

## Chapter 8: Existential Philosophy

**Overview:** Existentialism focuses on the individual over the group. In this chapter, we examine two thinkers who represent different strands of existential thought. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that religious values are being replaced by our scientific understanding of the universe, which is ultimately leading humans to a more highly evolved stage. Simone de Beauvoir argues that life is unclear and investigates why, for most of history, women have not been seen as equal to men.

**Major Ideas:** After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lecture, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

*Friedrich Nietzsche*  
The Death of God  
Nihilism  
The Overman  
Master versus Slave Morality  
The Will to Power

*Simone de Beauvoir*  
Ambiguity  
Human Conditioning  
Three Responses to Ambiguity  
The Second Sex  
The History of Women

# Friedrich Nietzsche

## Existentialism

Before getting into one of the most controversial philosophers of all time, Nietzsche, we have to talk about existentialism, a movement he often gets at least some credit for contributing to. *Existentialism* is a broad view suggesting that the most important philosophical questions we can ask are about meaning and choice on an individual level.

Existentialism is about the individual. It is important to note that Nietzsche's philosophy can be related to one strand of existentialism, but there are other strands. One of the most famous existentialists, for example, was a Christian. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855 c.e.) is famous for taking Christianity to a very personal level, arguing that we must make a *leap of faith* in God.<sup>1</sup> For Kierkegaard it's not just about believing your faith, it's about *living* your faith. The leap is so important because, in his eyes, it signals your ability to reject an otherwise meaningless life of people's earthly desires.

Nietzsche's view, however, goes in the other direction. For Nietzsche, as we will see, life truly begins (both individually and collectively) when we *reject* the idea of God and all that a belief in God entails. Sometimes the period we just studied, the European enlightenment, is said to have led to the modern period. *Modernity* in this sense refers to the way the enlightenment ideals—like a sort of faith in scientific progress—dominated many societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nietzsche didn't just reject God, he also rejected many of the ideals of modernism, creating arguments against science and philosophy as well as religion. Because Nietzsche railed against the ideals of modernism, sometimes he is said to have started another intellectual movement called *postmodernism*. Postmodernism is a view that is difficult to define, but it is still very much with us today, and often focuses on a *deconstruction* of social norms and common beliefs. At its best, postmodernism shines a

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<sup>1</sup> His most famous book is probably: Kierkegaard, S. (1992). *Either/Or*. A. Hannay (Trans.). New York: Penguin.

critical light on society, showing us the way our institutions have been built on outdated, racist or sexist ideas. At its worst, the movement is accused of producing absolute nonsense, leading thinkers like Noam Chomsky (1928-present) to say that they can't really respond to postmodernism at all because postmodernists themselves cannot point to any principles on which their theory is built.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a famous hoax was perpetrated against a postmodernist journal in which a writer submitted an essay that deliberately misunderstood scientific facts—yet the essay was accepted by the peer reviewed journal! (Called *The Sokal Hoax* based on the physics professor who perpetrated it.) Around that same time some critics of postmodernism created what they called a *postmodernism generator*, which allowed people to put in a couple of big words to generate a sentence or two of nonsense. Here's an example:

If one examines dialectic dematerialism, one is faced with a choice: either reject constructive discourse or conclude that narrative is a product of the masses, given that sexuality is distinct from language. It could be said that the subject is interpolated into a dialectic dematerialism that includes truth as a reality.<sup>3</sup>

Is that deep or meaningless? The answer is, it's meaningless. Unfortunately, and this is the major criticism of postmodernism, too many people take such writing to be profound, even if there's no meaning behind it.

None of the issues with postmodernism, however, are Nietzsche's fault directly. As we will see, Nietzsche's ideas *do* have at least some meaning. Nevertheless, it's not hard to see how later thinkers were led to postmodernism from Nietzsche, since he deconstructed just about everything possible about modern, Western society.

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<sup>2</sup> See his full critique of postmodernism here: <http://www.mrbauld.com/chomsky1.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This quote comes from one fake article, available here: <http://dev.null.org/postmodern/>

## Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900 c.e.) himself lived the lonely, solitary life of an outsider. He never quite seemed to fit in, despite sometimes being thought of as brilliant by his professors. His father was a Lutheran minister who died when Nietzsche was young. Nietzsche initially planned to be a minister like his father, but early on realized that the pious life was not for him. For example, he consistently questioned God's existence, which would eventually lead to one of his most famous ideas, the death of God. Later on Nietzsche attended a local university in Germany, the University of Bonn, but he didn't really fit in there either. He rejected the life of drinking, partying, and romantic pursuits that many of his fellow male classmates pursued. At another university, Nietzsche found a mentor who got him interested in philology, or the study of the ancient texts within philosophy and religion. The experience of reading different religious texts would ultimately lead him to another one of his famous ideas, slave versus master morality. In Nietzsche's writings we see many similar ideas being expressed in different ways. Unlike most previous philosophers, he wrote in aphorisms, leading his writing to be less clear to some. Nevertheless, there are clear ways in which Nietzsche uses logic and reason to deconstruct popular beliefs, as any good philosopher should. He even claimed that we should *philosophize with a hammer*, meaning that we should use philosophy to test the strength of our beliefs. Two of his most famous works, that many of the ideas in this chapter are drawn from, are *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche eventually met a woman whom he got along with well, Lou Salome (1861-1937 c.e.). They had a special relationship that was certainly intellectual and probably also romantic and/or physical. Ultimately, however, Salome left Nietzsche for another man. Later, after Nietzsche became famous, she wrote a book about him, profiting from

