

Sonia Kruks

Simone de Beauvoir and The Politics of Ambiguity

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Sonia Kruks's latest book contributes to a recent revival in Beauvoir scholarship, and also fills a gap in the field. *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* addresses Beauvoir as a political philosopher, arguing that Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity is a fruitful resource for political philosophy. At the same time, this book contributes to discussions immanent in feminist philosophy on the question of race privilege, making the import of the book extend beyond the realm of political philosophy. Ultimately, the careful attention Kruks gives to ambiguity is a much-needed contribution to Beauvoir scholarship.

For Kruks, Beauvoirian ambiguity provides a political humanism as the departure point for a Beauvoirian political philosophy. In the chapter "Humanism after Posthumanism," Kruks suggests that Beauvoir's conception of humanism is a productive alternative to the abstract humanism that has been vastly critiqued by feminist, queer, multicultural, and postcolonial theories. Although such theories see humanism as politically problematic for its ideological alliance with a Eurocentric, bourgeois, heteronormative agenda, Beauvoir, Kruks claims, takes humanism down a different, more liberatory route. Anticipating poststructuralist claims to a decentered subject, but outdoing them for her focus on the lived body, Kruks calls Beauvoir's humanism a critical one, and more specifically, an *ambiguous* one. Beauvoirian humanism is characterized by the "always already-situated, always material, always social" reality of the lived body, which emphasizes that to be human is to be a body that is both free yet constrained and vulnerable (35). In this way, the ambiguity of Beauvoirian humanism is about the relationship between subjective embodiment and contingent systems of power. On Kruks's reading of Beauvoir, the effect of this emphasis on embodiment and social context requires political action to take up the ambiguities of existence, rather than a politics that addresses an abstract subject.

Consequently, at its core, Beauvoirian humanism challenges an abstract humanism that masks difference. Kruks writes,

[T]he claim to struggle to free all or to act for any other "universal" end, such as justice or human rights for "all," can mask a dangerous refusal of responsibility for the injuries that may ensue. Thus, even as she persists in

affirming the value of freedom and in demanding a politics that facilitates its widest possibilities, Beauvoir recognizes the risks that such a politics runs. . . .

Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism thus affirms the impossibility of eliminating alterity and objectification from human relations, even as she insists on the obligation to struggle against practices that oppress and dehumanize. (53-54)

Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism thus accounts for difference such that the political subject is one anchored in her particularity and rooted in her situation.

There are at least two upshots to Kruks's description of Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism. First, it is a response to feminist criticisms that suggest Beauvoir's philosophy valorizes masculine ideals and that she disregards the differences among women. Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism demands that we be attuned to the realities of privilege and oppression and how oppressions manifest differently according to the place, time, and context from which they emerge. Rooted in lived experience, ambiguous humanism "acknowledges the particularities of a multiplicity of differently embodied lives;" it is "a humanism for which flourishing is not to be confounded with the presences of the individualistic liberal order that has accompanied the abstract humanism of the West" precisely because it takes seriously how political subjects are situated in the world (32). Additionally, the deployment of Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism for political purposes allows for calls of justice, freedom, and human rights to be made without solidifying a normative frame for "the human." In other words, ambiguous humanism is a political project that is critical of calls made in the name of humanity, while at the same time it concedes the political significance of notions of freedom and justice for all because they, for Beauvoir, secure political agency.

Kruks also suggests that Beauvoir's ambiguous humanism provides an important theory of oppression and dehumanization. It has often been suggested that Beauvoir merely appropriates Hegel's master-slave dialectic as a means to describe oppression, but Kruks claims that, following Beauvoir's work on sex, race, and age, we can see three ideal modes of oppression: asymmetrical recognition, indifference, and aversion.

The first form of oppression, asymmetrical recognition, is most evident in *The Second Sex*. From Beauvoir's account of feminine existence, we understand how women become complicit in their oppression through a certain kind of recognition. Women's existence as oppressed shows us how "the subjectivity of the oppressed will be acknowledged only to the barest extent that is necessary to harness their behavior to the interests of the dominant" (73). Indifference is best exemplified in Beauvoir's work, *America Day by Day*. Beauvoir's descriptions of race relations in the mid-twentieth-century United States disclose how "individuals may be treated as no more than anonymous members of a social category, as interchangeable unity in a 'series'" (73). The final mode of oppression, aversion, is evident in *The Coming of Age*. What is revealing about Beauvoir's description of the aged, Kruks claims, is the distancing or aversion that materializes toward the aged in Western societies. This distancing results in isolation and powerlessness. "Dispersed and excluded from public activities and spaces, apart from a small elite, the aged have

virtually no capacity for resistance" (88). But, Kruks explains, although these three ideal modes may be helpful for analytical purposes, the breadth of Beauvoir's work actually discloses her efforts to unravel a more complex understanding of how oppression manifests. In this way, individuals and groups are often affected and even privileged by various modes of oppression. Beyond these ideal modes of oppression, what Beauvoir captures through all of her descriptions of oppression is that oppression exists when a situation "curtails the ambiguities of an embodied subject and forecloses freedom" (91).

