construed within the understanding of the negative operative in the Hegelian dialectic by stating directly that "man is originally a negativity" (EA, 118). Just as Hegel's Spirit is not an entity but a negating *process*, Beauvoir insists that what we are is simply the free process of what we do—in other words our transcendent activity.

kind of solipsism: each of us construes the meaning of both past and present only from the perspective of our own project." Kruks, "Teaching Sartre," 86.

⁶ Kruks, "Teaching Sartre," 84.

⁷ Translation my own.

⁸ Beauvoir never abdicates this position on freedom. Even in *The Second Sex* she writes, "An existent *is* nothing other than what he does; the possible does not extend beyond the real, essence does not precede existence: in pure subjectivity, the human being *is not anything*. He is to be measured by his acts" (SS, 257; [DS I: 401]).

Like many 20th century existential philosophers, Beauvoir consistently maintains that our projection into the future is integral to this movement of transcendence. One of her core criticisms against Hegel is that he betrays his insight into freedom as negativity by constructing a positive future at the end of history.⁹ She claims that Hegel's optimistic focus on the future as some kind of preordained goal allows us to sacrifice the present in the name of an abstraction (EA, 106) and falsely blankets the essence of subjectivity as negativity.¹⁰

Although Beauvoir agrees with Hegel (and of course, Sartre) that freedom is defined as that which negates the given, she also recognizes that one's situation can sometimes serve not as a limit to be surpassed, but as an unsurpassable, seemingly natural wall imposed around existence.¹¹ Through her analysis of various marginalized groups in both her ethics and her feminism, it becomes clear that Beauvoir's conception of situation allows for, echoing what Kruks above calls, "gradations of freedom." For example, Beauvoir tells us in *The Prime of Life* that as early as *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* she believed that,

actual concrete possibilities vary from one person to the next. Some can attain to only a small part of those opportunities that are available to mankind at large ... Their transcendence is lost in the general mass of humanity, and takes on the appearance of immanence. (POL, 661)

In other words, although everyone is ontologically free, not everyone shares the same concrete *possibilities* for expressing this freedom. Some individuals may be in a favorable situation conducive to the expression of their freedom, and

⁹ Beauvoir writes that for Hegel, "the Future appears as both the infinite and as Totality, as number and as unity of conciliation; it is the abolition of the negative, it is fullness, happiness" (EA, 116).

¹⁰ At this stage, it seems as if Beauvoir's critical reading of Hegel clearly blinds her to the more obvious passages of the *Phenomenology* where Hegel does not envision the fulfillment of the Absolute as pure positivity and happiness, but as a preservation of past sacrifice and more importantly, as the stage for a new beginning. Nor does she do justice to his deep meditations on the tragic conflict between the individual and the universal. In part, this is because it is not until *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir's reading of Hegel reaches its fullest maturation. However, despite some concessions, Beauvoir maintains a consistent suspicion of Hegelian optimism and absolutism throughout her works.

¹¹ In *The Prime of Life* Beauvoir writes that she was intrigued by Sartre's discussion of "situation" in *Being and Nothingness*, yet she admits: "I maintained that from the angle of freedom as Sartre defined it—that is, an active transcendence of some given context rather than mere stoic resignation—not every situation was equally valid: what sort of transcendence could a woman shut up in a harem achieve?" Even though she grudgingly conceded to Sartre, she still concludes, "Basically I was right" (POL, 523).

others may simply suffer a loss of their transcendence so much so that it takes on the appearance of immanence, i.e., the appearance of givenness. Therefore, one's situation can in some cases serve not merely as a limitation to be surmounted in an upsurge of freedom, but as an intractable and oftentimes unknown constraint on action.

In oppression, "transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals" (EA, 81). Oppression thus effectively denies existents any expansion into the future, confining them in the given of the present, forcing them into a repetition of the past and making the givens of their situation appear to them as fixed, immovable, and unchanging: "[r]educed to pure facticity, congealed in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things" (EA, 100). Yet, in oppression, the ontological freedom of that existent is not simply destroyed (i.e., he or she is not literally turned into a thing) even if it is prevented from effecting the world. In the *Ethics*, Beauvoir writes that "[n]o social upheaval, no moral conversion can eliminate this lack which is in his heart" (EA, 118). By extrapolation, Beauvoir also means to argue that even if one is oppressed, the negativity of freedom cannot be annihilated. What then *happens* to the freedom that is employed in transcendent activity, but denied expression in conditions of immanence? If one cannot literally turn a human being into a thing through oppression, where does the transcendent thrust of freedom *go*?

