

Beauvoir and Rand

Asphyxiating People, Having Sex, and Pursuing a Career

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ABSTRACT: In an attempt to start rectifying a lamentable disparity in scholarship, we evince fruitful points of similarity and difference in the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Ayn Rand, paying particular attention to their views on long-term projects. Endorsing what might be called an “Ethic of Resolve,” Rand praises those who undertake sustained goal-directed actions such as careers. Beauvoir, however, endorses an “Ethic of Ambiguity” that makes her more skeptical about the prospects of carrying out lifelong projects without deluding oneself. Our study teases apart the strengths and drawbacks of these views.

Ask a random sample of people on an English-speaking university campus to name two women philosophers, and chances are Simone de Beauvoir and Ayn Rand will be the figures named most often. Beauvoir and Rand have more in common than this name recognition. Both were teenagers when they rejected religious doctrines and became atheists. Both excelled, not only in the male-dominated field of philosophy, but also in creative writing. Their first major novels, *L'invitée* (*She Came to Stay*) and *The Fountainhead*, were published in the same year, 1943. By the time Beauvoir and Rand passed away

in the 1980s, they had each made their intellectual mark. Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2010) is a foundational text for feminism (Hatcher 1989), while Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* propelled political libertarianism (a movement/party that Rand would later denounce). Freedom and emancipation from oppressive forces are the common themes of both works. Those themes are glossed in radically different ways. Indeed, "Ayn Rand has gained fame—and infamy—for her defense of rational selfishness and laissez-faire capitalism. But the Randian philosophy is much broader in its scope" (Sciabarra 1989, 32).

Rand and Beauvoir would have probably disliked each other. Debra Bergoffen singles out "the works of Ayn Rand" as an example of "the bourgeois humanism to which Beauvoir is opposed" (1997, 58 n. 25). For her part, Rand considered Existentialism a "disease" in the history of philosophy (in Mayhew 2005, 167). There is, however, much to be gained by re-creating an exchange of ideas. We can all agree that the two women would have held each other in philosophical (and perhaps even personal) contempt. The more interesting question is why—what are their reasons? This is where polemics end and scholarship begins. When we actually do that scholarly work, we quickly realize that the area of overlap is more significant than might at first appear.

In addition to theoretical works like Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* ([1966–67] 1990) and Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* ([1948] 1976), both thinkers felt at home in the medium of fiction. In an essay titled "Literature and Metaphysics" (reprinted in Beauvoir 2004, 269–77), Beauvoir insists on the philosophical relevance of individual human experience as portrayed in myth and literature. Indeed, "Beauvoir takes seriously [Henri] Bergson's criticism of intellectual understanding and accepts his implicit challenge to do philosophy through the novel" (Simons 2003, 108). Similarly, Rand chose excerpts from her four novels as the substance of her first nonfiction book, *For the New Intellectual* (1961). She explains in her preface to that book that "[i]n a certain sense, every novelist is a philosopher"—whether one is aware or not that the fictional world one projects implicitly favors a metaphysical stance (for more on literature as a vehicle for philosophical edification, see Dadlez 2013).

Rand and Beauvoir thus present us with comprehensive worldviews, expressed in both artistic and theoretical idioms. Given that many turn to their essays and novels for guidance, it behooves scholars to examine the substance of their prescriptions. Alas, despite the fact that Rand and Beauvoir are among the most widely read (male or female) philosophers, no one has, until now, essayed a serious comparative study. Rand's personal flaws and contempt for the establishment have been amply documented, but that hardly excuses academic neglect (scholars have certainly managed to move past the initial shock of more controversial figures). It takes hard work to figure out what are the good and bad elements in any system of thought (Branden 1984), and historically that

verdict is rarely settled once and for all. Indeed, Edward Fullbrook remarks that “[u]ntil quite recently, getting anyone to read a Beauvoir text for its philosophical content was nearly impossible. And reading one with a view to finding in it philosophical originality was deemed laughable” (in Beauvoir 2004, 34). This is the stage Rand’s work is currently in, so it can be sobering to know that Beauvoir’s work had to go through that stage too.

