

Beauvoir's Philosophy of Meaning in Life

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Abstract

While Simone de Beauvoir does not offer an explicit theory of meaning in life in any single work, she does provide in her various writings the materials needed to piece together such a theory. In this paper, I offer a systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life based on these materials. In particular, I develop this account based on her discussion of projects in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, her discussion of values in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, her discussions of death and aging in *The Coming of Age*, and her discussion of gender in *The Second Sex*. In the course of doing so, I also make connections to some of her fellow "existentialists" (Sartre and Heidegger) as well as some contemporary analytic philosophers (Setiya and Scheffler) in order to show the originality and continued relevance of Beauvoir's philosophy of meaning in life.

Introduction

Nowhere in her vast oeuvre does Simone de Beauvoir offer a systematic account of meaning in life. She does, however, discuss meaning in the course of developing her other views. In *The Second Sex* (1949) she argues that women have limited opportunities to make their lives meaningful, and in *The Coming of Age* (1970) she makes similar points about the elderly. And although her two dense philosophical works *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) don't mention "meaning" per se, let alone "meaning in life," they do concern *projects* and *values*—two key notions in contemporary analytic discussions of meaning in life. My aim in this paper is to draw together these diffuse comments in order to construct a coherent Beauvoirian account of meaning in life. I also draw some contrasts between Beauvoir's views and those of two of her contemporaries (Sartre and Heidegger) and make a few connections between her ideas and those in the current analytic debate, in order to show that Beauvoir's views about meaning in life were not only novel at the time but are also of continued relevance today.

I start by discussing Beauvoir's notion of projects (section 1). I then consider Beauvoir's position on what makes projects valuable and on the status of freedom

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as a primary value (section 2). Next, I sketch the connection between meaning and death, old age, and womanhood in order to flesh out Beauvoir's general theory of meaning in life (section 3). All of this adds up to a full-fledged and systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life, which I summarize in the conclusion of this paper (section 4).

1. Meaningful Projects

Pyrrhus and Cineas is a short but dense work about the point of having goals and engaging in projects. The title refers to the Hellenistic king Pyrrhus, who is set on conquering the world, and his "wise" adviser Cineas, who attempts to dissuade him. Beauvoir opens her book with the following account of their dialogue:

Plutarch tells us that one day Pyrrhus was devising projects of conquest. "We are going to subjugate Greece first," he was saying. "And after that?" said Cineas. "We will vanquish Africa." – "After Africa?" – "We will go on to Asia, we will conquer Asia Minor, Arabia." – "And after that?" – "We will go on as far as India." – "After India?" – "Ah!" said Pyrrhus, "I will rest." – "Why not rest right away?" said Cineas.¹

Beauvoir thinks that questions like the ones Cineas raises—"And after that? What's the use?"²—plague all of us. What's the purpose of doing anything if what we do has to end? Or, as Tolstoy asked in the depths of his mid-life crisis, "And what next? What for?"³ Trying to answer Cineas's (and Tolstoy's) questions is the main purpose of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. And while Beauvoir's discussion is sometimes difficult to follow, it contains many philosophically rich ideas. In what follows, I highlight eight key ideas that are especially relevant to understanding her overall view on meaning in life.

The *first* key idea related to meaning in life in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is Beauvoir's insistence that pursuing projects is at the heart of what it means to be a human being. Beauvoir believes that human beings have no "essence" and so they create themselves by their actions. In fact, this self-creation is a project in its

¹ Beauvoir 2004: 90.

² Ibid.: 91.

³ Tolstoy 2012: 14.

own right. In her words: “I am not a thing but a project of self toward the other, transcendence.”⁴ Beauvoir repeatedly stresses the fact that human beings are “transcendence,” by which she means that we are always acting, always projecting ourselves into the future. According to Beauvoir this is essential to the human condition. As she puts it, our “condition is to surpass everything given.” The upshot is that—Cineas’s questions notwithstanding—it is simply impossible for human beings *not* to engage in projects. As Jonathan Webber explains: “Pursuing projects with values at their core is not an optional feature of human life [for Beauvoir].”⁵

A *second* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* follows from this first: refusing to engage in projects, or even resting from such engagement, is not a viable response to Cineas’s questions. In fact, Beauvoir explicitly considers this solution (“Let man therefore renounce all projects”⁶), and she rejects it. As we have seen, human beings are by their very nature engaged in projects. Not only is being a human itself a project, but Beauvoir identifies such things as happiness and enjoyment as projects: “since man is project, his happiness, like his pleasures, can only be projects”; and “all enjoyment is project.”⁷ Indeed, “every thought, every feeling is project,”⁸ she says. And since everything we do is a project, including the very act of being human itself, not engaging in projects is simply out of the question.

