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# **The Reed Journal of Existentialism**

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“I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end.”

**Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse***



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# Selecting Figs

The Fetishization of Choices as a  
Cause of 'Bad Faith' in Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*

*by* Peter Klapes

Contrary to how she would probably describe herself, Esther Greenwood, of Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*, is a conformist. Nauseated by the freedom that she, a liberated, educated woman, has secured for herself, Esther struggles to make free, uninhibited choices. In attempting to negate the social mores and customs that she has inherited from her faith, community, and historical time period, Esther ends up basing every decision that she makes (or contemplates making) on those exact mores and customs that she dislikes so much.

Esther's behavior, though, occurs through no fault of her own. The young adult has merely realized a philosophical truth: that one can never fully purge herself of the life that they bear—that they have been living—in order to start anew.

One's sense of self—the 'me' in the locution "I am me"—is constructed through negation, not predication. That is, if we accept that the nature of the linguistic sign as arbitrary, and that signifier and signified are bound merely by superficial social contract, then it must be the case that our own being—existence—is always realized through negation, not predication. In fact, the lack of predicate in the mere statement of "I am" defines best the human person, replete with her essential nothingness. Though Esther realizes this fact in the wake of the death of friend, Joan, Plath's narrator expresses feelings of imprisonment and paralysis in decision-making. She feels she's trapped in a bell-jar. During these moments, Esther experiences intense nausea, as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre identifies it. As a result of such feeling, Esther lives a life of "bad faith", whereby she disowns her innate freedom and limits her ability to make free, uninhibited choices. Esther applies seemingly innate meaning—signification—to her experience of the world (perhaps, even, it can be said that she fetishizes the objective experiences that she has of the world), and becomes incapable of experiencing, with pleasure, the freedom that lies at the omphalos of the human lived-experience.

Esther's self-described "wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time" (94) reveals her first instance of 'bad faith.' Recounting an exchange with her (unfaithful) boyfriend, Buddy Willard, Esther recalls Buddy's past inquiry of her preferred place of living: city vs. country. After denying Buddy's marriage proposal, Esther reports that Buddy felt that her desire—to live in both city and country simultaneously—was the "perfect set up

of a true neurotic" (93). Esther, in response, corroborates Buddy's findings: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (94). Needless to say, Esther struggles with commitment. Her ability to make decisions seems impaired. Her response to Buddy's proposal ("I'm never going to get married" [93]) can be read as a rejection of commitment altogether—a hallmark sign of living in bad faith—whereby "marriage" seems to signify, on a broader level, commitment.

Such a fear of commitment, I would argue, emanates from Esther's application of a seemingly transcendental cover—a bell-jar—to her life. Esther first employs the metaphor of the bell-jar is when her scholarship's benefactress, Philomena Guinea, drives her through town, taking her to the private asylum: "... wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (185). Esther, nonetheless, sees herself as existing under a sort of transcendental "glass bell jar", transparent, though inescapable. Through the metaphor of the bell-jar, Esther demonstrates that she fails to view herself as radically free. Rather than accepting her essential nothingness, Esther imaginarily experiences her own existence as a closed, finite system, to which her every decision—so as not to break the bell-jar's glass—must conform. In the sentence that follows her initial mention of the bell-jar, Esther demonstrates her experience of nature itself, as well, has been tainted by the imaginary bell-jar: "Blue sky opened its dome above the river..." (185).

Like many a psychotic, Esther makes symbols out of natural phenomena, which are, foundationally, devoid of meaning or signification. In this instance, Esther gives agency to the inanimate sky and describes the sky's appearance as a dome, enclosing, from 'above', the river. Seemingly unable to deal with the nothingness that underlies human life itself, Esther gives meaning and agency to natural (neutral and passive) phenomena, so as to deflect responsibility for her life and for her choices. She is not free, because she lives within a bell-jar, and because the sky's dome encloses her—whatever decision she makes will be made with the premise that she is not free, but rather enclosed and finite.

This application of symbolic meaning to the physical, tangible choices that make up one's life can be seen through Esther's conceit of the fig tree and through her likening of life choices to figs. Flipping through a magazine, Esther comes across a story of a

Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun who kept meeting at [a fig] tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird's nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of an egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and then the nun didn't come out to pick figs with the Jewish man but a mean-faced Catholic kitchen maid came to pick them instead. (55)

The story Esther offers serves as an allegory for the experience of the desire for desire, the experience of which allows for the delay of authentic decision-making, or commitment. In this case, the impossibility of the romantic, or sexual, union of the Jewish man and the nun kept the experience of the daily fig-picking desirable—the nun is 'beautiful' because she is nun, and out of reach of the Jewish man.

and the nun kept the experience of the daily fig-picking desirable—the nun is ‘beautiful’ because she is nun, and out of reach of the Jewish man. The delay of decision-making regarding their seemingly natural entrance into an intimate relationship makes the situation seem dreamy—until a decision regarding the matter is made (i.e., when the backs of the hands of the two touch).

In the aforementioned anecdote, Plath appears to invoke the fig-tree deliberately as a direct reference to the fig tree’s biblical role. In the Book of Genesis, the leaves of the fig tree serve to fetishize the genitals. The genitals—as a bodily organ, devoid of any transcendental significance—become symbolic when Adam and Eve cover them with the leaves of the fig tree. For Adam and Eve, their genitals take on new meaning the minute they’re covered: they become mysterious and out-of-reach. In the story, the man and woman cease to be free human beings; rather, they take on divine, transcendental distinctions—being Jewish and being a nun—that cover, and make mysterious their (potential) intimacy. They neglect their ontological freedom, which would allow them to enter into an intimate relationship, and (rather) live in ‘bad faith,’ casting away decisions that can be made: decisions (in this case, the decision to enter into an intimate relationship) that would stand in their way (as decisions to be made). By applying labels or other structures to their lived experience, people (like the Jewish man and the nun, and Esther, with her perception of an enclosing bell-jar) delay decision-making. When they finally make a decision, they feel regret and live in bad faith. In the case of the nun, she never comes back to the fig tree. They live neurotically, as Esther would say, espous-



ing two desires at once (in our case, a desire both to be a nun or to be a Jewish man and to engage in intimate relations).

