

The Ethics of Ambiguity, Acting and Judging:
Simone de Beauvoir and the Algerian War

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Prepared for presentation at the 95th annual meeting of the American Political Science Association

Atlanta, Georgia
September 2-5, 1999

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Introduction

In Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical *Hard Times: Force of Circumstance, vol. II*, she makes the statement, "I am not a woman of action..." followed by an avowal of her vocation: "my reason for living is writing," and she ends the paragraph with the statement: "I contented myself with giving what help I could when I was asked for it; certain of my friends did more" (Beauvoir 1992 [1965], 183). What does Beauvoir mean when she says that she is not a woman of action? This is, after all, the author whose *Second Sex* had a profound effect on second wave feminism, and whose turbaned presence at the head of a demonstration for abortion rights, or working on behalf of young women not allowed to attend high school because they were pregnant, belies the modesty of this reflection upon herself. And yet, in distinguishing her own vocation as a writer from a life of action, she sets up a distinction that will be important for understanding her activities during the Algerian War as well as her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir 1948).

Her commentary is found in one of her autobiographical works, in the context of a discussion of the Algerian War for independence from France. This conflict was one about which Beauvoir felt very deeply. She was outspoken in her opposition to the continuing efforts of France to retain this North African colony. She also took on the cause of Djamilia Boupacha, an Algerian woman tortured by French soldiers and forced to confess to a crime she did not commit, which I will discuss later in this paper. And yet, this simple statement, "I am not a woman of action," opens up the question of what "action" is for Beauvoir, and what that meant in the context of her involvement with the Algerian War. Is this a recognition that she did not make the sacrifices for this cause that others did, or that she was not willing to? She is writing in

retrospect, but she uses the present tense. The text cited is found in the second volume of her autobiography at a point prior to the description of her involvement with the Boupacha situation, but she does not say something like “I was not (yet) a woman of action,” or “I had not yet become a woman of action.” Is being a woman of action a vocation on the order of Beauvoir’s own drive to write, something that gives one a “reason for living”? If so, then what sets writing apart from action? In order to begin to answer these questions, this paper examines Simone de Beauvoir’s involvement with the case of Djamila Boupacha, as well as the ethical system that she presents in one of her early philosophical texts, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, then turns to the writings of Hannah Arendt in order to begin to clarify the relation of judging and acting, particularly ethical action.

In Practice

While opposed to the violent maintenance of “Algérie Française” from the beginning of the Algerian War, Beauvoir took on a particular project that involved two goals. One was to remind the French people of the atrocities that were being committed in their name and to which many turned a blind eye, acts for which Beauvoir believed they were ultimately responsible as French citizens. The other was to bring about the release and vindication of twenty-two year old Djamila Boupacha.

In February of 1960, during the struggle for Algerian independence, Djamila Boupacha was imprisoned as a suspect in the planting of a bomb, later defused, in the café of the University of Algiers. She admitted involvement with the Algerian resistance forces, including having

harbored agents in her house, but initially denied any involvement with the bomb at the café. Eventually, a false confession was extracted from her under torture, which included submersion in water, electric shock, and rape with a bottle. The systematic torture of Algerians taken into custody was one of the central means of waging the “counter-terrorist” war of the French military forces. There was little accountability for these actions, as they were allowed as a sort of necessary evil by the French colonizers of Algeria; encouraged as a means of gathering intelligence by the military command in Algeria; and ignored by officials in France, who by this point wanted the conflict, which had spread across the Mediterranean into France, to be over, and France victorious. Boupacha’s case would have been like many others, a quick trial in an ostensibly civil court, with an officer of the military in judge’s robes presiding, and a guilty verdict based upon a confession that was the only evidence available, if not for her own courage and the intervention of Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir.

In Boupacha’s first interview with a magistrate, after more than a month of imprisonment, she had the temerity to request of the magistrate “Notez que j’ai été torturée” [“Note that I have been tortured”] (Montreynaud 1995, 466) and to demand that she be examined by a doctor. This was despite threats, “...above all, not to start talking about torture, like all the other half-wits they’d had to send back for further treatment” (Beauvoir 1962, 43). She almost did not speak out, and her accusations were greeted mainly with indifference by the magistrate, but Boupacha stood by her allegations of torture and declarations of innocence despite threats of both further torture to herself and harm to her family. At the same time, her brother wrote from Algeria to a young French attorney known for her activism, and asked her to take the case. Gisèle Halimi agreed to replace the overly complacent lawyer in Algeria whom the family had

previously retained, accepting the formidable task that Djamila Boupacha's defense would present.