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1978). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. W. Kaufmann (Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin; Nietzsche, F. (1989). *Beyond Good and Evil*. W. Kaufmann (Trans.). New York: Vintage.

the relationship. Perhaps due to this early unsavory experience with women, there were occasional attacks on women in his later writing, prompting some to dismiss Nietzsche's work on these grounds:

In the background of all their personal vanity, women themselves have still their impersonal scorn—for “woman.”

In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man.

Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything about woman has one solution—it is called pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

However, to dismiss all of Nietzsche's ideas based on the way he lived his life would be an *ad hominem* fallacy. His ideas should be considered on their own terms.

In Nietzsche's studies, he came across the writings of another German philosopher before him, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860 c.e.). Schopenhauer, a character in his own right, was a *pessimist*, or one who believes that human existence is so painful and unnecessary that withdrawal from the world itself is the only solution. He envied animals for their ability to apparently find solace in the present moment, not being encumbered with abstract thought like humans:

... an animal's enjoyment is not anticipated and therefore suffers no subtraction, so that the actual pleasure of the moment comes to it whole and unimpaired.<sup>6</sup>

Due to his view of life as ultimate suffering, Schopenhauer was one of the few Western philosophers of his time who seriously discussed Buddhist philosophy, given their focus on appreciating the present moment to come to terms with *dukkha*. Schopenhauer was also a big fan of art, because he believed that art could take us away temporarily from

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<sup>5</sup> Quotes come from *Beyond Good and Evil* (cited above), as well as: Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science*. B. Williams (Ed.) & A. Del Caro (Trans.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Quote comes from: Schopenhauer, A. (1917). *Studies in Pessimism*. T. B. Saunders (Ed. & Trans.). New York: Boni and Liveright.

the pain of existence. For Schopenhauer, art is an improvement upon life. He also thought that all organic life in the universe is driven by some sort of blind will beneath it all. By *blind will* he means some sort of force that is driven by pure chance, kind of like when you let go of a hose on full blast and it sprays in every direction uncontrollably. These last two ideas in particular would have a great influence on Nietzsche's own philosophy. To get a deeper idea of pessimism, consider this from Schopenhauer himself:

A man finds himself, to his great astonishment, suddenly existing, after thousands and thousands of years of nonexistence. He lives for a little while, and then again comes an equally long period when he must exist no more.

We are like a man running downhill, who cannot keep on his feet unless he runs on, and will inevitably fall if he stops.

[Boredom] is a direct proof that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life?

[Existence] is like a drop of water seen through a microscope, a single drop teeming with bacteria, or a speck of cheese full of mites invisible to the naked eye.<sup>7</sup>

These quotes not only illustrate Schopenhauer's pessimism, but they also illustrate the focus on subjective existence that later existentialists would capitalize upon. Although some strands of Nietzsche's philosophy might be said to be pessimistic, ultimately Nietzsche is not a pessimist. In fact, his philosophy, in the end, is life affirming, as we will see.

## **The Will to Power**

Because Nietzsche's metaphysical idea of power underlies all his philosophy, it is a good place to start. Drawing from Schopenhauer's idea of a blind will behind all life, Nietzsche refers to this force as *power*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

rather than will. For Nietzsche, the force behind life is a fundamental drive for power—but power in a broad sense. So when two people are in a fight, it is a struggle for power. However, when two people are in an online fight while playing *Call of Duty*, it is also a struggle for power. At the basic level of nature, when a plant moves toward the sun gradually, it is asserting its power. When a lion hunts a gazelle, it is a struggle for power. When cheating monkeys try to hide their infidelity, it's a display of power.<sup>8</sup>

However, the will to power can get even more subtle for Nietzsche. You might be thinking, does everyone really want power? What about peaceful organizations, like charities or some religious institutions? Don't they want peace and love, rather than power? Well, says Nietzsche, that's what they *say* they want, but it's not what they *really* want. Deep down, a charity wants to be known as the best charity, as a group that helps others—and that in itself is a form of power, of alleged superiority. Deep down, a religious person wants more converts, more money for their church. Power can be found in numbers, money, social recognition, and more.

In evolutionary biology, there is something called *virtue signaling*. Virtue signaling is exactly what it sounds like—signaling your virtue to others in public.<sup>9</sup> So when I open the door for you in front of a large group of people, that might be seen as virtue signaling because I arguably want to be recognized as a person who is virtuous enough to do that. Or, if I express moral condemnation of a terrorist action in public, I might be trying to signal my good morals to others through my statement. It's all just a power grab, Nietzsche would say.

