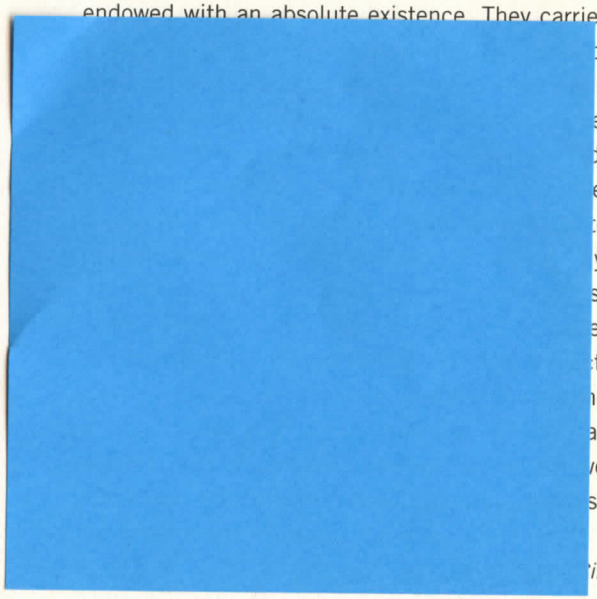
without ever coming together for any goal. Viewed by reflection, all human projects therefore seem absurd because they exist only by setting limits for themselves, and one can always overstep these limits, asking oneself derisively, 'Why as far as this? Why not further? What's the use?'

'I found that no goal was worth the trouble of any effort,' said Benjamin Constant's hero. Such are often the thoughts of the adolescent when the voice of reflection awakens in him. As a child, he was like Pyrrhus: he ran, he played without asking himself questions, and the objects that he created seemed to him endowed with an absolute existence. They carried within them-



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ineas, pp.90–91.

In her autobiography Beauvoir recounts the goad that led her to write *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, her earliest published philosophical work. 'Madame,' the publisher Jean Grenier asked her, 'are *you* an existentialist?' At this point, in early 1943, Beauvoir associated the philosophy of 'existentialism' with Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, and attributed the coining of the word 'existentialist' (the meaning of which she claimed not to understand)



to her compatriot Gabriel Marcel. (*The Prime of Life*, pp.547–8) Although we cannot say exactly when Beauvoir first identified herself as an existentialist, in writing *Pyrrhus and Cineas* she was beginning to work out her philosophical position explicitly. She later described the book as an attempt 'to provide existentialist morals with a material content'. (*The Prime of Life*, p.549) For Beauvoir and Sartre, the starting point of existentialism was the individual's consciousness, and all meaning and values ascribed to the world had their source in the individual. Disallowing any appeal to God, or any external moral authority like 'nature', existentialism seemed to many to be a fundamentally amoral, or even immoral, philosophy. Although Beauvoir's existentialist predecessors and peers – Sartre in particular – had claimed that an existentialist morality was possible, no one had actually showed how. Beauvoir's early attempts to flesh out such a morality, explaining exactly how morality could begin with the individual, were her first original contributions to the history of existentialist philosophy. And although Beauvoir's ethics have never been taken up wholesale (as philosophical theories very rarely are) aspects of it (the stress on the individual's relations with others and the social and ideological context of individual action) have made an important contributions to existentialist philosophy and are now the subject of renewed interest in Beauvoir's work.

Grenier had proposed that Beauvoir contribute to a volume of essays, 'typical of contemporary ideological trends'. Initially reluctant, Beauvoir nevertheless began writing and three months later was surprised to find that her essay had 'swelled into a small book'. (*The Prime of Life*, p.548) The particular problem that preoccupied her, and which had been the main theme of her recently published novel *The Blood of Others* (1943), was the nature of the relation between the free individual and 'universal reality', or the historically unfolding world of brute facts and other men and women. This was already a central concern in existentialism, to the extent that the nature of the relation was

one of the things that it attempted to work out philosophically. But Beauvoir's interpretation of the issue in terms of the individual's anguished struggle against the universal is distinctively original. In the extract above, from the opening paragraphs of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir sets out some basic existentialist principles in order to present this problem in its most acute form. This way of presenting a problem – drawing it out into its most extreme form – is typical of many of Beauvoir's works. These paragraphs are also typical of Beauvoir's early essays; in particular their openings. A cascade of claims and questions tumble one after another leaving the reader uncertain as to the main point. In the subsequent paragraphs the thematic foci and questions proliferate even further. Very often what Beauvoir specifies as the guiding question at the beginning of her essays is not followed through, or the main thematic focus emerges in such a way as to leave it behind. One might conclude from Beauvoir's work as a whole that editing was not one of her foremost literary skills. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, however, as in the other philosophical work of this period, the apparent jumble and waylaying of the argument is a consequence of the breathless vivacity of the writing and a faithfulness to the philosophical principle (attributed originally to Socrates) that one should go where the argument takes one, not lead the argument where one wants it to go. The style reflects the novelty of the content. This is philosophy leaping into an open field. What we now identify as the existentialist assumptions behind the argument were to Beauvoir and her contemporaries relatively new ideas, the consequences of which were only just beginning to be worked through. This is an excited philosophy.