Fortunately, things are changing. Pennsylvania State University Press publishes this double-blind peer-reviewed journal devoted to Rand, and she is the only woman represented in the twenty-volume Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers series (Gladstein 2010). Cambridge University Press published a monograph on Rand’s virtue ethics (Smith 2006), and Oxford University Press followed suit with a biography (Burns 2009). The controversial 1995 study of Rand’s Russian background by Chris Matthew Sciabarra has remained in such demand that it has undergone a second, augmented edition (Sciabarra [1995] 2013). In response to this growth in scholarship, Wiley-Blackwell is just about to release *A Companion to Ayn Rand* (Gotthelf and Salmieri 2015). There is no question that Rand is now being incorporated in the canon. Rand and Beauvoir are on equal footing in Wadsworth’s Philosophers series (Gotthelf 2000; Scholz 2000), for example. Still, in comparison with Rand, the secondary literature on Beauvoir has a considerable head start.

Asphyxiating People

To appreciate the extent of the discrepancy, consider Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, which was met with a negative reception by critics when it first appeared in 1957. The most vitriolic review was penned by Whittaker Chambers, who contended that “[f]rom almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: ‘To a gas chamber—go!’” This, to put it mildly, is a strong interpretation, not to mention an “insulting assessment, given the author’s Jewish background” (Gladstein 2000, 21).

Unless one invokes extravagant theories to justify anything-goes hermeneutics, the only plausible textual support for Chambers’s claim comes from a scene where, having each willfully abdicated their responsibility to think, engineers and executives send a passenger train pulled by a coal-burning engine into a long tunnel, resulting in suffocation. What Rand was trying to show by means of this fictional account was that complex societal divisions of labor do nothing to diminish the vital importance of grasping mind-independent facts (which is why she named her philosophy “Objectivism”). No murderer can be identified: it is *the world* that destroys the characters by purely causal means. Rand is saying that social conventions are neither the sole nor the primary

constraint on knowledge claims (for an extended discussion, see Champagne 2015). The scene, then, articulates a thesis in metaphysics and epistemology, not ethics.

There is no question that Rand was a provocative thinker, even in those drier branches of philosophy concerned with knowledge and reality. The asphyxiation scene is admittedly controversial, so it is still debated (see, for example, Bertonneau 2004, 303–5). However, given that human agency figures in the scene only in absentia, as a refusal to assume the burden of facing mind-independent facts, to infer that Rand is somehow advocating a policy involving “gas chambers”—rooms constructed by political regimes for the express purpose of genocide—is simply irresponsible (a reply to Chambers by the philosopher Leonard Peikoff was published, and is now reprinted in Mayhew 2009, 145–47).

Now, contrast this with *She Came to Stay* by Beauvoir ([1943] 1990; [1943] 2006). This novel describes the attempts by characters to implement various threesomes that would presumably foster greater existentialist authenticity. One of the characters, Françoise, feels that Xavière, her young female partner, is so self-assured that she has bewitched Françoise’s inner world. At one point, Françoise is dismayed by the recognition that her thoughts are not about where she currently is in Paris, but are rather directed at wherever Xavière might be. Since Françoise does not obtain the sort of attentive reciprocity she yearns for, she uses a gas range to asphyxiate Xavière. The end.

Unlike *Atlas Shrugged*, no gratuitous interpretations are needed to establish the presence of murder in this book. In fact, Beauvoir’s novel originally opened with the following epigraph from Hegel, now absent from recent English editions: “Each conscience seeks the death of the other” (Beauvoir [1943] 1990, 7).

To be clear, neither Rand nor Beauvoir ever killed anyone—both were novelist-philosophers; nothing less, nothing more. Still, the reception to their works has been inconsistent. Usually, killing is regarded as more reprehensible than letting die (see, for example, the intuitions teased out by Thomson 1976). In the tales we have recounted, Beauvoir “kills” her character whereas Rand “lets” hers “die.” Strangely, *She Came to Stay* was greeted warmly, its overt murder scene causing no discernible hoopla among critics. When it comes to Rand, though, many in lay (Moen 2012) and academic (Campbell 1996) circles feel satisfied with rehearsing tenuous dismissals gleaned only by hearsay. Beauvoir is, by comparison, treated to a red carpet reception. In fact, one introductory textbook suggests that “Françoise might . . . be seen as justified in her use of violence against Xavière. Xavière is, after all, a freedom that is denying Françoise of hers” (Scholz 2000, 29).

Rand rejects the initiation of force in all human affairs, because she glosses the attempt to bypass individual judgment as the ultimate expression of

contempt for the demands of human life. It is no accident, for example, that the copper magnate who blows up his mines in *Atlas Shrugged* waits for them to be vacant—acting otherwise would have forfeited the moral rectitude he displays. The only killing that is condoned in the novel occurs when the protagonist Dagny Taggart shoots an armed man denying her access to a room where her lover is being tortured. It is, on Rand's account, a purely retaliatory act, made necessary by the circumstances.