IV. Moving Beyond Hegel: The Paradox of Immanent Freedom

Echoing the Hegelian two-fold movement of constructive and destructive negativity, Beauvoir closes *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by laying out the very same double movement of freedom. She writes:

Man is free; but he finds his law in his very freedom. First, he must assume his freedom and not flee it; *he assumes it by a constructive movement*: one does not exist without doing something; *and also by a negative movement* which rejects oppression for oneself and others. In construction, as in rejection, it is a matter of reconquering freedom on the contingent facticity of existence. (EA, 156; italics my own)

Beauvoir here mirrors Hegel's discussion of the master-slave dialectic in which freedom, understood as negativity, has two distinct manifestations: a productive and a destructive movement. She interprets the constructive moment as *doing* something (i.e., *working*) and the negative moment as *revolt* (against the given).¹² These two movements must be undertaken if freedom is to be transcendent or actual. And both of these activities *change* the face of the world—one through building and modifying, the other through destroying sedimented structures.

In describing these modes of transcendence, Beauvoir takes over Hegel's own distinction between freedom as productive and destructive. However, her adoption is not without criticism. The first criticism can be found succinctly laid out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* where she writes,

There are thus two ways of surpassing the given ... In these two cases the given is present in its surpassing; but in one case it is present insofar as it is accepted, in the other insofar as rejected, and that makes a radical difference. Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term "*aufheben*"; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity; that is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development (EA, 84).

This first criticism centers around Hegel's teleological account of history in which revolution is simply a part of the restlessness of Spirit and sacrifice is swept up into what she sees as the contented future of humankind. Beauvoir, however, agrees more with Marx in that true revolt is not integrated into the world, but explodes the static structures of its givenness (*ibid.*).

Yet, there is another criticism of Hegel operative in Beauvoir's philosophy—one that is not so easily determined but upon closer inspection is ubiquitous. What if the givenness of the world is tacitly accepted and thus the surpassing of it practically impossible? Certainly, if the oppressed have the

¹² Karen Vintges calls these two moments *action* and the *rejection* of oppression (*Philosophy as Passion*, 82). She argues that Beauvoir eventually produces a "*negative moral code*" which asserts only that, from the perspective of morality, freedom cannot be limited or denied. She continues that Beauvoir abandons the project of constructing a positive ethical system, but rather elucidates a "*positive art of living*" in addition to the negative moral code (82-3). Vintges is correct in her characterization of the negative element of Beauvoir's ethics, although it is clear from the above discussions that Beauvoir also holds a "*creative*" component vital to morality, even if she refuses to give it a determinate content.

means to rebel, theirs is the path of revolution that confronts the awesome negativity of death and tears down social and political institutions that serve to alienate and exclude them. Following the revolution, they will then exert the creative expression of transcendence to set up a world of their own invention. Yet, some oppressed existents never even attain to revolution, and yet cannot be seen as simply reduced to the status of “things” and “objects” without freedom. In her inquiry into this dilemma, Beauvoir discovers two *other* expressions of freedom that are absent in Hegel’s philosophy and which help to explain the complexity of concrete situations of oppression. Instead of manifesting *transcendent* expressions of liberty, the oppressed spend their freedom in *immanent* gestures. Since they cannot actively change the situation, they emptily react against or quietly submit to it.

