ONE

Condemned to Freedom

> [Man] asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things . . . As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it.[1]

In an autobiographical account, Simone de Beauvoir describes what she calls the "existentialist offensive" that occurred in Paris in the weeks following the publication of the first issues of *Les Temps Modernes*, as well as her own first novel and two of Sartre's, the opening of *Les Bouches inutiles*, and Sartre's lecture "Is Existentialism a Humanism?" "We were astonished by the furor we caused," Beauvoir writes, "When Sartre gave his lecture, so many people turned up that they couldn't all get into the lecture hall; there was a frenzied crush and some women fainted."[2] The birth of the intense convergence of historic event and thought that was existentialism after the Liberation, still inspires enthusiasm, sometimes bordering on hyperbole. According to Anna Boschetti, the sudden and extraordinary popularity of Sartre's ideas led to his crowning as the incomparable French intellectual who "held undivided sway over the entire realm of French intellectual life."[3] Sartre undoubtedly posed an influential and controversial figure. This has recently been confirmed in something of a Sartre renaissance, dramatically announced by *Le Nouvel Observateur* on the cover of its January 19, 2000 issue in bold red letters: "*Après vingt ans de purgatoire Sartre revient.*"

One unfortunate aspect to this popularity is the overshadowing of Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with whom Sartre exchanged ideas and whose work profoundly influenced his own. These three French intellectuals of wartime and postwar France exerted a tremendous energy into thinking about freedom and emancipatory politics; thinking that settled into the proper names existentialism and phenomenology and that produced the humanist ontology later spurned by Foucault and others who were critical of the prevalence of the Sartrean subject. My primary interest in this chapter is to explore the dialogues and disagreements that occurred between these philosophers as they struggled with what it means to act in the name of philosophy and in the name of political emancipation. Tracing the narrative of affinities and disagreements that contributed to the development of their writings will illuminate a particularly dramatic moment in the history of philosophy's preoccupation with freedom and politics. The transformations in Sartre's thought as he strives to negotiate the inconsistent claims of freedom and *la force des choses*, and the alternative approaches Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty provide, raise especially significant questions.

The "tragic ambivalence" of a paradoxical human condition—escaping from a natural condition without actually being freed from it—is described by Beauvoir in the opening lines of *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* It is this paradox that troubles an existential notion of freedom even beyond Sartre's acknowledgment of experiencing himself "as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things." Perhaps then, Beauvoir's concern that philosophers have tried to "mask" their ambiguity could be directed at existentialism itself, when leaving the realm of the ontological and entering the turbulent field of the political.

At stake for Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, was the relationship of a philosophical notion of freedom to a political concept of action. Living and writing during the turmoil of World War II, heirs to the dialectics of Hegel and Marx, and to the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and witnesses to the gradual disclosing of the great secret of the Soviet camps, these thinkers struggled to fashion a philosophy of situated existence that compromised neither human freedom nor ethical and political responsibility for the other. As a result, they opened philosophy to questions of emancipatory struggles, primarily concerning that of women and the colonized other. Although they did not always agree with one another, for these existentialist phenomenologists, freedom was inextricably related to particular notions of action and responsibility.

What does it mean to act in the name of politics? What did *engagement* mean for those who coined the term, and what kind of investments, in politics, in freedom, were made along with it? In the following discussion, I will explore existentialism as a liberation discourse that had a considerable impact on the feminist and anticolonialist emancipatory movements that followed. I will examine in particular how Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty related a philosophical freedom to a humanist subject. If the history of philosophy has emphasized the freedom of the individual will, contemporary emancipatory political practices are rooted in assumptions about sovereignty and agency that can be traced in particular to Sartre's understanding of the responsible, active subject, free to choose his or her own future. There is no difference between the being of man and being free, Sartre claimed. This being and this freedom must be situated in his stubborn adherence to a belief that the relation between the self and the other is one of conflict, an idea inherited and adapted from Hegel. Therein lie the roots of oppression for Sartre; the conflict is never resolved until the one recognizes the other.

The Existential Subject and Its Other

Foucault once made an off-hand remark that "none of the philosophers of *engagement*—Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty—none of them did a thing."[4] Why he would make such a judgment of the three philosophers who most visibly participated with him in shaping the philosophical scene in France immediately after World War II, is not a trivial question. Foucault dismissed their commitments on account of a reliance on a humanist understanding of existence that privileged subjectivity, which for him evidently constituted the antithesis of what it means to "do" in the political realm.

For Sartre, however, there is no freedom without a subject and no subject who is not free. He begins his most well-known essay, "Existentialism Is a Humanism" with the assertion that "by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity."[5] "Existence precedes essence," became the mantra of existentialism, meaning that subjectivity must be the starting point, for man exists first and only secondarily defines himself. Sartre's notion of the subject presumes this man who is nothing but what he makes of himself, what he wills and imagines

himself to be in the future he hurls himself toward. It is impossible for him to transcend this subjectivity. Without this ability, and without a God to determine man's future, we are utterly responsible for our actions, and therefore free: "Man is freedom" Sartre writes, and is completely alone, without excuses, condemned to this freedom.[6]

Sartre's theory of freedom cannot therefore be separated from the absolute responsibility of a subject privileged as uniquely autonomous. This subject is predicated on the idea, necessary for Sartre's emphasis on the absolute freedom humans have to create their own lives, that consciousness is empty. No underlying substance constitutes the self, but a unity of consciousness—the "for-itself"—comes about through the original project or choice the subject makes, which nihilates its facticity. The individual is a presence to himself, rather than a self, which implies an inherent duality, for there is always detachment in the reflexive being. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, which means that it is fundamentally structured by transcendence. This being "for-itself" is distinguished from being "in-itself": pure being that cannot acknowledge or recognize itself for it simply *is* itself.[7]

These two structures are incommensurable when the other looks at me. While my own body is always experienced by me as a for-itself, I become the in-itself under this gaze, an object to the other who observes me. Sartre's description of the relation between the self and the other owes much to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, brought to the attention of French intellectuals by Alexandre Kojève in his lectures in Paris during the 1930s. For Hegel, the self-consciousness of human beings is characterized as having two objects, one of sense-certainty and perception and the other being itself. This consciousness is also structured as desire for the other, for an independent object that it must destroy "to give itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty."[8] But the desire is forever reproduced:

> Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. (109)

Self-consciousness, therefore, is satisfied only in another self-consciousness, a process Hegel calls recognition (110). When two self-consciousnesses meet, the one objectifies the other, in its attempt to see itself, or recognize

itself in the other. The struggle for recognition turns an initial equality into the consciousness either of the master or the slave. The master is recognized by the slave who is made to work for him and mediates between the master and nature. Thus the master is independent of the world and of things, while the slave, whose consciousness is inessential, is bound to the world and lacks self-determination.[9]