But Nietzsche didn't leave out philosophers and scientists. Philosophers claim to desire the truth through reason, but for Nietzsche that's all a

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<sup>8</sup> Believe it or not, monkeys do this; see here: Wadley-Michigan, J. (February 14, 2013). Cheating monkeys try to hide their infidelity. In *Futurity*. Retrieved from: <http://www.futurity.org/cheating-monkeys-try-to-hide-their-infidelity/>.

<sup>9</sup> According to evolutionary biology, virtue signaling is a part of sexual selection: we signal our virtue to make ourselves more appealing to the opposite sex.

cover up for a deeper desire to *be right*, another form of power. A scientist may claim that her research is geared toward helping others, but really she just wants the glory of being the one who, for example, cured malaria.

Nietzsche also believed the will to power could not be contained, no matter how much we try to stifle it. The will to power is random and chaotic. It doesn't follow any clear logic. It cannot be tamed. And yet, religions give us rigid commandments and guidelines. Scientists try to understand the world by creating strict rules and formulas. Nietzsche argues that the world is messier than that. For him, it is hopeless to ask people to follow strict rules or expect scientists to find absolutely universal laws since human nature, like all organic life, is based on power.

Interestingly, Nietzsche's writings were a great influence on Sigmund Freud (1856-1939 c.e.), the theorist who is famous for popularizing the idea of the unconscious (or *id* in his terms). Nietzsche's idea of the will to power foreshadows the unconscious in that Nietzsche is arguing that humans have competing desires—we claim to be acting for one reason (like truth, or salvation, or love) when in fact we are acting on a deep, unconscious driving force (the will to power). You may also see how these competing desires in humans were eventually incorporated into contemporary theories of how the mind works, like the dual processing model discussed in the first chapter.

## **Nihilism**

So if the world is too messy with power to be understood, where does that leave us? If even science is driven by power, can we know truth at all? Yes and no. Nietzsche championed a version of relativism that he called *perspectivism*. Like relativism, Nietzsche's perspectivism suggests that, ultimately, there are no objective moral values. Values are instead based on the perspective of the group in question.



Unlike some other versions of relativism, however, Nietzsche argued that his own view that everything is a matter of perspective, is *itself* a matter of perspective. He was aware of the way the logic of relativism applied to his own view. In fact he argued that we all experiment with different perspectives throughout our lives. For example, you might become an atheist for a while before becoming a Buddhist. Crucially, when you're looking at religion from an atheist perspective, religion seems "wrong" and atheism seems "right." But when you look at atheism from a religious perspective, then right and wrong are reversed. For Nietzsche, there is no ultimate right or wrong beneath it all, just our perspectives on right or wrong that are created by the very worldview with which we're experimenting. Even science is a perspective for Nietzsche, though he seems to have thought that science is unique in its predictive power. And there does at least appear to be progress in science, which is crucial to the next major idea.

To say that there is nothing truly beneath our perspectives is to say that life is fundamentally, at the core level, meaningless. This view, that life has no meaning, is known as *nihilism*. So for Nietzsche, while we all adopt different perspectives, there is no fundamental meaning beneath them. Nihilism also factors into Nietzsche's philosophy in another way, which we will get to soon. But first, we have to see Nietzsche's thoughts on the idea of God.

## **The Death of God**

We have already learned that God can be understood in different ways. Maybe God is within us (panentheism), maybe he is identical with the universe (pantheism), or maybe he created us separately from the universe (monotheism). When Nietzsche uses the term God, he primarily applies it to monotheism, in particular the monotheism of Christianity since he was most familiar with it. However, as we will see, his argument applies to other theistic views as well, including Islamic monotheism and ancient Greek polytheism.

What would happen if you had a time machine, and brought an everyday lighter from 7-11 to a village in the 1800s? The villagers might think that you're a sorcerer of some kind since they wouldn't understand the technology. What if we used the time machine to bring an airplane back to medieval times? The technology might seem so advanced that it's hard to even know how people of the time would react. They would perhaps see you as a God, which is an irony related to Nietzsche's point here. The more our technology improves, the more it explains what was previously explained by religious metaphysics. For example, it is scientific evidence that made us believe that the earth is revolving around the sun, and not vice versa. To support Nietzsche's point, the people who initially argued for the heliocentric model, like Galileo Galilei (1564-1642 c.e.), faced heresy charges. Why? Because the new evidence conflicted with the geocentric worldview of the Catholic Church. However, today, science has won this battle of knowledge, and even the most die-hard religious devotee will not argue that earth is the center of the universe. In other words, science can explain more effectively what was previously explained by religion. There are many examples of this phenomenon, from witchcraft to evolution. According to Nietzsche, the more science advances, the more it infringes upon religious claims that have been believed for thousands of years. In 2012 in Oregon, two parents allowed their son to die of appendicitis because they thought prayer would save him.<sup>10</sup> This is a clear example of people who cannot let go of a religious explanation in favor of a scientific one.