Writing in the first century AD, Plutarch's story is about the adviser Cineas' unsuccessful attempt to moderate king Pyrrhus' militaristic ambition. (After sustaining heavy defeats in a victory against the Romans in 279 BC Pyrrhus famously declared 'one more such victory and I am lost', giving rise to the idea of a 'pyrrhic victory'.) Giving the story an existentialist interpretation, Beauvoir uses the anecdote to reflect on the nature and meaning of human action in relation to the ultimate purpose of human existence. Facing questions of such enormity has made existentialism easy prey for ridicule. However, such ridicule often reveals the nagging insistence of the questions so guilelessly raised here, the little nagging 'what's the use?', the nameless anxiety that quietly accompanies us, especially in our quotidian working and consuming lives.



In Beauvoir's explanation for the uneasiness that accompanies human existence we can see her reliance on certain fundamental existentialist ideas. First, Beauvoir builds on the paradoxical idea that the essence of being human lies in human existence, that is, that the meaning of human existence is not given beforehand (by a God, for example, or by nature) but arises *in existing*. Accordingly, Beauvoir conceives of the human subject as a dynamic movement towards the future. To exist is to project oneself into the future, and this ceaseless movement of projection means that we cannot identify ourselves as a static and enduring essence that simply is what it is. Human existence is a continual process of *becoming*, for each of us a forever unfinished project (death is the cessation, not the completion of life). In this dynamic conception of the human subject, action, broadly conceived, is not what a human being *does*, it is what a human being *is*.

Second, in existentialist philosophy the meaning of human action, which is directed towards the future, is not determined by any external authority or set of circumstances, but is internal to that action itself, in the relation of an action to its end, its 'telos' or goal. For example, the meaning of any one of Pyrrhus' conquests is, for him, not determined by world history or by the gods, but by the goal of the conquest itself. Similarly, the meaning of human existence is itself not externally imposed or given, but internal to the understanding of the action – the 'projects' – that constitute it. And herein lies the problem.

In the extract above, Beauvoir writes that all human action is conceived and undertaken in relation to a specific end, and only

makes sense in relation to that end. Any action at all could suffice to illustrate this, but let us use Beauvoir herself as an example. In 1943 Beauvoir conceived the project of writing a philosophical essay, thinking to herself, as she wrote in her autobiography, that she 'has something to say about . . . the relationship of individual experience to universal reality'. (*The Prime of Life*, p.548) This project was necessarily limited by the projected goal: the production of the essay (rather than, say, a philosophical system spanning twenty volumes, or a comic opera concerned with the same theme). Without this projected end – or at least some projected end – all efforts to communicate something on her chosen topic would, as she wrote, 'be dispersed without ever coming together for any goal'. And yet as soon as she embarks on the essay, the projected end is revealed to be no more than an arbitrary limit. Why stop with an essay? Why not a twenty-volume work? If the overstepping of this arbitrary limit is easily conceived, what hold can the projection of the original goal have over me? On reflection, Beauvoir says, we see that all human action, though it is made meaningful in relation to its projected ends, is at the same time rendered otiose by them. Either we must set ourselves no limits, in which case we act haphazardly, or we restrict ourselves with goals that are immediately outdated. And if the limits we necessarily set for ourselves as the living goals of our actions immediately become no more than a deadening limitation, is not all human action, and thus human existence, thereby absurd?

This is not to conclude that all human action and existence is indeed absurd, it is merely to raise the *possibility* that it might be, based on the assumption that it is in the nature of human action to continually surpass itself. In typical existentialist fashion, Beauvoir is demanding that we look the unpleasant or threatening possibility of the absurdity of human existence squarely in the face, rather than comforting ourselves with convenient lies or conventional answers. In fact, it is precisely the confrontation with and rejection of the convenient lies or conventional answers