Of course, a person could try to be as inactive or restful as possible, but this would be an impossible and therefore absurd goal. As soon as we have any thoughts or desires, we are already transcending the moment and so are no longer perfectly at rest. Furthermore, according to Beauvoir, even if absolute inactivity were possible, it would not fulfill us. She cites Valéry who calls rest “the pure ennui of living.”⁹ Because we are “transcendence,” we would not be content at rest even if we could *per impossibile* achieve it. Beauvoir drives this point home by asking us to imagine paradise—a place of perfect restfulness—which, she says, immediately prompts all of us to ask ourselves: “What shall we do there?”¹⁰

A *third* key idea related to meaning in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that our projects are meaningful, and so give our lives meaning, only while we are engaged in them.

⁴ Beauvoir 2004: 93.

⁵ Webber 2018 (a): 225.

⁶ Beauvoir 2004: 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 140.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 98.

(By “meaningful” I mean having a point, purpose, or value. Thus, as I understand these terms, something is meaningful if, and only if, it has some point, purpose, or value.) As soon as they are over, our projects become meaningless. This explains why we are so often disappointed when we complete projects or meet our goals: a source of meaning in our lives has gone away. For example, if writing a book gives my life meaning, then finishing the book, far from adding meaning to my life, actually takes it away.

This admission, that projects have meaning only while they are ongoing, seems to concede a lot of ground to Cineas. If the meaning of a project disappears as soon as it is completed, then what’s the point in engaging in such a project—or any projects—in the first place? Here we come to a *fourth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, which constitutes the core of Beauvoir’s response to Cineas: the solution to finding meaning in life is not to give up on all projects (which is impossible), or to try to find a way to extend the meaning of a project after it is over (which is also impossible). It is simply to start another project. According to Beauvoir, a meaningful life consists in the pursuit of one meaningful project after another, in an ongoing and indefinite series. Sure, finishing a book is unsatisfying, because it’s over. But the solution is not to give up, or to dwell on one’s past accomplishments. Rather, according to Beauvoir, the solution is to write another book—or to start an entirely different kind of project. It is for this reason that Beauvoir ultimately sides with Pyrrhus over Cineas in their philosophical disagreement. It is the former, not the latter, who has the proper attitude toward life.

A useful contrast can be made here between Beauvoir’s position and a recent one put forward by Kieran Setiya. According to Setiya, simply replacing one project with another turns life into a never-ending series of accomplishments, the result of which is often a deep sense of futility. Indeed, this phenomenon is one of the main contributors to mid-life crises, which, according to Setiya, are properly understood as crises of meaning. Setiya describes this phenomenon as “the suspicion of something hollow in the sequence of accomplishment.”¹¹ Setiya proposes a number of solutions, such as finding meaning in the process, living in the moment, and focusing on atelic activities instead of telic ones.

None of these solutions are incompatible with Beauvoir’s claim that projects are meaningful only while they are happening, or her claim that a meaningful life

¹¹ Setiya 2017: 129.

consists in a series of such projects. That being said, Beauvoir need not necessarily endorse any of these solutions, either. On her view, as I understand her, engaging in one project after the next is simply *not* futile. True, it may be a matter of empirical (psychological) fact that some people feel this way, especially in mid-life, but such feelings are, according to Beauvoir, ultimately unjustified. According to her, projects are a source of meaning, and so engaging in projects makes a life meaningful—even if all of our projects eventually end and must be replaced by others. Feelings to the contrary might be typical—again, especially in mid-life—but that does not make them rational.

But even granting this point—that a life can be truly meaningful even if it consists in an indefinite series of projects, each of which must ultimately end—one might wonder if her claim that our projects are meaningful only while we are engaged in them (her third key idea) is too restrictive. After all, why not think that our projects can be meaningful, even after they end, in virtue of the products they leave behind? Suppose, for example, that my project consists in trying to write an interesting book. If I succeed, then my project is over, but the product of my project—the book—still exists. And if this book is meaningful, then it might confer some meaning on me, its creator. A similar idea is that my projects can remain meaningful, even after they end for me, so long as someone else takes them up. For example, suppose I start a book but then abandon it. If someone else takes up this project, and continues working on the book, then perhaps their doing so would add meaning to my life, even though I am no longer actively engaged in this project myself.