Nietzsche's argument here seems to suggest that science and religion are incompatible, a claim that many have disputed. The scientist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002 c.e.), for example, created the term *nonoverlapping magisteria* to suggest that science and religion deal with separate human inquiries (they do not overlap)—science being more concerned with the way the world is, and religion being more concerned

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<sup>10</sup> See the details in this article here: Faith healer parents avoid jail after son, 16, dies in horrible pain after they tried to "pray away" his burst appendix. (September 19, 2012). In *Dailymail.com*. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2205306/Russel-Brandi-Bellew-Faith-healer-parents-avoid-jail-Austin-Sprout-16-dies.html>.

with how we should behave. Others more specifically argue for separate areas of inquiry with *theistic evolution*, the idea that evolution did occur but that the process was begun by God. For example, the leader of the human genome project, Francis Collins (1950-present), wrote a book about his faith and his belief in evolution.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, some argue that claims about religion and science *do* overlap. After all, why do most people who argue against evolution do so in the first place? Some might say it's because they already believe that God created the universe, and the idea that it could have been created in any other way but God seems to infringe upon God's territory, so to speak. The example above of the kid who died in Oregon is another example of that potential overlap.

Needless to say, Nietzsche did not seem to think that religion and science represent two distinct areas of inquiry since he believed that science was overtaking religion gradually. The problem, says Nietzsche, is that when religion falls, when God falls, it leaves us to fend for ourselves morally. Because we've been following Christian morality for so many years in the West, we will be temporarily left without moral guidance when the idea of God completely dies. And for Nietzsche, God is dead or dying. The idea of a God may be the last religious idea to go, but it will go eventually, in his view. And when it goes completely, it will lead us to nihilism, meaninglessness, because God used to be the sole source of meaning.

Many readers of Nietzsche stop here to note some points of agreement and disagreement. For one, such a reader argues that Nietzsche is partly right, because of course morals have fallen by the wayside in favor of new technologies and materialism. But that's only because they are moving away from God in the first place, right? After all, this reader might argue, the idea of God is still alive and well since so many people around the world believe in him. It is first important to note that the way people believe in God from culture to culture is different, with many different concepts of God that sometimes conflict, as noted in this reader many times. Perhaps more importantly, we have already collectively

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<sup>11</sup> Collins, F. S. (2006). *The Language of God*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

decided as humans to reject concepts of God that people used to believe in. No one believes in Zeus anymore, and yet at one time in the West he was widely believed to be real. How is Yahweh (the Biblical God) different from Zeus? How is Allah (the Muslim God) different from Poseidon?

There is also some research contradicting the idea that religion makes people more moral in some way.<sup>12</sup> But Nietzsche's response to the fact that many people still claim to believe in God is that, in his view, deep down *their faith is empty*. They might go through the motions—go to church, affirm their faith to others, etc.—when deep down they don't really believe, and they are afraid to tell their friends and family that they don't believe. Nietzsche's response here, of course, depends on what people actually believe, which is not always easy to know. One study from PEW Research suggests that the US public is becoming slightly less religious.<sup>13</sup> However, another study suggests that some people who are unaffiliated with religion believe in some sort of higher power.<sup>14</sup> Together, these results suggest that some people may be rejecting the idea of God as it relates to specific religions, but not the idea of God as a general higher force.

Again, Nietzsche thought the death of God would eventually lead us all to a period of nihilism, where we would wallow in emptiness and despair for a time, trying to figure out what there is to live for if there's no God. This feeling of emptiness is a staple of existentialism. As noted, however, Nietzsche's philosophy in the end is *not* pessimistic, but life affirming.

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<sup>12</sup> Palermo, E. (2014, Sept 11). Religion doesn't make people more moral, study finds. In *LiveScience*. Retrieved from: <https://www.livescience.com/47799-morality-religion-political-beliefs.html>

<sup>13</sup> US Public becoming less religious. (2015, Nov 3). In *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

<sup>14</sup> Religion and the unaffiliated. (2012, Oct 19). In *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>

## The Overman

For Nietzsche, nihilism is only a stage, something we as humans have to go through temporarily, like going through the loss of a loved one. If Nietzsche's philosophy ended with the death of God then charges of pessimism would be warranted. But Nietzsche says that we will eventually see the light at the end of the tunnel, beyond God, leading us to a better, more evolved human being.

This more highly evolved being Nietzsche called the *Übermensch*, sometimes translated from German as *overman* or *Nietzschean Superman*. The overman is a consequence of the death of God. If God dies and the old moral values collapse, then we will be led to a new, brighter future where humans take charge of their own lives, and create their own values. This new human may look the same biologically, but she will be intellectually evolved, no longer tied down by outdated religious values and belief systems. The overman will see *himself* as a source of value, giving meaning to his own existence. The overman will thrive on independence and self creation. All according to Nietzsche:

Before God! But now this God has died. You higher men, this God was your greatest danger. It is only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected. Only now the great noon comes; only now the higher man becomes—lord... God died: now we want the overman to live.<sup>15</sup>

Although the first consequence of the death of God is nihilism, the light at the end of the tunnel is the overman. Sometimes Nietzsche described this stage of future human evolution as being *beyond good and evil*. The way we have understood good and evil thus far in the west is deeply tied to Judeo-Christian morality: sin, salvation, heaven, hell, and so forth. Nietzsche wants a society that leaves those words, and the values associated with them, behind. He wants us to go beyond traditional morality.

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<sup>15</sup> From *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, cited above.