Interestingly, Beauvoir's working title for *She Came to Stay* was *Self Defense*. It is worth stressing, though, that the alleged transgressions for which Xavière is blamed unfold squarely in Françoise's mind. "Indeed, the novel rigorously refuses ever to focalize anything through Xavière, so we never see a representation of their relation from Xavière's point of view" (Lucey 2010, 113). Françoise's imaginings and ensuing emotional states are nevertheless presented as a motive—and perhaps even a license—for deploying the ultimate form of physical harm. Maybe "license" is too strong. After all, "*She Came to Stay* is not a novel written to prove any point" (Sirridge 2003, 134). Even so, Beauvoir has given us textual cause to argue the matter. By parity, either Rand's writings and ideas deserve a fairer hearing, or Beauvoir's writings deserve a less timid critique.

Having Sex

Thankfully, morbidity and violence form only a minor slice of the Rand/Beauvoir thematic pie chart. Both Beauvoir and Rand portrayed strong female protagonists in a sex-positive manner that broke with the fictional and societal standards of their time. Rand's character Dagny Taggart, who has been described as "probably the most admirable and successful heroine in American fiction" (Gladstein 2000, 64), has several male lovers. Beauvoir's protagonist in *She Came to Stay*, Françoise, agrees to a ménage à trois and then has a sexual relationship with not only Xavière, but also Xavière's male lover. Beauvoir's call for (and practice of) sexual independence was acknowledged and celebrated by some. Life mirrored fiction. Beauvoir and Sartre's liaisons, for instance, were an accepted part of their mutual pact. Rand was married to the same man all her life, but she had an affair with a younger man that was kept secret from all but their spouses (Branden 1986).

Rand and Beauvoir are also notable for having chosen not to do the one thing men cannot do, that is, give birth. Indeed, when Rand and Beauvoir discuss sex, they rarely have procreation in mind. While many have found Beauvoir's fiction and lifestyle liberating, Rand has been taken to task in conservative circles for not saying enough about motherhood and family (see, for example, Touchstone 2006). According to Rand, building a career, not a family, should

be a person's first priority. This applies to men and women alike. Indeed, her character Dagny Taggart is so career-oriented that "there's really no difference between her and her male counterparts" (Michalson 1999, 217).

Pursuing a Career

Clearly, in their writings as well as in their personal lives, Beauvoir and Rand championed independence. They both held that one should freely elect the end(s) that one pursues. However, as philosophers, they disagreed on how much leeway such freedom licenses. It is in assessing the viable duration of pursuits that Beauvoir and Rand part ways. Beauvoir draws on Hegelian and Sartrean ideas (Lundgren-Gothlin 1994) to develop an "Ethics of Ambiguity," whereas Rand draws on Aristotelian and Nietzschean ideas (Machan 2001) to develop what might be called an "Ethics of Resolve." To illustrate the difference at hand, we can look more closely at career choices.

When we undertake long-term projects like careers, we effectively promise that we will continue to act a certain way. Promise-making and promise-keeping are distinct moments—one short-term, the other long-term. Promise-keeping of course presupposes promise-making, but it seems the latter can be had on the cheap: all one needs to do is make the right speech act and the deed is done. Of course, saying one will be an architect is one thing; actually becoming an architect is quite another. Still, in the very moment that it asserts itself, the will acts as its own tautological guarantor of rectitude.

However, once made, such gratuitous promises seemingly limit one's freedom. *Promise-keeping* thus requires that one bring one's conduct into conformity with the content of a foundational speech act over a sustained period of time. Absent the passage of time, there would be no need for a constant reaffirmation of an initial project or vow, no taxing effort to ensure fidelity, no anguish in seeing that aspiration possibly fail. Because the passage of time supplies renewed opportunities to change one's mind about one's pursuits, long-term projects like careers require agentive effort. Beauvoir therefore holds that "[f]reedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes" ([1948] 1976, 70). Philosophically, we can thus question whether prior acts bear on subsequent ones in a way that is genuinely binding.

A promise made when deviation from the action promised is (and is known to be) physically impossible would sound hollow, just as a promise kept in such circumstances would hardly count as praiseworthy. For instance, if a father "promises" his child that he will keep the earth in orbit, he does not deserve credit for its continued rotation. Seen in this light, promises are devices meant to corral human actions when genuine alternatives are possible. Hence, for a promise to be sustained from beginning to end, freedom must in some way

undercut itself. As Beauvoir writes, “If I leave behind an act which I have accomplished . . . [i]t is no longer anything but a stupid and opaque fact. In order to prevent this metamorphosis, I must ceaselessly return to it and justify it in the unity of the project in which I am engaged” ([1948] 1976, 27; see also her 2004, 93).

