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Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist about Meaning in Life

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Abstract

This paper answers the question of how Simone de Beauvoir's view on meaning in life ought to be categorized within the standard theoretical framework in contemporary analytic philosophy. According to this framework, theories of meaning divide into four main categories: supernaturalism, nihilism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism. Contemporary philosophers typically classify existentialists (including Beauvoir) as subjective naturalists, and some of Beauvoir's own writings seem to support this interpretation. A careful and systematic examination of Beauvoir's work, however, does not support this view. Morality and the value of freedom provide objective constraints on Beauvoir's view of meaning in life. Since Beauvoir's position combines both subjectivist and objectivist elements, it is best categorized as a "hybrid" position.

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's views on meaning in life have received very little attention in the contemporary analytic debate. In a previous paper, I began addressing this oversight by offering a systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life based on various writings from her vast oeuvre.[1] This paper builds on this previous work. In particular, it answers the question of how Beauvoir's view on meaning in life ought to be categorized within the standard theoretical framework in analytic philosophy.

According to this framework, theories of meaning divide into four main categories: supernaturalism, nihilism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism. Contemporary philosophers typically classify existentialists (e.g., Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir) as subjective naturalists, and some of Beauvoir's own writings seem to support this interpretation. A careful and systematic examination of Beauvoir's works, however, does not support this view. In this paper I argue that Beauvoir's position combines both subjectivist and objectivist elements and so is best categorized as a "hybrid" position. However, as I explain in the paper, this position is significantly different from other views that have been

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[1] Kiki Berk, "Beauvoir's Philosophy of Meaning in Life," in *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (June 2021): 60-77.

classified in this way, such as that of Susan Wolf.

This paper has six parts. I begin by explaining why Beauvoir is neither a supernaturalist nor a nihilist (section 1). Next, I offer reasons for thinking that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist (section 2) and go on to identify and explain the lesser-known objectivist elements in her view (sections 3 and 4). I then discuss how Beauvoir's view has been mischaracterized in the literature and how it ought to be categorized instead—as a hybrid view (section 5). I finish the paper with a few concluding thoughts (section 6).

1. Why Beauvoir Is Neither a Supernaturalist Nor a Nihilist

Beauvoir is clearly not a supernaturalist. I here understand supernaturalism as Metz defines it, namely as "the general view that what constitutes, or is at least necessary for, meaning in life is a relationship with a spiritual realm."[2] As an atheist, Beauvoir does not believe in God, and there is no reason to think that she believes in anything supernatural or spiritual, either. Beauvoir therefore lacks the necessary beliefs for being a supernaturalist. In fact, her view is quite the opposite: Beauvoir thinks that God would not be able to give our lives meaning even if he did exist.

Beauvoir criticizes the idea that God can be a source of purpose and meaning in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. She considers that, if there is a God, then all we need to do is his will. This raises the question of what God's will is. Beauvoir considers two options. According to the first, there is no distance between God's "project" and his "reality," meaning that "what he wills is; he wills what is."[3] This would mean that human beings could do whatever they want, because God wills all that is.[4] In an example from Beauvoir, this led a heretical sect in the twelfth century to "[squander] their lives in joyous orgies."[5] If it is the case that God wills all that is, then there is no point in turning to God to make our actions or our lives meaningful: "If [man] wants to give meaning to his behavior, he should not address himself to this impersonal, indifferent, and complete God."[6]

According to the second option, the will of God is not what "is" but what "has to be." If this is the case, then the issue is that it is not clear what God wants. As

[2] Metz 2013: 79.
[3] Beauvoir 2004: 102.
[4] That is, assuming that God does not want humans to do things they cannot do.
[5] Beauvoir 2004: 103.
[6] Beauvoir 2004: 103.

Beauvoir wonders: "Does God want the believer to massacre the unfaithful, burn the heretics, or tolerate their faith? Does he want him to go off to war or to make peace? Does he want capitalism or socialism?"[7] Beauvoir's worry is that, if there were a God, then he would always have to reveal his will to human beings, with all the complications this creates (in particular, how do we know this is really God?). God himself would not be able to give human beings any guidance directly: "God, if he existed, would therefore be powerless to guide human transcendence. Man is never in situation except before men, and this presence or this absence way up in heaven does not concern him." [8]

There is more to say about Beauvoir's views on God, but for our purposes this suffices to show that Beauvoir does not think that meaning in life depends on the existence of God, from which it follows that Beauvoir is not a supernaturalist.

