

REJECTING THE DREAM OF PURITY: SONIA KRUKS, *SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND THE POLITICS OF AMBIGUITY*. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012.

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This well-researched and welcome work on Simone de Beauvoir's ethical theory continues the contemporary fresh investigations into Beauvoir's work considered independently of Sartre's oeuvre, that is, as a philosophical system in its own right. Too often attention to Beauvoir's work has been distracted by obsession with her personal life and situation. From an existentialist standpoint, these are not irrelevant in the development of her work, but this emphasis has often worked to prevent a more in-depth analysis of the details of the ever-developing philosophy that encompassed her work and life.

Kruks' project is divided thoughtfully into chapters which reflect important points of intersection between Beauvoir's ethical theory and continuing philosophical and political concerns. Kruks locates Beauvoir's politics in a number of relevant contexts, including phenomenology, embodiment, post-war politics, and post-war and contemporary feminism. This last includes, importantly, intra-feminist dialogues of privilege, particularly with regard to race.

Overall, Kruks' study displays a threefold structure: she presents the historical, contextualised development of Beauvoir's theory, she offers a critical analysis, and, in conjunction with the latter, offers an interpretation and application of it in light of one or more contemporary ethical dilemmas. This approach ensures the reader understands Beauvoir's theory in multiple applicable contexts: that is to say, this is not merely a historical study of the genesis of Beauvoir's ethical thought but also a practical revival of Beauvoir's theory. Kruks breathes new life into Beauvoir's work against the background of contemporary politics and philosophy—an approach of which surely Beauvoir, with her intense practical ethical focus, would approve.

AMBIGUITY IN THE WORLD: BODILY/ POLITICAL/ETHICAL

Kruks identifies the phenomenological foundation of Beauvoir's political theory, namely, the idea that am-

biguity is not necessarily always indicative of a fault but can be a “quality of the phenomena themselves, signifying their indeterminacy.” (6) As Kruks points out, phenomenology of experience evidences Beauvoir’s descriptions of said experience: rather than turn our attention away from it, or be discomforted by it (though intellectual and moral discomfort / unease are acknowledged as perhaps being unavoidable), we draw nearer to it, trusting that it will reveal something of importance belonging to our ethical situation. It is a strength of Kruks’ reading of Beauvoir that Beauvoir’s phenomenological discoveries (or uncoverings) are shown here for the ground-breaking achievements that they are.

Kruks correctly identifies the site of ambiguity as being the embodied person. However much we may try to deny our personal ambiguity, it is inescapable (33). It lies in the bodily bedrock of our existence. Our own Being resists boundaries; is it so surprising that our actions may trespass across boundaries too?

We must then reinterpret ambiguity and failure as ‘essential’ to political action (127). Kruks points out that Beauvoir believes that “in an unjust world, the privileged are *unable to avoid* elements of complicity.” (121, my emphasis.) In rejecting the ‘dream of purity’, “...there will always be risks to progressive political action.” (123)

THE ROAD TO JUDGEMENT: CONTEMPORARY COMPLEXITIES AND CASE STUDIES

Examining the nature of these risks leads Kruks to place Beauvoir in the context of contemporary feminist narratives and conversations about privilege, particularly with regard to race. Kruks has read widely here and is able to place Beauvoir’s theory appropriately and fruitfully where it rightly belongs: with those who aim to carry on her legacy.

Reading Kruks’ account, her exegesis of Beauvoir’s thought here seems particularly pertinent to our current ‘post-partisan’ era. These days in the developed world old party loyalties are not as common nor as strong. Younger people, whose parents or grandparents had a solid adherence to a particular worldview, often see no ‘structure’ worth following. Total disengagement, and thus political inaction, is an ever-present risk. No one wishes to repeat the mistakes of previous generations with excessively rigid worldviews, but is there an element of bad faith in failing to engage with a struggle because we are aware that if we do so we risk our own moral reputation? Are we more concerned with our Being-for-Others than with bringing about real political change? Beauvoir has conducted a sort of risk assessment of the nature of being ethical, and concluded that there is a one hundred per cent chance we will fail in *some* way when we attempt to ‘do the right thing’. The pressing question then arises: why act at all? The path of good intentions is, on Beauvoir’s analysis, fraught with the perils of privilege, hypocrisy, incompleteness, moral blind spots (such as unconscious racism) and so on. We must navigate through the Scylla and Charybdis of moral cowardice (complete failure to act at all) and the mixed-moral outcomes of real political choices—while understanding that a completely immoral outcome is always a possibility. We have to accept that we are implicated, for better or for worse, in every attempted moral act. Kruks examines this dilemma through contemporary issues, such as the racial politics of self-transformation, wherein a white person aims to reconstruct herself in such a way as to negate the negative effects of privilege and open up empathy with persons of colour. This discussion brings to mind a contemporary political issue prominent in Australia today (but common to almost all colonised countries): whether and to what extent to intervene in a saga of oppression that continues to take young victims every day, namely that of the indigenous Australian ‘Aboriginal’ people. Despite the acknowledgement of the injustices visited upon the Stolen Generations, contemporary Aboriginal women still live in fear of their children being taken by the authorities¹. Are the government personnel who enforce fines against women who are unable to send their children to school, simply ‘deploying their privilege’ or causing harm to the very people they are meant to ‘help’?