that is at issue. Beauvoir describes this confrontation as a stage in the awakening philosophical consciousness of each individual. The 'voice of reflection awakens' during the *adolescence* of the philosophical subject. The agonies of teenage angst are no doubt comical to mature reflection, but it is to Beauvoir's great credit that she is able to give them a philosophical dignity. The child, she says elsewhere, lives in a world in which it takes no responsibility for the meanings and values that it is taught to ascribe to things, what Beauvoir calls a 'serious' world. (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.35) The totality of objects and relations that make up the world seem, to the child, to be 'endowed with an absolute existence' – they seem to need no justification or explanation for their existence, which is unquestioningly taken for granted. More importantly, Beauvoir implies, the child takes its own existence for granted. The 'crisis of adolescence' (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.39) is the end of this security and the beginning of our famed 'existential angst', when we 'assume' our subjectivity and are forced to begin to take responsibility for our own existence and the meanings it may have for us. The expressions of adolescent reflection on this crisis may take stereotypical forms, but, as Beauvoir shows, they may be translated into a vocabulary that reveals their philosophical truth. When the adolescent says petulantly that she 'did not ask to be born' she realises that her existence is sheer contingency, that there is no 'reason' for having been born. If the adolescent 'looks at his elders with scorn' it is because the nihilism of this crisis seems to him to be the only authentic response to the perceived pointlessness of existence. 'Some have killed themselves', Beauvoir says. It is worth taking that point seriously, instead of ridiculing and despising the young.

Although the adolescent features literally in Beauvoir's thought, the idea of the adolescence of the philosophical subject has a broader significance. The claims about the 'child' and the 'adolescent' in this extract are not merely empirical claims about stages of physiological and psychological maturation, but also

existential claims about the human subject. (If they were merely empirical claims we would have to disagree with some of them. Where is the child that does not ask questions about its existence?) In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, as in other of Beauvoir's works of this period, she follows a philosophical model provided by G. W. F. Hegel's remarkable, and famously difficult, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). In this book Hegel writes what he calls a 'science of the experience of consciousness', an account of the historical development of mind or spirit (*Geist*), ascending in stages from the simplest and retrospectively inadequate form of knowledge to 'absolute knowledge' or knowledge of the truth. Very often these stages are represented by distinct figures, frequently associated with a particular philosophical position – for example, the 'unhappy consciousness' of the religious man alienated from the Absolute, or the 'beautiful soul' of the moral idealist, untainted by any real moral relation to the world. The movement from one stage to another is described as a 'journey' of the experience of consciousness, and this must be understood at several levels simultaneously. Each consciousness – each one of us – undertakes this journey for ourselves. At the same time, each one of us lives at a particular point in the development of world history and thus at a particular point in the journey of universal spirit.

In the extract from *Pyrrhus and Cineas* the 'child' and the 'adolescent' are like the figures in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, representing stages on the journey of the development of consciousness in this multi-layered sense. Adolescence is a stage of individual maturation, but it is also a stage of individual philosophical development that is not age-specific, and a stage of the historical development of philosophy. Thus these opening paragraphs from *Pyrrhus and Cineas* refer not only to the philosophical awakening of each individual (Beauvoir included), but also to the philosophical awakening of Beauvoir's generation of philosophers – an awakening to the hard truths of existentialism – and even to the adolescence of the history of philosophy itself. This



last point seems odd, given that philosophy in the 1940s was in a sense already 'old'; at least 2,000 years old, according to the usual European histories. But philosophy, for Beauvoir, was adolescent in only just beginning to rid itself of the taken-for-granted certainties of its admittedly extended childhood. Specifically, philosophy was only just beginning to rid itself of the yoke of religious – for Beauvoir, Christian – certainty, of the comforting religious justification for human existence and the convenient religious explanations that gave it meaning and value.

In the Introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel describes the 'road' on which consciousness travels as 'the pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely . . . the way of despair'. At each stage in the education of consciousness, the realization of the inadequacy of its previous assumptions is experienced as 'a state of despair about all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, opinions, regardless of whether they are called one's own or someone else's'. [2] In the experience of despair we fail to see, according to Hegel, that our rejection of our previous beliefs is already a positive step, that our negation is 'determinate', meaning that its result is more than just nothing; it leads to something else. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, by raising the possibility that all human action and existence is absurd, Beauvoir dramatises just such an experience of despair in the opening paragraphs. Adolescence is the experience of despair without the insight into the positive result of its negation of previous beliefs. If we read no further in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* we would be left at this stage of despair, but of course the book does not end here.

