Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) is a key figure of French existentialism. Her early philosophical and literary writings are permeated by ethical questions of the other and ambiguity. Her magnum opus, *The Second Sex*, is widely recognized as a foundational work in feminist philosophy. Her attention to oppression and interpersonal relations persists through the writings that follow this treatise. In order to best assess the philosophical position that Beauvoir holds throughout her writings – philosophical, literary, and autobiographical – it is essential to understand how this position embraces phenomenological tenets and uses its methods for its expression. As Debra Bergoffen puts it, “To read Beauvoir as a philosopher is to discover that her concerns are persistently ethical and consistently phenomenological” (Bergoffen 2000, 69).

To demonstrate that this is the case, I will trace the development of her fundamental notion of ambiguity from *Pyrrhus and Cinéa* to *The Second Sex*. I will also explicate the notion of disclosure of existence as Beauvoir appropriates it in connection to the notion of the appeal to the Other. Importantly, the Beauvoirian understanding of disclosure directly relates to her understanding of the political role of literature. I will explain that Beauvoir’s reflections on philosophy, the role of literature, and her usage of multiple modes of expression are all part of her phenomenological method. This will allow for the demonstration of the phenomenological nature of *The Second Sex* in which she unveils specific patterns of oppression and inauthenticity. I will show that Beauvoir’s phenomenology supports an ethics of authenticity that champions ambiguity and freedom.

Beauvoir’s oeuvre is manifold and extensive. Throughout her career, Beauvoir wrote philosophical essays, novels, one play, autobiographies, and many shorter circumstantial pieces. The novel *She Came to Stay* (1943) is her first publication. Its epigraph, a quote from Hegel, illustrates particularly well the problem to be explored: “Each consciousness seeks the death of the other.” The main protagonist, Françoise, sees her life and relation with Pierre completely overturned by the presence of the young Xavière as they take the young woman under their wings. While Françoise has been experiencing a symbiotic relation with Pierre, Xavière is a foreign consciousness that remains entirely closed upon itself for Françoise: “Before Françoise’s very eyes, yet apart from her, existed something like a condemnation with no appeal: detached, absolute, unalterable, an alien conscience was rising” (Beauvoir 1982, 292). The French speaks of this presence as an enemy (*présence ennemie*). It is such because it has its own viewpoint on the world; its own intentional arc sheds meaning onto others and things, thus objectifying others. Françoise experiences...
her own objectification in Xavière’s eyes and perceives it as a threat to her own consciousness. As a result, the relation between the two is experienced as conflictual. The novel concludes with the main character, Françoise, murdering the young Xavière.

While this is quite a dramatic handling of the problem of other consciousnesses and interpersonal relations, Beauvoir presents a very sophisticated analysis of the problem from a phenomenological point of view both in this novel and in the writings that follow it. Many passages contain phenomenological analyses in which she tackles the intentional nature of consciousness. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator observes that “She [Françoise] alone evoked the significance of these abandoned places, of these slumbering things. The world belonged to her” (Beauvoir 1982, 2). This is the case because intentional consciousness constitutes the world for itself. Further, as Françoise observes the empty theater, the narrator notes, “the red-plush seats were lined up in their rows, motionless and expectant. A moment ago they had been aware of nothing. Now she was there and they held out their arms” (Beauvoir 1982, 12). The empty room and its objects come to life once an intentional consciousness encounters them, looks at them, and constitutes them for itself. Consciousness constitutes itself and the world as intentional. In the novel, the presence of an other, literally alien, consciousness becomes a threat for the main character as it challenges her whole world and relations with others. Indeed that alien consciousness is also intentional and engages in the same processes of world and self constitution.

Pyrrhus and Cinéas (1944) explores the question of self and world constitution through a different angle. The essay opens with a dialogue between the king, Pyrrhus, and his advisor, Cinéas. The conversation revolves around Pyrrhus’ conquests and what motivates them. If Pyrrhus will rest after a long series of conquests, as he claims, why not just rest now? To ask this question is to seek an answer to the question of whether life has meaning. Why engage in any course of action if life does not have any meaning? Beauvoir proposes that the human being defines itself and its world through its actions and thereby gives meaning to its life.

While she does not explicitly discuss the notion of ambiguity in this essay, one can see various aspects of it emerge. She discusses the relation between consciousness and the world, positing that we are free and yet situated. She also advances her view of intersubjective relations as both necessary to our constitution and potentially problematic. Beauvoir explains that we come to a world that we can make our own through our choices and deeds. She says: “My relationships with things are not given, are not fixed; I create them minute by minute. […] Thus our relationship with the world is not decided from the onset; it is we who decide” (Beauvoir 2004a, 94). We are in a world which we must appropriate for ourselves and give meaning to from our own perspective. “Each man decides on the place he occupies in the world, but he must occupy one. He can never withdraw from it” (Beauvoir 2004a, 100).