Part of the challenge for Halimi was the official resistance she knew she would encounter in both Algeria and France. This included restriction of her first trip to Algiers to forty-eight hours, a severe limitation given that Halimi would arrive on the 17th of May, Boupacha's hearing would take place on the 18th, and the dossier for her case would not be available for her lawyer to see on the day before the hearing. This limitation of the duration of her visit was a result of the visa she was granted by the Prefecture in France, and while she tried to have the visa extended, it was not surprising to her that she could not, as "the frequency with which those lawyers who regularly pleaded in Algeria were interned, expelled, or arrested while going about the normal business of their calling pointed to a deliberate policy of ensuring that the farcical travesty which passed for justice there should continue unmolested" (Beauvoir 1962, 25). Halimi used her legal training and knowledge, working in the courts first to have the trial postponed to give adequate time to prepare a defense for the military tribunal in Algeria, and eventually to have the trial moved to France, where the chances of an impartial judge who would examine the 'evidence' of Boupacha's involvement might be found. The chances were also perhaps greater that the allegations of torture might be investigated by a French judge more removed from the immediacy of the conflict in Algeria.

One of the first things that Halimi did upon returning to Paris was to notify officials, all the way up to Charles de Gaulle, of the circumstances of Boupacha's case, including her allegations of torture. This she did in order to "destroy a myth and block a handy official loophole. Whenever such abuses are brought to the notice of those ultimately responsible for

them, we hear the same old song: ‘It’s an Algerian affair; Paris knew nothing about it’” (Beauvoir 1962, 63). Halimi also contacted persons who had made known their opposition to France’s conduct of the war, including Simone de Beauvoir. It was decided that they must arouse public sympathy, a not-insignificant task, as they must, “overcome the most scandalous aspect of this whole scandalous affair – the fact that people *had got used to it.*” They concluded that “The French had to be shocked out of their comfortable indifference to the Algerian problem” (Beauvoir 1962, 65).

With this in mind, Beauvoir mobilized her social and intellectual power and wrote a stirring letter intended to galvanize public opinion, which she had published in the newspaper *Le Monde* on June 2nd. Titled “In Defense of Djamila Boupacha,” in it Beauvoir sought to confront the French people both with the horrific facts of Boupacha’s torture, and with their own complicity in the perpetuation of such practices in Algeria. Although Beauvoir was forced to substitute the word “belly” for the word vagina in the sentence that was to read, “They forced a bottle into her vagina,” the violence of the violation of this woman’s body was evident to all who would read the article, and it made what was an incident like many others in Algeria a *cause célèbre* in France. Beauvoir also organized a Djamila Boupacha committee to put pressure on French officials. Her goals as stated in *Le Monde* were to obtain further postponement of Boupacha’s trial, which was scheduled for June 17th, not nearly time enough to investigate Boupacha’s allegations; to ensure that neither Boupacha’s family, nor witnesses favorable to her would be harassed, intimidated, or worse; and to see the torturers of the El Biar and Hussein Dey prisons, where Boupacha had been held, brought to justice (Beauvoir 1962, 65).

While public sympathy may have been aroused by publicity of this case, official intransigence remained firmly in place. In her introduction to *Djamila Boupacha*, Beauvoir recounts the reaction of one official, the President of the Committee of Public Safety: “After all - as was delicately hinted by M. Patin...- Djamila Boupacha is still alive, so her ordeal cannot have been all that frightful. M. Patin was alluding to the use of the bottle on Djamila when he declared: ‘I feared at first that she might have been violated *per anum*... such treatment results in perforation of the intestines, and is fatal. But this was something quite different,’ he added, smiling: clearly nothing of the sort could ever happen to *him*” (Beauvoir 1962, 9). It was precisely this sort of willed blindness, the ease of knowing that this could never happen to them, or of believing that short of death no harm was done, or that anyone who did die in this conflict must have been a violent revolutionary or terrorist, and therefore meriting such punishment, that Beauvoir found impossible to accept. It was this willed blindness that would keep French citizens from acting to stop the torture used systematically by French forces in Algeria, and to stop the war by releasing Algeria from the colonial hold that France could no longer maintain. In asking, “Can we still be moved by the sufferings of one girl?” (Beauvoir 1962, 9), Beauvoir issued not just an imperative for empathy or thought, but a call to ethical action informed by judgement of the conditions under which the war was being waged. First, French citizens must open their eyes and judge for themselves not only the merits of this war, but also the particular ways in which it was being fought; then, they must act. These two principles: recognizing the conditions in which one lives, and acting in response to them, are central principles of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, written by Beauvoir and published fifteen years earlier.