Both of these attitudes or expressions of freedom—what I am calling “complaint” and “resignation”—fall under Beauvoir’s category of “abstract freedom.” It is somewhat confusing because she often addresses these terms under the rubric of “negative liberty” which appears to be a contradiction. If liberty is essentially negativity as argued above, how can negative liberty be a bad thing? However, it becomes clear in her work that when she employs the term “negative liberty,” she means us to take the term “negative” as “empty,” “abstract,” and/or “impotent,” as opposed to a “positive” sense of liberty that implies “concrete,” “expressive,” and “powerful” freedom in action. Repeatedly throughout her major philosophical works, Beauvoir claims that true freedom is “concrete,” that is, like production and revolt, it substantially affects the world of the existent expressing it. However, there is another expression of liberty that Beauvoir labels “abstract.” This kind of freedom is often discussed in tandem with immanence, thus drawing a connection between immanence and abstract liberty. To label freedom as immanent (as opposed to transcendent) is a radical claim for Beauvoir to make, given that immanence typically characterizes the existence of things. It is therefore tempting to say that those who are condemned to immanence are simply *not* free. But Beauvoir never denies the freedom of the existent, no matter how great the oppression. Instead, as she explains in the *Ethics*, “his transcendence is cut off from his goal or there is no longer any hold on objects which might give it a valid content, *his spontaneity is dissipated* without founding anything” (EA, 30; italics my own). Freedom is thus *dissipated*, not annihilated. This dissipation discloses itself in both complaint and resignation.

Complaint is clearly an expression of freedom in that it exhibits a conscious awareness of a situation and a reaction *against* it. But unlike revolt, it

does nothing to change the situation. Complaint, in the most general sense, is the best example of a revolt that remains empty and as such is “purely negative.” This is what Beauvoir means when she writes that “revolt, insofar as it is pure negative movement, remains abstract. It is fulfilled as freedom only by returning to the positive, that is, by giving itself a content through action, escape, political struggle, revolution” (EA, 31). In other words, if revolt fails to affect the world through concrete action, it is merely a powerless grievance. The clearest examples of complaint that Beauvoir provides for us can be found in *The Second Sex* (1949), where women are left to protest without the power to effectively change their lot. For example, she writes that woman “dares not revolt: it is with a bad heart that she submits; her attitude is one of constant reproach...[Her] usual tone is one of *complaint*” (SS, 606; [DS II: 495]; translation modified). Of course, complaining is not altering the situation, it is merely railing against it. This is why further down the page, Beauvoir characterizes woman’s situation as one of “impotent rage” (*ibid.*).¹³

Clearly, grumbling about one’s situation is an expression of freedom, but unlike creativity and revolt, it is an empty and almost meaningless expression—a mere expenditure that does nothing to improve or undermine the status quo. As shown above, true revolt requires exercising the destructive forces of freedom. *Impotent* revolt is the powerless and sad expression of a transcendence cut off from expression in any meaningful sense.¹⁴ Such expressions only serve to make the concerns of the oppressed seem petty and easily ignored, while simultaneously serving to reinforce their resentment.

In the case of women’s oppression, Beauvoir concludes, “[t]his shows why women do not succeed in building up a solid counter-universe whence they can challenge the males; now and then they rail at men in general ... But they lack the conviction necessary to build this grievance-world their resentment calls for” (SS, 617; [DS II: 508]). This paralyzed state of women’s liberty leads Beauvoir to close her detailed exploration of woman’s education from infancy to old age by exclaiming, “In her thinking as in her acts, the highest form of liberty available to the woman parasite is stoical defiance or skeptical irony. At no time of life does she succeed in being at once effective and independent” (SS, 596; [DS II: 482]). In other words, given her position of enforced immanence,

¹³ Beauvoir even goes so far as to say that woman’s life in general “is built upon a foundation of impotent revolt” (SS, 608; [DS II: 497]).

¹⁴ For example, even if a woman tries to revolt violently against her situation, her actions are “only a gesture. Yet above all she is engaged in expressing, through the pantomime of the nervous crisis, *the refusal she is unable to concretely realize*” (SS, 609; [DS II: 498]; translation modified; italics my own).

woman's reactions can never attain to concrete action and as such, she remains ineffective and dependent.

Yet, even complaint shows the *possibility* of enacting some form of change, if only minimal (EA, 153). There is a second, more powerless sense of negative liberty that is defined by acquiescence to the given and renunciation of all hope of changing it. Regarding this renunciation, Beauvoir writes in the *Ethics*, that there is "hardly a sadder virtue than resignation" (EA, 28). To resign oneself to the given is not simply to become an object, but to submerge oneself in immanence, to let go of even the desire to set up a project or to change the face of the world. It is, for Beauvoir, the emptiest expenditure of liberty. Through resignation, "one manages only to save an abstract notion of freedom. It is emptied of all content and all truth. The power of man ceases to be limited because it is annulled" (EA, 29).