The victims of colonialism are in situations which would seem to call for urgent moral action. Yet at the same time a privileged citizen is aware of the history in which intervention harmed more than it helped. Those who

modelled themselves as moral citizens in the past, who were intervening in order to, purportedly, improve the prospects of a particular ethnic group, were utterly blind to their own privilege, cultural imperialism and racism, such that their actions, regardless of intentions, were easily transmogrified into real and lasting harm. Here the pressing relevance of Kruks' study presents itself: how does a privileged being 'help' an under-privileged one? Is such help even possible? What does it mean to act across the boundaries of privilege? Here we also encounter the question of empathy—this is perhaps a fruitful line of investigation, but Kruks believes Beauvoir ultimately moves in a different direction. As she summarises:

Her outrage at French violence and abuse did not move her to try to immerse herself in the lived experience of Algerians. Her strategy was very different. Aware of her privileged status, she instead learned to deploy it as a basis for effective, public, political intervention. (111)

Not to escape one's privilege, then, but to deploy it strategically: this is indeed what Beauvoir did.

Kruks is right to position Beauvoir's choices against the background of current dialogues about privilege. We need to ask: what can and should a person in a similar privileged situation to Beauvoir's do now? In Australia, the very word 'intervention', in the case of the notorious gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous quality of life, has taken on an imperialist tone and become a tainted term of reference. The charge appears to be this: that the agents initiating the intervention do not acknowledge their own privilege and therefore fail to realise their own 'taintedness', their own complicity in past acts of oppression. Without this understanding, their 'moral' acts will be blind; and blindness of this sort is risky.

Against this line of argument, however, Kruks reveals the logic of Beauvoir's action:

...what her story teaches us is that the tendency of privileged progressives to fixate on disclosing and overcoming their personal privilege needs to be complemented, or sometimes even countered, by another politics in which privilege is usefully deployed rather than introspectively dissected and 'worked on'. (123)

It's still not clear however if any of this ultimately helps those stuck in such moral dilemmas: the person who wishes to act morally suffers the tension between holding back and surging forth into positive action. On Kruks' reading, Beauvoir's hope is that we should not buckle under this tension, but push through it, trusting that we can manage to bend our privilege to our moral will appropriately. However, this course seems to hold the potential to lead us astray—the problem with privilege is that it is not always clear how to 'use' it in a way that assists rather than harms others, as the history of paternalistic 'assistance' to and speaking for colonised peoples shows.

Perhaps we should return to Beauvoir's provocative question in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: 'May it be that there is an irresistible dialectic of power wherein morality has no place? Is the ethical concern, even in its realistic and concrete form, detrimental to the interests of action?'². To which, of course, she gave us an answer:

But an action which wants to serve man ought to be careful not to forget him along the way; if it chooses to fulfil itself blindly, it will lose its meaning or will take on an unforeseen meaning; *for the goal is not fixed once and for all; it is defined all along the road which leads to it.*³

The legacy of Beauvoir's political thought is that we must continually recreate our political action, through re-thinking, recharging and reorientating ourselves with regard to others and to our own privilege. We do not 'have' a political position from which clear political action inevitably flows; on the contrary, we must *live* and re-live our political positions and with each new positioning a new set of imperfect actions presents itself. If this sounds like hard work, that's because it is: it is not for the intellectually lazy and certainly not for a blind follower of any political party. Beauvoir will allow no delegation of the responsibility for evaluating one's own

political actions: these cannot be justified by a party line.

Ultimately, as Kruks explains, Beauvoir's message is positive: by letting go of the quest for ethical or political purity we open up the space for real political action, even if in doing so we also offer ourselves up to the judgement of later, clearer-seeing generations. (See, for example, Kruks' discussion of the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the final chapter, "An Eye for an Eye: The Question of Revenge".)

BEAUVOIR'S NOVELS: POLITICAL LEGACY

In addition to the political and ethical analysis, Kruks' study also treats of the literature that was part of Beauvoir's broad interdisciplinary range. Investigating Beauvoir's famous 1954 novel *The Mandarins* she argues that we can find in it a 'rich phenomenology of political judgement' (131) and a 'phenomenology of political experience' (132), both being phenomenologies of questionings rather than assertions. Indeed, Beauvoir's novels follow a phenomenological methodology with a view to understanding the structures political agents find themselves in. Existentialist novels such as Beauvoir's are thus *existential acts* more than philosophical treatises to be consumed. They refer the reader back to her own existence and invite her to engage with the existential questions featured therein. Kruks points out that "Beauvoir *lived* her philosophical orientation to the world" (21) (her emphasis). To read Beauvoir's novels is to attempt to co-live this philosophical orientation, but in a different time and place. Possibly, the structure of these works must remain forever unfinished, with a permanent space into which the ethical inquirer must project their interpretation and deliver the final judgement. In this way, Kruks invites us to see *The Mandarins* and other of Beauvoir's novels as novels of problems, not solutions. The value for those wishing to uncover Beauvoir's political theory is that it invites the reader to perform the phenomenological analyses that lead to a deeper mining of the ontological forces at work.

CONCLUSION

At 180 pages, this study is not a long work, although it is rich in content. The chapter on Privilege, in particular, left me wanting an extended discussion of the implications of the analysis, and more engagement with current debates. This is a huge field, however, and Kruks should be commended for opening up this line of investigation. In fact, my hope is that this volume will have a galvanising effect upon academics and philosophically-inclined activists of all backgrounds. It is worth remembering that both Beauvoir and Sartre were not only theoreticians but also engaged in practical political action, even in the midst of intense post-World-War II ethical complexity. They did not allow this ambiguity to paralyse them. Kruks' study invites us to see ambiguity not as something to be denied, ignored or overcome, but something to acknowledge and *work through*, with effective political and moral action to be found on the other side.

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NOTES

1. Kelly Briggs, 'Aboriginal mothers like me still fear that our children could be taken away', *The Guardian* 21 Jan 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/21/aboriginal-mothers-like-me-still-fear-that-our-children-could-be-taken-away>. Accessed 22 Jan 2014.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, Trans. B. Frechtman, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, New York: Citadel, 1948, 1976, 152.
3. Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 153.