In Theory

Simone de Beauvoir published *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* in the fall of 1947, two years after the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, and three years after the liberation of Paris. In this, one of her few specifically theoretical works, she establishes an ethical system based in what she describes as the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. What we all have in common as human beings is the perception of ourselves as subjects, of others as objects, and the difficulties that inhere in the recognition that for those 'other' subjects, we are objects, and that they are themselves subjects in their own right. It is a given for Beauvoir that there is no higher power upon which humans can rely that will reveal or hide the meaning of mortal lives. Each person must make meaning out of the material of life. The disclosure of this meaning, or failure thereof, is found in the content of the actions each person undertakes. While each subject exists for the disclosure of the meaning of her own life, she also exists in a world of other subjects, and one of the fundamental difficulties is that these 'other subjects' are seen and treated merely as 'others.' It is this difficulty that must be confronted in the making of a meaningful life. Beauvoir says, "And it is true that each is bound to all, but that is precisely the ambiguity of his condition: in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects" (Beauvoir 1948, 112).

For Beauvoir, the overall goal out of which each person must make meaning of her life is the search for the conditions that will allow all people to choose freedom. Beauvoir asserts that "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can,

at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (Beauvoir 1948, 18). However, this is difficult as the modern condition imposes constraints whereby, “Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means” (Beauvoir 1948, 8-9). While one is free to choose the means, mode and content of one’s action, it is not ethical action unless it gestures in the direction of freedom for all. Failure to hold oneself to this standard would involve life lived on the mere order of being, whereas engaging in ethical action would involve a move toward authentic existence, which is lived not only in the present but gestures toward the future. At the same time, the choice, in existentialism, through one’s actions to reject one’s own freedom, or to reject that of others and also thereby curtail one’s own freedom, is an open possibility, and it is against this that Beauvoir writes in her *Ethics*.

Beauvoir discusses several different types of persons and their ways of living, some of which contravene her imperative that: “It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (Beauvoir 1948, 9). In some way, each of these types represents a flight from recognition of the conditions in which s/he lives, or failure to recognize the commitments which Beauvoir would have each of us acknowledge. In examining these, it becomes clear that for Beauvoir, there is a distinction between ‘action,’ the things that people do as a regular part of their daily lives, and ‘ethical action,’ endeavors that fulfill the conditions that she establishes throughout the text. These typologies are descriptions of what persons may, through the choices they make, be or do at a particular moment in time, or perhaps over a long period of time. However, people are not inherently of a

certain type, and a person can, by virtue of the choices and actions s/he makes and undertakes, fall into one category or another, or overlap categories. In fact, looking at these ‘types’ is most helpful as a heuristic that provides a means of concretizing her theory and showing examples of some of the potential pitfalls, and potential for realization, that await the person who would seek to act ethically.

To begin with the hazards, the first type she calls the “sub-man.” This person “feels only the facticity of his existence” (Beauvoir 1948, 44), which is to say that the sub-man is content with living only in the realm of being, thinking only of the present, rather than seeking existence, which is rooted in the present, but looks to the future for the fulfillment of its projects of freedom. The sub-man acts against the impulse to engage the world through ethical action, remaining in a cycle of stagnation and nothingness. What is particularly dangerous about the sub-man is that because s/he chooses no project, s/he is open to the manipulation of others, for purposes that s/he does not choose (Beauvoir 1948, 43-44). The “serious man” also rejects existence, but does so in such a way that, “He loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity” (Beauvoir 1948, 45). This object is a project of sorts, and it can take many forms, but the crucial aspect of the life of the serious man is the subjugation of self in the service of an object that is unquestioned and taken as an unchanging given. For Beauvoir, the content of the project of freedom is constantly changing, and one chooses each day, each moment, what the content of that project will be. The serious man seeks precisely the comfort of an unchanging, unexamined basis for action and for this reason, the actions that follow are inauthentic. This serious attitude can fall into that of “the nihilist,” someone whose object becomes the pursuit of nothingness. This attitude is different from that of the sub-man in its cognizance that life must