Beauvoir addresses these possibilities in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and her treatment of them leads us to fifth key idea in this book. Beauvoir admits that the products of projects can be meaningful, but only under certain conditions—namely, if these products are involved in other people’s projects. Thus, a book sitting on a shelf has no meaning whatsoever; it is meaningful only if somebody else uses it for a project of their own—such as a research project. The same holds for projects aimed at intangible products (such as the creation of institutions) or projects themselves that are carried on by other people after we are done with them. The underlying idea here is that nothing has meaning in itself; things have value only in virtue of their involvement in human projects, which can “transcend” those things and thereby confer meaning upon them. This is a *fifth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: a thing is meaningful only if it is involved in some human project. This applies to the products of projects (e.g., books) as well as to projects

themselves that can be “transferred” to another person (e.g., the writing of a book). Human beings confer meaning on things through their projects, so anything outside the sphere of human projects is meaningless.

Thus, Beauvoir admits that products and projects can be meaningful after a person is finished with them. But at the same time, she rejects the idea that this confers any meaning on the life of the person who produced that product or originated that project. How are these two positions compatible with each other?

This leads us to a *sixth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: the product of a project of mine can be meaningful in *someone else’s* life, if that person incorporates that product into one of their own projects, but this adds no meaning to *my* life. Likewise, a completed project of mine that is taken up by someone else can add meaning to *their* life, but it adds no meaning to *mine*. According to Beauvoir, we must distinguish between the meaning of a thing (or project), on the one hand, and the person for whom such a thing (or project) is meaningful, on the other. A thing (or project) is meaningful only for the individual who uses that thing (or engages in that project).

In fact, surprisingly enough, Beauvoir actually endorses the *inverse* of the proposal under consideration. According to Beauvoir, a project is meaningful only if the product of that project—or that project itself, if it has no product—is in some way taken up by other people and incorporated into their projects. In other words, the transferability of products and projects from one person to another is a *necessary* (but not sufficient) condition for the meaningfulness of those original projects. This is a *seventh* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: if a person is engaged in some project that is not in some way taken up by other people after it is completed, for example through its product (if it has one), then this project has no meaning to begin with.

Given that the meaning of our completed projects depends on their being taken up in some way by other people, it follows that the existence of other people is essential for living a meaningful life. This is an *eighth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and the final one I will discuss in this paper. Indeed, according to Beauvoir, the existence of other people is so important that the extinction of the human race is an even bigger threat to the meaning in our lives than our own individual deaths. For although our individual deaths will mark the end of our projects, and so take away all meaning from our lives, the future end of humanity will do so just as effectively—but while we are still alive. As Beauvoir writes: “My project loses all meaning not if my death is announced, but if the end of the world is announced

to me.”¹² And: “A man who survives alone on earth after a worldwide cataclysm must strive, like Ezekiel, to resuscitate humanity, or he will have nothing left to do but die.”¹³ Without other people to build on our projects (or to use the products of our projects), our projects become meaningless—even while we are doing them. Thus, the end of humanity would be, for Beauvoir, literally a fate worse than death.

Beauvoir’s reasoning here is reminiscent of the point Samuel Sheffler makes in *Death and the Afterlife* with his “doomsday scenario” thought experiment. Sheffler asks us to consider the following thought experiment:

Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal life span, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life?¹⁴

Sheffler argues that many of our projects would no longer seem worth pursuing. One of the reasons for this is that many of the things we do are to benefit other people, such as trying to find a cure for cancer, writing a book, or raising a family. Thus, according to Sheffler, the end of the human race would deprive our projects of more value and significance than our individual deaths would. As Sheffler explains: “There are many projects and activities whose importance to us is not diminished by the prospect of our own deaths but would be diminished by the prospect that everyone else will die soon.”¹⁵ This echoes Beauvoir’s position.