The same is true of an individual’s project. We exist in the world and appropriate it through our actions and we form projects in it. This is not something we can escape: it is the very way in which we exist. Although this may lead us to think that projects and meanings are arbitrary and formed in a solipsistic fashion, Beauvoir argues rather that this is not the case. We form our projects and generate meaning in the world as beings that are always in relation with others. She says: “A man alone in the world would be paralyzed by the manifest vision of the vanity of all his goals. He would undoubtedly not be able to stand living. But man is not alone in the world” (Beauvoir 2004a, 115). We live in a world that is populated by other free consciousnesses. We are all subjects of our own existences and, at the same time, objects in that of others.

In Pyrrhus and Cinéas, the presence of others is no longer as threatening as it was in She Came to Stay. The Other validates our existence, our goals, our actions, and our choices. It is only once the Other also values whatever it is that I have put forth that its value is established. Likewise,
the Other needs me to take on their project. Humans appeal to one another for the validation and grounding of their project, and thereby of their own existence. As Beauvoir explains, this appeal, this call to the other to take on our project, can resonate only if the Other is free and if I have made them my fellow human.

However, there is a risk involved in appealing to the Other: the Other might choose not to reciprocate and not to consider me a free human being. She says, “Our being realizes itself only by choosing to be in danger in the world, in danger before the foreign and divided freedoms that take hold of it” (Beauvoir 2004a, 133). Making ourselves vulnerable, putting ourselves at risk, we regain ourselves. The Other must be free if they are to respond to the appeal but, because they are free, they can also opt to ignore it, objectify us, deny our freedom. Despite the risk that is inherent in this, Beauvoir insists that we must work actively to make human beings free. The need we have for others, the fact that “Our freedoms support each other like the stones in an arch” (Beauvoir 2004a, 140) leads her to embrace this ethical and political stance, one that will endure through her career.

In her publications between Pyrrhus and Cinéas and The Second Sex, Beauvoir continues to explore the notion of ambiguity, focusing on ethical and political questions. Her essays Moral Idealism and Political Realism (1945) and An Eye for an Eye (1946), as well as her novel The Blood of Others (1945) and her play The Useless Mouths (1945), continue to flesh out the tension between freedom and situation, between the self and others, choice, action, and responsibility. This is all related to the ambiguity she has identified as being at the heart of the human condition.

This reflection culminates in the essay The Ethics of Ambiguity (1947). Debra Bergoffen suggests that “Instead, however, of interpreting intentionality as directed by the desires of the same perceiving (Husserl), imperialist (Sartre), or sexual (Merleau-Ponty) subject, Beauvoir’s The Ethics of Ambiguity introduces the idea of otherness into intentionality itself” (Bergoffen 2000, 62). I would argue rather that this move had already been accomplished at the time of Pyrrhus and Cinéas. We have seen above that the individual is always in a realm of intersubjectivity, always in relation with others. The Ethics of Ambiguity reinforces and consolidates this view by putting emphasis on authentic ethical flourishing.

Beauvoir explains, “To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it” (Beauvoir 1976, 13). This involves acknowledging one’s own ambiguity and one’s connection to others. One must acknowledge and aim to realize oneself as both object and subject, immanence and transcendence, self and other, free and situated. One must come to terms with the fact 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 1976, 15)

I take this passage to be a description of the operations of consciousness as intentional, which constitutes itself and the world in the same process. And it is reminiscent of the passages I have quoted above from both She Came to Stay and Pyrrhus and Cinéas. The emphasis is now put on the notion of disclosure. Beauvoir explains that “man does not create the world. He succeeds in disclosing it only through the resistance which the world opposes to him” (Beauvoir 1976, 28). But she reminds us that “if it is true that every project emanates from subjectivity, it is also true that this subjective movement establishes by itself a surpassing of subjectivity. Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men” (Beauvoir 1976, 72). This brings her to the same conclusion she had drawn in Pyrrhus and Cinéas, namely, “To want
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existence, to want to disclose the world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will” (Beauvoir 1976, 86–87). Her phenomenological position carries an ethical and political imperative, namely to actively work to maximize freedom in the world by fighting oppression.

In order to accomplish her goals, Beauvoir feels the need to adopt a methodological stance that allows her to tackle ambiguity. She is critical of traditional philosophizing, which she finds reductive and alienating. At the beginning of The Ethics of Ambiguity, she explains that, “As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it” (De Beauvoir 1976, 7). They have done so by adopting philosophical viewpoints that were dualistic and championed an absolutist point of view. Rather, she wants to “try to assume our fundamental ambiguity” (Beauvoir 1976, 9). This entails embracing a non-dualistic understanding of ourselves and of our interaction with others and the world.

