

---

# Simone de Beauvoir's Apprenticeship of Freedom

SUSAN M. BREDLAU

---

In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir makes reference to an “apprenticeship of freedom”; she writes, “Even today in western countries, among women who have not had in their work an apprenticeship of freedom, there are still many who take shelter in the shadow of men” (37). In describing freedom as accomplished through an apprenticeship, Beauvoir suggests that a subject can only be free if she is taught by others to be free. Beauvoir does not, however, directly address why freedom requires an apprenticeship or what such an apprenticeship entails. Yet even though Beauvoir only mentions an apprenticeship of freedom in passing, this idea, I will argue, is neither inconsistent with nor insignificant to her more explicit claims about freedom; indeed, thinking through the idea of an apprenticeship of freedom provides valuable insight into the ethical implications of Beauvoir’s conception of freedom. Drawing on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Beauvoir’s other major philosophical work, *The Second Sex*, I will explicate the idea of an apprenticeship of freedom, establishing why such an apprenticeship is a necessary condition of freedom and describing how such an apprenticeship is administered. In doing so, I will draw together two strands of thought within recent research on Beauvoir—first, that Beauvoir conceives of freedom as embodied<sup>1</sup> and, second, that she conceives of freedom as interpersonal<sup>2</sup>—to consider how freedom begins to develop during a subject’s childhood.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, I will explore how adults’ interactions with a child either support or impede the realization of this child’s freedom.

In Section One, I will focus on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to argue that a subject realizes her freedom most fully when she has projects that actually transform the present world and do not merely conform to it. To be truly free, a subject must be able, through skilful handling of the world, to make a situation that is indifferent to (or even impedes) her into a situation that supports her. In Section Two, I will explore how a subject's ability to recognize and develop her freedom is an interpersonal achievement. A subject is not inherently capable of transforming the world; a subject *becomes* capable of transforming the world. Before a subject, as an adult, can engage in projects that actually transform the world, she must, as a child, engage in projects that reveal the possibility of transforming the world and allow her to develop the skills necessary for such transformation. A child could never, however, engage in such projects on her own; she depends on other people for the materials and guidance necessary for engaging in such projects. If a child were not, in other words, apprenticed to others, she could never become capable of transforming the world; for a subject to fully realize her freedom, she must engage in an apprenticeship of freedom. Thus even as any particular subject's childhood interactions with adults may only restrict her freedom, there is, nonetheless, no way for a subject to become free except through interactions with others; an adult subject's freedom is an accomplishment in which others are necessarily involved. Finally, in Section Three, I will turn to Beauvoir's remarks about apprenticeships in *The Second Sex* to give a more detailed account of how adults, in their interactions with children, either provide or withhold an apprenticeship of freedom. Throughout this article, I will generally focus on an individual subject and her personal relations with others rather than on some larger social group and its political situation. Indeed, Beauvoir's idea of an apprenticeship of freedom asks us to consider whether those who have attained political freedom are, nonetheless, truly able to be free.

### **I. Freedom as a Bodily Achievement**

A subject, Beauvoir argues, exists as disclosing the world; “By uprooting himself from the world, man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him” (*EA* 12). In not being any of the beings she discloses, a subject is not cut off from beings; rather, a subject gives beings their significance. A subject exists as the unceasing achievement of meanings to which she is always irreducible; a subject “rejoins himself only to the extent that he agrees to remain at a distance from himself” (Beauvoir, *EA* 13).

Yet while a subject can never be equated with the world she discloses, she is not disembodied. A subject’s accomplishment of meaning, Beauvoir writes, cannot “be merely contemplative and verbal. It is carried out in an act” (*EA* 27). A subject is not simply a mind, and the human body is not simply an object; rather, a subject is her body. The body’s interaction with the world, far from being an impediment to a subject’s disclosure of the world, actually makes it possible; “man does not create the world. He succeeds in disclosing it only through the resistance which the world opposes to him” (Beauvoir, *EA* 28). This fundamental resistance between an embodied subject and the world is not the disclosure of a resistant world; rather, it is the condition for any disclosure whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> As Beauvoir writes, “I can not appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph, not as a defeat” (*EA* 12). While a subject may interact with the world in a way that discloses it as restrictive, she may also interact with the world in a way that discloses it as enabling; the snow, for example, that prevents a subject from walking down the hill can also be the snow that allows her to slide down the hill. Either of these specific meanings, however, as well as any other specific meanings, requires a subject’s concrete interaction with the world. Of course, not all of a subject’s interactions with the world take the

form of active grasping; a subject may, for example, interact with the world by standing aloof from it or observing it. Nonetheless, these ways of disclosing the world are still bodily, and even a subject's refusal to grab hold of something in the world is still a way of interacting with the world.