What does Nietzsche mean by going beyond morality? What sorts of values would an overman create? Wouldn't there just be chaos with a bunch of overmen and overwomen running around? These are important questions, and we will get to them. But first we must take a look at two trends in morality that Nietzsche highlighted in his writings.

### **Slave Morality and Master Morality**

As a philologist, Nietzsche had studied many religious texts, and he developed a theory of two distinct types of human morality that he believed had developed over time. *Slave morality* began when our natural instincts and passions were overrun by rules and customs. For example, in the West slave morality began when the ancient Greeks created a rational society based on values like equality and moderation; and this sort of morality continued in Christianity as Greek rationality mixed with the religion to perpetuate similar values. For Nietzsche, the values of slave morality are the values of the *underman*, the opposite of the overman. The underman is resentful of those with true power, and cannot bear to live in a universe without God. In fact, for Nietzsche, the underman clings to the idea of God, refusing to let go of it, like a scared child clinging to his mother. The underman is resentful of the overman, which Nietzsche commonly referred to with the French word, *ressentiment*. In other words, the underman wants to be as unique, creative, and original as the overman, but he cannot, which leads to the feeling of resentment. Instead, the underman's cowardice leads to an inferior form of morality where it's not strength that is highlighted, but subservience, obedience to the crowd, humility, dependence, and so forth. The underman even creates false ideals of equality to convince the powerful to protect the weak. For example, the underman claims that powerful instincts that are characteristic of powerful leaders should be subdued or eliminated (think of the stoics).

It probably goes without saying that the overman is the creator of master morality, the opposite of slave morality. *Master morality* is the morality of the strong that was characteristic of leaders throughout the world

before the rise of Judeo-Christian morality (or slave morality). Master moralists are on the way to becoming the overman. They embrace the death of God. They want to create their own values. Both the slave moralist and the master moralist are driven by the will to power, but only the master moralist admits it. The master moralist isn't afraid to admit that he wants power because one of his great virtues is honesty.

So now we are in a better position to answer the questions about the overman that were posed previously. Moving beyond good and evil to the stage of the overman would take us back to master morality. Overmen would cultivate values like honesty, strength, and confidence. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche loved art, so it seems like the overman would hold art in high esteem. In fact, in some of his writings Nietzsche suggests that we should see our lives as works of art, creating them the way we see fit:

Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations, and to our creation of new tables of what is good. We... want to become human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche also discusses *eternal recurrence*. Although the concept of an eternal return appears in many other belief systems, for Nietzsche it was a thought experiment that helped to illustrate a key characteristic of the overman. Imagine if you had to live your life over and over again, but you could not change anything, merely watching your life play itself out like a movie? When many people hear this thought experiment they reject it: wouldn't it get unbearably boring? For Nietzsche, an overman would value his life so much that he would freely consent to living it over and over. This illustrates the value of life affirmation that undoubtedly would be possessed by the overman, sometimes expressed with the Latin phrase *amor fati*, or love your fate.

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<sup>16</sup> From *The Gay Science*, cited above.

But what about the chaos? If everyone was creating their own values, wouldn't chaos ensue? Because Nietzsche did not fully develop the concept of the overman, the answers to these questions aren't clear. It's certainly possible that some overmen and overwomen, in their search to fulfill their will to power, would have conflicting desires. Nietzsche didn't really say anything specific about the sort of society overmen would create. As evolved beings, would they find some way to create a just society that allows mastery morality, and humans generally, to thrive? In the end, Nietzsche wasn't clear about it because he didn't know what would really happen, often referring to himself as a prophet. Only time will tell whether humans evolve to another stage.



## Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986 c.e.) was a French, existential philosopher. A well known intellectual in her time, her long time boyfriend was another famous existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980 c.e.). The two philosophers had an open relationship, and saw themselves as intellectual equals. Interestingly, de Beauvoir sometimes rejected the label of philosopher. Nevertheless, she is often considered a philosopher based on the fact that she challenged the male dominated worldview with her book *The Second Sex*.<sup>17</sup> Like Socrates, she challenged the status quo. Also, her writing itself is often quite philosophical, and she cites many other philosophers in her arguments. She rejected the label of feminist as well, despite the aforementioned book being oft-cited as a major contributor to second wave feminism.

Before getting to her famous views on women, it is important to address her general philosophy.

### Ambiguity

Throughout this class we have looked at many different understandings of human nature, from the Greeks' focus on rationality to the Buddhists' focus on suffering to the theologians' focus on God to Rand's focus on selfishness to Nietzsche's focus on power. Now, we look at one more view. *Ambiguity*, for de Beauvoir, refers to the idea that life is not clear. If I ask myself what I am as a human, what will the answer be? For de Beauvoir, the answer will be different depending on the stage of my life, and even the time of day. Sometimes I feel like a disembodied consciousness, other times I feel very identified with my body, other times I feel totally free, other times constrained, other times social, other times solitary, and so forth. There is no one thing that you are, says de Beauvoir. Your existence cannot be characterized in a singular way, thus it's ambiguous. A hammer's existence is not complicated, it just is. But a

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<sup>17</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (1989). *The Second Sex*. H. M. Parshley (Ed. & Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

human's existence is complex, because we are like a glass of water that is constantly being filled up, but that never quite gets completely full. To put it another way, a human, by nature, is a lack of something. A human is actively growing, changing, and interacting with the world. Although we can never completely fill this lack, it is no cause for despair according to de Beauvoir. We can take delight in this effort toward impossible completion. Nothing we do is a diversion: hunting, fishing, writing books, playing *GTA IV*—all these are movements towards realizing ourselves, and they are valuable insofar as we give value to them. A project has value in itself.