have an object beyond mere being. However, the failure of the object as pursued by the serious man leads to nihilism, and the object is then to “be nothing” (Beauvoir 1948, 52). Beauvoir asserts that the nihilist is both correct and tragically wrong: “The nihilist is right in thinking that the world *possesses* no justification and that he himself *is* nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly” (Beauvoir 1948, 57). Next, Beauvoir examines the type she calls “the adventurer.” This person is constantly acting, but there is no purpose behind the action other than “action for its own sake” (Beauvoir 1948, 58). This person “finds joy in spreading through the world a freedom which remains indifferent to its content” (Beauvoir 1948, 58). Like the serious man, the adventurer acts, but the lack of a coherent project of freedom informing the action robs it of any ethical content. The “passionate man” is like the serious man in his selection and adherence to an object, but whereas the serious man sees that object “as a thing detached from himself,” the passionate man believes that “it is disclosed by his subjectivity” (Beauvoir 1948, 64). Because he believes that this freedom is his alone, he does not hesitate to treat other humans as things, consigning them through thoughts and actions to the realm of facticity in the search for an ostensibly higher object (Beauvoir 1948, 66). The “critic” fails in the realm of epistemology. For this type of person “defines himself positively as the independence of the mind.” And his failing is revealed in that, “He understands, dominates, and rejects, in the name of total truth, the necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses. But ambiguity is at the heart of his very attitude, for the independent man is still a man with his particular situation in the world, and what he defines as objective truth is the object of his own choice” (Beauvoir 1948, 68-69). Thus, the critic, even when engaged solely in his own

intellectual pursuits, makes the mistake of substituting his own truth for a universal truth which is only ever partial, and which cannot be realized at the level of theory alone.

Against these types, Beauvoir upholds “the artist and the writer,” who, when acting authentically, seek to reify existence, and to make meaning, but without attempting to thereby assert their own being as fixed. In this way, they avoid the falling into facticity of the sub-man, but the authenticity of the search for human existence, and the understanding of the partiality of the truths revealed through art, lead them to avoid the pitfalls of the serious man, the passionate man, or the critic as they engage with the world (Beauvoir 1948, 69). Beauvoir’s statement distinguishing her own vocation as writer from the status of “woman of action” takes on greater importance when combined with an appreciation of what the artist and writer can do insofar as they can arrest the play of significations, and freeze a moment of existence. Both the artist and writer and those who observe what they have created are pulled out of the limited frame of their own subjectivity, opened to an experience of another subjectivity, and, as we will explore later, are pushed to judge not only the particular work, but more importantly the status of existence itself.

Against the bad example of the adventurer, whose action is without purpose, is posited that of the “genuinely free man,” described by Beauvoir as one “whose end is the liberation of himself and others” and who acts in such a way that the means to his desired end do not contravene that end (Beauvoir 1948, 60). Beauvoir uses examples drawn from the Second World War and the French Resistance movement, and from the Soviet Union and French Communists’ relation to it, in order to show the difficulties that inhere in living ethically. In this paper, it is the Algerian War that serves as background to Beauvoir’s ethical theory.

Acting

We must each decide which actions to take for ourselves, as, “Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods” (Beauvoir 1948, 134). The method that Beauvoir proposes involves consciousness of the ambiguity of the human condition, i.e. that we are in the world as both subjects and objects, and, as a consequence, that this consciousness informs the actions of individuals. Beauvoir asserts that: “To will oneself free is to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person concrete action to be achieved” (Beauvoir 1948, 73). The situations of the conflict in Algeria and the case of Djamila Boupacha that confronted Beauvoir in France in the late 50s and early 1960s, and that demanded ‘concrete action,’ offer a means of examining her ethics and its possibilities.

Looking at the concept “action” through the lens of Beauvoir’s *Ethics* yields at least two different understandings of the term. There is ‘action’ of an everyday variety. These are the things that we do that comprise our lives in the mode of being. The second sort of action is perhaps more properly called ‘ethical action,’ and it is action on this order that seeks to extend one’s life into the realm of existence, through a project of freedom that reaches into the future. There are three moments involved in ethical action, and at each moment there is a risk that the person attempting it will fail. In acting ethically, there is the will and reason behind the action, the action itself, and the resulting consequences of the action.