Since the world a subject experiences *is* only as it *is disclosed by her*, it does not have any inherent meaning; no situation is, independent of a subject, important or unimportant, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, welcome or unwelcome, frustrating or helpful. The meaning of a subject's present world reflects her particular way of currently interacting with the world, it reflects—to use Beauvoir's term—her projects;<sup>5</sup> “It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world” (*EA* 15). To expand on Beauvoir's own example, if someone encounters a locked door as obstructing her, it is her own project of getting into the space beyond the door that gives the door this meaning (*EA* 29). Furthermore, a subject's projects, though not always explicitly chosen, are nonetheless always a matter of choice. A subject could always pursue a different project; rather than trying to get beyond the door, for example, she could remain in the same place. Of course, changing projects may involve sacrifices that a subject is unwilling to make. Still, it is her own unwillingness to make these sacrifices, and not the world itself, that prevents her from pursuing a different project.

A subject exists as free, then, in so far as she exists as disclosing being; “To wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as freedom are one and the same movement. Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring” (Beauvoir, *EA* 24). Nothing other than a subject's projects compel her to experience the world as she does. The meaning of the present world, therefore, is never an irrefutable fact to which a subject must necessarily submit; a subject is always able, by pursuing a different project, to disclose the world

differently. Thus a subject's projects can never be dictated to her by the world; any project, Beauvoir writes, "is never founded, it founds itself" (*EA* 26). Likewise, a subject's projects can never be dictated to her by other people. Other people may, of course, try to define the world for her and, indeed, a subject may attempt to get others to define the world for her. Other subjects' definitions can only be compelling, however, if she discloses them as such. A subject's freedom can never be totally usurped or renounced; any particular meaning that the world has is definitive only insofar as she considers it to be definitive.<sup>6</sup>

A subject need not, however, recognize her own freedom. Yet doing so is critical to truly realizing her freedom. As Kristana Arp has argued, Beauvoir distinguishes between natural (or what Arp refers to as "ontological") freedom and moral freedom (27-29).<sup>7</sup> Ontological freedom—the kind of freedom I have focused on up to this point—is inherent in every subject, *qua* subject, and cannot be escaped (Arp 27). However, moral freedom—the kind of freedom I will focus on for the rest of this paper—is only possessed by those who recognize their ontological freedom and embrace freedom both for themselves and for others (Arp 28). To truly be free, Beauvoir asserts, one must "will oneself free" (*EA* 25).

A child, though ontologically free *qua* subject, is not yet morally free. Beauvoir argues that a child considers the present world to be given independently of her, and hence, to be unchangeable; "The child's situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit" (Beauvoir, *EA* 35). A subject begins her existence by, in effect, misunderstanding her existence; she believes that she can only accept the present world, and she does not realize that it is her own acceptance of the present world that leaves it unchanged. Initially unaware that the meaning of her present world is achieved through

her interaction with it, a subject must come to understand that while she can interact with this world in ways that preserve its present meaning, she can also interact with it in ways that do not.<sup>8</sup>

Yet even when a subject recognizes and embraces her freedom, her projects can realize this freedom more or less fully. Although the present world gets its particular meaning from a subject's current project, this meaning is not always compatible with her project. A subject can, for example, meet obstacles as she interacts with the world. Now, in so far as it is the subject's own project that discloses the world as restrictive, a subject need only adopt a new project that works within this restriction, and the world will no longer be restrictive. If, for example, a subject is unable to open a door, she need only choose to remain where she is, and the door is no longer an obstacle. Yet in abandoning her original project and adopting a new project, Beauvoir argues, a subject realizes her freedom incompletely; "If a door refuses to open, let us accept not opening it and there we are free. But by doing that, one manages only to save an abstract notion of freedom. It is emptied of all content and all truth" (*EA* 29).<sup>9</sup> If a subject can only alter the meaning of her present world while leaving this world otherwise unchanged, she is not truly free. That is, while she may be ontologically free, her moral freedom remains largely undeveloped.