Esther's likening of decisions to figs reveals the impossibility and mysteriousness of life choices:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America [...] and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

Again, the fig (and the fig tree) represents fetishization—the morphing of some physical, material thing into a sort of transcendental, spiritual experience. For Esther, nonetheless, each fig—representing a decision—is fetishized. Each fig represents an idea of a particular life that Esther feels she must exhibit, whether it be a life with “a husband and a happy home and children”, a life as a “brilliant professor”, or a life in “Europe and African and South America”. By concealing her choices under the guise of the fetishizing fig, Esther creates a false dichotomy: she sees the ideals of having children, for instance, and being an ‘amazing editor’ as being unsynthesizable. In their most essential state, however, these concrete choices are not innately mutually exclusive. Esther, unfortunately, fails to recognize this. As a result, she

finds herself sitting there “unable to decide [as] the figs began to wrinkle and go black...”. Each decision, for Esther, becomes symbolic of some larger ideology, or some larger ideal (represented by the fig). Esther cannot choose because in creating ideals she negates her ontological freedom, and thus lives in ‘bad faith’ (or, perhaps even better, ‘neurotically’, and in self-contradiction, underneath the top of the glass bell-jar, or the dome of the sky).

Such indecision is also seen in Esther’s suicidal ideation. Throughout the course of the novel, Esther contemplates various forms of suicide—even-  
tually attempting and failing to kill herself. As soon as she contemplates “open[ing her] veins in a warm bath”, Esther cannot follow through: “when it came down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (147). Esther remains caught at the precipice of life and death: she desires death, but never actually follows through on her suicidal ideations. She appears to desire to live, or at least to experience pain and emotion and some sort of feeling of liberty, or freedom. The problem emanates from the fact that her freedom necessitates life (and not death, which would foreclose any possibility of experiencing freedom as we know it). Esther realizes very well that the death she wants to experience is not “in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb”. Rather, Esther understands that her desire is to locate and to ‘kill’ the ‘deep, more secret’ aspect of herself, which, to me, seems to refer to that same “mysterious”, “secretive” place where fetishizations

and such—which always precipitate one's living in bad faith—reside.

Finally, however, in the wake of the death of her friend Joan Gilling, Esther realizes the lack of predicate (transcendental, mysterious fetishizations) in—and the essential nothingness of—her own free lived experience: “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. / I am, I am, I am” (243 [‘/’] added to show essential nothingness of—her own free lived experience: “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. / I am, I am, I am” (243 [‘/’] added to show author's seemingly significant line break). Here, we see Esther come to terms with her own freedom, whereby she comes to terms with her lack of predicate, if you will. Rather than specifying, qualifying, or limiting her own being (the ‘I am’) in any way, she leaves her possibilities open. She doesn't say that she is a woman, or a writer, or a student, or a young adult who hates her mother. She just is. At this penultimate scene of the novel, Esther realizes that she is free. Though in order to be free, she must (still) exist. She cannot commit suicide. Cherishing her own free existence, Esther finally inches towards breaking out of the institution, and becomes even closer to her separation from a life of bad faith.

Until the conclusion of Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, is a conformist. Nauseated, as Jean-Paul Sartre would say, by the innate freedom of human life, Esther finds herself creating boundaries and limitations for herself and for her life. Unfortunately, Esther's choices become laden with meaning and transcendental significance—they become

fetishized. A choice to live in one place over the other, for instance, becomes a symbolic gesture, whereby Esther feels she has 'bought into' one standard of living over another. Her choice to get married—or not—speaks to her ability to achieve success, and her choice of suicide method speaks to how masculine, feminine, or courageous she is. When her choices take on such meaning—which otherwise doesn't exist—our narrator begins living in bad faith. In order to deal with the existential nausea she experiences, Esther adopts particular values thus disowning her innate freedom. She forecloses certain options for reasons that she has merely invented. Finally, however, when faced intimately with death, Esther becomes free, and lives according to no imaginary standards, ideologies, or values. She excitedly realizes "I am, I am, I am". She seems to break out of her own life of bad faith, ready to bite into the sweet figs, to conquer them, and to annihilate them, so as to reach the core of life: (free) choice. One would hope that Sylvia Plath herself felt that she had done the same. and to annihilate them, so as to reach the core of life: (free) choice. One would hope that Sylvia Plath herself felt that she had done the same.

# Awake

*by* Kali Breska



# Metaphor and Metaphysics

in Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/ Or*

by Wan Bo

Søren Kierkegaard's existential insight sometimes eclipses his literary achievement. His command of metaphor<sup>1</sup>, in particular, is part of his overlooked literary gift: his writing style involving pseudonyms and fragmentary, inconsistent personal accounts has perhaps perplexed many, but one can hardly deny his genius in constructing vivid metaphors that serve an indispensable role throughout his authorship. In addition to initiating an existential mood, Kierkegaard's metaphors help his readers imagine a profound, exquisite reality rich in personal details and feelings. In his early major work *Either/Or*, for example, metaphors play a predominant role. They appear to function on two levels: first, a localised, micro level that involves individual metaphors serving specific purposes, and second, an aggregate, macro level that allures a reader to approach Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* as one giant theatrical metaphor. Kierkegaard emphasises that *Either/Or contains no*

1. Scholars may differentiate a simile and a metaphor. While a simile involves explicit comparative words or phrases such as like, metaphors make direct comparisons between two entities. In this essay, such difference is of minor importance, and I will treat similes the same way as metaphors.



concrete information or well-circumscribed interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Under the pseudonym of Victor Eremita,<sup>3</sup> he posits himself as the witty editor for the two fictional characters instead of their creator.<sup>4</sup> He asks his readers to approach *Either/Or* on the whole as “the work of one man”,<sup>5</sup> or an endless dialogue between two contrasting attitudes towards human existence, namely the aesthetic and the ethical attitudes.