Although much of Beauvoir's work accounts for oppression, Kruks also shows how the question of privilege and its relation to one's responsibility and/or implication in oppression is central to Beauvoir's work. In order to think through this question, Kruks looks at the recent discussion in feminist philosophy of the question of race privilege and its relation to gender subordination. It is here that Kruks offers one of her most interesting contributions to feminist philosophy. Kruks turns to Beauvoir in order to address the problem of privilege that has troubled feminist thought, particularly the predicament faced by white feminists who seek to eliminate injustice and oppression, while also being implicated in white privilege. Of course, Kruks notes here that the problem of privilege is not limited to race; it also includes heterosexual privilege, class privilege, and the privilege of nationality. However, the problem of race privilege is exemplary in highlighting what Kruks calls "a 'politics of self-transformation'" (96). The politics of self-transformation is where "one endeavors to discover how one has unmindfully and ignorantly accepted one's privilege and then proceeds to 'work on oneself' in order to overcome it" (96). This kind of politics, Kruks claims, is overwhelmingly evident in current feminist work on white privilege to the detriment of a progressive politics. From Kruks's perspective, this relationship to privilege assumes an autonomous self who is responsible for radically altering her self on her own. But such an autonomous self is not actually possible when we take Beauvoir's claim about our existential ambiguity seriously. That is, as ambiguous existents, our situations are never fully transparent to us. Additionally, "a politics of self-transformation . . . may too easily collapse into a rather self-referential, even self-indulgent, concern with one's own feelings, attitudes, and actions, a kind of 'care of the self' or a personal therapeutic," thereby making the already privileged political subject even more immersed in her own privilege (101). Beauvoir, however, provides an alternative theory of privilege that moves away from this discourse of self-righteousness. From our ambiguity, Kruks suggests that Beauvoir offers a politics of deployment. The politics of deployment is "where one contests privilege not by 'working on oneself' but by consciously using the advantages that stem from one's privileges in order to combat structures of power" (96). Whereas self-transformation emphasizes the privileged self working on itself, the politics of deployment shifts the focus away from an autonomous self and throws her into the world of others. That is, a politics of deployment is about the self working for others. Beauvoir's gesture away from ideal politics and pure self-transformation means that we have to confront the complexities of politics. Rather than renounce privilege, we ought to come to grips with how to mobilize our own privilege to work effectively for and with oppressed groups.

In her last chapters, "Dilemmas of Political Judgment" and "'An Eye for an Eye': The Question of Revenge," Kruks underscores the political significance of this gesture. What Beauvoir shows us is that the actions we take and the determinations we make may fail,

and in some way they always necessarily will fail for some, but this does not mean we do not act; rather, it means that we must make our deliberations from the particularities of the situation at hand. It must be understood, for example, that the justice of forgiveness or of revenge is not applicable everywhere at every time in the same way. Rather, Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity demands our attentiveness to the situation so that the most appropriate judgments and responses can be made. Here, Kruks's main point is that Beauvoir's politics of ambiguity makes politics pay attention to circumstance. Rejecting the moves of abstract humanism, Beauvoir requires that we take seriously each situation, each event, each atrocity and injustice and act in a way that relates to its particularity. And it is true, Kruks implies time and again, that Beauvoir is no idealist. She knows politics will fail. But this, Kruks says, is where Beauvoir gets it right: "Beauvoir's insistence on failure may seem too somber a note on which to end my study of her political thinking, but I do not think it is. For Beauvoir's message is not one of pessimism or despair. Rather, she demands that we continue to struggle for greater freedom in the world, even though we know our efforts will be fraught with risks and frustrations" (181).

Kruks's careful attention to the political dimensions and implications of Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity reveals Beauvoir's philosophical consideration of the existential character of possibilities of political agency. Moreover, although Beauvoir is often read primarily as a philosopher of gender, Kruks navigates the depth of Beauvoir's work, revealing Beauvoir as a political thinker. This framing of Beauvoir does not detract from her work on gender, but instead underscores another layer of Beauvoir as a thinker who ought to be taken seriously. Accordingly, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* is valuable not only for its contribution of a missing link in contemporary Beauvoir scholarship, but also for the broader challenge it presents to political projects and philosophical considerations that fail to take seriously the contingency and ambiguity of situations and political action.