In thinking about a subject's projects, then, it is important to distinguish between her everyday projects of going to work, cooking dinner, and so forth, and her existential project of truly realizing her freedom. Though the existential project is not simply equivalent to everyday projects, it is also not utterly separate from these projects. That is, realizing one's freedom is not an *additional* activity performed independently of other daily activities. If a subject realizes her freedom, she does so *through* her daily activities. Nonetheless, not every activity a subject can perform will contribute to her existential project; indeed, some activities will actually impede a subject from revealing herself as truly free. Beauvoir's insight is that while a subject's freedom is

not disconnected from her everyday projects, this freedom is also not realized through just any everyday project. To keep this distinction between a subject's existential project and her everyday projects clear the term 'project' hereafter refers only to a subject's everyday projects.

A truly free subject is able to have projects that, rather than conforming to the present world, actively transform it:

on the one hand, freedom can always save itself, for it is realized as a disclosure of existence through its very failures, and it can again confirm itself by a death freely chosen. But, on the other hand, the situations which it discloses through its project toward itself do not appear as equivalents. It regards as privileged situations those which permit it to realize itself as indefinite movement. (Beauvoir, *EA* 32)

Although a subject is still free if she interacts with the present world in a way that conforms to it, she is more free if she can interact with it in other ways as well. To realize her freedom most fully, a subject cannot simply recognize that she has projects, and she cannot simply have any projects whatsoever. To realize her freedom most fully, she must have projects through which she makes a world initially disclosed as indifferent, or even in opposition, to her projects into a world that affirms these projects and allows their continued development.

Whether a subject can have projects that transform the world depends on the particular ways in which a subject is able to interact with the world. Not every interaction with the world transforms it; indeed, many interactions actually leave the world unaltered. To transform the world, a subject must be able to overcome obstacles rather than simply accepting them; she must be able to handle the world skilfully. A subject's skilful handling of the present world, though it always involves the body, is not confined to ways of (quite literally) handling the world. A subject may handle the world skilfully, not just with her hands but also with her eyes, ears, and other body parts as well as through language and other forms of communication.

Very generally, then, the extent to which a subject can realize her freedom depends on her current repertoire of skills as well as her ability to acquire additional skills. Freedom, though not a specific skill, nor even a finite set of specific skills, is expressed through specific skills. A subject's skilful handling of the world however, is often habitual, and thus not something a subject is usually explicitly aware of.<sup>10</sup> Yet precisely because a subject's skilful handling of the world often goes unnoticed, her repertoire of skills tends to be taken for granted and the process through which these skills were acquired tends to be overlooked.

## **II. Freedom as an Interpersonal Achievement**

As embodied, freedom is not fully realized at birth; a young child can barely grasp the world, let alone handle it skilfully. Freedom is gradually realized over time as a subject, through the projects she pursues, begins to recognize and embrace her freedom by developing the ability to transform the world.

A child's projects, however, depend on adults. Often, this dependence is quite explicit. Young children, in particular, are rarely left alone; almost all of the projects they pursue are pursued together with adults. A child, for example, frequently relies on others to demonstrate specific projects to her and then to assist her with them. Furthermore, many of the projects a child pursues necessarily involve adults. Language acquisition, as well as the development of various other social skills, requires interaction with adults; a child cannot learn to speak on her own. Indeed, a project such as language acquisition illustrates how critical many of a child's early interactions with adults are for her later life. In order to be able to pursue certain projects as an adult, a subject must have first pursued these projects as a child; if a subject does not, for example, acquire language by a certain age, she will never be able to speak in the same way as



others.<sup>11</sup> A child cannot, however, pursue a project such as language acquisition all on her own; she relies on adults to communicate with her.

Yet even when a child pursues projects in which adults are not directly involved, these projects still depend on adults. A child, unlike an adult, does not really own anything, and she has little ability to obtain anything by herself. Thus a child can only interact with what adults make available to her. In pursuing projects alone, therefore, a child still relies on adults to provide her with the materials necessary for these projects.