Turning our attention to the quote in which Beauvoir says that she is not a woman of action seems to yield another understanding of the term. For here, parallel to writing, action is

invoked as a mode of existence, a vocation on the order of her own chosen vocation of writing. It does not quite seem to map onto the first sort of action from her ethics, the action of being, as ‘the writer’ is one of the examples of someone whose actions when properly undertaken reach into the realm of existence, and are therefore examples of ethical action. And yet, the action of the writer is not in its essence a necessarily ethical type of activity. It is something of an attenuated action. In her *Ethics*, she writes of it in such a way that it becomes a paradoxically active freezing of a moment such that the author and others may see the reality in which they live, which will enable them to act ethically, if they so choose. Through the push to see things from a slightly different perspective, or perhaps the shock to one’s subjectivity experienced through the writer’s or artist’s work, the person is confronted with a vision of life that is inclusive of more than merely the limited subjectivity of any one person, and that therefore opens up a momentary means of bridging the difficult gap between subject and object that is the essence of the human condition according to Beauvoir. Hannah Arendt will show that the ability to “train one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt 1982, 43) better enables one to judge actions in the past and present. The writer can assist in this process by offering alternate perspectives, as well as exercises in judgment.

Through writing, the writer engages in an action that offers a reflection of existence which is presented to others and to the writer, making a reality present, albeit at one remove from reality, and yet enabling other action. For example, when confronted with the situation of the Algerian War, Beauvoir did what she deemed most appropriate through both her writing and the other risks she took in order to make public her opposition to the war and the continuing use of torture as a weapon. In so doing, she sought to make French citizens aware of the crimes being

committed in their names, and that they perpetuated through their apathy. She seems to conform to the outline, from her *Ethics*, of the writer's ethical action, and yet she says of herself that she is not a woman of action. Is this because the circumstances of the Algerian War demanded more, an extraordinary amount or type of action? Alternatively, she could be proposing another way of looking at action, one more closely linked with the distinction that Hannah Arendt makes between acting and judging, and in this case it could mean that she was not a woman of action insofar as she was not engaged in politics as her chosen vocation. Her writing allowed her to make known her own judgments, and to push others to judge and participate in the realm of political action.

The different ways of looking at the concept 'action' lead to different implications for her ethical theory and its confrontation with a challenging situation. Indeed, reading Beauvoir's novel *The Blood of Others*, published in France the year before her *Ethics*, leads one easily to imagine the development of Beauvoir's ethical theory through the test of the characters she created, and whose comprehension, incomprehension, achievements and missteps, would be a literary, and somewhat more concrete, precursor of the principles set out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In this novel, Beauvoir presents some of the ruses her characters use in an attempt to fool themselves into believing they can avoid engaging the world, as well as the ways in which they positively engage the world. These characters are confronted with choices that are more complex and therefore more lifelike, and in comparison to the types mentioned above, reveal the limitations that allow the heuristic value of her typology to proceed only so far. When their lens is turned on Beauvoir's engagement with the Algerian War, the types seem to diminish in value, and it is more useful to examine the constitutive parts of ethical action.

Beauvoir's concept of 'ethical action' involves three component parts: the will and reason behind the action, the action itself, and acceptance of the consequences of the action. In relation to the motive force behind all ethical action, Beauvoir says that: "It is desire which creates the desirable, and the project which sets up the end. It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged" (Beauvoir 1948, 15). The judgment is determined both at the communal level, in the laws and precepts that societies establish as their guiding principles, and at an individual level, by the person contemplating the particular action in question. On the one hand, Beauvoir says that we must all decide which actions to take for ourselves. We are free to act in ways that promote neither our own nor anyone else's project of freedom. On the other hand, in order to be a part of ethical action, that decision must take into account the presence of others, and the impact that the action will have on those others. This moment of decision and the form that it would take is left to the individual to shape, be that through positive action and the desire to claim one's own freedom, or through renunciation of the moment of acknowledgment and potential freedom, i.e. in Beauvoir's terms, remaining in a state of immanence.