Sartre's own elaboration of the relation between consciousnesses in *Being and Nothingness*, while taking issue with Hegel's idealism, reinforces this principle of conflict between self and other. But Sartre believes he has solved the problem of solipsism that Hegel, and later Husserl, did not adequately overcome. Hegel proved that self-consciousness is mediated by the Other since my own consciousness is identical with itself by means of the exclusion of every other, Sartre argues, but he relied on a universal self-consciousness disengaged from existence. Hegel's "I am I," a universal form of identity, has nothing to do with the concrete consciousness of existentialism, according to Sartre, because self-consciousness cannot be described in terms of knowledge. "The reflection does not make itself be the reflecting; we are dealing here with a being which nihilates itself in its being and which seeks in vain to dissolve into itself as a *self*. . . . Hegel has not succeeded in accounting for this abstract doubling of the Me which he gives as equivalent to self-consciousness."[10] Furthermore, Sartre claims, existentialism gets rid of the pure unreflective consciousness of the transcendental "I" and shows that existence is different from an Ego. "In short, consciousness is a concrete being *sui generis*, not an abstract, unjustifiable relation of identity" (323).

Unlike his predecessors, Sartre conceptualizes a concrete material relation between two subjects, structured by the gaze or the look. The other "is not only the one whom I see, but the one *who sees me*" Sartre states, and who therefore makes of me an object (310). When I am caught doing something I should not, I am ashamed, but only because of being exposed to the other's gaze. Hence, the other negates my experience in a certain sense, since the other is the one for whom I am not subject but object. Sartre concludes then, that "as the subject of knowledge I strive to determine as object the subject who denies my character as subject and who himself determines me as object" (310). The result is a battle for recognition as a subject by the other whose very being as another subject is a threat to my own subjectivity. I am objectified by the other's look. As in Sartre's famous dictum at the end of *Huis Clos*, "hell is—other people"[11]

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This description of the detachment of the reflexive being for-itself, the structure of consciousness as transcendent, and the demand for recognition from the other that turns the relation into an antagonistic one, is integral to Sartre's conceptualization of human freedom, as well as his developing ideas on the origin of oppression that become increasingly important after the writing of *Being and Nothingness*. I will come back to this latter theme to elaborate on the idea—familiar in all emancipatory discourses—that only such a fundamental recognition can reverse the process of objectification in colonization or enslavement. For now, I turn to the question of how this subject, this unified consciousness, is ontologically free, for Sartre's early work ascribes to human beings an absolute and fundamental freedom, motivated by a radical rejection of what he perceives to be a reliance on objective conditions in Marx.

Beauvoir succinctly describes this critique in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, a text in which she proposes an ethical attitude compatible with the absurd condition of the existential subject. After elaborating the paradoxical condition of being human as one of existing both in the world and at a distance from it, and the experience of this condition of fundamental lack as a triumph rather than defeat, as a demand for responsibility, Beauvoir arrives at the question of how existentialism makes the leap from the freedom of the individual to that of the collective. "How could men," she asks, "originally separated, get together?"[12]

Marxism is brought into the discussion at this point to show that it shares with existentialism an interest in situation and the separation it implies. For example, Beauvoir argues that for Marx it is the needs of a people and the revolt of a class that define their projection toward a new situation and a rejection of the old; "only the will of men decides" (18–19). Situations are not in themselves undesirable or preferable, but humans determine them to be one or the other.

Revolution then, for Marxists, is caused by a subjective movement that is responsible for creating revolutionary values in revolt and hope, according to Beauvoir. Yet while this attests to the privileging of the "will of men" in Marxism, and to the language of projects, goals, and action—all terms prized by existentialists—Beauvoir claims that the Marxist human will is not free, but the reflection of objective conditions that define the situation of a class or people (19). Given the current development of capital-

ism, she continues, the proletariat "can not help" wishing for the demise of the class system. Hence, "subjectivity is re-absorbed into the objectivity of the given world. Revolt, need, hope, rejection, and desire are only the resultants of external forces" (19–20).

Thus Beauvoir has argued that the Marxist tends to posit the meaning of a situation in objective conditions and impose it on the consciousness of a passive subject. This is the essential point on which existentialism departs from dialectical materialism, she claims. For the existentialist, meaning "surges up" only by the disclosure that a free subject effects in his project (20). Even a Marxist, she adds, needs a decision arising only from himself, and not only the intellectual, but the proletariat has the autonomy to choose how to take up or respond to the revolution: it can "let itself be lured on" or "can sleep in the dull comfort" of capitalism—in other words, it is free to betray the revolution (20).

Freedom in this instance originates in choice, which Beauvoir evidently believes Marx neglects. Since it is in the name of action that Marxists repudiate a philosophy of freedom, however, she argues: "It is contradictory, then, to reject with horror the moment of choice which is precisely the moment when spirit passes into nature, the moment of the concrete fulfillment of man and morality" (22–23). It is only the absolute freedom of existentialism that will give us a principle of action, Beauvoir insists. She admits, however, that Marxism does not always deny freedom. Action would be meaningless if events followed one upon the other in mechanical order. The Marxist revolutionary asserts himself as a free agent. "So Marxists often find themselves having to confirm this belief in freedom, even if they have to reconcile it with determination as well as they can" (21).[13]

Interestingly enough, this could describe the very tension Beauvoir and Sartre demonstrate in their respective works on freedom. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, Beauvoir seems unwilling to admit this. Later, in *The Second Sex* and in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, we will discover a closer attention paid to the situations that are *not* of one's choosing. In Sartre's elaboration of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, however, we are presented with an absolute notion of freedom that is reminiscent of Hegel's and Kant's stress on the autonomous, self-legislating individual. Like Hegel, Sartre is not interested in a liberal notion of freedom based on choosing between various available options, but in a fundamental choice. One could say with Hegel, freedom is not just free choice, but being a free will that wills the free will. Against the Marxist reliance on objective conditions, which like

Beauvoir, Sartre believes risks compromising human freedom, *Being and Nothingness* outlines an absolute freedom that condemns the existential subject to a life of overwhelming choice and responsibility. Freedom in these writings is not an accoutrement of humanness but the very stuff of being.