In a very real sense, then, a child's projects are always given to her by others. To say that a child's projects must be given to her, however, is not to imply that a child's relation to these projects is merely passive. A child must actively pursue the projects adults give her, and her own activity may contribute to, or even change, these projects in important and unexpected ways. Moreover, a child may refuse to undertake certain projects. Nonetheless, all of the child's interactions with the world, even those that do not occur in the presence of adults, still require the involvement of adults. Sometimes, adults give a child projects directly by assigning her a specific task to perform. At other times, adults give a child projects indirectly by providing her with the resources for pursuing projects of her own choosing. Others need not explicitly acknowledge that they are giving a child projects; indeed, in some cases, those who had their attention drawn to the projects they were giving a child might be disturbed by these projects. Nonetheless, even when a child pursues projects by herself, these projects are given to her by others since she is incapable of providing the conditions under which she can pursue these projects by herself.

Now, not every project that a child might pursue will actually allow her to recognize and develop her freedom. That is, not every project will reveal to her the possibility of transforming

the world and allow her to develop the skills necessary for such transformation. To acquire the skills necessary for transforming the present world, for example, a child must have projects in which she actively grasps, and does not just observe, the present world. Furthermore, to acquire a large repertoire of skills, a child must consistently pursue new projects whose accomplishment is prepared for, and yet cannot be effected by her present skills. A child, however, has neither the means nor the knowledge required for ensuring that the projects she pursues meet these criteria; only adults can ensure that a child's projects are neither too easy nor too difficult for her.

A subject's fully realized freedom, then, is an accomplishment that she has not achieved on her own. A subject does not and indeed cannot become free independently of others. In order to give herself projects that transform the world, a subject must first be given specific kinds of projects by others; she must participate in an apprenticeship of freedom. Thus although there is a tension in the very idea of an apprenticeship of freedom, this tension marks the possibility of freedom and not its impossibility. The full realization of a subject's freedom entails that she first depend on others. This dependence, however, will reveal a subject's freedom to her; when adults truly succeed in being responsible for a child's projects, they enable her to become responsible for her own projects.

Yet, as I will discuss shortly, while adults are responsible for a child's apprenticeship of freedom, they may not fulfill this responsibility. While interactions with other people are a condition for the realization of a subject's freedom, a subject's *actual* interactions with others may only stifle her freedom. Adults do not necessarily give a child the kind of projects that comprise an apprenticeship of freedom; some of the projects adults give a child may actually hinder her from recognizing and developing her freedom.

### III. An Apprenticeship of Freedom

Throughout *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir makes reference to a boy's and a girl's apprenticeships for life (xxxvi, 280, 297, 698, and elsewhere). Starting at birth, Beauvoir argues, a child learns from adults how to exist; existential maturity, in contrast to physical maturity, can only be achieved through education.<sup>12</sup> These apprenticeships are not necessarily recognized as such; adults may not realize that their interactions with a child give her projects. Moreover, subjectivity and freedom are rarely, if ever, the explicit focus of a child's interactions with adults. Thus adults may not recognize that the projects they give a child teach her how to be a subject and establish the extent of her freedom. Nonetheless, adults are always contributing, either positively or negatively, to the realization of a child's freedom.

The apprenticeships of a boy and a girl, Beauvoir argues, have not historically been equivalent. A boy and a girl, even when they grow up with the same people in the same place, tend to be given different projects. Moreover, Beauvoir argues, the distinct set of projects that adults give to each constitute two distinct apprenticeships; adults teach a boy and a girl different ways of being a subject. As Beauvoir writes, in the projects adults give a boy, he does not face a "fundamental opposition between his concern for the objective figure which is his, and his will to self-realization in concrete projects. It is by *doing* that he creates his existence, both in one and the same action" (SS 280). In the projects adults give a girl, however, "she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy" (Beauvoir, SS 280).

Thus, while a boy is generally taught to be a subject who recognizes himself as such, a girl is generally taught to be a subject whose own subjectivity is concealed from her. Furthermore, while a boy is generally taught how to transform the present world, a girl is

generally taught how to conform to the present world. The differences between how adults have historically interacted with a boy and a girl has meant that while a boy learns to exist in a way that usually allows him to realize his freedom, a girl learns to exist in a way that usually is at odds with the realization of her freedom.