Summing up, the eight key ideas related to meaning in life in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* are the following. First, pursuing projects is essential to human life. Not only is being a human being itself a project, but virtually all of our actions and activities are projects. Second, and relatedly, inactivity is an impossible and therefore absurd goal. Furthermore, as contrary to our nature, pure rest would be deeply unsatisfying even if it were possible. Third, our projects are meaningful only while we are engaged in them. Thus, once a project has been completed, it is no longer a source of meaning in our lives. From this it follows (fourth) that a meaningful life consists of the pursuit of one meaningful project after another. Beauvoir therefore sides with Pyrrhus over Cineas in the short debate with which

¹² Beauvoir 2004: 129.

¹³ Ibid.: 135.

¹⁴ Sheffler 2013:18.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 26.

she begins her book. Fifth, a thing is meaningful only if it is involved in some human project. This applies to the products of projects as well to our projects themselves once they are completed or abandoned. However, (sixth) this does not confer any meaning on the life of the person who produced that product or originated that project. Rather (seventh) the inverse is true: projects that are not in some way taken up by others after they have been completed have no meaning in the first place. And finally, (eighth) it follows that meaning in life requires the existence of other people.

2. Freedom as the Highest Value

The previous section focused on Beauvoir's ideas about projects and how they are related to meaning. This section focuses on Beauvoir's ideas about value. These topics are closely related, for it is common to understand meaning in terms of value. A project is meaningful if, and only if, it has value; and a life is meaningful if, and only if, it contains a sufficient quantity of valuable projects. What, according to Beauvoir, makes a project valuable? Answering this question will be the main purpose of this section.

In short, Beauvoir thinks that projects are valuable simply because we choose to pursue them. Choosing particular ends is precisely what confers value on them. Thus, we don't pursue certain projects because those projects are valuable; rather, our projects are valuable because we choose to pursue them. The very act of pursuing something makes that thing valuable for me. Beauvoir expresses this idea many times and in many different ways, and this notion has not escaped the notice of her commentators. Shannon Mussett, for example, writes: "For Beauvoir, one's project is in no way predetermined or valuable in itself. What I choose to do takes on meaning and value by the very fact that I choose it."¹⁶ And again: "Beauvoir means to emphasize that human beings undertake meaningful actions... because to choose a course of action, to infuse it with value through the act of choosing it, is the clearest expression of our freedom."¹⁷ Gwendolyn Dolske puts it as follows: "[Beauvoir] suggests that meaning must be pursued rather than provided from an external source."¹⁸

For Beauvoir, a project is valuable to us as soon as we choose to pursue it and

¹⁶ Mussett 2006: 233.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 233-4.

¹⁸ Dolske 2015: 112.

in virtue of our choosing to pursue it. But why? According to Beauvoir, choosing to pursue something is valuable because doing so is an expression of our *freedom*, and freedom itself has value and is the source of all other values. The centrality of freedom in existentialist thought cannot be overstated. One of the defining features of existentialism is that it is up to individuals to shape their lives, to “make” themselves, and to determine how to live. Since existence precedes essence, nothing is predetermined, including human nature, the meaning of life, and our values. This means that it is human beings who create values: “It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the bases of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged.”¹⁹ More specifically, the expression of human freedom creates all other value and meaning in the world. Thus, freedom is what we might call the “primary value,” because it is a value that is the source of all other values. This is why Beauvoir calls freedom the “universal, absolute end from which all significations and all values spring.”²⁰

But, according to Beauvoir, it is not just our own freedom that is valuable: everyone else’s freedom is valuable, too. And this has a surprising implication for the meaningfulness of our projects. According to Beauvoir, because everyone’s freedom is valuable, projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are absurd and therefore meaningless. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, for example, Beauvoir argues that Pyrrhus’s project of conquering the world is ultimately meaningless, not for the reasons Cineas gives (which Beauvoir rejects), but because this project infringes on other people’s freedom. Likewise, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir gives *oppression* as an example of an absurd, and therefore meaningless, project. In her words: “A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.”²¹ And also: “If the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce his oppression.”²² For Beauvoir, then, there is at least one objective constraint on which kinds of projects can be meaningful: such projects cannot infringe on other people’s freedom. Projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are simply meaningless, no matter how freely they are chosen or how much they are subjectively enjoyed.

Beauvoir’s position that freedom is the source of all other values combined with her position that projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are

¹⁹ Beauvoir 1948: 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 91.