Like handcuffs, constraint from without is, we can assume, fairly straightforward (Kruks 1987). When one is deprived of freedom of action, responsibility vanishes. However, once we realize that in promise-keeping the “master” and the “slave” are one and the same person, don’t these labels/roles cease to make sense? As such, it seems we can meaningfully ask whether honoring one’s word constitutes a *limit on* or an *expression of* freedom. As an existentialist, Beauvoir is open to the idea that we can always redefine ourselves. Our essence as humans, she argues, lies precisely in not having an essence (see Nuyen 1985, 174). Hence, Beauvoir would hold that, if the projects we undertake are ever binding, it is in virtue of the fact that we watch over each other’s pronouncements.

Rand also endorses freedom, but since she wants to assign primacy to the individual, she is reluctant to see promises as merely socially binding. Even so, verbalized promises are crucial to enabling the coordination of individual and collective action. In a way, the entire plot line of Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* emanates from promises. As a young engineer, John Galt promises to stop “the motor of the world” by gradually removing productive and inventive people from society. Reacting against the collectivist credo put in effect at the automotive company he works for, he publicly declares, “I will put an end to this, once and for all” ([1957] 1999, 671). Of course, no one present at the time holds him accountable for making good on this bold (and unlikely) proclamation. The twists and turns of the storyline nevertheless trace the various steps Galt takes to keep his pledge. Likewise, the machine that powers everything in Galt’s utopian compound is revealed only to those who take an oath—one that must be uttered with a full grasp of the long-term actions it requires (731–32). It could be read as a metaphor for a perpetual motion machine, set in motion by the will.

Like Rand, Beauvoir construes commitment to any activity as a decision. Yet, Beauvoir is aware that, if the specific target of a committed attitude is to remain constant, one must decide in its favor again and again (2004, 93). To learn how to play the piano, for instance, one does not show up at the first lesson only to thereafter coast on behavioral cruise control. Rather, attendance is taken at each keystroke. This voluntarism, however, militates against achieving consistency, since nothing constrains one to abide by one’s previous action(s). Notwithstanding a measure of habitual inertia, sudden about-face always remains an option. In the case of careers, this means that one will end up having

jobs, but steadfast commitment to a single vocation is neither mandatory nor likely.

Rand (1961, 160) would agree with Beauvoir that agentive involvement is needed, but in keeping with her Aristotelian allegiances, Rand would add that a human is bound to experience sustained goal-directed movement as most rewarding. Her reasons are mainly biological. The finitude of the individual who wants to live, Rand (1964) argues, is the wellspring of all valuations, since it is only when considered in light of the fundamental alternative of its life or demise that objects and events become good or bad. In principle, these assessments of what is a value or disvalue are perfectly soluble (Champagne 2011). Rand therefore holds that freedom must in the end settle on a distinct course of action, and that there is moreover some standard by which to appraise whether or not the path taken is appropriate.

Beauvoir would disagree. She writes that “the epithet useful . . . has no more meaning if taken by itself than the words *high*, *low*, *right*, and *left*” ([1948] 1976, 49). The indictment here seems to be that, since these are ego-centric (literally “self-centered”) predicates, they fall short of having moral significance. Beauvoir is thus much more skeptical about the prospects of confidently undertaking long-term projects without deluding oneself. Hazel Barnes captures this divergence well when she contrasts the respective slogans of Objectivism and Existentialism: “‘Existence is identity.’ ‘Existence precedes essence.’ *There* is the heart of the difference” (1967, 128). Constant actions are obviously more suspect on the latter view than on the former.

According to Randian metaethics, the objects and events in an individual’s surroundings have normative valences only because they stand to further or hinder that individual’s own life (Smith 2000). Rand thus held that if someone did not *want* to live, that fabric of values would unravel. In this (limited) sense, she agrees with Beauvoir that “there exists no absolute value before the passion of man, outside of it, in relation to which one might distinguish the useless from the useful” (Beauvoir [1948] 1976, 11). Yet, despite placing inchoate self-affirmation at the root of her ethical system, Rand regards every judgment that comes afterward as determined by purely descriptive considerations. As such, the Randian view “may be reduced to two points: the choice to live, and the law of causality. Once we accept life as our ultimate goal, we discover what it requires by discovering the causal connections between man’s nature and his life” (Kelley 2000, 54).