The negation at the heart of human consciousness—the fact that the being of the for-itself is to nihilate the in-itself which it is—is crucial for understanding freedom in Sartre. In fact, freedom is this permanent possibility of nihilating the "having-been" of the subject: "Indeed by the sole fact that I am conscious of the causes which inspire my action, these causes are already transcendent objects for my consciousness; they are outside. In vain shall I seek to catch hold of them; I escape them by my very existence. I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free."[14] Existential freedom is therefore this permanent possibility of realizing a nihilating rupture with the world and oneself. This rupture means that the subject is always more than what names or defines it; the for-itself escapes its being as its essence; it is always something other than what can be said of it (567). In spite of this, we perpetually attempt to deny this rupture, grasping in vain for the in-itself, in anguish over the fact that we are not free to cease being free. Refusing freedom is an attempt to apprehend oneself as being-in-itself; to confer permanence on the causes and motives of our choices rather than recognizing that we alone give meaning to them (568).

To maintain freedom as absolute, Sartre must demonstrate that it has no external limits. The difficulty arises when considering how to reconcile this absolute freedom with the material situations of human subjects—in other words, with the force of circumstance. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre uses the example of a formidable crag of rock that appears before a climber, to demonstrate that freedom itself, and not external forces, constitutes the limits that it encounters. If one has to give up the climb because the rock is insurmountable, he argues, this does not mean that we are made unfree by the presence of an obstacle, but that the crag is revealed to be too difficult only because it was originally thought to be surmountable (620). In itself then, the rock is neither an obstacle nor an aid, but becomes so depending on the subject's project or intention.

Intentionality, or the ability of the subject to realize a conscious project, is reflected in the act, which for Sartre means that consciousness has withdrawn itself from the world and moved from being to nonbeing. It is through this moment of negation that the for-itself, or the human subject, escapes

its being as its essence—"the for-itself is always something other than what can be *said* of it" (567). The structure of this act, this intentionality, is what Sartre believes has been neglected in the history of philosophy's endless arguments about determinism and free will (559). The being who is said to be free, according to Sartre, is the one who realizes his projects; for while brute things can pose limits to our freedom of action "it is our freedom itself which must first constitute the framework, the technique, and the ends in relation to which they will manifest themselves as limits" (620). Even if the rock is too difficult to climb, it is revealed as such because it was originally thought climbable; therefore, Sartre asserts, it is our freedom alone that constitutes these limits (620). To realize a project, the very meaning of freedom, the projection of an end must be distinguished from its realization. Conceiving a plan is not enough to realize it. Consequently, Sartre argues, "the resistance which freedom reveals in the existent, far from being a danger to freedom, results only in enabling it to arise as freedom." The free for-itself exists only as engaged in a resisting world. "Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning" (621).

The idea that freedom is manifest in the subject's projects, or intentional commitments, defined postwar existential philosophy as a philosophy of *engagement*. In Sartre's final section of the chapter on freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, he makes clear what this fact of freedom represents for humankind. The consequence of being condemned to freedom is responsibility for the world. "Man carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (707). Responsibility means "the consciousness of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object" (707). The entire responsibility for what happens to me is *mine*; there are no accidents in life, so there is no point in complaining since "nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are" (708). If, for example, Sartre writes, I am living through war, it is my war, and I deserve it because I always have the choice to leave it, through desertion or suicide. If these are not choices I make, I have chosen war and bear full responsibility for it (709). In fact, Sartre goes so far as to say that I am as responsible for this war as if I had declared it myself: "I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it" (710).

While freedom is manifest in these responsible acts, Sartre describes a curious residual in-itself that remains. Consider the following intriguing passage in *Being and Nothingness* that follows his discussion of the crag of

rock. In spite of the choice we have in rendering the rock passable or impassable, there is a "residuum," he writes, that is responsible for rendering one particular crag more favorable for climbing than another:

> Even after all these observations, there remains an unnamable and unthinkable *residuum which belongs to the in-itself considered* and which is responsible for the fact that in a world illuminated by our freedom, this particular crag will be more favorable for scaling and that one not. But this *residue* is far from being originally a limit for freedom; in fact, it is thanks to this residue—that is, to the brute in-itself as such—that freedom arises as freedom. (620)

The in-itself of freedom, freedom *itself,* is ungraspable, like Heidegger's *Dasein,* Sartre claims, yet this residuum is the condition of freedom. "How then are we to describe an existence which perpetually makes itself and which refuses to be confined in a definition?" he asks. "The very use of the term 'freedom' is dangerous if it is to imply that the word refers to a concept as words ordinarily do. Indefinable and unnamable, is freedom also indescribable?" (565)

The answer Sartre gives us is ambiguous. Freedom itself, this unnamable concept, makes itself an act. Like consciousness that cannot be described in its general connotations, Sartre argues, freedom can only be understood as a particular question: the question of *my* particular freedom. This is freedom as "pure factual necessity," a contingent existence that I am *not* able *not* to experience. This particular freedom is constantly in question. It is not a quality or a property of my nature, but the very "stuff of my being" that I must comprehend at some level (566).

It appears that Sartre has made a distinction here between freedom and freedoms. Freedom *itself* is the indeterminate condition of intentional free acts. Curiously, this indeterminate residuum that he suggests is dangerous even to name, is in the end, in spite of his arguments to the contrary, responsible for making one situation (one crag of rock) more favorable than another.

Significantly, Sartre calls this unnamable "residue" of freedom, the "brute in-itself" which we read of rather viscerally in *Nausea,* which appeared five years before *Being and Nothingness.* Sartre's protagonist, Roquentin, sits in a park alone, gazing at the roots of a chestnut tree, "this black knotty mass, entirely beastly," and notes that existence has "unveiled itself" to him: "suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have *seen.*"[15] For

Roquentin, existence had immediately lost "the harmless look of an abstract category,"; "it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness" (127).

The force of the passage is in its separation of an obscene, brute existence from the more pleasant appearance of things, a decidedly unphenomenological move on Sartre's part. The monstrous masses are an inconvenience, Roquentin thinks,

> I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. . . . We were a heap of living creatures, irritated, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason to be there, none of us, each one, confused, vaguely alarmed, felt in the way in relation to the others. In the way: it was the only relationship I could establish between these trees, these gates, these stones. (127–28)

This contempt for being "in the way" extends for Roquentin to his own body "soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with my dismal thoughts" until he thinks killing himself might be a way to "wipe out at least one of these superfluous lives" (128). But even his death would have been in the way, he muses: "In the way, my corpse, my blood on these stones . . . and the decomposed flesh . . . I was *In the way* for eternity" (128–29). It is then that the trademark term of existentialism—*absurdity*—comes to Roquentin.