²² *Ibid.*: 96.

meaningless highlights the special status of freedom as a value in Beauvoir's philosophy. But what exactly is the nature of this special status? On the one hand, Beauvoir seems to suggest that freedom is *objectively valuable* when she writes things like, "The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is."²³ On the other hand, Beauvoir apparently resists this conclusion when she writes in the same book things like, "[Freedom] is not a ready-made value which offers itself from the outside."²⁴ This suggests that freedom is only *subjectively valuable*, that is, has value because we choose to give it value. So, which is it?

There is a noteworthy parallel here with Sartre's philosophy, for Sartre finds himself in the same predicament when it comes to his own views on freedom. Like Beauvoir, Sartre seems to reject the view that there are any objective values, including freedom, and yet he describes freedom in the same way that Beauvoir does, namely as the primary value that gives value to everything else. Sartre scholars have frequently noticed this tension in Sartre and have offered a number of different explanations of it. In *Freedom as a Value*, for example, David Detmer diagnoses this tension in Sartre's philosophy as a shift in thinking between the early Sartre and the late Sartre. Whereas Sartre in his early works is a subjectivist about all values, including freedom, he later admits that freedom must be objectively valuable.

While I am not sure whether Beauvoir undergoes an analogous shift in views from an earlier to a later period, I do think that the position which Sartre (according to Detmer) ended up holding—namely, that freedom is an objective value—is best understood as her considered view. Certainly, Beauvoir does suggest at times that all values are in some sense subjective, but she is also clearly committed to the view that freedom has objective value. In other words, the latter seems so indispensable to her overall philosophy, both in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, as we have seen, that this simply must be her view. Perhaps when Beauvoir says that all values are in some sense subjective, she either doesn't realize that elsewhere she is committed to the existence of at least one objective value (namely, freedom), or else what she really means to say is that all values depend, in some sense, on the subject. Arguably the latter is true even if, strictly speaking, freedom is an objective value, for how freedom gets

²³ Ibid.: 57-8.

²⁴ Ibid.: 24.

expressed varies greatly from individual to individual, and so is subjective in a loose sense.

These reflections on the status of freedom raise the question of how to categorize Beauvoir's view within the standard analytic framework. The two Beauvoir scholars who have written on this come to different conclusions. Jonathan Webber calls Beauvoir's view "objective" because Beauvoir is committed to the objectivity of the value of freedom. Elena Popa classifies Beauvoir's view as a "hybrid view" where the subjective element is "to decide meaning for oneself" and the objective element is "the constraints stemming from one's relation to others."²⁵ But calling Beauvoir an objective naturalist, as Webber does, seems to be diametrically opposed to the spirit of her view. Likewise, I think that it is misleading to categorize Beauvoir's view as a hybrid position, as Popa does, given that the term "hybrid view" applies to positions like Susan Wolf's, and Beauvoir's view is, as Popa herself admits, not at all like Wolf's. According to hybrid views, meaning in life is achieved through the subjective engagement in projects that have objective worth. This is not what Beauvoir thinks.

In the end, the question of whether to call Beauvoir's view a form of objective or subjective naturalism is a hard one to answer. The exercise of freedom, which is objectively valuable, is the source of all other values, which are subjectively valuable. This position involves both objective and subjective elements. In this regard, Beauvoir's view is usefully compared to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, which also has objective and subjective elements: objective because desire satisfaction is a value independent of what anybody thinks about it, and subjective because what each of us desires varies from person to person. Beauvoir's view, like the Desire Satisfaction Theory, seems to evade a simple classification within the standard categories.

3. Expanding Beauvoir's View

We have now covered the fundamentals of Beauvoir's view of meaning in life, but there are a few important topics left to discuss. Any account of meaning in life needs to include an account of how meaning is related to death. Death plays an important role in Beauvoir's philosophy in general and in her view on meaning in

²⁵ Popa 2019: 428.

life in particular (section 3.1). In addition, any account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life is incomplete without a discussion of her views on old age and womanhood, each of which, she thinks, has an important connection to meaning in life (sections 3.2 and 3.3).

3.1 Death

Mortality plays an important role in Beauvoir's thinking about meaning in life. Of her book *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she writes: "I wanted to demonstrate that without [death] there could be neither projects nor values."²⁶ Beauvoir's work is suffused with references to death, and as much as she detests it, she makes it very clear that the opposite—life without death—is even more undesirable. Indeed, she thinks that death is a necessary condition for meaning in life. In *The Prime of Life* (1960), she writes: "Though death challenges our existence, it also gives meaning to our lives," and "I learned that it was possible to accept death in order for life to keep its meaning."²⁷ In *The Blood of Others* (1945), she writes: "It is sometimes necessary to risk death for life to remain meaningful."²⁸ And in her novel *All Men Are Mortal* (1946), Beauvoir argues that an immortal existence would lose all meaning and value.