One’s natural endowments presumably count among the many facts to be considered when deciding how to structure one’s actions into a lifelong project like a career. Beauvoir acknowledges this when she writes that “[d]oubtless, every one casts himself into [the world] on the basis of his physiological possibilities” ([1948] 1976, 41; see also her 2004, 163). Still, she holds fast to

her existentialist allegiances by immediately adding that this “*determines* no behavior” ([1948] 1976, 41; emphasis in original). If this is right, then one can in principle refuse to accept (what appears to be) a natural inclination (Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 21–48). Beauvoir thus sees a person’s will as supplying the very content(s) of the norms humans should abide by, insofar as “human freedom is the ultimate, the unique end to which man should destine himself” ([1948] 1976, 49; see Prosch 1961, 158–60).

Rand is not a determinist. Still, in her philosophy, dispositions and innate skills seem to carry more weight. Her hero John Galt, for example, is depicted as having always enjoyed a sense of certitude and efficacy ([1957] 1999, 786). In this respect, it might be said that “Rand’s view of man retains the old [Aristotelian] acorn theory. Man’s potentialities may be hidden, but they resemble the embryo oak tree” (Barnes 1967, 128). Nevertheless, because it is the individual who ultimately supports and shapes the actualization of that embryonic potential, the trajectory of her leading characters is never described in a deterministic idiom. Indeed, “[t]o live a purposeful life is, to some extent, to plot one’s own life story,” such that “[t]he success or failure of the characters in *Atlas Shrugged* is tied to their ability to do just that” (Breashears 2014, 31). Because an exercise of the will is constantly required to fuel personal growth, the exact dynamics of the narrative self-constitution are by no means given. Until it runs out of canvas, the ongoing project of painting a life portrait is never complete. Rand’s aim is thus to give new meaning to the economic simile “self-made man” (see Burns 2011, 340).

Bearing sole responsibility for shaping one’s life does not, however, give the individual free rein. Reality is an ever-present constraint (Champagne 2015). Rand’s Objectivist philosophy thus sees the mind as primarily fact-directed. Because Rand takes rationality to be the “master virtue” (Smith 2006, 52–61), she construes freedom very differently from Beauvoir.

Now, a psychological subject is, in one sense, just another fact in the universe. Hence, psychological facts admit of an objective treatment. Of course, figuring out such high-level truths is, like all truths, an accomplishment. A fallible mind must *actively* gather facts (e.g., Am I any good at math?), *actively* synthesize their meaning (e.g., Might I be poor at math because of a lack of training?), *actively* judge them (e.g., Would it be worth my while to rectify my lacuna?), and *actively* act on them (e.g., Now I must take extra math tutoring). There is ample room at each step for undetermined expressions of the will. Still, assuming all those steps are carried out, the best result should be constant: fix the nature of the person and the nature of the world and, presumably, you thereby fix the best path to be taken. After all, if something as elusive as art can be judged objectively good or objectively bad, as Rand ([1969] 1975) contends, then surely a question like “Is X the

proper career for me?” is not exempt from the demands of objectivity. Hence, when one decides to change course, there is a real risk of distancing oneself from happiness, putting unneeded distance between the experiential self and a state of flourishing.

A character like Dagny Taggart could perhaps spontaneously decide to become, say, a veterinarian. Doing so certainly would not violate the laws of physics. The question is, if Dagny did so and adduced only her sovereign will as her reason, would that be consistent with her extant characterization? If the answer is no, then something external to her will must be generating some friction. Perhaps the source of this friction is no more ontologically exotic than the drag of personal history (as captured in artifacts, past conversations, etc.). Still, rightly or wrongly, Rand believes it is possible to negotiate an acceptance of one's conditions and an initiative in the reshaping of those conditions. The Nietzschean call, taken from Pindar, to “become what/who you are” would seem applicable here (see Hunt 2006).

For Beauvoir, a sudden and arbitrary career change would simply be an affirmation of freedom. Many who have been inspired by Beauvoir's radical philosophy of self-determination have been moved to switch career paths. Existentialism cannot demand that such a sudden transition be preceded by a fact-gathering phase since, according to the existentialist ontology, the truth about such matters is made, not discovered. If Beauvoir is right, there is no stable gauge that can ensure that one's choices and undertakings make any sense. All human meaning is bootstrapped.