It is less obvious that Beauvoir is not a nihilist, where nihilism is understood as the view that life is meaningless. In fact, atheist existentialists have sometimes been interpreted as nihilists. Sartre, for example, has often been interpreted (wrongly, I think) as a nihilist. But there are compelling reasons to think that Beauvoir is not a nihilist. The best evidence for this conclusion is that in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir rejects "the nihilistic attitude," as she calls it. Beauvoir defines the nihilistic attitude as follows: "Conscious of being unable to be anything, man then decides to be nothing. We shall call this attitude nihilistic."[9] At face value, the nihilistic attitude is different from the theory of nihilism as it is defined and understood in the contemporary debate about meaning in life. However, in her rejection of the nihilistic attitude, Beauvoir rejects nihilism as well. This is apparent from the following passages:

> The nihilist is right in thinking that the world possess no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly.[10]

> 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.[11]

[7] Beauvoir 2004: 104.
[8] Beauvoir 2004: 105.
[9] Beauvoir 1948: 52.
[10] Beauvoir 1948: 57.
[11] Beauvoir 1948: 57-8.

These quotations make it clear that Beauvoir is not a nihilist in the contemporary sense of the word. According to Beauvoir, the universe does not contain any essence, values, or meaning in itself; it is up to human beings to bring these things into the world.

Another important piece of evidence that Beauvoir is not a nihilist is that in several of her works she discusses ways in which our lives can be more or less meaningful, which implies that life is not necessarily devoid of meaning, and that it is possible to give life meaning. For example, in *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir explains how the lives of elderly people can be more or less meaningful depending on how privileged they are. She discusses how many uneducated laborers, who have been exploited by the system their whole lives, struggle to make their lives meaningful in old age because they don't have any projects of their own upon which to fall back after retirement. For example: "The reason that the retired man is rendered hopeless by the want of meaning in his present life is that the meaning of his existence has been stolen from him from the very beginning."[12] And: "Even if decent houses are built for them [retired laborers], they cannot be provided with the culture, the interests and the responsibilities that would give their life a meaning."[13] Beauvoir makes it very clear that she does not think the lives of the elderly are inherently less meaningful; this is merely the result of their situation. Living a meaningful life is very well possible, according to Beauvoir, also for the elderly: "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."[14] This is why the lives of the privileged elderly do not necessarily decrease in meaning, and why Beauvoir thinks we ought to change society so that everyone can enjoy this privilege. Remarks such as these in *The Coming of Age* suggest that Beauvoir thinks that our lives are not altogether meaningless, from which it follows that she is not a nihilist.

[12] Beauvoir 1972: 542.
[13] Beauvoir 1972: 542.
[14] Beauvoir 1972: 540.

2. Why Beauvoir Seems to Be a Subjectivist

There are much better reasons to think that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist. Before we look at these reasons, let's define "subjective naturalism" (which I will sometimes refer to as "subjectivism") and distinguish it from "objective naturalism" (or simply "objectivism"). I am here understanding subjective naturalism, as Metz does, as the theory that "what makes a life meaningful depends on the subject."[15] Given that, on this theory, meaning depends on the subject, it follows that meaningful lives can vary greatly. Metz expresses this idea as follows: "subjectivism is the abstract idea that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject."[16] Subjectivism, therefore, seems to involve two closely connected components: (i) meaning depends on the subject, and (ii) meaningful lives can vary greatly between subjects. For example, a subjectivist might think that a person's life is meaningful just in case one thinks it is, from which it follows that two very different lives might be equally meaningful, and two very similar lives might vary greatly in meaningfulness.[17] For the objectivist, on the other hand, "certain states of affairs in the physical world are meaningful 'in themselves', apart from being the object of propositional attitudes."[18] This means that those states of affairs are meaningful independently of subjects in general and any subject in particular. According to the objectivist, "some conditions are such that they ought to be wanted, chosen, valued, and so on, even if people have not done so."[19] This means that certain projects and lives are inherently more meaningful than others, no matter how anyone experiences them or what anyone thinks about them.