There is undoubtedly an element of Socratic indirectness associated with metaphorical descriptions in *Either/Or* and in Kierkegaard’s authorship at large. Kierkegaard does not systematically nor clearly defend his arguments in *Either/Or* like other European intellectuals of his time. One might reasonably wonder why Kierkegaard has to write metaphorically in a philosophical book. Would *Either/Or* be less impactful, literally or existentially, if Kierkegaard wrote it in a more conventional, argumentative manner? If so, what is so special about metaphors that makes them most suited for an existential work like *Either/Or*? Most intriguingly, what are the existential and metaphysical implications of writing and reading metaphors?

As a start to answer those questions, one can argue that writing metaphorically has practical purposes:<sup>6</sup> it engages readers in an absorbing mood without triggering their critical lenses. On a personal level, readers can relate to or even resent A’s melancholic struggles and B’s somehow prescriptive tone. Most readers would likely prefer a metaphorical writing to an argumentative essay, especially when the essay is addressing existential themes on a personal level. *Metaphors* help readers immerse themselves

2. Søren Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. (London, England: Penguin Books, 1992), 35-6.

3. For consistency, this essay attributes all of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms (namely Victor Eremita, A, Judge Vilhelm in *Either/Or*) back to him. This essay will use Kierkegaard as the subject whenever a writing process is described as main

intimately with *Either/Or*, making *Either/Or* an exceptionally enchanting volume to read and re-read.

Interestingly, these practical considerations seem to address human psychology and entail some existential and metaphysical reasons to write metaphorically. In her short critique on systematic metaphysics *Literature and Metaphysics*, Simone de Beauvoir notices a blurred boundary between literature and metaphysics while arguing for an existentialist conception of metaphysics. To do metaphysics, according to Beauvoir, is to be metaphysical, or “to realise in oneself the metaphysical attitude, which consists in positing oneself in one’s totality before the totality of the world”,<sup>7</sup> to confront personal, raw experiences and emotions prior to cognitive elucidation.<sup>8</sup> By totality, Beauvoir thinks of one’s body, emotions and senses in addition to cognitive faculties although very often only the latest is emphasised in the western philosophical tradition. The traditional conception of systematic metaphysics, in contrast, is merely a “false naturalistic objectivity”,<sup>9</sup> if not a brutal simplification ignorant of nuanced human conditions. Beauvoir comments that Kierkegaard’s *The Seducer’s Diary* “offers the original experience in its dramatic singularity”,<sup>10</sup> expressing the otherwise inexpressible. Kierkegaard uses both theoretical treatises and metaphorical fictions throughout his authorship as an attempt to “reconcile the objective and subjective, the absolute and the relative, the timeless and the historical”.<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir illustrates how the literary aspect of Kierkegaard’s authorship is indispensable to his existential project that presupposes his metaphysical views on self and the physical reality. Kierkegaardian metaphor and his metaphysics

4. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 29-33.

5. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 36.

6. Benjamin Daise, *Kierkegaard’s Socratic Art* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), 23.

7. Simone De Beauvoir and Margaret A. Simons, *Philosophical Writings* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 273.

therefore converge philosophically besides sharing a common prefix. Metaphor manifests an overlooked aspect of metaphysical experience: subjective, singular, dramatic and ambiguous, which cannot be grasped by rationality or intellect alone.

This essay makes the leap from the metaphorical to the metaphysical. Inspired by Beauvoir's existentialist conception of metaphysics, this essay first contextualises some of Kierkegaard's enchanting metaphors within the existential mood of his early major work *Either/Or*. I shall first divide localised metaphors into A's aesthetic imagination and B's (or Judge Vilhelm's) ethical thought experiment before analysing their metaphysical implications separately. Among A's aesthetic imagination, Kierkegaard often borrows images from nature, or the physical reality, to express something deeply inside. Among Vilhelm's ethical thought experiments, Kierkegaard keeps coming inwards to address the ontology of selfhood when he crafts thought experiments situated in the physical reality. Rather paradoxically, Kierkegaard's metaphors of one's inner experience connect to his metaphysical view of nature and the physical reality, and his metaphors of the external world reveal his metaphysics of inner selfhood. Through Kierkegaardian metaphors, the inward and the outward, the subjective and the objective, the contingent and the necessary work in existential harmony in *Either/Or*.

Finally, I consider the postulate of *Either/Or* being one theatrical metaphor and the existential implications of such hypothesis, namely how existence can be seen as an endless, painful struggle that demands to be felt but not necessarily rationalised, and how

8. Simone De Beauvoir and Margaret A. Simons, 270.

9. Simone De Beauvoir and Margaret A. Simons, 275.

10. Simone De Beauvoir and A. Simons, 274.

11. Simone De Beauvoir and Margaret A. Simons, 274.

*Either/Or* on the whole feels like a sincere and affecting prayer. I conclude that metaphors in *Either/Or* question the attainability of the absolute truth and the possibility of metaphysics; they function as an ultimate philosophising agent.

### **Metaphor as Aesthetic Imagination and the Metaphysics of the Physical Reality**

“My melancholy is the most faithful mistress I have known”,<sup>12</sup> A’s collection of essays opens with a dramatic metaphor in *Diapsalmata* that mostly consists of short, cinematic meditations. It is hard to pinpoint the genre of these personal meditations although melancholy seems to be the unifying emotion underneath them. Besides the metaphor of mistress, Kierkegaard compares A’s soul to a dead sea,<sup>13</sup> her<sup>14</sup> thought to a barren land<sup>15</sup> and her sorrow to a knight’s castle that “lies like an eagle’s eyrie high up upon the mountain peaks among the clouds”,<sup>16</sup> to just name a few. A is depicted to be a sensitive, well-educated and depressing romanticist who is drawn to aesthetic sensations, however fleeting they might be. These emotional metaphors imply Kierkegaard’s existential arguments about a disillusioned romanticist’s freedom and struggle in front of infinitely many possibilities in a world devoid of any moral authority, and her unavoidable melancholy towards an incomplete existence.<sup>17</sup>

Almost all metaphors in *Diapsalmata* describe A’s inner psychological experiences. Such close attention to one’s inner feelings of alienation, solitude and

12. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 44.

13. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 53.

14. For consistency, this essay treats ‘she’ and ‘her’ as a gender-neutral reference throughout this essay when the gender of the subject is unclear.

15. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 45.

16. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 56.

17. Jamie Lorentzen, *Kierkegaard’s Metaphors* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2001), 81.

melancholy is consistent with Kierkegaard's belief that one's inner world cannot be fully accounted for by theories or factors from one's external world.<sup>18</sup> The western intellectual tradition has been notoriously favouring the naturalist conception of metaphysics and a unifying, rational and even empirical theory explaining both the inner and the outer world. Kierkegaard finds that philosophical conviction a seriously mistaken belief that needs to be fixed.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard regards the careful depiction of one's inner experiences as a central task for his authorship.<sup>20</sup> He writes in his diary when he is twenty-two:

What use would it be if truth were to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledged it or not, inducing an anxious shiver rather than trusting devotion? Certainly, I won't deny that I still accept an imperative of knowledge... But then it must be taken up alive in me, and this is what I now see as the main point. It is this my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water.<sup>21</sup>

Kierkegaard challenges the influential Platonic conception of the objective, indifferent truth. He boldly claims that truth should not be indifferent to the truth-seeking agent, or himself in this case. On the contrary, truth should be personal, internalised into individual existence and even eroticising to some extent. Kierkegaard keeps such belief throughout his authorship, and precisely because of this, As aesthetic imagination always has plenty of intimate moments; all can be attributed to Kierkegaard's dedication to inwardness and subjectivity.

Once Kierkegaard focuses his attention inwards and listens in silence, his phrases become much more

18. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 27.

19. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 28.

20. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 27.

21. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks Volume I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 19-20.

metaphorical as evident in *Diapsalmata* and the first part of *Either/Or* in general. “As a poet and philosopher, I have presented everything in the medium of imagination”;<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard reveals his purpose of the writing metaphorically and of becoming a poet-philosopher. Lorentzen notices that Kierkegaard uses metaphors to frame abstract possibilities in concrete terms,<sup>23</sup> and metaphors are “essential expressions for all of Kierkegaard’s thoughts on ideality”.<sup>24</sup>

By ‘ideality’, Lorentzen means the formulation of an ideal understanding from an imaginary or even blurry concept inspired by the imperfect physical reality.<sup>25</sup> Such emphasis on, or even abuse of imagination resonates with the romanticist conviction that one can reinvent oneself among infinitely many possibilities,<sup>26</sup> or, to use another Kierkegaardian metaphor: “crop rotation”.<sup>27</sup> Metaphors seem to play a key role in Kierkegaard’s aesthetic imagination<sup>28</sup> due to the presence of aesthetic possibilities and the absence of a higher moral authority in A’s aesthetic worldview. Evidently, towards the end of *The Seducer’s Diary*, Kierkegaard writes:

Everything is metaphor; I myself am a myth about myself, for it is not rather as a myth that I hasten to this tryst? Who I am is irrelevant; everything finite and temporal is forgotten; only the eternal remains, the power of erotic love, its longing, its bliss. How responsive is my soul, like a taut bow, how ready are my thoughts, like arrows in my quiver not poisoned, and yet able to blend with blood. How vigorous, sound, and happy is my soul, as present as a god.<sup>29</sup>

22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks* Volume VIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 447.

23. Lorentzen, 16.

24. Lorentzen, 17.

25. Lorentzen, 17.

26. Lorentzen, 70.

27. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 239.



Here, A is depicted to dwell in aesthetic possibilities of metaphor and sense the immortality of selfhood amidst his bittersweet realisation. For Kierkegaard, metaphor effectively bridges the abstract and the concrete, the absent and the present, the mortal and the eternal in the more romanticist half of *Either/Or*.

It is interesting to consider what inspires Kierkegaard's metaphors of inwardness and personal emotions, or what concretise A's existential struggle. Strangely, Kierkegaard very often borrows images from nature, or the physical reality, to construct his metaphor of inwardness. An interesting explanation to these nature-inspired metaphors is related to Kierkegaard's view on nature in his later authorship:

[Y]ou come into existence, that you exist, that "today" you receive the necessities of existence, that you came into existence, that you became a human being, that you can see - consider this: that you can see, that you can hear, that you have a sense of smell, that you have a sense of taste, that you can feel, that the sun shines for you and for your sake, that when it becomes weary, the moon begins to shine and the stars are lit.<sup>30</sup>

Here, Kierkegaard addresses the necessity of the external world to one's existence. His reverent tone reveals his belief that nature is something given to human existence and even something holy. Through nature, human makes senses of their sensual experiences and even cognition. Nature signals actuality and external dependency within the package of existence. Although A would not necessarily relate to nature in such a respectful way, she does accept the necessity of nature. In *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard writes:

28. Lorentzen, 69.

29. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 375-6. (translation modified by Howard V.Hong and Edna H.Hong).

30. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 78-9.

How full of omens all Nature is! I take warning from the flight of the birds, from their cries, from the player slap of the fish against the water's surface, from their disappearance beneath the depths, from a distant barking of dogs, from a wagon's faraway clatter, from footballs that echo from afar. No ghosts do I see in this night hour; I do not see what has been, but what shall be, from the bosom of the lake, from the kiss of the dew, from the mist that spreads over the earth and hides its fruitful embrace.<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard views nature as a very much enchanted, self-conscious entity that is much more than an exploitable resource. He acknowledges the continuity of nature as he can foresees what it shall become. Nature hints a dynamic future rather than a static past. It is not surprising for him to borrow images from nature and concretise his imaginary aesthetic possibilities and abstract inner world with images from nature.