Why does Beauvoir think that death is a necessary condition for having meaning in life? This is not entirely clear, but the life of Fosca, the immortal protagonist of *All Men Are Mortal*, gives us a clue. As a result of his immortality, Fosca has lost all of his interests and desires. To say that he is bored is an understatement; Fosca is apathetic to the degree that he calls himself (ironically) "a dead man."²⁹ Having lost all motivation, Fosca hardly pursues any projects, which in turn renders his life meaningless. And this makes perfect sense since, according to Beauvoir, it is engaging in projects that gives our lives meaning in the first place. So, in short, mortality is necessary for a meaningful life because without it, we (like Fosca) would have no motivation to do anything; and without doing anything we could not have meaningful lives.

Beauvoir's view that life can be meaningful only if we die might sound similar to the position of Heidegger, who famously claims in *Being and Time* (1927) that

²⁶ Beauvoir 1962: 606.

²⁷ Ibid.: 433.

²⁸ Beauvoir 1964: 318 & 322.

²⁹ Beauvoir 1946: 26.

our human reality (*Dasein*) is fundamentally “being-toward-death.” In fact, Beauvoir explicitly rejects this view. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, for example, she writes that “One must not say, with Heidegger, that man’s authentic project is being for death.”³⁰ Whereas Heidegger sees death as informing all of our projects and saturating our very existence, Beauvoir thinks that “The human being exists in the form of projects that are not projects toward death...but projects toward singular ends.”³¹ Thus, for Beauvoir, although mortality is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, it is in no way part of the meaning of life itself, as it is for Heidegger.

3.2 Old Age

The Coming of Age, Beauvoir’s massive tome on old age, identifies a number of hardships faced by the elderly. One of these hardships is that it is difficult for old people to make their lives meaningful. It is important to note that Beauvoir does not think that the lives of the elderly are inherently any less meaningful than anyone else’s, or that elderly individuals cannot live meaningful lives. Indeed, she thinks that the elderly *can* live meaningful lives if they are able to overcome certain obstacles and pursue meaningful projects: “There is only one solution if old age is not an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work.”³² Beauvoir’s position is simply that it is *difficult* for the elderly to pursue meaningful projects and so live meaningful lives. And this is for at least three reasons.

The first is a contingent reason that reflects a deep problem in modern society. Many unprivileged, uneducated laborers are exploited by the system and devote their entire lives to labor. As a result, they are not able to develop meaningful projects during their working lives, at least not outside of their jobs. This often comes to light at the time of retirement, at which point these former laborers have no meaningful projects upon which to fall back. In this case, old age does not so much cause as reveal a lack of meaning. And when it is revealed, it is often too late to do anything about it, at least according to Beauvoir. As she writes: “Even if decent houses are built for them, they cannot be provided with the culture, the

³⁰ Beauvoir 2004: 114.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 115.

³² Beauvoir 1972: 540.

interests and the responsibilities that would give their life a meaning.”³³ Culture, interests, and responsibilities can provide one with opportunities for developing meaningful projects, but only when they are given to a person at an early enough age to properly cultivate them. By the time laborers are at the age of retirement, it is often too late. One implication of this is that being able to make one’s life—at any age—meaningful is partly a matter of privilege—a privilege that is denied to the poor and the oppressed.

A second reason why it is difficult for the elderly to pursue meaningful projects is more philosophical, and it is related to our previous discussion of projects. One aspect of our projects is that they are essentially forward-looking, which means that having meaning in one’s life requires looking forward into the future, not backwards into the past. As Beauvoir writes: “The whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us.”³⁴ But, of course, the elderly have more of their lives behind them than ahead of them, and this tempts them to spend their time looking backward rather than forward—on what they have done rather than on what they can still do. And this makes it harder for them to engage in meaningful projects, which by their very nature require looking ahead into the future.