Although it may seem inconceivable that the interpersonal interactions that constitute an apprenticeship of freedom could be missing from a child's life, Beauvoir's descriptions of specific interactions between children and adults in *The Second Sex* reveals how these kind of interactions can be, and often have been, denied to a child. In this final section, then, I will draw together and expand upon Beauvoir's often dispersed descriptions of specific interactions between children and adults to give concrete content to Beauvoir's idea of an apprenticeship of freedom and to discover to how others can provide, or withhold, an apprenticeship of freedom. In doing so, I will focus on three aspects of an apprenticeship of freedom: (1) the cultivation of a child's willingness to transform the world through the establishment of her body as her own; (2) the development of a child's ability to transform the world through her acquisition of particular bodily skills; and (3), the encouragement of a child's recognition of her own freedom through transformations of the world that are self-directed rather than in obedience to others.

Of course, in many places, adults' interactions with a boy and with a girl may no longer be as different as they were at the time Beauvoir was writing. Worldwide, however, there continue to be significant differences between the treatment of girls and boys.<sup>13</sup> As Ruth Levine *et al.*, citing research by Hill and King (1995), report: "girls spend between 33-85 percent more time per day working at home and in unpaid market work than do boys of the same age" (*Girls Count*). Cynthia Lloyd reports that gender gaps in primary and secondary school education continue to persist in many countries (*New Lessons*). Furthermore, recognizing the differences

Beauvoir notes—regardless of whether they continue to exist—is helpful for understanding how adults’ interactions with a child give her specific projects as well as for evaluating the significance of these projects for a child’s freedom. In considering the specific interactions described by Beauvoir, therefore, my focus will not be on evaluating whether the differences Beauvoir notes between a boy’s and girl’s interactions with adults continue to exist. Instead, my focus will be on noticing the usually unnoticed projects that adults give to a child through these interactions and on understanding why certain projects contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom while others do not. Indeed, by reviewing more blatant differences between how adults have interacted with children in the past, it may be easier to identify more subtle, yet still not insignificant, differences between adults’ current interactions with children.

A child’s apprenticeship for life, Beauvoir argues, begins as soon as a child is born; even as an infant, a boy’s interactions with adults are different than a girl’s. These interactions initially focus on a child’s own body. Beauvoir notes that adults tend to draw a boy’s attention to his body and encourage him to explore its activity. Adults, for example, often praise a boy’s penis and show him how, by handling it, he can direct his stream of urine. While seemingly inconsequential, these interactions actually give a boy a project; “To boys the urinary function seems like a free game, with the charm of all games that offer liberty of action; the penis can be manipulated, it gives opportunity for action, which is one of the deep interests of the child” (Beauvoir, *SS* 273).

Through the project of investigating his penis, then, a boy begins to discover his body’s powers and bring them under his control. As he does so, he gradually changes his body from a force that might act against him into a force that acts on his behalf. That is, he makes his body his own; his body increasingly enacts his subjectivity. As Beauvoir writes:

The major benefit obtained from ... [such a project] is that, having an organ that can be seen and grasped, he can at least partially identify himself with it. He projects the mystery of his body, its threats, outside of himself, which enables him to keep them at a distance. (*SS* 278)

This project and others like it have a significant impact on a boy's sense of his own body, enabling him to experience his body as securely his own. Such projects, therefore, contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom by cultivating a boy's willingness to transform the world. Confident that his body will not betray him, a boy will feel ready to turn his focus away from his body and toward the rest of the world.

A girl, of course, does not have a penis, and thus adults cannot give her the same project of directed urination as a boy. Yet, Beauvoir argues, the anatomical differences between boys and girls do not dictate different apprenticeships for life. A girl's inability to take on one particular project would be inconsequential if adults gave her other projects that, like a boy's project of directing his urine, allowed her to discover and take control of her body's powers (*SS* 280).<sup>14</sup> According to Beauvoir, however, adults make few positive comments to a girl about her body, and they seldom encourage her to explore its activity; "Mothers and nurses feel no reverence or tenderness toward her genitals; they do not direct her attention toward that secret organ, invisible except for its covering, and not to be grasped in the hand" (*SS* 272). Instead, adults direct a girl's attention to a doll (Beauvoir, *SS* 278). In doing so, adults give a girl a very different kind of project than the one they give a boy. In playing with a doll, a girl precisely does not play with her own body; her body's powers, therefore, remain largely undiscovered, and she misses an important opportunity for making her body her own.