The above discovery well leads to a metaphysical discussion of nature or the external world according to Kierkegaard. It can be reasonably postulated that although Kierkegaard thinks that the inward cannot be fully accounted for by the outward, focusing on the inward does not mean to abandon the outward. Quite the contrary, Kierkegaard views nature by virtue of necessity. Although the Kierkegaardian view of nature only becomes explicit in his later authorship, his conception of nature can still be found in A's melancholic metaphors in his early work *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard does not view nature as accidental or exploitable but an enchanted source of inspiration, future possibilities and concretised aesthetic imagination. Human existence and consciousness are contingent on nature, or the external world, effectively refuting the Cartesian scepticism against the external world.

31. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 375.

## Metaphor as Ethical Thought Experiment<sup>32</sup> and the Metaphysics of Selfhood

“MB, or Judge Vilhelm, attempts to treat A’s depressive mood and concludes that A’s romanticist misery is due to the lack of continuity in his character building<sup>33</sup>; since A always feels free to be anyone he wants to be, he is not bounded by any interpersonal relationship or moral principles; as a result he often becomes a stranger to himself and feel lost in his freedom. Vilhelm argues that the consequence of boundless freedom is not enlightenment but misery, as evident in A’s eventual disappointment and struggle. Vilhelm’s tone in the second part of *Either/Or* sounds much more prescriptive as he tries to help A recognise the root of misery before stepping out of it. Vilhelm believes that a complete existence requires one to take ownership, or ethical responsibility of one’s choice and contingency, or what has been given to oneself after birth;<sup>34</sup> it is not an aesthetic existence but an ethical one. Vilhelm regards the external world and interpersonal relationships as the source of morality, and one should accept external conditions befallen on oneself to truly own oneself and live an ethical existence. Different from A’s focus on inner feelings, Vilhelm’s apparent focus is to remind A of the external world whose necessity and morality A is unwilling to admit.

Meanwhile, metaphors still play an indispensable role in Kierkegaard’s writing although he tends to stay away from A’s romanticist, melancholic writing style in the second part of *Either/Or*. Vilhelm seldom uses metaphors as aesthetic imagination but as ethical thought experiments. Lorentzen observes

32. I own the idea of an ethical thought experiment to Lorentzen who first uses the term in the table of contents of Kierkegaard’s *Metaphor*.

33. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 542.

34. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 551.

that metaphor is a chief agent in human moral nature,<sup>35</sup> as “significant human development rests upon such metamorphoses between the possible and the actual”.<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard is not the first philosopher who incorporates metaphorical thought experiments with ethical implications; Plato’s allegory of the cave serves as an earlier example. Metaphorical communication helps Vilhelm leap from aesthetic imagination to ethical actuality; it grabs A, lost in her aesthetic imagination, back to what grounds her existence, namely the sense of continuity in his history and the necessity of the external world. One typical example involves Vilhelm questioning A’s moral conscience towards youth:

Imagine a young man at an age when life really begins to have meaning; he is healthy, pure, joyful, mentally gifted, full of hope and himself the hope of all who know him; imagine that, yes, it’s hard to say this - imagine that he was mistaken about you, that he believed you were a serious, tried and experienced person, in whom one could safely seek enlightenment on one’s life riddles; imagine that he appealed to you with that enduring trust which is the ornament of youth, with that ungain-sayable right of claim that is the privilege of youth - how would you answer him? Would you answer, ‘Yes, I say only either/or’? Hardly.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that Vilhelm tries to convince A that he would not tell the young boy to live an aesthetic life avoiding interpersonal connections so that A can realise his distrust in his own lifestyle. In the quote, metaphor functions differently as compared to an aesthetic imagination. Vilhelm’s ethical thought experiment is still intimate, but the metaphor is longer and more coherent than A’s short, dramatic episodes from nature.

35. Lorentzen 119.

36. Lorentzen 110.

37. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 480.

Although Vilhelm makes it explicit that he wants to focus on the necessity and morality of the external world, he cannot avoid the central moral agent, namely A's inner selfhood. To Kierkegaard, Selfhood is a relational concept existing in relation to the external world. Kierkegaard begins *The Sickness Unto Death* by arguing for the relational definition of the selfhood:

The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself. A human being is the synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short, a synthesis.<sup>38</sup>

It is impossible to pinpoint the ontology of selfhood unless it is presented in relation to something external, like one's personal history, interpersonal relationships or faithful relation with God. It further reinforces Kierkegaard's belief that selfhood is not self-sufficient. It is then understandable when Vilhelm, or Kierkegaard, very often seems to describe human existence as if there is a God, or a moral authority, in the second part of *Either/Or*. Such theological presupposition is not accidental but crucial.

Kierkegaard's choice to write metaphorically is further explained by his metaphysics of selfhood, or how human beings come to know and define themselves. There are some striking similarities between a metaphor and Kierkegaard's conception of selfhood. Just like selfhood being the synthesis of related concepts, metaphor is a relational concept too: "it synthesises two similar or contrasting things, a tenor, or primary object, and a vehicle, or a secondary object, suggesting or illuminating particular aspects of the

38. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), 43.

primary object that otherwise may not readily be apparent”.<sup>39</sup> *Metaphor* fuses two objects into a dynamic idea, making it an exceptionally suitable tool for existential dialectician, “for its form and content more closely imitate the human self and human existence than systematic discourse”.<sup>40</sup> Similar to selfhood being not self-sufficient, metaphor is not self-sufficient too. It is not enough to read a Kierkegaardian metaphor literally but to think of the constituents of the metaphor that stimulates and approximates one’s inner selfhood. Reading and analysing Kierkegaardian metaphors paves the way to comprehend Kierkegaard’s existential insight on the problem of being.

In fact, Kierkegaard would argue that one’s inner selfhood is essentially a metaphor too, and writing metaphorically is the only way to approximate or express selfhood. “I am a metaphor”, the implication of such relational conception of selfhood is profound. It argues against the Aristotelian conception of selfhood which assigns every individual a destined purpose and a checklist to differentiate itself from other beings. Selfhood is not static anymore, but relational, dynamic and conditional.