If this is the brute reality that Sartre believes constitutes the unnamable residuum of freedom, what vision of freedom has he left us with in these early writings? With his liberal use of the terms of transcendence—*nihilating rupture*, existing *beyond* essence or the motives of action, *decomposed flesh* that becomes a monstrous obstruction (to what? we are led to ask)— freedom appears to be the flight from constraints. Through individual choice and action, limits are transcended, attesting to the power Sartre has bestowed on human consciousness. Maintaining a Cartesian dualism between consciousness and body that is inconsistent with his otherwise phenomenological-existential bent, Sartre describes freedom as the power of consciousness to transcend the limits of the flesh, or "brute reality." This is confirmed when he states that freedom is "the perpetual escape from contingency."[16]

Between Transcendence and Immanence

In her autobiographical text, *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir recalls a conversation with Sartre in 1940 in which she argues with him that not every situation is equal from the point of view of freedom—"for what transcendence is possible for a woman locked up in a harem?"—to which Sartre responds that even existence in a harem could be lived in different ways.[17] This hallmark of existentialist freedom—the absolute choice of the individual—cannot be maintained by Sartre when he begins to reflect on the force of circumstance as Beauvoir does here. Sartre's early works are particularly marked by this troubled relation between transcendence and immanence, or between the autonomy of the subject and the facticity of the situation. Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty negotiate the relation between these quite differently, exposing in Sartre the problematic of an absolute freedom that merely flees the predicaments of a contingent world.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes the dilemma of the woman, caught in the situation of a male-defined world, but longing for the transcendence man accomplishes with ease—the spontaneous "upsurge" into the world. While man defines himself, woman is defined only in relation to him: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."[18] From this "handicapped" position, as Beauvoir puts it, woman is at war against man, for only one winner can assume the status of absolute (xxi):

> The woman who is shut up in immanence endeavors to hold man in that prison also; thus the prison will be confused with the world, and woman will no longer suffer from being confined there . . . It was neither a changeless essence nor a mistaken choice that doomed her to immanence, to inferiority. They were imposed upon her. All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception. (797)

Times have changed, however, Beauvoir adds. Writing in the early 1950s, she says, today, the combat has taken a different shape. Woman endeavors to escape from her prison without seeking to drag man into immanence; she desires to emerge herself into the "light of transcendence" (717). The result is still, however, a battle for domination, albeit one of two "transcendences" face to face.

The vision of freedom we are given in Beauvoir's detailed phenomenological description of the predicament of woman is a liberal model of negative freedom. The "independent" woman longs to be freed from the constraints of a sexuality defined by man, from a femininity artificially shaped and imposed on woman from without and from the requirement to

please rather than exercise her intellect (682). Woman chafes against the limits imposed on her freedom like the intellectual woman Beauvoir describes who cannot "stop the surge of a body that is straining toward the world and change it into a statue animated by voiceless tremors" (685).[19] Beauvoir's expression of this need for woman to surge beyond the constraints of her sex is most dramatic in her frequently derogatory references to the female body—occupied by a "hostile element . . . the species gnawing at their vitals" (30)—and to her harsh criticism of the perspective that woman's "physiological destiny" is fulfilled in motherhood.

It is important to note that Beauvoir here demonstrates the very ambivalence for which she criticizes Marxists in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, between determinism and freedom or between the situation one does not choose for oneself, and the ability to transcend it. While often anti-essentialist in her description of woman's being—one is not born a woman, not defined by her biology—she is at the same time defined as Other, as the inessential, as the object to man's subject and must deal with an existence imprisoned by her jailers: "mother, wife, sweetheart" (30).[20]

It seems clear, as Sonia Kruks argues, that when Beauvoir attempted to systematically analyze oppression it became impossible to do so within the confines of Sartre's thought.[21] Beauvoir never ignored the constraints of situation in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in which she transforms a Sartrean absolute notion of freedom into an ambiguous one. As she states in her opening remarks, "[Man] asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things."[22] Indeed, the greater their "mastery of the world" the more they find themselves "crushed by uncontrollable forces" (9). This, and not simply the absolute freedom to choose, is the "tragic ambiguity" of the human condition that all men have attempted to mask. If freedom discloses its situations, as Sartre argues, for Beauvoir this does not mean that each situation is equivalent. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had argued that the condition of freedom is so thoroughly absolute that even the individual who finds himself a prisoner has a choice: while we cannot say that a prisoner is always free to leave, or free to desire release, we can say that the prisoner is "always free to try to escape."[23]

For Beauvoir, however, there are oppressive situations in which freedom is not possible. If life is reduced to merely maintaining itself, then "living is only not dying and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation."[24] Oppression is defined by Beauvoir as the situation

when man's usual condition of transcending himself falls "uselessly back upon itself" because it is cut off from its goals.[25] It is not a natural condition, for it is not objects that oppress us, although natural obstacles can certainly pose limits. These misfortunes, even death, we must assume as the natural limit of life, whereas the limits imposed by other people alone can rob me of the meaning of my acts and my life. "Only man can be an enemy for man," Beauvoir states "for 'we' is legion and not an individual; each one depends upon others, and what happens to me by means of others depends upon me as regards its meaning" (82). In the case of war, one does not submit as one does to an earthquake, but takes sides for or against, causing others to become either friends or enemies. "It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful" (82). Freedom requires that it emerge into an open future and since it is other men who open the future to me, Beauvoir asserts, they can equally take it away by obliging me to "consume my transcendence in vain" keeping me below the level that they have conquered and thus cutting me off from the future. Under such circumstances, I become a thing (82).

In this discussion Beauvoir reveals that a recognition and analysis of oppression alters the terms of a philosophical discussion of freedom. It is the situation of woman as constrained by patriarchal limits that renders an absolute freedom impossible. While she doesn't explicitly raise the question, she certainly exposes the challenge posed by using a philosophical and ontological understanding of freedom to engage with the experience of unfreedom. There are limits to absolute freedom in the phenomenal world.

Evidently, for Beauvoir freedom is much more contingent on the intersubjective condition of humankind and on the circumstances this interdependency can give rise to, than it is for Sartre in his early writings. She also introduces a concept of freedom as opening onto a future that must remain indeterminate. Both of these ideas bring Beauvoir much closer to Merleau-Ponty than to Sartre, although she consistently maintains a defense of the latter's ideas as having the most influence on her own.