Her philosophical method avoids the philosophical treatise and favors instead a manifold approach to the complexities and fundamental ambiguity of human existence and experience. As Sara Heinämäa puts it, Beauvoir rejects “philosophical systems that do not pay attention to the plurality of living experience and its expression in language” (Heinämäa 2003, 17). Phenomenology is a method of choice, since it “aims at a presuppositionless description of the essential features of experience” (Heinämäa 2003, 11). Wendy O’Brien explains that Beauvoir’s encounter with phenomenology happened early, as she was studying with Jacques Baruzzi at the Sorbonne. He was interested in German philosophy, and it is more than likely that he would have been aware of Husserl’s phenomenological works (O’Brien 2001, 3ff.). Beauvoir would thus have been exposed to these ideas before she set out to write her first pieces.

Her review of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception written for Les Temps modernes in 1945 leaves no doubt about Beauvoir’s enthusiasm for the potential of the phenomenological approach as well as her agreement with some of the insights offered by Merleau-Ponty. She says, “One of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of the subject and the object” (Beauvoir 2004b, 160). By focusing on embodied consciousness, phenomenology shows that it is impossible to think the body merely as an object. Embodied consciousness is of the world and is “our manner of being in the world, our ‘anchorage’ in this world” (Beauvoir 2004b, 161). This body is not in the world in the same way as any other object. It lives in it, “our existence realizes itself in it” (Beauvoir 2004b, 161). It does so through its action in the world and through its relating to things in the world. The world is our place, we give it meaning through our actions.

Given her claims in Pyrrhus and Cinéas, it is not surprising that Beauvoir would welcome such phenomenological views. In fact, her own align with those of Merleau-Ponty. She concludes her short review by pointing out that the most important aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s book is its attention to the lived experience of perception thanks to the phenomenological method that avoids the pitfalls of the systematic philosophy she criticizes and rejects. She says,

Merleau-Ponty does not invent a system; he starts from established facts and he demonstrates that it is impossible to account for them on an experimental plane. Instead they imply an entire relationship between man and the world, and it is this relationship that he patiently brings out.

(Beauvoir 2004b, 163–164)

What Merleau-Ponty shows, and what Beauvoir appreciates, is that one must start from one’s experience in the world and in relation with objects rather than attempt to build an abstract
system of thought and then try to superimpose it on the world. This means going back to the things themselves as has been famously claimed by Edmund Husserl. Doing so means unveiling things and our relations to them.

In addition to phenomenology as a philosophical method, metaphysical literature is another methodological tool that can bring about the disclosure of existence that Beauvoir’s ethico-political imperative necessitates. In her 1946 essay, “Literature and Metaphysics,” Beauvoir explains that the metaphysical novel, if “honestly read, and honestly written, provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression” (Beauvoir 2004c, 276). In seeking to unveil ambiguous reality, the metaphysical novel does not convey specific philosophical ideas, and thus avoids the didacticism of the roman à thèse.

This reality is permeated by ambiguity. Beauvoir claims,

> It is not by chance if existentialist thought today attempts to express itself sometimes by theoretical treatises and sometimes by fiction; it is because it is an effort to reconcile the objective and the subjective, the absolute and the relative, the timeless and the historical.

(Beanvoir 2004c, 274)

For Beauvoir, the metaphysical novel’s accomplishment lies precisely in that: it can evoke for the reader the fundamental ambiguity of our existence. In communicating this to the reader, it also serves to open the reader’s eyes to their own experiences as ambiguous beings and possibly illuminate in what way human freedom may be stifled. In doing so, it contributes to the appeal that Beauvoir identified as necessary in Pyrrhus and Cinéas.

It appears, then, that a manifold of methods ought to be embraced in order to maximize the appeal to the Other. And this is why Beauvoir writes the diverse type of works she does. The Second Sex (1949), however, is a particular case. Within it, Beauvoir makes use of different methodological approaches. The book combines the philosophical essay, the historical account, the anthropological analysis, as well as literary and autobiographical writing through the many excerpts that Beauvoir quotes. Despite this, Karen Vintges suggests that “far from being a clumsy eclectic work [a charge sometimes put against the work], The Second Sex is structured systematically as a philosophical phenomenological enterprise” (Vintges 1995, 49). I agree with Vintges that this is the case and that, in particular, the extensive use of examples is essential to this approach. Indeed, by presenting a manifold of experiences to the reader through these examples, the appeal is maximized: it is more likely that one of those will resonate with the reader. The inner methodological multiplicity of The Second Sex makes it more efficient in its appeal to the reader.5