Realizing that there is such circularity might cause vertigo. Still, on Beauvoir's existentialist view, retaining confidence in objectivity would at best be a naive/misguided delusion—and at worst a cover for oppressive tactics. Given that “the rejection of existence is still another way of existing” ([1948] 1976, 43), Beauvoir thinks the only philosophically responsible policy is that “man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it” (13). Barnes explains the divergence well:

Rand is right in insisting that we have certainty about many specific things even if absolute certainty is lacking. Rand goes much farther than this. For her, values and morals are subject to the same sort of rational appraisal as tables are. In many ways, it would be a great relief if this were so. It would all be so easy. . . . The existentialist, on the other hand, confronts his freedom in anguish. . . . He realizes that all is open. His freedom is not just the choice between thinking and not thinking, between seeing what is right or refusing to see it. He knows that being free means creating standards of right and wrong. (1967, 132–33)

A common locution like “figuring out what to do with your life” is, from this standpoint, a holdover from misguided essentialist views of human nature. The attraction of Rand’s writings would therefore owe primarily to the conveyance of a false sense that such locutions make sense—that there is some objective truth of the matter about what career one ought to pursue. In the eyes of Beauvoir, only a child-like mind would reify patterns of habituation into an essential (and not accidental) part of what it is ([1948] 1976, 35). Philosophically, healthy adulthood requires a measure of confusion, as distressing as that might be, psychologically speaking.

As a prominent site of vocational entrenchment, universities are where most people carve their life-long personal identity. The promise-making implicit in admission is easy, whereas the promise-keeping marked by graduation is arduous. We nonetheless make choices that, socially at least, will continuously define us. Beauvoir thus observes that such decisions “can always be reconsidered, but the fact is that conversions are difficult because the world reflects back upon us a choice that is confirmed through this world which it has fashioned. Thus, a more and more rigorous circle is formed from which one is more and more unlikely to escape” (40). A university education is not legally binding, so the glue that holds a student’s project together over time has to come from elsewhere.

Are professors promoting or hindering freedom when they enjoin their students to go from one point to another as originally planned/agreed? It is hard to say which is sadder: dutiful resignation to a sphere of activity for which there is no passion, or constant reorientation bearing no fruit(s). Of course, this may rest on a false dichotomy. Another possible scenario could be passionate long-term commitment—a sense that one is traveling in a straight line and that, while nothing prevents one from altering one’s course, there is nowhere else one would rather go. Indeed, “[i]f one never becomes who one is, but is always, inevitably becoming and revising a practical identity in exercising this capacity, if one is always in a kind of suspense about who one will turn out, yet again provisionally, to be, what is the *proper* acknowledgment of this state of affairs?” (Pippin 2006, 132). Keeping selfhood in a state of perpetual flux just for the sake of feeling oneself free can seem like a form of psychological torture. Why not instead marshal a kind of fallible inference to the best explanation and settle on a personal identity until and unless one is given tangible cause to engage in revisions? Constantly calling into question one’s chosen path is nonetheless what Beauvoir’s existentialist ethic recommends.

Since the lone person has no stable compass, Beauvoir concludes that “[m]an can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men” ([1948] 1976, 72; see also Arp 2001). It is because one publicly told other people that one would do such and such that one *ought* to do such and such. Promises

to others are therefore deemed more binding than promises to oneself. Rand would ardently disagree. She argues that a promise made to another is to be kept precisely because one has first seen the independent merit—the personal gain—that results from honoring promises silently made to oneself (see Smith 2006, 176–97).

This Randian shift to inner honesty has far-ranging practical consequences. In venues lacking informed scholarly oversight, we often read about how Rand supposedly advocated the accumulation of material wealth, come what may (see, for example, the straw Rand erected by Sheehy 2004). However, this interpretation is flatly contradicted by her written work (a fact recently highlighted by Khawaja 2014, 218). For instance, the architect Roark in *The Fountainhead* ([1943] 1994) secretly transfers all the public credit (and monetary remuneration) to another person in exchange for seeing his own design built. To be clear, Roark does not want to starve in anonymity. Yet, when forced to choose, he prizes realizing his vision over any societal reward. We are thus quite far from the mistaken popular view of Rand as an advocate of crude consumerism (the point is also made well in Heller 2009). In fact, the ethicist Neera Badhwar (1998) thinks Rand's greatest contribution has been her portrayal of flourishing as a state of inner tranquility and contentment.