Resignation, like complaint, is not solely a result of the oppression of women. Rather, it can be applied to many groups for whom transcendence has been denied by a situation of enforced immanence. To the existent who is resigned to a situation, the given does not appear as a limitation to be surpassed, but as a hopelessly unalterable and static fact. However, as with complaint, some of Beauvoir's strongest descriptions of this attitude of sheer defeatism are found in *The Second Sex*. There she says that on the whole, women, "accept what is. One of their distinguishing traits is resignation" (SS, 601; [DS II: 489]). Returning to her many arguments that enforced immanence (or oppression) is defined by the denial of an open future to an existent, it is clear that if one is forced merely to maintain the present through a repetition of the past, then quite often the only choice left is to resign oneself to such a "destiny."

Left no possibility for concrete choice, the existent can, in essence, deny that choice exists and believe that the situation is immutable. This is why Beauvoir writes that, for example, "[a] proud woman can make a lofty virtue of resignation" (SS, 602; [DS II: 490]) because what other options are really available to her? Abandoning even the desire to complain about the situation, the extreme and most triumphant configuration of oppression leads the oppressed to give up the use of eyes even to see their situation as unjust and harmful. It is at this point that the forces of domination are most successful and oppression most complete. Even in resignation, freedom is expressed, but its expression is so reduced, so empty, that it can only be called freedom in name only.

The idea of resignation brings up a certain tension in Beauvoir's formulation of oppression. On the one hand, she maintains that certain extreme

forms of oppression essentially rob human beings of their ability to make choices. She confesses that sometimes existents can be so degraded that they are hardly more than beasts. This is the extreme manifestation of enforced immanence such as the situation of Jews in concentration camps. Reduced to little more than an “animal horde,” their revolts “were only the agitations of animals” (EA, 101). Can a Jew in a concentration camp or an Algerian in a French torture chamber¹⁵ honestly be said to have even a modicum of choice to resign themselves to their situations? In a very strong sense, no, they cannot and Beauvoir acknowledges this. However, she refuses to take the position that freedom can ever be completely destroyed in an individual so long as that individual lives. And besides, the freedom to essentially give up is not always done in bad faith, but is often demanded by the brutality of the situation. This is the ultimate goal of all oppression—to reduce existents to such demoralized and dehumanized states that their sphere of choice is reduced to nothing more than the stark acceptance of their oppression. Furthermore, the power of mystification, which forces a fixed identity onto individuals, complicates the “choice” of resignation. Beauvoir is clear that:

The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning; thus, he does not accept his condition through a resignation of his freedom since he can not even dream of any other. (EA 85)

Although it seems that resignation is impossible in the aforementioned examples, I argue that Beauvoir’s utilization of the category of “resignation” as such, includes even the mystified slave in that there is still a tacit acceptance of what is, coupled with a total lack of power to change it. The individuals trapped in concentration camps or taught from birth that they are slaves by nature, are still free in the abstract sense, but their freedom is merely a total surrender to the given. Admittedly, this might not seem like freedom in any kind of meaningful sense, but that is precisely Beauvoir’s point—freedom merely to accept the

¹⁵ This thematic of extreme oppression essentially robbing the existent of any kind of substantial choice also underlies her analysis of the French atrocities in Algeria as described in her *Introduction* to the Djamila Boupacha book. There we are shown cases of torture that force us to ask whether one can be said to choose to resign oneself to the situation in the face of extreme physical and mental violence.

situation as unalterable or predetermined is only the exercise of a negative liberty.

Taking into account the excesses of oppression, Beauvoir forces us to admit that even in resignation there is still freedom. Freedom, in other words, can never be destroyed in human beings, even if it is completely ineffectual in its diffusion. As Kruks observes, freedom, “can, in a situation of extreme oppression, be wholly suppressed, *even though it cannot be definitively eliminated*” and therefore, “should oppression start to weaken, freedom can always reerupt.”¹⁶ It is thus the *potential* of freedom to overcome oppression to which Beauvoir commands our attention. That said, we can certainly never deceive ourselves that resignation in the face of oppression is an authentic expression of human liberty. Beauvoir reminds us that we must “respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself” (EA, 90-1).¹⁷ The freedom to dissipate rather than alter is simply an expenditure of energy instead of the active production or education of the existent. As such it is the lowest and saddest state of affairs resulting from oppression.