The Intentional World

Merleau-Ponty seeks to undermine Sartre's absolute position on freedom and the privileging of human consciousness by stressing a phenomenological understanding of the world as already there, as already constituting the field of our existence, and "flesh" or embodied existence inextricably

intertwined in this given world, *before* reflection or cognition. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* he attempts to find a way between the polarities of the objectivist and the idealist perspectives, the political consequences of which he elaborates in other writings, and most acutely in several letters to Sartre over an editorial dispute concerning *Les Temps Modernes.*

Like Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty points toward a freedom that opens onto an unknown or unpredictable future: "Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it: as long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls up specially favored modes of resolution, and also that it is powerless to bring one into being by itself."[26] Human consciousness is not the only intentional mode for Merleau-Ponty, as he illustrates with his criticism of Sartre's discussion of the crag of rock. While he agrees that it is freedom that brings into being the obstacles to freedom, Merleau-Ponty points out that one rock could appear as an obstacle while another as a means. In the world of the particular, freedom does not arrange obstacles, it merely lays down the general structures of the world (510). "In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose" (511). Without these external intentions, we would not have a world, "a collection of things which emerge from a background of formlessness by presenting themselves to our body as 'to be touched,' 'to be taken', 'to be climbed over' " (512). The *world* intends and not merely human consciousnesses.

Choice itself, from this perspective, becomes ambiguous, not made in a vacuum but rooted in the situated existence of the individual in an intentional world. No matter whether I decide that the mountains I wish to climb are small, they are high because "they exceed my body's power to take them in its stride" (511). The intention is not mine to make; it originates elsewhere and no matter how I elect to see these mountains before me, it is still "to my terrestrial experience" that I must have recourse (511).

In a passage that similarly articulates Beauvoir's repeated vacillation between woman's situation and the absolute freedom she wishes to maintain, albeit in the general terms of an intentional world rather than a patriarchal order, Merleau-Ponty states:

> To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways *at once*. There is,

therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice, I am never a thing and never bare consciousness. (527)

Working thus from within the space *between* determinism and indeterminacy, he refuses to privilege either an intentional consciousness that determines its own future or the dark weight of the world on a passive subject. It is impossible, he asserts, to know precisely the share contributed by the situation or by freedom (527). This is made particularly explicit in the question of how a revolutionary movement comes into being.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre explains how the worker's consciousness awakens to his own oppressive condition. Revolt is not the outcome of objective conditions, he argues, for there was exploitation long before there was revolution. Rather, it is the decision taken by the worker to will revolution that makes him a proletarian: "The evaluation of the present operates through one's free project for the future" as Merleau-Ponty puts it, characterizing Sartre's position (514). But from this assumption we can conclude that history has no significance in itself, Merleau-Ponty complains, it is only given meaning by our will. Once again, he argues, we are falling into the either/or trap of objectivism and idealism, in the first case positing that consciousness of one's class depends on objective characteristics, in the latter suggesting that being a proletariat is the result of being conscious of it. On the contrary, he states, I am not *conscious* of being working class or middle class simply because I sell my labor or my interests are bound up with capitalism, but I simply *exist* as working or middle class. I do not therefore become someone of the working class on the day that I choose to view history in light of the class struggle. Rather, "[w]hat makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework" (515).

The situations one finds oneself in, then, are not in any sense chosen, and this does not imply an evaluation, for an oppressive situation can persist without my becoming class-conscious. How then does one become a revolutionary, Merleau-Ponty asks? By becoming aware of the condition that others share with him, "[s]ocial space begins to acquire a magnetic field, and a region of the exploited is seen to appear" (517). Class comes into being, and the situation becomes revolutionary, when the connections that exist objectively between groups of the proletariat are finally perceived as a common obstacle to the existence of each and every one (517). It is doubt-

ful whether a representation of the revolution is imagined before it happens; it arises day by day: "It is sufficient that the journeyman or the farmer should feel that he is on the march towards a certain crossroads, to which the road trodden by the town labourers also leads. Both find their journey's end in revolution, which would perhaps have terrified them had it been described and represented to them in advance" (517).

The revolutionary project is therefore not the explicit positing of an end or the result of a deliberate judgment. It may be this for the intellectual, or for the propagandist relying on the ideas of the intellectual, but in order for the revolution to cease to be the product of an abstract decision, and become historical reality, "it must be worked out in the dealings men have with each other, and in the relations of the man to his job" (518). The outcome then, that I recognize myself as a worker or as a bourgeois in relation to the class struggle, and take a stand accordingly, is not the result of a mechanical causality, but neither is it an unmotivated act; "it is prepared by some molecular process, it matures in co-existence before bursting forth into words and being related to objective ends" (518).

The criticism of Sartre implied in this discussion stresses that the problem is one of positing the project as merely intellectual and ignoring its existential aspect; that of moving toward a goal both determinate and indeterminate, for the end is recognized only at its attainment. It is not an absolute choice then that designates the worker as a proletarian for this would suggest that "problems are solved on the day they are posed" and that "every question already contains the reply that awaits it," but a particular mode of coexistence in the past and present, a particular way of being in a natural and social world (519).

In the following chapter's discussion of "consciousness raising" in emancipatory movements, Merleau-Ponty's arguments appear to be corroborated. Sartre's stark understanding of choice and decision, and of the freedom that permits them, ignores the collective process of revolt and the force of the movement that takes on a life of its own. For now, I wish to highlight the unusual sense of freedom Merleau-Ponty alludes to; one that echoes Schelling's acknowledgment of the determinate and indeterminate aspects of freedom, as well as anticipates the aporias of deconstruction that undermine any simple opposition between dialectical concepts, but call attention instead to the relation between these dialectics and what does not even belong to the dialectical. I will address this further in Chapter 4. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, it is impossible to determine the share contributed by the situation and that by freedom. Clearly, freedom in this instance stands for the

indeterminate. Yet he also states that freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer (454), suggesting that freedom itself is this space in between determinism and indeterminism. This remarkable claim transforms Sartre's understanding of freedom as transcendence. Most significant is Merleau-Ponty's insistence that "nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but, on the contrary, because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world" (456). It is a claim that breaks apart the dialectical distinction of "inside" and "outside" and of freedom as constitutive of that outside. The idea of freedom constantly interrupts this dialectic, by demanding "that our decision should plunge into the future, that something should have been done by it, that the subsequent instant should benefit from its predecessor and, though not necessitated, should be at least required by it." For if freedom is doing, Merleau-Ponty concludes, "it is necessary that what it does should not be immediately undone by a new freedom" (437).