For de Beauvoir, the proper response to an ambiguous life is to embrace it, and to realize that not only will many of our projects remain incomplete, but the projects we do complete can be surpassed by others. A scientist creates a theory, thinking it will be the last word on some subject. But, as history has taught us, theories are created, refuted, modified. A new engine is invented, but newer engines will come after that. There is no reason to be pessimistic about these things, for this is what life is in de Beauvoir's view: a process of realizing ourselves through different projects that interest us.

However, de Beauvoir argued that there are inappropriate ways to respond to ambiguity, which we will turn to now.

### **Three Responses to Ambiguity**

*Nihilism* is one attempt to resolve the ambiguity of life—withdraw into yourself to observe the world from afar, so that all significance is gone. Whereas Nietzsche saw nihilism as a stage that we must go through and overcome, de Beauvoir saw it as an escape, an inauthentic response to ambiguity. Nihilism is a response that denies the ambiguity of life by withdrawing from life itself. A nihilist does not take responsibility for her existence.

Another response to an ambiguous existence is something de Beauvoir calls *seriousness*. To understand this response, we'll have to first look at

her view of how people in general are brought up, conditioned. Children begin life with a level of seriousness: a child is born into a world he cannot change. He cannot change the way things are, he can only submit. For instance, when his mother tells him that stealing is wrong, he accepts it as an absolute moral law. He does not question it and ask *why* it's wrong. But cracks in this worldview develop during adolescence. As a teenager, the child notices the contradictions of adults, his parents, and the world as a whole. For example, he might notice that his father has lied to his mother, after being told by his father that lying is wrong. If he looks deep enough, the child will see that his own values and customs come from adults.

It is at this point that the child realizes his freedom. He realizes he, too, will have to become an adult and make choices. But this is a mixed blessing. For the world is no longer outside of the child's control—he has to *make* it, he has to contribute. He may reach the point where he is afraid of his freedom, afraid of the fact that he must interact with the world. And he will all his life be nostalgic for a time when he did not have to choose and everything was laid out before him: his childhood. Have you not at some point in your life longed for some moment or time in your childhood, where you felt completely free?

Instead, the man takes refuge in the serious world that he once knew as a child. But this time, the man pretends that the values are still objective (authorized by God, for example), real, independent of other men, when in fact *they are created by other men*, according to de Beauvoir. So, unlike the child, the man is choosing, even if he doesn't think he is. De Beauvoir says the situation is like a woman who, while reading a love letter, pretends to forget that she sent it to herself. In other words, the serious person claims to take refuge in values that are of nonhuman origin, but there are no such values! He thinks his values are unconditioned, but he is lying to himself.

According to de Beauvoir, the serious person joins a group of people such as Christians or Communists (or whatever), and these

identifications supply him with rights. He believes in these rights as though they are objective, but really he has chosen them (again, the love letter). This serious attitude can easily lead to fanaticism, where the freedom of others is ignored for some supposedly objective ideal. The serious man sacrifices himself to an ideal that he has chosen.

The third response to an ambiguous life is the *adventurer*. Unlike the nihilist or the serious person, the adventurer rejoices in ambiguity. He likes that there are no objective values, that life is uncertain. He does not take refuge in any system, and he does not care how his adventures affect others. He cares only about glory. These people are indifferent to everyone and everything. There are definitely some similarities between this response to ambiguity and Nietzsche's overman, although de Beauvoir claims that the adventurer is not fully living an authentic life. Although he is on a better track than the first two responses, the adventurer still depends on others for his success. For example, a great conqueror depends on his soldiers, a great musician depends on her fans.

We will now turn to de Beauvoir's view on women to see how it connects with her thoughts on ambiguity.

## **The Second Sex**

De Beauvoir's most famous quote is probably this one from *The Second Sex* (cited above): "A woman is not born, but rather becomes a woman." In other words, social conditions shape femininity more than any other factor, including biology. At a young age, girls are given girl's toys (like dresses) and boys are given boy's toys (like toy guns). It is important to note that de Beauvoir did not deny that boys, too, are shaped by society. However, she did argue that the consequences to society shaping women are worse for women than the same situation for men, since women have generally been seen as second class citizens in most societies for many years. Women's common status as second class citizens is why she refers to them as *the second sex*. Men are the first sex, the ones whose rights matter most in the eyes of most societies, while women generally come in second in this regard. Not only that, but women are expected to

fit the feminine ideal created by society, facing social criticism if they do not.