Moreover, when adults do draw a girl's attention to her body, Beauvoir argues, they often do so in ways that actually make it harder for her to make her body her own. While a girl, for

example, usually learns from adults that she will be able to have children, she often is not told how pregnancy occurs or what childbirth entails. Through their comments about pregnancy, then, adults give a girl a project of investigating her reproductive system. Yet this investigation tends to only make her body mysterious to her; she is unable, on the basis of the limited information others provide her and her own exploration of her body, to take charge of her body's reproductive powers. At first, Beauvoir writes, this mystery is magical rather than troubling (*SS* 283). As a girl grows older, though, "The magic of maternity has been dissipated ... Often it no longer seems marvelous but rather horrible that a parasitic body should proliferate within her body; the very idea of this monstrous swelling frightens her" (Beauvoir, *SS* 299).

Thus rather than securing her body as her own, this project and others like it actually undermine a girl's relation to her body. Since she is unable to learn exactly how she becomes pregnant, she experiences her body as able, without her consent or even her knowledge, of engaging in an activity that she does not want it to. Instead of enacting her subjectivity, her body seems, in an important respect, to be opposed to it. Such projects, then, fail to contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom because they leave a girl unwilling to transform the world. Concerned that her body may betray her, a girl will feel unready to turn her focus away from her body and toward the rest of the world. Indeed, she may even withdraw from the larger world and concentrate, instead, on protecting herself from her own body.

The interactions adults have with a boy and a girl about the larger world are also, Beauvoir reveals, significantly different. Adults, Beauvoir notes, often allow a boy to play outside while insisting that girl play inside. In allowing a boy to play outdoors, adults give him, albeit indirectly, projects such as "climbing trees, fighting with his companions, facing them in rough games" (Beauvoir, *SS* 280). In these projects, a boy actively grasps the world and

confronts obstacles that he is, nonetheless, largely prepared to overcome; a boy “undertakes, he invents, he dares” (Beauvoir, *SS* 280). Through such projects, therefore, a boy learns that he need not simply accept the present world; if there is no fort in the backyard, a boy can make one out of tree branches. Furthermore, through such projects a boy acquires the kind of skills that are necessary for making a present world that initially impedes him into a world that affirms him; if the branches for the fort are too long, he learns to cut them. Such projects thus contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom by making a boy capable of transforming the world.

In keeping a girl indoors, however, adults largely deprive a girl of projects in which she actively grasps the world and confronts obstacles. A family’s house is generally a world that is not to be touched; there is furniture that must not be broken, for example, and rugs that should not get dirty. The indoors, in other words, is a world with which a girl’s projects should not, for the most part, interfere. In keeping a girl indoors, then, adults indirectly give her projects that involve little concrete interaction with the present world and leave it mostly unchanged. A girl, for example, spends much of her time playing with dolls; in such a project, she engages with the world primarily on its terms and not on her own. As a result, she is less likely to discover that her present world can be transformed, and she develops few of the skills necessary for doing so.

Beauvoir also notes that even when adults allow a boy and a girl access to the same places, the clothing they provide for each effectively give a boy and girl different projects. Adults dress a boy in trousers, clothes that allow him to move his body freely; in addition, adults do not criticize him for getting his clothes dirty. Just as a boy does not worry about his body, then, a boy does not worry about his clothing, and he pursues projects that, often quite messily, immerse him in the world. The girl, on the other hand, is “dressed in inconvenient and frilly clothes of which she has to be careful, her hair done up in fancy style, [and] she is given rules of



deportment” (Beauvoir, *SS* 282). A girl’s clothes restrict her movement, and she is expected to keep them clean. Unlike a boy, then, she is concerned about her clothing, just as she is concerned about her own body, and she pursues projects that will keep her neat and unscathed. Such projects, though, tend to minimize her contact with the world. Thus rather than teaching a girl skills for transforming the world, such projects teach her to conform to the present world and do not contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom.

Moreover, when adults do give a girl a project in which she might transform the world, she is often, in contrast to a boy, given this project directly. Outside, a boy is usually out of sight of adults; with no adult authority immediately present, a boy must decide for himself what he will do and negotiate possible opposition from others by himself. A boy’s projects, then, allow him to recognize his own freedom; through them, he learns that “he will obtain adult approval by becoming independent of adults. He will please them by not appearing to seek to please them” (Beauvoir, *SS* 270). Unlike a boy, however, a girl is often told what to do; “the boy is commonly excused, but his sister is allowed, even asked, to sweep, dust, peel vegetables, wash the baby, watch the soup kettle” (Beauvoir, *SS* 285). Furthermore, she is usually expected to pursue these projects in accordance with the wishes of adults; “She would like to escape from her mother’s authority, an authority that is exercised in a much more intimate and everyday manner than is anything that the boys have to accept” (Beauvoir, *SS* 294). A girl’s project’s, then, actually impede the recognition of her freedom. Even when a girl transforms the world, she usually does so in submission to adults and so these projects tend to conceal, rather than reveal, her own freedom.