An Ethic of Disalienation

In Sartre's prewar elaboration of absolute freedom, it seems he is not willing to acknowledge what Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty seek to emphasize—the givenness of the world, our situatedness in structures that are already in existence, and the limits to freedom imposed by the situation of oppression. Sartre's treatment of freedom in *Being and Nothingness* is emblematic of the harsh, lonely, and antagonistic world of the three characters in *No Exit* who find themselves in a hell defined simply by each other, or of Roquentin in *Nausea*, oppressed by his own freedom to choose. Thomas Flynn argues that this describes an ethic of authenticity, which for Sartre consists "in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibility and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate."[27] Flynn remarks that this was the ethic that appealed to the postwar French public, taking up as their hero Orestes of Sartre's play *The Flies*, "doer of the deed, alone and free, fated to choose his path in a godless universe."[28]

Flynn draws attention to another ethic, however, only hinted at in *Being and Nothingness* but developed in Sartre's October 1945 lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism." He calls this an "ethic of disalienation," which turns from an ethic of authenticity to a revolutionary politics that stresses solidarity and collective identity (32). He argues that Sartre's experience of war and the Resistance in France—of "courage, self-sacrifice, and

camaraderie"—gave him a newfound ideal of common freedom (31). "Never were we more free than under the German occupation" Sartre states about this experience.[29] The "exhilaration of common threat," as Flynn describes it, the experience of solidarity, and perhaps the influence of his friends Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty,[30] sparked a new interest for Sartre in the freedom of all and coincided with a growing interest in politics that the three of them shared.

Two points in the lecture on humanism I wish to dwell on here briefly. The first is that Sartre states that man is responsible for all men, not only himself, because the existential emphasis on subjectivity means both that each individual subject is free and that man cannot pass beyond subjectivity. This means not only that man chooses himself, but that "in choosing for himself, he chooses for all men."[31] The second point is that this choosing is articulated as both a moral and creative choice:

> For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. (29)

The gaze under which Sartre's characters in *No Exit* experience their own objectification here develops into the look of the entire world: "Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly" (31). While Sartre maintains as he does in *Being and Nothingness* that the point of departure, the ultimate truth, is that *I think, therefore I am*, and that the only absolute truth all can attain is that one has this sense of self, he warns here that this is no "narrowly individual subjectivism" for "we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves" (39). Consequently, Sartre concludes, we find ourselves in an "intersubjective" world in which we share a universal human condition—of being in the world, of laboring and dying—that allows us to understand even those who live in distant parts of the world. This leads to Sartre's audacious remark that "[e]very purpose, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European" (39–40).

Freedom from this transformed perspective is thus related to intersubjectivity, but also, as Thomas Busch argues, to a greater recognition of la force des choses, the very points for which Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir

criticized Sartre. Busch demonstrates that on nearly every occasion given to Sartre to comment on his work since his earlier prewar writings on the existential project and radical freedom, he has mentioned the changes that have occurred in his thought.[32] It was the war, Sartre states, that "shattered the worn structures of our thought."[33] In a 1969 interview he confesses to being "truly scandalized" by a prefatory note he had written years earlier, stating that a man is always free to choose to be a traitor or resist, no matter what the circumstances. To understand this, Sartre continues, one has to realize that *Being and Nothingness* traces an interior experience disconnected from the exterior experience of a petty-bourgeois intellectual. "A simple formula would be to say that life taught me *la force des choses*—the power of circumstances."[34] Not even the notion of subjectivity is exempt from this rethinking. Sartre confesses that in *Being and Nothingness*, "what you could call 'subjectivity' is not what it would be for me now. But 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' seem to me entirely useless notions today, anyway."[35]

Busch traces the development of Sartre's transformation in thought from the absolute freedom in *Being and Nothingness* to an almost deterministic outlook in *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (1952), *The Communists and Peace* (1952), and *The Words* (1963). These were all written after World War II and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the situatedness of human life and of solidarity and social alienation. In *The Words* in particular, Sartre's autobiographical account of his childhood, he writes angrily about his bourgeois upbringing, stating: "I was a child, that monster which they had fabricated."[36] Later he writes that he did not choose his vocation, "it had been imposed on me by others" (129).

It is questionable, however, whether Sartre ever accounts for this change in his ideas on freedom. Although he moves from an emphasis on the transcendent power of consciousness to the force of facticity between the prewar writing of *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* and the postwar works *The Communists and Peace* and *The Words*, arguably, this tension remains visible throughout his oeuvre. I would suggest this is the result of an unwavering position on the relation between the self and the other, for despite the frequent changes of heart Sartre attests to in various interviews and his alternating positions on communism, Marxism, or on his fellow existentialists' ideas, he remains remarkably consistent in his view of the human subject's relation to the other.

Monika Langer demonstrates this with her examination of several examples in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, written in 1960 after

his declared change of mind on the issue of sociality and the individual's relation to situated existence. In the first volume of the *Critique*, for example, Langer points out that Sartre still maintains his idea of sociality arising from the look, one that involves negation. Gazing out of a window to look at a road mender and a gardener, working on either side of a wall and each unaware of the other, Sartre maintains, according to Langer, that "It is the *passive viewer's* need to *project* himself through the two workers whom his look *confronts*, in order to *distinguish* their ends from his own, which prompts him to realize his membership in a particular society."[37] Furthermore, she adds, the workers' reality affects the onlooker only insofar as it is not his reality. This negation is central to the bond between subjects for Sartre, in the *Critique* just as it was in *Being and Nothingness*. Indeed, Sartre contends that "it is impossible *to exist amongst men* without their becoming objects both for me and for them through me, without my being an object for them . . . the foundation of the human relation as the immediate and perpetual determination of everyone by the Other and by all . . . is simply *praxis*."[38]

The extent of this conflict is best exemplified by Sartre's discussion of the boxing match in the second volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and introduces here his increasing interest in anticolonial struggles, particularly in Algeria. The boxing match, he argues, is "a public incarnation of *every* conflict. It relates, without any intermediary, to the interhuman tension produced by the interiorization of scarcity."[39] He demonstrates this by pointing out that boxers are exploited, selling their labor power in the form of destructive violence, becoming in effect, "the servants of the bourgeois class":

> The alienation is total. The growing lad used to locate his value and his freedom in his individual violence. . . . In the name of that ethic of strength and domination—and in order to escape the common fate of the oppressed, in whom he discovers and detests his own wretchedness as a victim—he sells his strength, his agility and his courage. He sells even that rage which makes him so combative. At once, *it is no longer his*, it is taken from him. (43)

There is an order to this metamorphosis, Sartre writes. First, particular circumstances determine that an individual has felt the violence of his working class and exteriorized it into "universal and anarchistic" aggression. By doing so he becomes the "unintegrated element" capable of individual violence—the boxer—pitted against other loners. He accepts that his violence, "an ever fruitless spasm to struggle free from poverty" be sold to

enable his promotion into bourgeois society, but most often the promotion does not happen, and he remains exploited (44). Unlike workers in the labor market, the boxer experiences uniquely the isolation of exploitation, unable to participate in the trade-union associations the worker has access to for solidarity. Thus, Sartre concludes, "the violence which, in every fight, takes hold of him and hurls him against an enemy brother, was in its origin the same violence that moves from the oppressors to the oppressed, then back from the latter to the former, and makes it possible to call the opposition between classes a struggle" (44).