Since, according to Rand, the self is the primary recipient of values, the self is also the primary party harmed by a broken promise. She claims that, as reflective beings, we do irreparable harm to ourselves when we fail to follow through on our commitments. For instance, when the character Peter Keating confirms late in life that he should have been a painter all along ([1943] 1994, 609), he confronts an inner truth, which he had known but suppressed in his youth (20). His prereflective inclination for art beckoned acknowledgment as a species of psychological fact. Hence, it would seem that Keating's evasion is blameworthy, even if the whole affair transpires at a private level. No one can detect or police this moral transgression—except the agent in question. Even so, it betokens a tragedy. Keating thereby becomes an allegory of the waste occasioned by following a life plan that others find worthy instead of one that reflects individual judgment and inclination(s). Keating is “selfless,” in that his self is made up of what others think—which is why Rand titled her main treatise on ethics *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964).

There are parallels between Keating and Beauvoir's character Françoise. Indeed, “[t]he habitual nature of Françoise's denial of her feelings is evident in scene after scene of the novel, as she chooses to deny her own feelings rather than inconvenience others” (Simons 2003, 113). One could perhaps argue that Beauvoir's philosophy is capable of reprimanding this as “bad faith.” It is unclear, however, if and how an existentialist could support such a reprimand (see Shabot and Menschenfreund 2008). “It is, after all, up to you to decide

whether you want to live an authentic life” (Eshleman 2009, 75). Perhaps on the joint assumptions that (1) one should be happy and that (2) bad faith is not conducive to happiness, the reprimand can have some traction. Beauvoir might admit (2), but she would probably not endorse (1). In *She Came to Stay*, Françoise is described as having a “bias” in favor of being happy.

Interestingly, there seems to have been some hesitation on this last point. In the 1990 edition of Beauvoir’s novel, the passage in question reads, “Françoise was cut to the quick. Was it possible that her bias in favor of happiness, which seemed to her so obviously compelling, was being rejected with scorn?” ([1943] 1990, 101). If a mere “bias” is what prompts one to pursue happiness instead of, say, melancholy or angst, then the compass of one’s action is ultimately one’s personal preference(s), which might conceivably shift. However, in the more recent 2006 edition of *She Came to Stay*, the same passage reads, “Françoise was cut to the quick. Surely she couldn’t contemptuously push aside the acceptance of this happiness that seems to her so clearly to be asserting itself” ([1943] 2006, 96). Here the term “bias” has been deleted, and greater emphasis is put on the force with which hedonistic impulses assert themselves. In the French original, however, we find the equivalent of “bias” (“partis pris”): “Françoise fut touchée au vif; ce parti pris de bonheur qui lui semblait s’imposer avec tant d’évidence, on pouvait donc le repousser avec mépris?” (1943, 122–23; for editorial comments on the poor state of such translations, see Beauvoir 2004, 4–5).

Seeing how evading one’s attitudes with regards to happiness cannot be characterized as blameworthy without endorsing a tacit form of objectivism (or a closely related form of eudaemonism), is the only remaining stance one of ambiguity, as Beauvoir maintains? The state to be sought, according to Beauvoir, is not nihilism, which would merely be the “stationary” opposite of dogmatism. Instead, like many French intellectuals influenced by the phenomenological inquiries of Edmund Husserl (Weiss 2008, 26–38), Beauvoir wants to countenance a fundamental experiential indeterminacy. Feasibly or not, Beauvoir’s ideal subject strives to keep the Hegelian dialectic at the vacillating moment prior to synthesis and thereby “remains at a distance; he is never fulfilled” (Beauvoir [1948] 1976, 65). The idea of a unique lifelong vocation would make little sense to such a person. An existentialist inspired by Beauvoir would therefore regard the promise-keeping heroes discussed by Rand as fictional portrayals detached from actual human nature, whose powers of resolve are to be taken no more seriously than those of comic book figures able to leap over tall buildings in a single bound.

The fact that Rand ([1969] 1975) described her fiction as falling in the Romantic tradition might spare her this charge (although perhaps at the price of Platonizing ideals, which Rand would have disavowed). However, the absence of any truly supernatural endowments in Randian characters makes it hard to

see how one could sustain a strong claim of metaphysical impossibility. A better response would therefore be to see long-term resolve as a feat that is admittedly great and/or exceptional, but which nonetheless falls within the ambit of human capabilities. It may be true, as one critic put it, that “[e]conomic men’ proved to be a scarcer commodity than the theory takes for granted” (Fletcher 1974, 373). But, on the terms it has set, the radical freedom espoused by Beauvoir cannot rule out the conduct of a person like Dagny Taggart.