Given these definitions of subjective and objective naturalism, Beauvoir appears to be a subjective naturalist. There are at least three reasons to think this. First, subjectivism about meaning meshes perfectly with the rest of Beauvoir's worldview. Beauvoir appears to be a subjective naturalist in virtue of being an existentialist. As an existentialist, Beauvoir thinks that nothing is inherently meaningful or valuable but rather human beings introduce values and meaning into the world through their actions. One of the defining features of existentialism

[15] Metz 2013: 164.
[16] Metz 2013: 19.
[17] Metz also uses more fleshed-out and specific definitions of subjectivism, but I am here sticking to this more general definition of subjectivism.
[18] Metz 2013: 165.
[19] Metz 2013: 165.

is that it is up to individuals to shape their own lives, to "make" themselves, and to determine how to live. Since existence precedes essence, human beings are free to create their own meaning in life, and nothing—including human nature, the meaning of life, and values—is predetermined. Beauvoir herself attributes subjectivism to existentialism: "By affirming that the source of all values resides in the freedom of man, existentialism merely carries on the tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel…"[20] Existentialism and subjective naturalism fit together, which explains why Metz mentions existentialism as a paradigmatic example of subjective naturalism about meaning in life.[21]

Second, Beauvoir seems to defend subjective naturalism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she claims that projects are not inherently meaningful but instead are given meaning by subjects. As she puts it: "A project is exactly what it decides to be. It has the meaning that it gives itself. One cannot define it from the outside."[22] And: "In truth, only the subject defines the meaning of his action."[23] Human beings are therefore the source of meaning and value in the world: "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."[24] And: "There exists no absolute value before the passion of man, outside of it."[25] In *Pyrrhus and Cineas,* Beauvoir makes the point repeatedly that things such as worth, utility, and progress don't have any meaning except from a particular point of view. In other words, nothing has inherent value or meaning. She writes, for example, "How does one decide what is worth the most in itself: the life of a cathedral builder or that of a pilot?"[26] And: "The words 'utility', 'progress', 'fear' have meaning only in a world where the project has made points of view and ends appear."[27] And in the conclusion of this book, Beauvoir writes about the negative power within her, which releases her of "the illusion of false objectivity."

Third, Beauvoir seems to oppose objective naturalism by rejecting the very notion of objective values in the first place. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir discusses different "attitudes," one of which is "the serious mind." Just as

[20] Beauvoir 1948: 17.
[21] See Metz 2013: 169.
[22] Beauvoir 2004: 100.
[23] Beauvoir 2004: 114
[24] Beauvoir 1948: 15.
[25] Beauvoir 1948: 11.
[26] Beauvoir 2004: 127.
[27] Beauvoir 2004: 141.

Beauvoir rejects the nihilistic attitude, she also rejects "the serious attitude," which is to regard values as being objective. In her own words:

> The serious mind claims to separate the end from the project that defines it and to recognize in it an intrinsic value. He believes that values are in the world, before man, without him. Man would only have to pick them. But Spinoza and Hegel, more definitively, have already dissipated this illusion of false objectivity.[28]

> We must first turn away from the errors of false objectivity. The serious mind considers health, fortune, education, and comfort as indisputable goods whose worth is written in heaven. But he is duped by an illusion; ready-made values whose hierarchy is imposed upon my decisions do not exist without me. What's good for a man is what he wants as his own good.[29]

> The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned.[30]

It should not come as a surprise, then, that Beauvoir has often been interpreted as a subjectivist in the literature. For example, Shannon Mussett 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."[31] Similarly, Gwendolyn Dolske says of Beauvoir that "she suggests that meaning must be pursued rather than provided from an external source."[32]

These three pieces of evidence (Beauvoir's existentialism, her pro-subjectivist comments, and her anti-objectivist comments) provide support for the position that Beauvoir is a subjective naturalist. Nevertheless, things are not as simple as they seem, as I will argue in the next two sections.

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[28] Beauvoir 2004: 99.
[29] Beauvoir 2004: 126-7.
[30] Beauvoir 1948: 46.
[31] Mussett 2006: 233.
[32] Dolske 2015: 112.

3. Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist I: Freedom

Although there are reasons to think that Beauvoir is a subjectivist about meaning, the status of freedom as a value complicates this interpretation. In order to understand why, we need to learn more about Beauvoir's views on values in general and on the value of freedom in particular.

For Beauvoir, a project is valuable to us as soon as we choose to pursue it and in virtue of our choosing to pursue it. According to Beauvoir, choosing to pursue something is valuable because doing so is an expression of our freedom, and freedom itself has value. The centrality of freedom in existentialist thought cannot be overstated. When describing existentialism, Beauvoir writes: "as for us, whatever the case may be, we believe in freedom."[33] Not only is freedom the central value, the expression of human freedom (namely, choosing) creates all other value and meaning in the world. Freedom is the "primary value," because it is the 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."[34]

Beauvoir's position that freedom is the source of all other values highlights the special status of freedom 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, "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."[35] On the other hand, Beauvoir apparently resists this conclusion when in the same book she writes, "[Freedom] is not a ready-made value which offers itself from the outside."[36] The latter quotation 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 being the primary value which gives value to everything else.