Sartre uses this example to illustrate the alienation of the violence of the oppressed. While he uses Marx's terminology throughout his description of the boxer's metamorphosis, his emphasis here is a primal-like battle of life, what Langer calls, "the graphic reduction of history and social life to a melodramatic fight."[40] The rage, its origin in the oppressor and transferal to the oppressed, the violence this rage gives birth to—these are expressed by the anticolonialist intellectuals who penned the most influential revolutionary texts of the twentieth century. I will discuss these writings in the following chapter.

It appears that Sartre does not quite achieve the ethic of disalienation Flynn attributes to him, stuck as he is between the competing claims of immanence and transcendence. How solidarity is possible when there appears to be no model for reciprocity or friendship remains unclear. Even in his description of the proletariat-turned-revolutionary in *Being and Nothingness*, it is difficult to see how the emancipatory project is a collective endeavor. For Sartre, being immersed in a historical situation means one remains caught up in living one's existence and does not imagine a different one. A worker of 1830 does not represent his sufferings to himself as unbearable, Sartre states, but "adapts himself to them not through resignation but because he lacks the education and reflection necessary for him to conceive of a social state in which these sufferings would not exist. Consequently *he does not act*."[41] In other words, the worker suffers without considering his suffering or conferring value on it—to suffer is simply to be. Therefore, Sartre concludes, this suffering cannot be in itself a motive for action, and thus no factual state, whether political or economic, can motivate an act (562).

The only thing that can motivate an act, for Sartre, is the movement of "wrenching" away from oneself and the world, from one's position as "worker-finding-his-suffering-natural" (563). Only by surmounting and denying this form can the worker understand his suffering as unbearable

and make it the motive of revolutionary action. It is the act, therefore, and not the cause, that Sartre privileges here; the act "decides its ends and its motives, and the act is the expression of freedom" (565).

The Event

In a bitter dispute over an incident regarding *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal they edited together, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre for this exaggerated interest in the act, accusing Sartre of "ultra-bolshevism." The exchange of letters concerning this dispute in July 1953 are a remarkable testimony to the political implications of their different conceptions of freedom. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Sartre for falling into the either/or trap of objectivism and idealism provides the basis not only for Merleau-Ponty's concerns with an absolute freedom, but also with the political investments to which such a position leads. This critique led to some major disagreements over political positions taken in the journal.[42]

The letters provide us with a rich description of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as an "attitude in the world."[43] Out of a pained and sometimes bitter response to what Sartre himself admits is a judgment, there emerges a passionate defense for a unique kind of political thought and practice, one committed to taking responsibility for the "unacceptable" events of the day. For Merleau-Ponty it was the Stalinist death camps, the Korean war, and his own experience of World War II that drew him inevitably "toward what happens, toward events, the exterior, toward political and social life"[44] But it is in the crucible of these events, *l'épreuve des événements*, their test or ordeal, that he comes to reflect on the problematic of choice, freedom, and action.

The philosopher is always in the world, Merleau-Ponty writes in reply to Sartre's charge that he has abdicated politics and taken up the "alibi" of philosophy.[45] This is stated in the context of one of many references in Merleau-Ponty's letter to the event. For Merleau-Ponty an engagement with the event must not preclude the reflective distance necessary to place it within its socio-historic context. It even becomes an act of bad faith, he suggests, if one engages with each event on its own in times of crises (41). He writes to Sartre:

> Most of the time, the event can only be accounted for from within an entire politics that changes its meaning, and it would be artificial and deceiving to provoke judgment on each point of a politics rather than considering it in its extent and in its

relation to that of its adversary: it allows for things which would not be accepted in the larger picture to be passed over in the detail or, on the contrary, to render unacceptable by using little facts that, when seen as a larger set, is within the logic of the struggle. (41)

Sartre's philosophy of *engagement*, evident in what Merleau-Ponty calls the "on-the-fly positions" taken in their journal, *Les Temps Modernes* (42), is characterized by treating each event as if it were "decisive, unique, and final [*irréparable*]" (43). Engagement is therefore less political, less philosophical, Merleau-Ponty complains, than his own position that most action happens between event and thought. "What I imagined," he writes, "was the writer's act as moving back and forth between the event and the general line" (42). The distance this creates between the event and the judgment passed on it "disables the trap of the event and reveals its meaning clearly" (43).

What Merleau-Ponty means by being trapped by the event slowly unfolds in the letter. A few pages later he accuses Sartre again of becoming too entangled in the event, of letting day-to-day events decide for him, while missing the "total event" of the past few years (47). These comments are made in the context of a debate on communism, on the choice of being for or against, that provides the bone of contention between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; for while both are critical of the Communist Party, Sartre appears to reject a public position of critique. Consequently he rejects Merleau-Ponty's submission for *Les Temps Modernes*, an essay in which he criticizes Sartre's notion of *engagement* for polarizing communism and bourgeois society, not primarily because he disagrees with it or takes offense at it—"rest assured that my self-image is not the matter" Sartre says—but because Merleau-Ponty's words would have "immediate echoes *on the Right*" (34). A disagreement between the editors would risk confusing the readers, who according to Sartre, do not want justifications but objective principles, and would end up playing into the anti-Communists' "game" (35–37).