In her introduction to *Djamila Boupacha*, Beauvoir speaks of the ease with which the "heart-breaking cries of agony and grief that have so long been going up from Algerian soil - and indeed, in France as well - have failed to reach your ears, or if they have, have been so faint that it took only a little dishonesty on your part to ignore them" (Beauvoir 1962, 10-11). Against this attitude, Beauvoir proposes that "only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening into the absurdity of facticity" (Beauvoir 1948, 71), offering a motive both self-interested and altruistic for ethical action. One sees here what one is not to do. One should not

turn one's back on evidence of the oppression of others. In the context of the Algerian War and Djamila Boupacha's situation, knowledge that practices such as torture were standard procedure for French troops acting in the name of France and therefore for all French citizens, should have been enough of a motivation to outrage for persons who considered themselves ethical human beings, but was not. It was left to Beauvoir, and writers, activists and artists like her, to function as educators, eye-openers, to French women and men who would seek to penetrate the fog of apathy that perhaps made their lives more comfortable, but which rendered them incapable of seeing the humanity, and recognizing the justice of the claims of the Algerians who had lived for more than a century under France's colonial rule, and were fighting to throw it off. Beauvoir also sought to interrupt the willingness of French citizens to trust those French officials who duplicitously affirmed that torture was not an accepted practice anymore in Algeria, then ignored evidence to the contrary, or condoned such conduct by the military. She sought not trust, but judgment; that her fellow citizens would examine for themselves what was happening in Algeria, and come to some decision as to the rightness or wrongness of what they found.

The second moment of ethical action, the particular action taken, is partially dependent on the situation of the individual, but also dependent upon politics, according to Beauvoir. She says that "[H]ere the question is political before being moral: we must end by abolishing all suppression; each one must carry on in his struggle in connection with that of the other and by integrating it into the general pattern. What order should be followed? What tactics should be adopted? It is a matter of opportunity and efficiency. For each one it also depends on his individual situation" (Beauvoir 1948, 89). It is clear that in the context of Djamila Boupacha's case, there was for Beauvoir a certain expectation that French women and men should act

ethically by acting in some way to throw off the burden that their complicity had brought them. The content of the action was not determined, but the opportunity to act was offered. The freedom that was offered was not just their own, the safe, comfortable, ersatz freedom of the French citizen at home, sympathetic to those French citizens in Algeria, but, oppressors more or less direct of the Algerian people. The freedom offered was their own as well as that of Djamila Boupacha, whose voice would be heard, and whose claim would extend to the many others whose accusations had similarly been denied.

Recognizing that “Oppression tries to defend itself by its utility...[but that] nothing is useful if it is not useful to man; nothing is useful to man if he is not in a position to define his own ends and values, if he is not free” (Beauvoir 1948, 95), Beauvoir was anticipating some of the objections to an independent Algeria, and some of its justifications as well. This would suggest that political assessment is the constant companion of ethical action, and that citizens needed to let those politicians who would continue to defend France’s colony and its means of retaining it know that they would no longer accept this behavior or rationale. They could, and some did, do this through protests, petitions, and direct confrontation. In the context of the case of Djamila Boupacha, Gisèle Halimi used her legal knowledge, and worked in the courts to have the trial moved, defended Boupacha, and attempted to see that the allegations of torture were investigated. Boupacha’s courage, in standing by her allegations of torture and declarations of innocence despite threats of further torture or harm to her family, is clear. Beauvoir wrote a stirring letter intended to galvanize public opinion, published in the newspaper *Le Monde*. She also organized a movement to pressure the authorities to move Boupacha’s case from Algeria to France, and, along with Halimi, assisted in the publication of the book *Djamila Boupacha*. They

sought thereby to inspire “general revulsion” for the treatment of Djamilia Boupacha and others similarly treated. But Beauvoir insists that this feeling is not enough, as “[A]ny such revulsion will lack concrete reality unless it takes the form of political action” (Beauvoir 1948, 20).

The third moment, that of accepting the consequences of one’s action, is important insofar as the actor acknowledges that s/he sets into motion a chain of events not always clearly evident, but for which s/he is responsible. Not only will s/he be judged in her own time, but in the future as historians and others look to the past for their own insights. In the immediate context of the Algerian War, Beauvoir’s very public stance led to death threats, a partial self-imposed social exile, and the risk of legal repercussions for some of her involvement with the Djamilia Boupacha situation. In particular, Beauvoir actually wrote only the preface of the book *Djamila Boupacha*, but signed her name as a co-author with Gisèle Halimi, in order to shield Halimi from the legal risks of revealing material that was crucial to the narrative of torture and legal travesty that the book sought to tell, but that was not legally permitted to be published. Signing as a co-author made Beauvoir equally subject to punishment if the authorities had decided to prosecute.