In the projects that adults give a girl, she faces a conflict between her interactions with the world and her freedom, a conflict that she is, in many ways, prevented by adults from

overcoming. Primarily confined by adult to projects that require her to be passive—projects that either conform to the present world or that transform the world only in obedience to others—a girl has little opportunity to recognize or develop her freedom. In learning to simply accept the situations she finds herself in, a girl participates, in effect, in apprenticeship of oppression rather than freedom.

By denying a child an apprenticeship of freedom early in life, adults make it more difficult for a child to participate in an apprenticeship of freedom later in life. In giving a girl projects of passivity, adults leave her unaccustomed to the work required for transforming the world. Thus even if she should, later in life, be given projects in which she can transform the world, she must, unlike the boy, first overcome a certain aversion to the work these projects demand of her:

the delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and educators, books and myths, women and men; she is taught to enjoy them from earliest childhood; the temptation becomes more and more insidious; and she is the more fatally bound to yield to those delights as the flight of her transcendence is dashed against harsher obstacles. (Beauvoir, *SS* 298)

A person who does not participate in an apprenticeship of freedom as a child, then, is, as an adult, at a serious disadvantage; “Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as a subject” (Beauvoir, *SS* 280).

Moreover, by denying a child an apprenticeship of freedom, adults also make it more likely that this person’s children will also not participate in an apprenticeship of freedom. Beauvoir notes that a girl is usually given projects by her mother, while a boy is given projects by his father (*SS* 280-1). These projects tend to reflect the projects that the mother and father were themselves given as children. Yet if the mother did not, as is likely, participate in an

apprenticeship of freedom, the projects she gives her daughter will perpetuate the oppression she has herself endured. A woman's denial of an apprenticeship of freedom to her daughter may be inadvertent; she may simply not know how to give her daughter other projects. Often, though, this denial is purposeful; "a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will as rule think that it is wiser to make a 'true woman' of her, since society will more readily accept her" (Beauvoir, *SS* 281). Moreover, Beauvoir notes that some women, frustrated by their own lack of freedom, take their revenge on their daughters, denying their daughters the very freedom that they themselves have been denied; "the mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile toward her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it" (*SS* 281). In denying a child an apprenticeship of freedom, then, a vicious circle is set up, not just for one child but for generations of children.

Now, the boy's apprenticeship for life described by Beauvoir cannot simply be equated with an apprenticeship of freedom. Indeed, I would argue that in so far as a boy's apprenticeship for life has tended to foster an individualistic rather than an interpersonal understanding of freedom, this apprenticeship has impeded a full realization of freedom. Nonetheless, the interactions that Beauvoir documents between adults and a boy, although perhaps not a perfect example of an apprenticeship of freedom, nonetheless give a good sense of the kind of interactions that contribute to an apprenticeship of freedom.

Yet even if a boy and a girl were given similar projects, other factors could affect a girl's ability to realize her freedom. As Beauvoir recognizes, even a girl who is allowed, and even encouraged, to act like a boy while she is growing up, will often feel pressured to act differently once she is older.<sup>15</sup> Thus although she may be able to transform the world, she may be reluctant

to actually do so. As a result, rather than continuing to develop, her ability to transform the world could actually deteriorate. In order for a girl's apprenticeship of freedom to be successful, then, it may need to include projects that will not only enable her to transform the world but also will enable her to resist those who would oppress her.

In their interactions with children, adults provide—or withhold—apprenticeships of freedom. In giving children projects for which they must take responsibility and that transform the world, adults enable them to recognize and develop their freedom. In giving children projects that require their submission to others and that conform to the world, adults prevent them from recognizing and developing their freedom. The interactions adults have with a child are critical to her future freedom. Thus those who have been fortunate enough to participate in an apprenticeship of freedom have a particular responsibility for insuring that they now provide such an apprenticeship to others.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eva Gothlin, for example, argues that Beauvoir's discussion in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* of human existence as a disclosure, rather than a lack of being, implies an embodied conception of freedom. For a related discussion of embodiment and freedom, see Kruks.