A politics emerges here that Merleau-Ponty's writings struggle to evade: one in which choice and decision stand out as absolutes, and action is defined against interpretation. Sartre refers to the reaction required by the event, and his criticism of Merleau-Ponty appears in the latter's refusal to react. What Merleau-Ponty refuses, however, is not action itself, but an action defined by an absolute choice for an absolute position. The contradictions inherent in being either for the party or against it, he states, make it both impossible to be an anti-Communist and impossible to be a Communist.[46] For the Marxist critique of capitalism is still valid: anti-Sovietism has come to resemble "the brutality" and anguish of fascism. The proletariat revolution,

on the other hand, has come to a halt, having aggravated the dictatorial apparatus while renouncing the liberty of the proletariat.[47] Thus when asked by Americans "why aren't you with us" against communism, Merleau-Ponty replies: "It would be necessary to know whom or what they are for."[48] Declaring the Soviet Union as enemy number one, he argues, leads to the inability to critique anything but the Soviet system. This would mean that for the moment there is no other enemy than Russia, and we must give up any discussion of the non-Soviet world. In short, Merleau-Ponty states curtly, these anti-Communists "no longer have any political ideas."[49]

Not having any political ideas refers to a Stalinist dictatorship that has created a style, in which a regime wants to *do* and does not want to *know* anything. "It does not want to know itself as it *is* . . . So it arranges its secret knowledge of itself with such care that it can succeed in not knowing about itself in good faith . . . Its great rule is to judge without being judged—to judge without understanding in order not to be judged."[50] Much like the criticism he is making of Sartre in the 1953 exchange, for throwing himself forward into action "at the risk of crushing everything," Merleau-Ponty is arguing against a politics that results from a desire to control the contingencies of the present and to secure the future. In actuality, political life is not so fixed into either/or dilemmas. Politicians, he remarks in a 1960 interview, are not as Manichean as is commonly thought: "There are moments for affirmation and moments for negation: these are moments of crisis. Beyond these moments, 'yes' and 'no' are the politics of an amateur. Let me emphasize this point: by refusing to abide by the *yes* and the *no* the philosopher does not stand outside politics, but is confined to doing what everyone, and especially the professional politician, *does*."[51] Marx, for example, posited revolution as a rupture with the past but nevertheless its accomplishment; and even Lenin once admitted that Beethoven sonatas moved one to forgiveness.[52] But a communism that has become Manichean and ruthless—"virtue . . . changed into poison"[53]—Merleau-Ponty asserts, necessitates thinking beyond what one does. Even if you have chosen, you must say why and under what conditions: "the 'yes' and the 'no' are interesting only in punctuating a cycle of action."[54]

These claims—that philosophy as an attitude in the world is immersed in a political field constituted by contingent, ambiguous human relations and situations; that engagement with events requires an action not reduced to yes or no decisions, but one that requires doing and reflecting—prefigure Derrida's notion of undecidability, to be addressed in Chapter 4. Marxism assumed, "all too quickly that it had discovered the key," Merleau-Ponty

states, and Sartre was guilty of constructing and inhabiting a future that was all his own.[55] Whereas "I tend to live in the present," he writes to Sartre, "leaving it undecidable and open as it is" (48). This "undecidability" is the condition of the possibility of doing anything, according to Merleau-Ponty, for "[*t*]*he human world is an open or unfinished system and the same radical contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the inevitability of disorder and prevents us from despairing of it*" providing that we remember its machineries are men and try to expand man's relation to man.[56]

This is a demand for a political attitude not bound to solutions that seek to secure the future. The illusions of classical political philosophy, "that the human world is a cluster of rational wills" governed by rules of order based on timeless principles, and that makes decisions "through academic debates in which the most rational end up convincing all the others" must be disbanded, Merleau-Ponty states.[57] But this sentiment has contemporary implications as well, against a rational, communicative ethics approach for example. As he tells Sartre in 1953, to write about events on a daily basis when one tends toward philosophical reflection, "demands and at the same time prevents the elaboration of principles" (41). There is anguish in this ambiguity—the anguish of discovering that history bequeaths a question rather than a destiny.[58] To propose a solution to a question, when the question inevitably changes before the solution is implemented, cannot recognize the indeterminacy of all political life. Merleau-Ponty writes: "When people demand a 'solution,' they imply that the world and human coexistence are comparable to a geometry problem in which there is an unknown but not an indeterminate factor and where what one is looking for is related to the data and their possible relationships in terms of a rule." Is humanity a problem of that sort?[59]

Predictably, the politics of contingency advocated by Merleau-Ponty has provoked the criticism that his work remains unable to account for political judgment and decision. Mostly he is ignored altogether as a political philosopher. His critique of a metaphysically constructed inside and outside—what he calls "reversibility"—readily acknowledged in his ontology of the flesh and related notions, is not considered applicable in the political realm, indicating a particular notion of politics that excludes the kinds of questions Merleau-Ponty raised. He is considered to have turned in later life toward introspection and reflection—turned from the radicalism of communism and socialism to the validity of liberalism. This demonstrates for many that Merleau-Ponty never really developed a practical philosophy, although as Duane Davis suggests, his work holds promise for one.[60] Consider Bernard Flynn's claim that while the late writings of Merleau-Ponty give rise to a profoundly

subversive reflection on metaphysics, "there are no substantial political writings which correspond to this phase of his philosophy."[61] Even those who acknowledge Merleau-Ponty's politics as an attempt to reveal political praxis as negativity find the project unfinished. As Diana Coole states: "the question of how this praxis is to be undertaken, and by whom, remains unresolved."[62] Like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty's work is not considered to promote a politics that will sufficiently guide us into the future.

The lack of sustained attention to Merleau-Ponty's political ideas illuminates the assumptions we maintain regarding freedom and the political practice thought necessary to secure it. What I have tried to do in this chapter is show the tension in existentialism between freedom and the "force of circumstance," between transcendence and immanence, free will and determinism, which caused Sartre and Beauvoir to be dissatisfied with Marxism, yet unable to articulate a notion of freedom as anything other than transcendent flight from "brute" existence, heavy and constrained by circumstance. While Beauvoir was far more willing to acknowledge the limits of situated existence, she was also too close to a restrictive view of the self/other relation. The politics of engagement, dear to existentialism, was too focused on the power of human consciousness, and on an individualistic freedom in competition with others' freedom. What we can conclude from this is a view of the political as an autonomous struggle for freedom from contingency. Politics and freedom become opponents.

Merleau-Ponty, alone of the three, consistently believed that we are both determined and free at once. It is Sartre's emphasis on action, however, on freedom as autonomy and on violence as the only means to end oppression, that sparked the interest of anticolonialists such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, and influenced revolutionaries like Che Guevara and Steve Biko. We are left with two divergent views on politics and freedom, both of which responded to the problems of a Marxism gone awry, and which were ultimately concerned with the liberation of the human subject from oppressive forces. It was Sartre's interpretation of the events of his time, however, that was responsible for the furor of "the existentialist offensive" and which profoundly influenced ensuing decades of political thought and practice, and Beauvoir's existential reading of woman's situation that contributed to the second wave feminist movement in North America. One could only speculate as to the reasons why Merleau-Ponty retreated from political activity and how emancipatory discourses would have developed in his later life and after his untimely death had his views on the contingency of politics and anxiety over political polarizations been given more credence.