### **Either/ Or as one Theatrical Metaphor of Existence and Kierkegaard’s Metaphysical Project**

So far, this essay has surveyed some localised, specific metaphors in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* while reflecting on a seeming paradox. That is, when Kierkegaard describes the inward, he keeps borrowing images from the outward, and when Kierkegaard emphasises the outward, he synthesises the inward. Upon a closer analysis, I argue that it is not necessarily paradoxical; it is a stepping stone to make

39. Lorentzen 10.

40. Lorentzen 110.

sense of Kierkegaard's metaphysical views of selfhood and the external world, which are more explicitly argued in his later authorship. Kierkegaard's metaphysical belief resolves the paradox and allows the inward and the outward, the subjective and the objective, as well as the contingent and the necessary to co-exist harmony.

Just as those localised, specific metaphors, my discussion of Kierkegaardian metaphysics, such as the metaphysics of natural objects in the physical world, has been localised and specific so far. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard seems to undertake a more profound metaphysical project as he asks his reader to read *Either/Or* on an aggregate rather than a localised level. In the preface of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym of Victor Eremita, leaves his readers an existential afterthought: Are A and B really so different after all? Is *Either/Or* a work of two parts or essentially just one?<sup>41</sup> If *Either/Or* is ultimately about one person, who is she? After all, treating A and Vilhelm as distinct people seems suspicious, since Vilhelm seems to know A too well, and he even mocks his writing style at times; he even knows how to write like A. Kierkegaard's answer is consistent with his witty sense of humour: he claims that he does not know the answer as he is only the editor for the two.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, no chronological order is given so readers do not know whether A replies to Vilhelm after all or remains in silence.<sup>43</sup> Due to A's silence, Kierkegaard admits that the conversation in *Either/Or* can be endless,<sup>44</sup> and perhaps he hopes that his readers can approach *Either/Or* precisely as an endless existential struggle.

Scholarly readings of *Either/Or* often treat it as an

41. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 36.

42. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 36.

43. Joakim Garff, 'The Esthetic Is above My Element', (Indiana University Press 2004): 59.

44. Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, 36.



existential progression from the first part (an aesthetic life) to the second part (an ethical/religious existence); Vilhelm's views seem to win the dis-course since they are placed after A's diaries by Victor Eremita, and A offers no response to Vilhelm.<sup>45</sup> Garff, on the other hand, suggests a different way of reading *Either/Or*. Inspired by the deconstructive movement in philosophical hermeneutics, he argues for a blurred distinction between A and Vilhelm (or between the aesthetic and the ethical) while noticing an implicit narrator underneath both A and Vilhelm, and the book is not about either-or, but both-and. He claims that A and Vilhelm could be one person, or different aspects of one character. He too refers to the preface for inspiration since that is the place where Kierkegaard most likely speaks with his own voice:

With the inquiry about the genuine storyteller we are brought back to Victor Eremita's foreword, where the authors disappeared into the "boxes in a Chinese puzzle". Who they were, these disappeared ones, is of less importance. The crucial point is the fact that they disappeared. This shows that *Either/Or* by way of both composition and structure is actually an unfolding of the consciousness that occasions A's conflict. [...] The preface's casting of disappeared authors is moreover a reflection of A's own consciousness of the storyteller's absence. And the preface, like the work itself, remains a fragmentary endeavour - something that becomes even more obvious when A juxtaposes the fragmentary with the "art of writing posthumous papers".<sup>46</sup>

Who is narrating *Either/Or*, and who are his intended readers? Garff argues that Vilhelm might not be writing directly back to A as he sometimes approaches A's struggle within a different context.<sup>47</sup> Garff argues that A's struggle represents the crisis of modernity at large and the living conditions of a

45. Garff, 59.

46. Garff, 65.

47. Garff, 64.

much larger population, including Vilhelm. In fact, A appears to be Vilhelm's burden as Vilhelm's attitude towards his unknown wife resembles A's Seducer's Diary, or in Garff's words, Vilhelm's writing also contains a "strangely eroticising" element.<sup>48</sup> The distinction between A and Vilhelm is blurred, leaving readers the task to construct an imaginary narrator. "Precisely because modernity has lost both its authenticity and its formerly fixed references to a transcendental signifier", Garff argues, "the subject has become burdened with the titanic task of procuring its own existential substance".<sup>49</sup> By subject, Garff refers to readers of *Either/Or*; perhaps the meaning of the volume and the identity of the narrator are left to readers to decide. Kierkegaard's existential project underneath *Either/Or* is therefore a collaborative task with no presupposed meaning.

Garff's literary critique on *Either/Or* is deconstructive, as he problematises any static meaning of the text and denies any clear identity for the narrator. Readers need to discover how *Either/Or* reflects themselves existentially and construct their own meaning. The deconstructive methodology perhaps works especially well for *Either/Or* because the volume challenges the traditional author-reader relationship and the absolute authority assigned to the author:

This plurality of voices, pens, positions, and literary jokers - which are also present in the most philosophical parts of the work (the Fragments and Postscript) - necessitates a never resting attentiveness on the part of the reader. The reader must have a dual view, which not only grasps what Kierkegaard writes, but also how he writes what he writes.<sup>50</sup>

48. Garff, 66.

49. Garff, 62.

50. Garff, 69.

*Either/Or* demonstrates how the identity of a transcendental author or intended meaning can be intellectually and existentially limiting when a reader approaches the volume in a traditional, Saussurean manner that summarises *Either/Or* into three existential stages, namely the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious stages. According to Garff, such categorisation is even clichéd.<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard might be much less prescriptive than traditional scholarly readings assume him to be. *Either/Or*, on the whole, contains no fixed meanings but acts like a theatrical metaphor for its audience to reflect on themselves in an existential mood. *Either/Or* is not just a work of existentialism but also functions as an ultimate philosophising agent.