The Second Sex (1949) further refines the notion of ambiguity by adding an extra layer to it: that of sex and gender. Although Beauvoir does not use the term “gender” herself, the work she accomplishes in the book provides the foundation upon which gender theory can be erected by dissociating gender from physiological sex and insisting that “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 2011, 283). She thus continues to hold to the phenomenological notion of the body as a situation rather than a thing. In the first chapter, “Biological Data,” she explicitly positions herself in this philosophical tradition. She says, “in the position I adopt – that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty – that if the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (Beauvoir 2011, 46).6 This is consistent with the views she elaborated starting with She Came to Stay. In The Second Sex, this leads her to the conclusion that although the biological data she has uncovered about male and female bodies are important, they are far from determining. She says:

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These biological data are of extreme importance: they play an all-important role and are an essential element of woman’s situation: we will be referring to them in all further accounts. Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped, which explains why we have studied these data so deeply; they are one of the keys that enable us to understand woman. But we refuse the idea that they form a fixed destiny for her.

(Beauvoir 2011, 44).

In this manner, Beauvoir introduces an important distinction between the physiological body, which she refers to under the banner of “biological data,” and the lived body of embodied intentional free consciousness. It is the latter that can determine itself in situation. This distinction then serves as the foundation for her critique and rejection of the patriarchal oppressive system in which woman is relegated to the role of the subservient Other to man. Indeed, the situation is constitutive of one’s self but it is not a destiny. The phenomenological positions Beauvoir embraces are thus pillars to her feminist analysis and critique as well as to her political program. She concludes the treatise by a call for action: “Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (Beauvoir 2011, 766).

In the works that follow The Second Sex, Beauvoir’s political commitments to fighting oppression become more and more prominent. All her writings, literary, philosophical, autobiographical, are driven by this desire to disclose existence and appeal to the reader to take on action to change and improve the world. Interestingly, Beauvoir wrote another treatise, Old Age (1970), in which she put a manifold methodology similar to the one used in The Second Sex to work. Beauvoir’s commitments to phenomenology and its philosophical method persist through her entire career and serve to establish her ethical and political positions on firm ground, that of ambiguity, freedom, and intersubjective relations.

Notes
1 Many commentators have read this novel as a mise en œuvre of Sartre’s view that “The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the Mitsein; it is conflict” (Sartre 2009, 451). In her “Sartre and Beauvoir on Hegel’s Master Slave Dialectic and the Question of the ‘Look,’” Debbie Evans (2009) shows that this is not the case and that, in fact, Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel’s dialectic in the novel served as an inspiration for Sartre to turn to Hegel. Each thinker uses Hegel each in their own way.
2 This is reminiscent of Sartre’s phrase: “The Other steals the world from me” (Sartre 2009, 313).
3 This essay has often been taken to present the Sartrean ethics promised in conclusion of Being and Nothingness. Because Beauvoir was considered to be merely Sartrean for a long time and because Sartre had failed to publish an ethics, readers turned to this essay for the Sartrean ethics they were looking for. This, however, constitutes a profound misunderstanding of Beauvoir’s original phenomenological position, which rests on ambiguity in a way that escapes Sartre’s views.
4 Heinämaa argues that Beauvoir is a Socratic type of philosopher who prefers to focus on questioning. She also claims that Kierkegaard was influential in the development of her philosophical method. His notion of indirect communication in particular would have been of interest to her.
5 I have explored in detail how this appeal operates in the context of The Second Sex and how it relates to Beauvoir’s phenomenological positions in my article “The Second Sex as Appeal: The Ethical Dimension of Ambiguity.”
6 She explicitly relates this to the views of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. It is to be noted that Beauvoir wrote a review of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception for Les Temps modernes in 1945. In it, she expressed her enthusiasm for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, in particular his view of the body as situated and as the expression of our existence. She also praised his method: “Merleau-Ponty does
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not invent a system; he starts from established facts and he demonstrates that it is impossible to account
for them on an experimental plane” (Beauvoir 2004b, 163).

7 Although the use of “brotherhood” might seem surprising, one must keep in mind that what Beauvoir
is referring to here is the notion of equality and solidarity that is expressed in the motto of the French
Republic, “Liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

8 In her introduction to Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age, Sylvia Stoller explains that there are many
similarities in themes and methods between The Second Sex and Old Age. Both are concerned with the
oppression and marginalization of a group, women in the one case and the elderly in the other. And
both use a phenomenological method that combines a variety of approaches and narratives to unveil
the situation in which the oppressed group comes to be marginalized. Stoller is right that this later
work has been unduly neglected and her edited volume begins to remedy this situation. See her Simone
de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time.

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