<sup>2</sup> Gail Weiss, for example, argues that Beauvoir, in contrast to Sartre, views other's freedom as a necessary condition for one's own freedom. For a related discussion, see also Daigle.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Singer, although she does not discuss an apprenticeship of freedom, argues that Beauvoir conceives of freedom as developing; Singer writes, "As a consequence of her developmental model of freedom tied to material conditions, Beauvoir recommends an ethic of commitment geared toward a situation in which freedom ought to be mobilized in concert with others for the purpose of creating the conditions for its further development by engaging others in the recognition and exercise of their freedom" (238). In this paper, I will be working out how, particularly with respect to children, such conditions can be created. For a related discussion, see Busch.

<sup>4</sup> As will become clear shortly, this resistance is the very possibility of her disclosing the world as either restricting or enabling her projects.

<sup>5</sup> Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, uses the term “project” in a similar sense.

<sup>6</sup> Yet although nothing outside a subject can justify her projects, a subject is not, therefore, utterly unaccountable for them. Rather, a subject must herself justify her projects; “It is up to man to make it important to be a man, and he alone can feel his success or failure” (Beauvoir, *EA* 16). The subject’s freedom, far from relieving her of all responsibility for her projects, makes her absolutely responsible for them.

<sup>7</sup> Arp also identifies a third conception of freedom in Beauvoir’s work: power (29).

<sup>8</sup> In an effort to avoid the responsibility that freedom entails, a subject who has come to recognize her freedom may dishonestly attempt to conceal this freedom from herself; Beauvoir discusses several ways in which subjects attempt such concealment (*EA* 42-68).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. “If I persist in beating my fist against a stone wall, my freedom exhausts itself in this useless gesture without succeeding in giving itself a content” (Beauvoir, *EA* 28).

<sup>10</sup> As I will discuss shortly, not all habits enable a subject’s skilful handling of the world; indeed, some habits actually damage, or even destroy, a subject’s ability to handle the world skilfully.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, there are also many projects that a subject need not begin pursuing as a child in order to pursue them later in life. Nonetheless, there remain some projects that a subject must begin pursuing as a child if she is to be able to pursue them later in life.

<sup>12</sup> A child, of course, does not only interact with adult. Nonetheless, in so far as a child cannot interact with other children unless permitted to by an adult, even what a child learns from other children is, at least indirectly, learned from an adult.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the current situation of girls world-wide, see *Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls* 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Beauvoir writes, “... it is within the totality of their lives that each factor—penis or doll—takes on its importance” (*SS* 280).

<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir writes, “Unless the little girl leads an unusually solitary existence, a boyish way of life, though approved by her parents, will shock her entourage, her friends, her teachers” (*SS* 281).

### Works Cited

Arp, Kristana. “Conceptions of Freedom in Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.” *International Studies in Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (1999): 25-34.

*Because I am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls* 2009. 2009. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.

- Busch, Thomas. "Simone de Beauvoir on Achieving Subjectivity." *The Contradictions of Freedom: Philosophical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir's The Mandarins*. Eds. Sally J. Scholz and Shannon M Mussett. Albany: SUNY Press, 2005. 177-188.
- Daigle, Christine. "The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir." *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics*. Ed. Christine Daigle. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006. 120-41.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press, 1994.
- . *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Gothlin, Eva. "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger." *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*. Ed. Claudia Card. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 45-65.
- . "Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Phenomenology and Philosophy of History in *Le Deuxième Sexe*." *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*. Eds. Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001. 41-52.
- Kruks, Sonia. "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom." *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. Ed. Margaret A. Simons. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. 79-96.
- Levine, Ruth, Cynthia Lloyd, Margaret Greene, and Caren Grown. *Girls Count: A Global Investment and Action Agenda*. Center for Global Development 2008. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.
- Lloyd, Cynthia. *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls*. Population Council. 2009. Web. 6 Jun. 2010.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.
- Singer, Linda. "Interpretation and Retrieval: Rereading Beauvoir." *Women's Studies International Forum* 8, no. 3 (1985): 231-8.
- Weiss, Gail. "Freedom F/Or the Other" in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*. Eds. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 241-54.