Reading *Either/Or* on the whole as a theatrical metaphor or an existential struggle has its metaphysical implications. From wondering about the volume's narrator to its metaphysical presuppositions, *Either/Or* has been regarded as post-metaphysical<sup>52</sup> as it presumes a different conception of metaphysics as compared to the traditional, naturalistic conception of metaphysics. As Kierkegaard finds truth ultimately subjective and inward, metaphysics also leans towards singularity and indirectness. *Either/Or* questions the very possibility of metaphysics, or "the truth of truth,"<sup>53</sup> and how the right strategy to approach metaphysics. Arguing that Kierkegaard marks the turning point in the history of European metaphysics, Weston writes:

Metaphysics in constructing life as having an immanent goal fails to recognise that the wholeness of life from the point of view of the living, the existing individual cannot be so conceived. Its view is a result of seeing the question of human life 'objectively', a relation to past

51. Garff, 69.

52. Michael Weston. *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy: An Introduction*. (Routledge 1994), 27.

53. Weston, 28.

human existence, as when we concern ourselves with the objective truth about historical events, but which we cannot take up in relation to our *own*... The metaphysical project [of Kierkegaard] treats human life in the mode of pastness and only so can it think of it in terms of a final result. But whereas it makes sense to relate to the past in terms of disinterested inquiry and so in terms of the objective truth, such a relation is only possible for a being who has a quite different relation to her or his own life.<sup>54</sup>

Kierkegaard's metaphysical project asserts that the external and the seemingly objective world are part of the internal experiences of living.<sup>55</sup> To reject the internal aspect of experiences and presume an objective, indifferent metaphysics, to Kierkegaard, is simplified, self-contradictory and even comical.<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard's metaphysical project re-defines one's past and future.<sup>57</sup> One's future is not deemed as the fulfilment of some destined purposes or a vague prediction in accordance to one's static past, but a dynamic process of becoming. Kierkegaardian metaphysics advocates for an "open" future where the past is taken "as one's own and so in relation to the absolute openness of one's future". *Either/Or*, on the whole, is a character's history, or his-story, that signals the openness of the future and a selfhood in the process of becoming. It hopes for a divine existence and a moral authority. It recognises the contingency of human existence and strikes its readers as an earnest prayer.

### **What Could Still be Said: Metaphor, Metaphysics, and Metaphilosophy**

*Either/Or* on the whole as a theatrical metaphor of one person's existential struggles leaves its readers a meta-philosophical afterthought. While a con-

54. Weston, 29-30, emphasis as original.

55. Weston, 29.

56. Weston, 28.

57. Weston, 31.

ventional philosophical essay presents structured arguments and engages its reader's cognitive faculties, *Either/Or* evokes emotional, spiritual and bodily reactions: the volume not just engages cognitive faculties of readers, it also unsettles, liberates and inspires. In the western intellectual tradition, the mind has often been prioritised as the essence of human while other parts of human existence are deemed peripheral. Philosophy, as a result, has often been treated as the exercise of the mind and cognition. *Either/Or* criticises that intellectual tradition and explores a fuller range of human experiences that involve the bodily, spiritual and interpersonal aspects of existence. Rejecting any direct communication of truth, Kierkegaard implies that philosophy can be, or perhaps even should be non-cognitive, personal and metaphorical. All human faculties including but not limited to the cognitive faculty are involved in philosophising with *Either/Or*. Metaphysics is not just understood in *Either/Or*, but felt, experienced and integrated into individual existence. Through such genuine interactions, readers of *Either/Or* regard life as metaphysics and metaphysics as life.

Where does the story end? The story leads to some meta-philosophical questions: How should philosophers approach metaphysics, and is it possible to do metaphysics, objectively or existentially, after all? Does the end of metaphysics mean infinitely many possibilities or a definite closure? Just like Kierkegaard's existential and metaphysical project, the story of metaphysics strikes as an endless conversation, or a perpetual struggle between purposes of life and melancholic disillusion. Perhaps the story will end one day, or perhaps it never will. For now, I am happy that the story does not end here, and it continues to hope, pray and inspire.

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# Sunny Side Up

*by* Kali Breska



# Boarderlands Breaching

*by* Grace Baker

She seeds a slow growth,  
planted under harboring skies,  
militant at most.  
Growing inside and out,  
until inside comes out.  
Gray and green never looked better on you,  
she says.

My stomach aches  
as if it were the cavernous ocean splitting into  
two halves of Earth.  
I make a feast out of a whole melon,  
to ease my emptiness,  
Rind and all.

I run around with my pants cut short.  
Rain drops slide down my cheeks.  
I mistake them for tears and  
look up at the beasts,  
brawling above.

That night a seedling crawls out of  
the corner of my mouth.  
A vine transformed.  
She passes by my window,  
the girl who lives among gods  
with the face of a human.



# Can One Imagine Sisyphus Happy?

## The New Being in Relation to Sisyphus and Tantalus

by Peyton Harrington

Albert Camus's book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, concludes with the thought, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>1</sup> Sisyphus, Camus's absurdist hero, assumes his burden of rolling a boulder up a mountain knowing that once he reaches the summit, the boulder will roll back down to the base; he knows that he will descend the mountain again to roll the boulder back up; and he knows too that this task is endless: the boulder will never sit at the top. The task is absurd, but Sisyphus does it anyway. Despite the absurdity of Sisyphus's existence, Camus tells his reader that "he too concludes all is well."<sup>2</sup> Absurdity and happiness are wrapped into one; however, Sisyphus has a fellow cellmate in Tartarus with a similar punishment but whose happiness escapes my imagination: Tantalus. He is tormented by great hunger and thirst, yet he sits in a pool of water surrounded by grapes. When Tantalus reaches to grab the grapes to alleviate his hunger, the grapes move just beyond his grasp; when he bends over to take a drink, the water recedes. When he is done reaching, the grapes

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 78.

2. *Ibid.*

return to their normal position, as does the water when he sits up again.<sup>3</sup> The English word “tantalize,” meaning to torment someone with a desire that is unobtainable, is derived from his punishment.