Woman of action, or not, Beauvoir certainly forces us to question our own responsibility to act, and the opportunities that are offered, denied, or that must be sought out, depending on one’s situation. There are still unanswered questions. Perhaps Beauvoir was using the word ‘action’ in a very pedestrian sense in her statement. After all, Françoise Sagan also wrote an article about Boupacha’s case after it was initially publicized. Was this a moment of ‘ethical action’ for someone whose decision to write it is described as, “show[ing] the impact of the case on ‘neutral’ opinion in France” (Beauvoir 1962, 251)? By her description of such in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it would seem to fit the criteria. And if so, then Beauvoir’s own involvement would

count as moments of ethical action, but it also seems that Beauvoir saw her vocation as something very different, and Sagan's article may have been evidence of the effect of Beauvoir's efforts to push the French people to judge the Boupacha situation, and to make known their judgments.

Even a lifetime of such moments for Beauvoir, and there were many of them, did not lead her to consider herself a 'woman of action.' Beauvoir rejected the title feminist until late in her life, and in an interview with Alice Schwarzer, Beauvoir criticizes women's groups from the era prior to the creation of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) as being "reformist and legalistic," as opposed to undertaking the more radical actions of the MLF. Once again, this reinforces that for Beauvoir, actions undertaken at both the collective and individual levels must be appropriate to the situation, but it also suggests that they work toward a radical change in society as a whole. It seems that Beauvoir saw her role as helping along that radical change primarily through her writing, which would push women and men all over the world to think, to judge, to act, and to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Judging

Turning to Hannah Arendt's writing on judging helps elucidate Beauvoir's work on ethical action and responsibility. For Arendt offers judging as a crucial element of human existence, that was to serve as the resolution to the philosophical problems she had created in her own separation of thinking from willing. Neither one nor the other, but involving elements of both, judging offered a way to bridge the gaps that she had explored in *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt

1978). In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt sets forth the concept of 'judging' as a distinct mental activity (Arendt 1982, 4). History is about judging; and it is the spectator who judges, who stands between the events of the past, and judges them, with an eye toward the future that is influenced by the judgments of that spectator. While the spectator judges past actions, the spectator and the actor are distinguished by the greater ability of the spectator to see the whole of a particular situation, and by impartiality, whereas the actor has a view of the situation that is partial. However, the two are linked insofar as the actor responds to the expectations of the spectator (Arendt 1982, 55). In her lectures on Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, Arendt characterizes Kant's notion of this relation of spectator to event in the following manner: "The importance of the occurrence (Begebenheit) is for him exclusively in the eye of the beholder, in the opinion of the onlookers who proclaim their attitude in public. Their reaction to the event proves the 'moral character' of mankind. Without this sympathetic participation, the 'meaning' of the occurrence would be altogether different or simply nonexistent" (Arendt 1982, 46). Later, Arendt says that "Morality here is the coincidence of the private and the public.... Morality means being fit to be *seen*..." (Arendt 1982, 49). There is a striking coincidence between this description of judging and the way it works, and Beauvoir's goal to mobilize the opinion of those onlookers, i.e. French citizens, who would not see what was taking place in the conduct of the Algerian War. That the routine use of torture was hidden, as much as possible, from the French people by their own officials, and that the people hid it from themselves until forced to confront this terrible fact, shows that it was not, in Arendt's terms, 'fit to be seen.' The deception and the self-deception revealed a distressing lack in the 'moral character' of the French, and Beauvoir wished to thrust the reality of their responsibility into the

tranquillity of citizens' private lives in making public the facts of the Boupacha case. What she sought was a public willing to judge, to participate through their judgment, in the events that were then taking place in Algeria, and to give those events meaning in ways that their apathy could not.