Now, regardless of whether one’s conduct is predominantly erratic or cohesive, Beauvoir and Rand both recognize that life inherently repels inaction. Humans may have free will, but one decision they cannot make is standing still. For Rand, this has to do with our biological nature (Binswanger 1990). For Beauvoir, this is simply in virtue of the fact that time marches on (see her [1970] 1977; as well as Deutscher 1999). Thus, in “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” Beauvoir (2004, 89–149) resigns herself to the agentive movement of Pyrrhus, because the contrasting idleness of Cineas is simply not feasible. In the course of this inevitable movement, one can deny a natural impulse or “bias in favor of happiness” (Beauvoir [1943] 1990, 101). Tragically, Beauvoir’s character Françoise “retreats to subjective idealism in order to suppress the regret that accompanies her dutifulness” (Simons 2003, 114). This, however, is discordant with the phenomenological compact to accept experience as it presents itself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another disciple of Husserl (and friend of Beauvoir), reviewing *She Came to Stay* in an essay on “Metaphysics and the Novel” (reprinted in his 1964, 26–40), praised Beauvoir for trying to develop a moral code centered on ambiguity. Yet, a Randian might say that, just as Merleau-Ponty realized that “[t]he most important lesson which the [phenomenological] reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” ([1945] 1974, xiv), the attempt to remain “unbiased” about happiness teaches us the impossibility of a complete ambiguity.

Conclusion

It is often remarked (by admirers and detractors alike) that Rand’s novels appeal particularly strongly to the young. According to Rand, the ability to keep a firm handle on one’s long-term personal projects and ambitions means that “spiritual” aging is not mandatory: “To hold an unchanging youth is to reach, at the end, the vision with which one started” (Rand [1957] 1999, 724). So, while Camille Paglia has decried “the dour adulthood of both Simone de Beauvoir and Ayn Rand” (1995, 44), a careful study of their lives and works actually speaks to an opposite conclusion.

Rand was a young immigrant who wanted to write for the movies. She not only achieved that, but went on to be a successful playwright and world-famous

novelist. Later, she rendered the technical aspects of her underlying philosophy explicit in nonfiction essays. Beauvoir's early goals to teach and to write were readily achieved. Although Beauvoir was eventually dismissed from her teaching job, she too went on to be a celebrated writer; her novel *The Mandarins* ([1954] 1999), for instance, was awarded the Goncourt Prize. Beauvoir was never as comfortable as Rand with the idea of being a philosopher, but there is no doubt that Beauvoir also made major advances in that field. Both women consciously gave themselves central parts in the script of their own lives. Once Beauvoir decided to become a writer, her subject, more often than not, was herself. Similarly, Rand's work of fiction, *We the Living* ([1936] 1996), was openly autobiographical, and she even makes a "cameo" in *Atlas Shrugged* as the "fishwife" of Galt's Gulch ([1957] 1999, 720). In a context of long-term planning, both women achieved the early career goals they had set for themselves. And they knew it.

Beauvoir nevertheless celebrates an ethos that is completely alien to Rand's thought. Beauvoir maintains that "[v]iewed by reflection, all human projects . . . seem absurd because they exist only by setting limits for themselves, and one can always overstep these limits, asking oneself derisively, 'Why as far as this? Why not further? What's the use?'" (2004, 90). Discovering that we are our own source of constraint should, for an existentialist, be a profoundly disturbing discovery, one that no reflective adult should take lightly. To go on in an unswerving line after such a realization would be to perpetuate a caricature of the human condition.

The optimistic worldview expressed in Rand's work thus stands in sharp contrast with Beauvoir's focus on the abortive aspect of the human condition, "the laceration and the failure of that drive toward being which always misses its goal" ([1948] 1976, 42). Beauvoir enjoins Americans in particular to awaken to "the tragic sense of life" (2004, 314). Rand—who defines a "sense of life" as an "emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence" (1984, 205)—celebrates the fact that while "Europeans do believe in Original Sin . . . Americans do not" (1984, 211; for more on Rand's optimism, see Den Uyl 1999, 96–97). Ostensibly, the rift here runs deeper than an ocean.

Despite these important differences, Rand and Beauvoir agree that all the facts in the world do not add up to a decision. So, when adopting a given life plan, are those facts still relevant? The ethicist of ambiguity will naturally point out that framing the question in such black-and-white terms assumes that clear-cut answers can be had, and thus begs the question in favor of Objectivism. Yet, the same reproach holds the other way round: to assume that no tangible resolution is in the offing is to beg the question in favor of Existentialism. Thus, by its nature, our study cannot claim a conclusive resting place. Still, given that scholars (like Schor 1995, 3–27) have begun to critically reconsider Beauvoir's stance,

it might be worthwhile to fold the ideas of Ayn Rand into that reconsideration. Clearly, on this and other fronts, there is much work to be done.

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