



Existentialism in Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)

Skye Cleary
Columbia University

Beauvoir's existentialism starts from the fact that we are thrown into the world with much that we did not choose, such as our bodies and our situations; but we are fundamentally free, and we realize our freedom by actively choosing our lives, propelling ourselves purposefully into self-chosen projects, creating our own values and reasons for living, and taking risks. We create and discover meaning in our lives by "transcending," that is, by launching ourselves into the world beyond our given situations (the facts, or "facticity," of our lives) into relationships and activities (*The Second Sex*, 73–74). Our being is our passion which is our choice (*Ethics of Ambiguity*, 11).

While Beauvoir acknowledges that we are not absolutely free, since our situations – such as poverty, ignorance, and oppression – restrict our freedom, she argues that existentialism is exciting and liberating because it provides the clarity to realise that one's destiny is in one's hands. The very antithesis of doom and gloom, she says, existentialism aims at self-fulfilment through whatever project one chooses in life ("An Existentialist Looks at Americans," 309). The question of life is not whether it is useful or worthwhile, but whether and how one wants to live (*Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15).

Primary Sources:

Beauvoir, Simone de 2004. An Existentialist Looks at Americans, in Simons, Margaret A.; Timmermann, Marybeth; Mader, Mary Beth & Beauvoir, Sylvie Le Bon de (eds.): *Philosophical Writings*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1948. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Frechtman, Bernard (trans.). Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press.

Beauvoir, Simone de 2011. *The Second Sex*. Borde, Constance & Malovany-Chevallier,

Sheila (trans.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Secondary Sources:

Cleary, Skye 2015. *Existentialism and Romantic Love*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cleary, Skye 2017. Simone de Beauvoir on Love, in Grau, C. & Smuts, A. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keywords:

freedom, facticity, authenticity, responsibility, transcendence, oppression