[33] Beauvoir 1948: 23.
[34] Beauvoir 1948: 24.
[35] Beauvoir 1948: 57-8.
[36] Beauvoir 1948: 24.

Sartre scholars have noticed this tension in Sartre and offered a number of different explanations for it. In *Freedom as a Value*, for example, David Detmer diagnoses this tension in Sartre's philosophy as a shift in thinking from an early to a later period. "We have seen … [that] the early Sartre defends an extreme form of ethical subjectivism. However, we have also seen… that there are objectivist strains running through Sartre's writings in all stages in his career, becoming increasingly prominent in his later writings."[37] Whereas Sartre in his early works is a subjectivist about all values, including freedom, he later admits that freedom must be objectively valuable. As Detmer writes: "In his later works, however, Sartre seems to mean by this claim [that freedom is the "highest" or most important value] that we are morally *obliged* to choose freedom, and to make our subsidiary choices on the basis of their tendency to promote or diminish freedom."[38] Whereas the early Sartre believes human beings *invent* all values, the later Sartre holds that some values (in particular, freedom) are *discovered*.

While it is not entirely clear whether Beauvoir undergoes a parallel shift in views from an early to a later period (more on which later), I do think that the position which, according to Detmer, Sartre ends up holding—namely, that freedom is an objective value—is best understood as Beauvoir's considered view. Certainly, Beauvoir suggests at times that all values are in some sense subjective, but she is also clearly committed to the view that freedom has objective value. The latter seems so indispensable to her overall philosophy, both in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that this must be what she thinks. It is clear from her writings that she thinks that a meaningful life is a free life. But to define a meaningful life as a free life is to reject pure subjectivism (whether we should call her view "objectivist" or something else instead is an issue to which I will return in section 5). When Beauvoir says that all values are in some sense subjective, either she 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.[39]

Even though Beauvoir is virtually always regarded as a subjectivist in the literature, my view that freedom is an objective value for Beauvoir finds some support in the literature, including the work of Jonathan Webber. Webber uses the

[37] Detmer 1986: 203.
[38] Detmer 1986: 203.
[39] Arguably the latter is true even if, strictly speaking, freedom is an objective value, for how freedom gets expressed varies greatly from individual to individual, and so is subjective in a loose sense of the word.

term "human agency" to refer to that which we have been referring to as "freedom." (Freedom should be understood as freedom of choice, which human beings exercise through their agency.) And Webber concludes that human agency has objective value for Beauvoir: "The value of human agency … cannot be a subjective value dependent on having some specific project. … you must accept the value of human agency regardless of which projects you in fact pursue. That is, you must accept that human agency is objectively valuable."[40]

4. Why Beauvoir Is Not a Subjectivist II: Morality

We have just established that Beauvoir is not a pure subjectivist because she thinks that a meaningful life is a free life. But it turns out that there is another objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects on Beauvoir's view. The constraint in question is that 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."[41] And also: "If the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce his oppression."[42] For Beauvoir, then, there is an 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 subjectively engaging they are..

What is Beauvoir's reason for adopting this objective constraint? In short, she thinks that morality matters, and she understands morality in terms of freedom. This makes sense, given that her aim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is to develop an ethical theory based on existentialism, in which freedom is the central value. Beauvoir mentions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that existentialism is often seen as a "solipsistic" philosophy, which she aims to disprove by stressing the essential connection between our own freedom and that of other people. Morality and

[40] Webber 2018: 227-8.
[41] Beauvoir 1948: 91.
[42] Beauvoir 1948: 96.

freedom are thus inextricably linked for Beauvoir: "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision."[43] Beauvoir makes it very clear that she thinks that freedom comes with a certain "law" or "requirement," which we can understand as a moral law or requirement. In her own words:

> Man is free; but he finds his law in his very freedom. First, he must assume his freedom and not flee it; he assumed it by a constructive movement: one does not exist without doing something; and also by a negative movement which rejects oppression for oneself and others.[44]

> He can become conscious of the real requirements of his own freedom, which can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others. Therefore, in any case, the freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves.[45]

Oppressing others by infringing upon their freedom is thus the paradigm case of an immoral, absurd, and meaningless action.[46]

It is important to understand that for Beauvoir the recognition of the value of other people's freedom, and the moral imperative not to infringe upon it, has the further implication that one ought to promote other people's freedom, too. This means that social and political action are required to improve others' situations so that they can have more freedom. Karen Vintges captures this idea well when she writes:

> Willing ourselves free is wanting to *practice* our freedom. This means that we must accept the fact that we have to surpass ourselves and reach out for the world. To realize our freedom, we have to act as a body in the world. The attitude of willing oneself free thus implies that we, by way of a so-called "moral conversion," accept our bodily and emotional dimension and

[43] Beauvoir 1948: 24.
[44] Beauvoir 1948: 156.
[45] Beauvoir 1948: 60.
[46] In the existentialist ethics that Beauvoir develops, moral and immoral actions are defined in an idiosyncratic, narrow way (namely, in terms of freedom). This means that certain cases that are standardly used in the literature about immoral, meaningless actions, may not be so on Beauvoir's view. For example, on Beauvoir's account Gauguin's leaving his family was not immoral because his actions did not infringe on anyone's freedom. Thanks to Masahiro Morioka for the example.

> transform our pure freedom into a concrete commitment to the freedom of our fellow men; in other words, get involved.[47]

Webber makes a similar point when he writes about Beauvoir: "We are therefore obliged, she argues, to promote wealth, health, and education for all people."[48]

We have now identified a second objective element in Beauvoir's view on meaning. This raises the question of whether we should say the same of Beauvoir as Detmer said of Sartre, namely that "there is … a definite drift from the subjective to the objective."[49] It would be convenient if we could point to a development from an early, subjectivist Beauvoir to a late, objectivist Beauvoir, but it's not clear if that would be true to the facts. Both the subjective and objective elements of Beauvoir's view are contained in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, which was written in 1943 (published in 1944), and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which came out in 1948. Moreover, in *Becoming Beauvoir*, Kate Kirkpatrick describes how Beauvoir already raises the question of the self and the other in her early diaries. As Kirkpatrick writes: "Striving to be free, therefore, wasn't good enough – any person who valued freedom without hypocrisy had to value it in other people, to act in such a way that they exercised their freedom ethically."[50] Very early on, then, Beauvoir thought that the freedom to become an *ethical* self was more important than freedom itself. Even though the centrality of the radical freedom of the self cannot be denied in both the early Sartre and the early Beauvoir, it seems that Beauvoir realized much earlier than Sartre that it was wrong to stop there. Kirkpatrick argues that Beauvoir's ideas were the catalyst for Sartre to move away from his views about the primacy of a purely subjective, radical individual freedom to recognizing the value of others' freedom as well. It seems, then, that there was less of a shift in Beauvoir's thinking, and, insofar as there was one, it occurred much earlier than Sartre's. Thus, we cannot attribute the subjectivist and objectivist elements of her view to different periods in her thought.

According to Beauvoir, then, a meaningful life is not just a free life. In the end, a meaningful life is also a moral life: one that does not infringe on other people's freedom and even promotes it. This means that there are two objective elements in Beauvoir's view on meaning: freedom and morality. This leaves us with the

[47] Vintges 2004: 226.
[48] Webber 2018: 230.
[49] Detmer 1988: 205.
[50] Kirkpatrick 2019: 201.

question of how to categorize Beauvoir's view. Can she still be said to be a subjectivist or should she be classified as an objectivist instead? Or is she neither?

5. Why Beauvoir Holds a Hybrid View

Given the conclusions of the previous two sections, one might wonder whether Beauvoir's position ought to be classified as a version of objective naturalism. After all, there is, on her view, at least one objective value and one objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects. All other values are derivative from the objective value of freedom. And, as we have established, Beauvoir thinks that a meaningful life is a free and a moral life. Beauvoir's view on meaning clearly has implications for how we ought to live our lives, as certain projects are more meaningful than others. For example, projects promoting the freedom of others are more meaningful than projects that don't or that do the opposite. All of this has an objective ring to it.

However, simply labeling Beauvoir as an objectivist doesn't really capture the spirit of her view. As discussed earlier, the intended conclusion of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that values are subjective, and Beauvoir spends a large part of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* conveying this sentiment. She passionately argues against the "serious man," who thinks of values the way the objectivist does. To call Beauvoir an objective naturalist would therefore be diametrically opposed to her aims and intentions. In addition, this categorization would not mesh well with some of her other important beliefs, which we have already encountered in section 2. Beauvoir believes that meaning and value are first introduced in the world by people (subjects or consciousnesses) and—within the constraints just specified—whatever people choose to pursue is valuable to them.[51] This means that there is a very wide range of valuable projects; the only projects that are *not* valuable are those that infringe on other people's freedom. Value, therefore, depends on the subject and varies greatly between subjects, which is exactly how we defined subjectivism earlier. Calling Beauvoir an objectivist, then, would be misleading and not do justice to her position.