She also claims that a woman feels more alienated from her body than a man. Childbearing is a burden for a woman, and demands heavy sacrifices on her body. In other words, her sexual life is, in some sense, in opposition to her existence as a person. A man, on the other hand, is more likely to see his sexuality as consistent with his existence: finding a wife and having a child might be seen as one of many of his life accomplishments. He does not have to take maternity leave. De Beauvoir also notes that, physically, women are less robust, more delicate, and smaller than men. The world is bound to seem very different from either perspective, since the body is the instrument of our grasp upon the world.

Importantly, de Beauvoir denies that her status as the second sex gives a woman a fixed destiny. As an existentialist who believed in personal responsibility, she thought that we all have limitations—poor eyesight, being short, being poor, etc.—but what matters is the way we respond to them. Still, a woman's ability to overcome her limitations depends in part upon the society in which she is born. For example, although women are more biologically constrained than men, de Beauvoir says, how much this matters depends on how many children society demands and the quality of care given to pregnant women.

Although she put a lot of responsibility on women to overcome their status as the second sex, she still believed that women should be educated about the history of their sex, which we turn to now.

## **The History of Women**

Expanding on her idea of the second sex, de Beauvoir notes that throughout much of human history, women have been seen as an *other* to men. Men have usually been understood as those capable of achieving excellence, while women have been understood only in relation to men. This nonreciprocal relationship is symbolized in many historical

writings, from philosophy to religion. One of de Beauvoir's prime examples is the book of Genesis from the Bible, where Adam is created whole by God, but Eve is made from Adam's flesh—not to mention that Eve is ultimately the one who leads humanity into sin. Additionally, the books of the Bible themselves were typically written and compiled by men, as can be seen from gatherings like the *Council of Nicea* where church leaders and others in power came together to solidify Christian doctrine for their followers.

There are also biblical passages that seem to explicitly endorse an unequal status between men and women:

Women should learn quietly and submissively. Do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly. For God made Adam first, and afterward he made Eve (Timothy 2:11-15).

But it is not just the Bible, as this passage from the Muslim holy text, the Qur'an, makes clear:

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other... Good women are obedient... admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them (4:34).

It is important to note that these quotes are clearly taken out of context to support de Beauvoir's point. The cherry picking of religious texts can go both ways, since there are usually dense, ambiguous passages in any such text. Still, de Beauvoir argues that the presence of such passages at all is support for her thesis of women as other in history.

Philosophy isn't any better, and from Aristotle to Aquinas we see examples of a reinforcement of women as the second sex. Aristotle said women's place is in the home. Aquinas said that women have an inferior soul to men that develops later in the womb. And here is Confucius' view of women:

Women and people of low birth are hard to deal with.<sup>18</sup>

This quote from Confucius is important, because it is more subtle. Sometimes you hear people today say that women are now basically equal to men, and that calls for women's rights are overblown. While it's true that in many countries around the world women have gained rights over time, inequality can surface in subtle ways. It might surface in an ambiguous, sexual comment from a coworker or boss, or in congress.

And it's worse in some industries. In *The Atlantic* magazine, one female veteran software engineer recounts her interview of a potential employee who was male.<sup>19</sup> She was interviewing *him*, and he wouldn't even give her the time of day, making rude comments and ignoring her when she asked him legitimate questions about his work experience.

In the end, it would probably be unfair to dismiss either philosophy or religion entirely for sexism in its past since, as the above interview example illustrates, it's not just in these domains that we find sexism. Just as slavery and human sacrifice used to be the norm, so did sexism, and we are currently dealing with the aftermath. And despite still having a long way to go, philosophy has made some progress in the last couple hundred years. For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Stuart Mill wrote eloquently about women's rights.<sup>20</sup> De Beauvoir herself is an example of how philosophy can be taken in the right direction.

From a purely explanatory perspective, de Beauvoir examined another question related to women's history: why have males dominated for so long in the first place? She found three primary answers. First, women feel the species tie to men, because men are physically bigger and stronger. This one seems obvious. One reason men have been seen as the first sex is that in early human societies their strength was responsible for much of the labor that allowed society itself to function. Second,

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<sup>18</sup> The quote comes from *The Analects*, cited in the ancient Chinese philosophy chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Mundy, L. (2017, April). Why is Silicon Valley so awful to women? *The Atlantic*, 60-73.

<sup>20</sup> See: Mill, J. S. (1997). *The Subjection of Women*. London, England: Dover Publications.

women haven't had access to the educational resources, since for most of human history such resources were controlled by elite males. The third reason, which de Beauvoir considers the strongest, that women have been seen as an other is that they are content to be in that position. That's right, de Beauvoir partly blames women for their second class status, because it's *easier* to be the second sex. If a woman can find a man who will work and provide for her, she gets her needs met, and her life may be more comfortable. In other words, women are the second sex in part because they accept that role. If women want to be treated like equals, de Beauvoir argues, then they have as much work as men do to make it happen. Women have to understand what history has done to their sex and overcome it.

Going back to de Beauvoir's previous claims, she believes that an authentic person will embrace the ambiguity of life, accepting any limitations he might have. The historical factors surrounding women constitute a limitation for women that can and should be overcome. However, this overcoming may look different in different cases. One woman may choose to be a housewife because she wants to, while another woman may choose to be a doctor. As long as the housewife chose to become that, and was not clearly influenced by social norms or the media, then de Beauvoir would support it. But these last points raise an important question: to what extent does the media itself create desires in women (and in all people for that matter)? We already saw de Beauvoir's argument that women become women based on what society tells them, but how powerful is the pull of these social norms?