Yet, despite the difficulties of extreme oppression, Beauvoir explains in a late interview that it is always necessary to uphold the freedom of the individual *even in the very act of renunciation*: “Well, naturally, the choice itself depends upon a number of things. But after all, there is still some freedom or choice, *even in resignation of course.*”¹⁸ For Beauvoir, if we do not hold on to the liberty of even the most degraded and abused human being—the one whose freedom is wasted in impotent acts of complaint or resignation—we lose the hope of bringing such oppression to an end.

Conclusion

Beauvoir’s introduction of the categories of complaint and resignation help to reveal the paradoxical manifestation of immanent freedom found in oppression. Although this idea seems contradictory (in that freedom is usually

¹⁶ Sonia Kruks, “Gender and Subjectivity,” 100. Italics my own.

¹⁷ This staunch belief in the hollowness of resignation and the ethical necessity to fight against it leads Beauvoir so far as to posit a figure such as the Marquis de Sade as a “great moralist” (55) because he fiercely rejects the virtue of resignation which “is a stupid submission to the rule of evil, as recreated by society. In submitting, man renounces both his authenticity and his freedom.” Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?” 66.

¹⁸ Margaret Simons, “Two Interviews,” 16. Italics my own.

defined as a *transcendent* surpassing of the given toward an indefinite future) Beauvoir's discovery of these immanent dissipations of freedom allows her to move beyond Hegelian optimism. Hegel did not see the mechanism of this contradictory freedom and thus did not account for oppression in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In contrast, Beauvoir argues that if we fail to understand immanent freedom (or negative liberty) we fail to comprehend how oppression can take on semi-permanent or regressive structures.

There are many important ramifications to Beauvoir's politics resulting from the above analysis. For one, it shows that we cannot even begin to talk about revolution and creativity—the transcendent expressions of the negativity that is our freedom—before we can understand how freedom can expend itself *without* transforming the world. Certainly, she acknowledges that before real labor can occur, the oppressed must revolt. That is why she writes “the oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt, since the essential characteristic of the situation against which he is rebelling is precisely its prohibiting him from any positive development; it is only in social and political struggle that his transcendence passes beyond to the infinite” (EA, 87). Yet, to achieve liberation, the oppressed must first overcome the pitfalls of resignation and complaint.

Additionally, it is crucial to remember that the Hegelian dialectic of mastery and servitude, which reveals the truth of self-consciousness as negativity, is essentially rooted in a struggle for recognition. When one is, through the machinations of oppression, reduced to the state of simply complaining against, or resigning oneself to the givenness of the situation, there has been a total breakdown in recognition. The futile attempts of the existent to expend energy rather than to build or destroy, indicate the unqualified isolation of one whose voice, actions, and desires are not even taken up into an individual dialogue, let alone the public sphere. In construction and dissolution, there is at least an undeclared recognition of the existents' freedom in that it is impossible to deny that the world is transformed through their actions. But in the hollow gestures of complaint and resignation, it is possible for the powerful to simply ignore the situation and needs of the oppressed by refusing to recognize them.

Clearly then, although Beauvoir admires the Hegelian construction of freedom as a two-fold negativity, she goes beyond his analysis by undoing the optimism that freedom is progressively realized. For Beauvoir, there is no historical guarantee that existents will ever move beyond abstract expenditures of freedom and thus no guarantee that the oppressed will ever be recognized.

Nonetheless, she also believes that revolution is a necessary step before the oppressed can attain to creative affirmation of freedom.¹⁹

Because Beauvoir is more attuned to the necessity of understanding and alleviating oppressive structures (structures which only allow certain existents empty and abstract expressions of freedom) she sees something that Hegel's optimism blinds him too—conditions of stagnation and even regression in human advancement. Beauvoir provides us with an expansion of Hegelian freedom by uncovering sites of powerlessness that must be confronted before social and political emancipation and transformation can become a reality for the oppressed.

¹⁹ For example, regarding woman she writes, "But simply from the fact that liberty in woman is still abstract and empty, she can exercise it only in revolt ... Resignation is only abdication and flight, there is no other way out for woman than to work for her liberation" (SS, 627; [DS II: 522]; translation modified).

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