While it is not obvious how to classify Beauvoir's view, it is clear is that her position involves both objective and subjective elements. In this regard, Beauvoir's view is usefully compared to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, which

[51] Note that on Beauvoir's view they do not even have to find their project valuable themselves, they just have to choose to pursue it.

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 greatly from person to person. Detmer reaches the same conclusion about Sartre's position:

> Understood this way, Sartre's freedom-ethic would appear to contain both objectivist and subjectivist elements. The claim that freedom is the highest value entails, under present circumstances, that we should do more than merely invent values freely. Rather, it calls for the recognition on our part of certain stringent duties toward others. Thus, from the claim that freedom is the highest value, it follows that, no matter, what I might think or feel about it, I am wrong if I do not act so as to help others fulfill their needs. This ethic is, therefore, objectivist in the sense which I have defined.[52]

One might think that Beauvoir (and Sartre, for that matter) is simply contradicting herself. However, this reading is uncharitable and fails to recognize that the subjectivist and objectivist strands in their thinking are, in fact, compatible. There is no logical contradiction in saying that all values are subjective, except for the value of freedom, and that all pursued projects are meaningful, except for those that infringe on people's freedom. In fact, Detmer makes the case that combining the subjectivist and objectivist elements is one of the most important contributions of Sartre's ethics: "The most important of these contributions consists, I believe, in the wealth of tools which he has provided us for resolving the conflict between subjectivism and objectivism."[53] He even says that: "it is the chief virtue of Sartre's ethical theory that it recognizes, and, with admirable clarity and insight articulates, both of them."[54]

In light of all of this, it seems best to call Beauvoir's position a hybrid one, which combines subjective and objective elements. It is important to note that this is not a "hybrid" position in the sense that this term is used in the literature—which is to say, a hybrid position à la Susan Wolf. According to Wolf, meaning arises from subjective engagement with objectively valuable projects. Even though Beauvoir's view has subjective and objective elements, it contains neither "subjective engagement" nor "objectively valuable projects." Objectively

[52] Detmer 1986: 206-7.
[53] Detmer 1986: 207.
[54] Detmer 1986: 215.

valuable projects don't exist for Beauvoir, and subjective engagement isn't part of her theory, either. The subjective element for Beauvoir consists simply in my choice to pursue some project. Being engaged in this project is not necessary for it to be meaningful. If I am bored, checked out, or alienated, the project is still meaningful as long as I continue to pursue it. The only sense in which Beauvoir's view is a hybrid view, then, is that it is subjectivist in spirit and contains objective constraints. It has no further similarities to what we commonly call a "hybrid view" in the literature.

As discussed earlier, this is not how Beauvoir has been understood. In a break from this, Elena Popa agrees with me that Beauvoir holds a hybrid view that contains subjective and objective elements. According to her, the subjective element is "to decide meaning for oneself" and the objective element consists in "the constraints stemming from one's relation to others."[55] This seems right. However, Popa sees greater similarities between Beauvoir and Wolf than I do (although she does acknowledge some important differences). As she writes: "In an important sense Beauvoir's view fits the structure proposed by Wolf, not only in incorporating subjective and objective components, but also in capturing their interaction."[56] I disagree. In my view, the only similarity between these views is that both contain subjective and objective components.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Beauvoir is not a subjectivist about meaning in life, as she has often been interpreted to be in the literature. Even though her view on meaning in life contains subjective elements, it contains equally important objective elements. The essential tenet of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics, not to infringe on other people's freedom (and ideally to promote it), forms an objective constraint on the meaningfulness of our projects. Beauvoir should therefore be said to hold a hybrid view, which combines subjective and objective elements in a way that differs from the paradigm hybrid view in the contemporary literature, namely that of Susan Wolf. Although Beauvoir uses a narrow and idiosyncratic interpretation of morality, her position on the connection between meaningfulness and morality is one that can be found in the contemporary literature, too: there is a virtual consensus in the literature that immoral projects

[55] Popa 2019: 428.
[56] Popa 2019: 428.

are not meaningful. There are thus a number of important points of agreement between Beauvoir's theory and those discussed in the contemporary debate, although these similarities remain limited to the broad strokes. This underscores both the relevance and the originality of Beauvoir's views on meaning in life.[57]

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