To address these questions, I will end this chapter with an excerpt of an essay by some female philosopher friends of mine from a book I edited many years ago.<sup>21</sup> In the excerpt, the authors discuss the way a particular video game franchise, *The Legend of Zelda*, reinforces the idea of women as an other, drawing from Plato's theory of forms.

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<sup>21</sup> Here's the book: Cuddy, L. (Ed.). (2008). *The Legend of Zelda and Philosophy*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.



In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir acknowledges that there are very real differences between the sexes, but this is not to say that one is necessarily better or worse than the other. De Beauvoir argues that differences in situational factors, which began with biological differences, account for the historical subordination of women that persists to this day. Women can get pregnant and are physiologically equipped to care for their young. Infants need much attention and care because they cannot survive independently. A woman that is tending to a newborn's needs is less likely to take care of her own, so this became the responsibility of the man in her life. This explains the origin of women's dependence on men. This dynamic has been reinforced through women's demotion to second class citizen status and their institutional disadvantages in capitalist economies. Women are left with few means for adequately taking care of themselves and are therefore stuck in an unbreakable cycle of dependence upon men, which is subsequently taken as evidence of allegedly inherent inferiority.

Because women have been historically subordinated to men, this places men in a position of advantage and privilege over women. One consequence of this is that history is most often described from a male point of view, even though this represents only around half of the entire species. So, the definitions that have been established and accepted come from the male perspective, even those pertaining only to the female portion of the population. This may explain the discrepancy between the definitions for woman and female. De Beauvoir points out that it is not enough to be a female to be a woman. Women are not born, but made, and they are both female and *feminine*. The notion of femininity is slippery and mysterious while at the same time pervasive and sought after: some men desire it, some women want to embody it, and other women reject it. This concept of femininity is integral to understanding what de Beauvoir calls "the myth of woman."

De Beauvoir's account of the myth of woman has three components: woman as mother, woman as wife, and woman as idea. In referring to the myth of woman, de Beauvoir is speaking of the view of woman as feminine, as voiced by man to serve his own interests and purposes. Describing femininity as a myth emphasizes the difficulty in comprehending what femininity is, since myths are ideas that transcend the mind and cannot be grasped in their entirety. The lack of ostensive description of femininity is attributed to the difficulties associated with comprehension of myths. And just as the typological female characters in the *Zelda* games correlate to different stereotypical female roles, the three parts of the myth of woman also represent different features of female life, isolating them so that they stand opposed to each other. This demarcation, both within the myth of woman and in the typologies, is not necessary, as the different parts of each are not mutually exclusive. But although it is plausible for one character to occupy space outside these characterizations, this possibility is seldom explored.

Stories and the female characters depicted in them are one channel through which ideas regarding femininity proliferate. The maiden, and *Zelda* as the paradigmatic maiden, appears to be what de Beauvoir was describing with the third component of the mythology of woman, woman as idea. There exist striking similarities between woman as idea and the maiden typology. The phrase *woman as idea* is derived from the Platonic world in which Forms exist in their perfect state. Eternal and immutable, they are then instantiated in less than ideal versions in our world. Within this Platonic framework, different essences are possessed by man and by woman, and this explains the differences between the two. De Beauvoir's account of woman as idea refers to an ideal of femininity that individual women try to emulate. Though she personally rejected this view, this is why the myth of woman can be interpreted as the myth of femininity. While no permanent feminine ideal exists, many women and men act as if it does, and

the ideal of femininity, or the Platonic woman, can be roughly sketched from de Beauvoir's thoughts and comments on the idea of woman that she disperses throughout her exploration of myths.

Cultural variations regarding standards of beauty are one source of difficulty in describing the feminine ideal. But even so, de Beauvoir is committed to the necessity of the ideal's beauty, which can be determined by cultural norms. In addition to beautiful, she is also to be youthful and in good health. These traits appear in all known accounts of femininity. When virginity is added to the list, the result is that men find this combination constituting the feminine ideal erotically attractive. Zelda is young and beautiful, and she also seems healthy, or at least healthy enough to hold or hide the Triforce of Wisdom, defy Ganon, and survive imprisonment. While Zelda's virginity or lack thereof is never addressed, it seems reasonable to think of her as a virgin. Zelda is essentially virtuous, acting as the bodily representation of good throughout the *Zelda* games. In legends, these are generally attributes of the characters that are pure and virtuous, and virginity has long been associated with the notion of the pure and virtuous female. The final featured de Beauvoir discusses is that of the feminine body's possession of qualities of inertness and passivity. In contrast, masculinity is marked by fitness, strength, and action. Masculinity and femininity share an oppositional relation with one another in that what one has, the other lacks. Hence, the man is active, and the woman is passive. Yet again, this is observable in *Zelda*. There are few ways to make a character more passive than by having her locked up in a distant castle, waiting for her hero to rescue her.