A third reason why old age makes it harder to live a meaningful life is based on another aspect of projects, namely that they involve *doing* rather than *being*. We have seen that Beauvoir thinks that human beings are always active and can never be at rest. As Mussett says: “Beauvoir prioritizes doing over being as the individual is in essence, nothing.”³⁵ Yet, Beauvoir thinks that an old person’s life is more defined by being than by doing. For this reason, the elderly naturally don’t engage in as many active projects. Both a focus on looking backwards and a focus on being are in tension with the forward-looking, active nature of projects. Because of the active, forward-looking nature of projects, which is contrary to their own nature, it is harder for the elderly to make their lives meaningful.

3.3 Womanhood

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that it is harder for women than it is for men to make their lives meaningful. Published in 1949, this book focuses on the

³³ Ibid.: 542.

³⁴ Ibid.: p. 5.

³⁵ Mussett 2006: 232.

traditional gender roles of women at that time. To what degree these “traditional” gender roles still exist is an open question, but in what follows I will speak about them in the present tense.

One reason why it is harder for women to make their lives meaningful, according to Beauvoir, is that many tasks that women engage in, such as routine housework, are repetitive, cyclical, and unsatisfying. This type of activity is opposed to a project that is progressive, productive, or creative—that is, a project with which progress is made or a product is created. Beauvoir writes about women doing housework that they are “occupied without ever doing anything.”³⁶ Being in this situation does not make it easy for women to imbue their lives with meaning. The upshot of this is that, according to Beauvoir, a project must be in some way progressive, productive, or creative in order to be truly meaningful.

To make matters worse for women, the meaningless tasks in which they are so often engaged (at least traditionally) are not freely chosen. Rather, they are imposed on them by their society, which has a conception of what a woman is and how she ought to live. Gwendolyn Dolske captures this point (and the previous one) well when she writes:

Woman is at greater risk of losing sight of purpose than man because she is prone to behaving according to the structure of other’s ideas of her purpose. Therefore, finding meaning in women’s lives poses difficulties for them since the duties assigned to them by custom are duties entailing little creativity or possibility of defining and redefining one’s self (unlike the possibilities typically open to men).³⁷

Beauvoir sees many women as finding meaning in marriage and in caring for others (namely, their husbands and their children), rather than living for themselves. This gives us another insight into Beauvoir’s view of meaningful projects in general: they must be freely chosen rather than assigned by others.

Finally, according to Beauvoir, women are often tempted to willingly conform to these societal roles rather than realize their freedom and create their own meaning. Beauvoir describes this as follows:

³⁶ Beauvoir 1989: 604.

³⁷ Dolske 2015: 125.

When man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.³⁸

This makes matters even worse. Not only are women coerced into playing the role of *Other*, but they are even further coerced into accepting it. Such women do not treat themselves as free subjects but rather as objects, which turns them into what Beauvoir calls an “immanence” rather than a “transcendence.”³⁹ As Dolske puts it: “Woman struggles more with transcendence because the world (and at times, her own self-deception) nudges her toward treating herself as project rather than acting autonomously in the world and creating her project.”⁴⁰

4. Conclusion

The previous section has yielded some additional ideas that can be used to supplement Beauvoir’s theory of meaning in life as articulated in earlier sections. To start, we have seen that our lives can be meaningful only because we are mortal. From Beauvoir’s discussion of old age we have also learned that having meaning in one’s life requires that one be sufficiently *active* and that one’s projects be sufficiently *forward looking*. Furthermore, we have seen that being able to make one’s life meaningful is, in part, a matter of societal conditions and privilege within society. And from Beauvoir’s discussion of gender we have learned that projects must be progressive, productive, and creative in order to be meaningful and that they have to be freely chosen rather than assigned to us by others.

These ideas about meaning drawn from Beauvoir’s discussion on death, old age, and gender are all compatible with the eight key ideas about meaning found in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. According to the latter, it is virtually impossible for human beings not to pursue projects, and projects are only meaningful while we are engaged in them. One implication of this is that a meaningful life consists of a series of projects, and another is that other people are necessary for there to be meaning in life because they can take up our projects (or their products), thereby

³⁸ Beauvoir 1989: xxvii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 603.

⁴⁰ Dolske 2015: 112.

safeguarding their meaning. Last, but not least, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (as well as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) argue that our projects are truly meaningful only if they do not infringe on anyone else's freedom: since freedom is the source of all meaning, pursuing a project at the expense of another's freedom is absurd and meaningless.

In conclusion, Beauvoir's ideas about meaning, dispersed over several works and embedded in her positions on other issues, add up to a coherent, interesting, and philosophically rich view of meaning in life.⁴¹

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