Beauvoir goes on to argue that it is in the impact of my actions on others that the possibility of the justification for my action arises. The paradox of action, according to Beauvoir, is that although the goal of every action is what gives it meaning as an action, that end is immediately capable of being surpassed, potentially rendering the action meaningless. To fend off this meaninglessness we seek for our action a goal that cannot be surpassed. If we imagine that this means we should aim at an

infinite end we are doomed to failure as 'our efforts would be dispersed without ever coming together for any goal'. An infinite goal is a meaningless goal for a finite being. According to Beauvoir, however, the one reality that I cannot transcend or surpass is the reality of the freedom of another human being. If, Beauvoir argued, the ends of my actions are taken up by other people and made the ends of their actions too, the end of my action has taken on a form in which it cannot be surpassed by me. In the simplest terms this means that my own projects can be justified in their becoming the projects of my fellow human beings. I need my fellow human beings, 'these foreign freedoms', Beauvoir writes, 'because once I have surpassed my own goals, my actions will fall back upon themselves, inert and useless, if they have not been carried off [by others] toward a new future by new projects'. (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, p.135) In so doing the others recognize the validity of my actions and ends and thus justify them, rescuing them from their potential absurdity. For Beauvoir this necessity provides us with the rational basis of morality. Others are only able to make my projects their own if they have the 'health, leisure, security, and the [social and political] freedom to do with themselves what they want . . . I must therefore strive to create for men situations such that they can accompany and surpass my transcendence.' (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, p.137)

Some twenty years later, in the second volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir was under no illusions about the success or strength of this solution. It fails, she says there, in assuming that the individual hammers out their project on their own and only then asks her fellow human beings to endorse it, instead of recognizing the role that others play in all my concerns from the very beginning. Beauvoir proceeds as if we work out our projects solitarily, and then go looking for others to take them up, but the truth is that the others are always already there, as no human being lives or acts in isolation. The mistaken 'subjectivism' of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is, Beauvoir says, coupled with a



streak of idealism – a tendency to seek solutions to problems in the realm of ideas, rather than in human relations in the world itself – 'that deprived my speculations of all, or nearly all, their significance'. (*The Prime of Life*, pp.549–50) She might also have added that the morality of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is wholly self-serving. 'I ask for health, knowledge, well-being, and leisure for men' (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, p.137) only because *I need* their freedom to justify my actions, not because their health and so on is something worth striving for in its own right. Thus Beauvoir was right to see, on reflection, that the ad hoc and unconvincing solution to the problems raised at the beginning of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* was not where the interest of the book lies. 'This first essay only interests me today,' she wrote in the early 1960s, 'insofar as it marks a stage in my development.' (*The Prime of Life*, p.550) In the same vein we might – quite without contempt – see *Pyrrhus and Cineas* as an expression of Beauvoir's philosophical late-adolescence, where what is of most importance is the critical questioning of received opinion and the rejection of old certainties. To this extent, these extracts demonstrate Beauvoir's willingness to step into the unknown and her ability to give philosophical voice to the kinds of 'adolescent' anxieties and thoughts that mark the dawning of philosophical reflection. Moreover, these anxieties persist in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, repressed but not overcome by the alleged solution to the existential problems. In particular, they return explicitly in Beauvoir's final reflections and conclusions, where she acknowledges that my projects cannot be justified by being taken over by another precisely because they are then no longer *my* projects. The real conclusion at the end of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that we act – we *must* act – despite and in the face of the paradoxes of action: 'We must assume our actions in uncertainty and risk, and that is precisely the essence of freedom.' (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, p.139) The answer to the problem is that there is no answer. This is the deepest truth of our permanent adolescence. The challenge is to see in it something more than mere negation.

This is what we now think of as classic existentialism. It renders comprehensible, if not justifiable, the popular view of existentialism as a gloomy and pessimistic philosophy for adolescents. But in the last lines of these extracts from *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir has a surprise for us up her sleeve. 'In spite of everything,' she writes, 'my heart beats, my hand reaches out, new projects are born and push me forward.' I am not a thing, she continues a few pages later, but 'a project of self toward the other . . . a spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts'. (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, p.93) These lines suggest that the necessity for us to act in the full acknowledgement of the paradoxes of action and the potential meaninglessness of existence is not done grudgingly or in resignation but, on the contrary, in joy. Nothing suppresses 'the 'élan of our spontaneity', the upsurge of life itself, or vitality. Fresh desires, the impulse to love – just 'wanting' in general – continue to assert themselves despite the 'pessimistic' conclusions of philosophical reflection and this, in the end, is the true paradox of action.

# 2

# AMBIGUITY

'The continuous work of our life,' says Montaigne, 'is to build death.' . . . Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby introduced into his destiny. 'Rational animal', 'thinking reed', he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it. He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. At every moment he can grasp the non-temporal truth of his existence. But between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing. This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.

As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it.

. . . At the present time there still exist many doctrines which choose to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too