Judging is a solitary endeavor, that involves two linked mental operations: the imagination, and, in Kant's terms, "the operation of reflection" (Arendt 1982, 68). The imagination is necessary insofar as it can "make present what is absent.... by reflecting not on an object but on its representation. The represented object now arouses one's pleasure or displeasure.... Kant calls this 'the operation of reflection'" (Arendt 1982, 65). This latter step is "the actual activity of judging something." (Arendt 1982, 68) In her exploration of what it means for someone to "train one's imagination to go visiting" (Arendt 1982, 43), Lisa Disch says of representative thinking that, "It does involve a withdrawal from action, although not into utter solitude; rather, in judging, one exercises the imagination to simulate the condition of plurality in the mind" (Disch 1994, 155). This is not merely empathy, which Arendt rejects because of its assimilationism, and yet, Disch is critical of Arendt's failure to account for the limited perspectives that a solitary person can imaginatively evoke, especially insofar as there is no discomfort evinced in Arendt's account of the process of imagination as it is involved in judging (Disch 1994, 168).

Disch also discusses Arendt's "Political Experiences" course, saying that, "The syllabus demonstrates Arendt's implicit assumption that literature makes it possible to enter into both aspects of another's standpoint: the intellectual perspective *as well as* the circumstances that give rise to it" (Disch 1994, 154). As a writer whose works were both literary and philosophical,

Beauvoir clearly also saw literature as an effective means to push men and women to examine their lives and the times in which they were living. In this way, she could communicate the political and ethical principles she found most important. There is an effort at persuasion, not only in her pushing her readers to judge in the first place, but to reach a particular judgment. It is in this sense of potential persuasion, that s/he who judges would seek the agreement of others, that judging takes place in a community (Arendt 1982, 72).

In noting that judging is done with some cognizance of the “community sense,” Arendt cites Kant’s observation that “the beautiful, interests [us] only [when we are] in *society*....” (Arendt 1982, 67). Disch, however, shows that the distinction between Kant’s common, or community, sense, and Arendt’s is that Kant’s “involves abstracting from the ‘limitations’ of a contingent situation to think as ‘any’ man.” She continues, “By contrast, Arendt describes feeling and thinking simultaneously from a plurality of standpoints” (Disch 1994, 153). Beauvoir’s account of freedom as intersubjective, and contextually sensitive, and therefore more aligned with Merleau-Ponty’s account of freedom than with Sartre’s, has been shown by Sonia Kruks (Kruks 1995). In this way, Beauvoir’s notion of freedom also rests in a social setting, and is dependent upon the perspectives of others, and the ability to accept and incorporate those into the project of freedom that the subject creates for herself. The notion of a contextual freedom, based in the particular circumstances of an individual’s life, also finds affinities with Arendt’s account of judging insofar as it is concerned with the particular, rather than with some notion of universal validity. Both Beauvoir and Arendt are concerned with the partial truths that judging can impart to s/he who judges, not as an imperfect reflection of a universal law, but as a necessary acknowledgment of and confrontation with the imperfections of the human condition.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has not been to turn Beauvoir into the woman of action she claimed not to be, nor to turn her ethical theory into that of Hannah Arendt. That said, there are clear affinities between the two that have helped elucidate Beauvoir's imperatives in the historical context of the Algerian War. That Beauvoir wants French citizens to judge is clear. She also wants them to act in light of that judgment. This seems to blur the lines between actor and spectator that Arendt is careful to draw, and raises questions for further investigation about the temporality of judging for both of these writers. As what Lisa Disch calls a "marginal critic," Beauvoir was not merely a "disinterested spectator" (Disch 1994, 143) of the politics of her time, but participated in the upheaval through her repeated demands that the French people act ethically and take responsibility for Algeria's colonial legacy and the war being fought in its wake. This was a call to embrace the ambiguity of the human condition, and to let the ability to judge help in navigating a life full of the choices offered by the particularity of one's existence.

Postscript: The End of the Story

As a result of the efforts on her behalf, Djamila Boupacha's case was moved to France. Scrupulous attention was given to fairness in the conduct of Boupacha's case by the judge who heard it in the French city of Caen. The judge's repeated requests for information and for pictures of officers from the two prisons for the purposes of identification, and the repeated refusal of

military officials to release such pictures, serve as an acknowledgment of the validity of Boupacha's claims. The judge's requests were consistently denied by the military commanders in France and Algeria on the basis that it might diminish the morale of the soldiers in question, and would interfere with their right to confront their accusers. Boupacha was released from prison in May of 1962, shortly after the Evian Accords that ended the war were signed. An amnesty law made it impossible to bring her torturers to justice, or to determine their identities.

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