Both Tantalus’s and Sisyphus’s punishments are tantalizing: the sight of what they desire or the end of what they have strived for is in reach, but, as soon as that last effort is made, the promise of fulfillment disappears: the water always recedes; the stone always rolls down the mountain. In this paper, I will argue that this tantalizing is an incompleteness, and that this incompleteness is based on two improper approaches to what Paul Tillich calls “ultimate concern:” concreteness and universality, applying to Sisyphus and Tantalus respectively.<sup>4</sup> To establish this, I will draw the similarities between what Tillich calls “ultimate concern,” the concern of Dasein in Heidegger’s work *Being and Time*, and their relation to being-in-the-world; these similarities will show the difference between being-in-the-world as such (what Tillich calls the “ground of being”) and a particular way of being-in-the-world. I will then show two possible ways of relating to being-in-the-world as such, and that Sisyphus and Tantalus represent these two ways of relation. I will conclude by arguing that in order to imagine Sisyphus happy, one must unify the universal with the concrete and the concrete with the universal, and that this is accomplished by Tillich’s conception of the New Being.

On a purely image-based analysis, it is harder to

3. “I saw the pain of Tantalus, in water to his chin, so parched, no way to drink. When that old man bent down towards the water, it was gone; some god had dried it up, and at his feet dark earth appeared. Tall leafy trees hung fruit above his head: sweet figs and pomegranates and brightly shining apples and ripe olives. But when he grasped them with his hands, the wind hurled them away towards the shadowy clouds,” Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), book 11, lines 583-592.

4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 11.

imagine Tantalus as happy as Sisyphus. How does one imagine starving and being dehydrated, with the knowledge that these powerful feelings and the weakness associated with them will never dissipate despite being surrounded by food and water, and still saying, "all is well"? It might be possible to suggest that since Tantalus is being punished for eternity, he will not die of hunger or thirst, so he can affirm his existence just as Sisyphus does; but, if one excludes the eternal aspect of the characters' punishments, then Sisyphus and Tantalus become analogies for the human condition. The particular images reveal a difference of kind between the two punishments even given the same general theme of a tantalizing desire: Tantalus lacks something that Sisyphus can at least be presumed to have, that which gives him his strength to roll the boulder up the mountain time and time again: food and water. Food and water are, for all intents and purposes, the necessities for living. To draw the analogy clearly, food and water represent the possibility of being concerned with tasks: they are our ultimate concern.

Before moving toward an understanding of ultimate concern, it is necessary to delineate what is meant by 'concern' in the first place. In his seminal work, *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger describes concern as an essential way of Dasein's being-in-the-world, and that Dasein is a being concerned with its own being.<sup>5</sup> This concern is equivalent to the colloquial phrase "care for oneself," and this care for oneself is taking care of things and a concern for them.<sup>6</sup> Since Dasein is essentially concerned with oneself, then the things in the world which I interact with must

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 40.

6. Even if only privatively, care is always taking care of things and concern. In willing, a being that is understood, that is, projected upon its possibility, is grasped as something to be taken care of or to be brought to its being through concern," *Ibid.*, p. 181.

by necessity be for the sake of my being. This is not to take a solipsist position, however, for the “world” that Dasein inhabits is characterized by its care for itself, which is also its concern.<sup>7</sup> Dasein is always concerned with something—whether that be finding a place to live, bills to pay, or shopping for food—and these things exist in so far as they relate to Dasein. These things exist in a world and Dasein is its world. Dasein, then, is concerned with its own being. Since what Dasein is concerned with constitutes its being-in-the-world, it follows that what Dasein is concerned with is what Dasein *is*.

The conclusion from what follows above is that Sisyphus’s world is characterized by his one task of rolling the boulder up the mountain (and rolling it back up again). Sisyphus exists as he rolls the boulder up the mountain, knowing that his desire to roll it over the mountain is a tantalizing one: he will always be so close, yet he will never accomplish his task. This does not matter to Sisyphus (as Camus describes him) because it is not the completion of the task that Sisyphus is concerned with; rather, Sisyphus is concerned with the *boulder itself*.<sup>8</sup> The boulder is Sisyphus’s existence: he exists for the boulder—it is his burden, his task<sup>9</sup>—just as the boulder exists for him; their existence is one and the same. Similarly, Tantalus’s world is characterized by the lake and grapes: food and water are his concern. Tantalus knows his fate as well; his punishment is to feel starvation and dehydration for all eternity because he violated the Greek law of hospitality in the highest degree.<sup>10</sup> But there is something strange in Tantalus’s case: his concern is toward those things which allow him to

7. “With its facticity, the being-in-the-world of Da-sein is already dispersed in definite ways of being-in, perhaps even split up... Because being-in-the-world belongs essentially to Da-sein, its being toward the world is essentially taking care,” *Ibid.*, p. 53.

8. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Op. Cit., p. 78.

9. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Op. Cit., p. 78.

be concerned at all, that is, to be-in-the-world; he is concerned with the foundations of being-in-the-world. Without food and water Tantalus will die. If he does not have these things, then he ceases to be-in-the-world: he ceases to exist. The difference between Sisyphus and Tantalus can now be said in this way: Sisyphus is concerned with *a way of* being-in-the-world; Tantalus is concerned with the *possibility of* being-in-the-world. The latter case is the central focus of the first volume of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*; Tillich calls this concern the ultimate concern: "[it] is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance.

The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no 'place' to flee from it. The total concern is infinite: no moment of relaxation and rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite." In other words, the ultimate concern is, first, devoid of any *particular* content but pervades *all* content. Second, there is no-thing within the world that is not ultimately concerning. That which is ultimately concerning cannot be split into two or shared with preliminary concerns: I cannot, for example, say in the presence of God "You are my ultimate concern but I am concerned with other things as well." Third, that which is ultimately concerning is without end. These three conditions make up the first criterion of the ultimate concern. The second criterion for the ultimate concern is "that which determines our being or not-being ... nothing can be of ultimate concern for us which does not have the power of threatening and

10. Another poetic telling of Tantalus's punishment and its cause is found in The Odes of Pindar, "That life is too much for his strength; he is buckled fast in torment, agony fourth among three others, because he stole and gave to his own fellowship that ambrosia and nectar wherewith the gods made him immortal. If any man thinks to swindle God, he is wrong," Pindar, *Olympia 1*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, (University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 23.

11. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Op. Cit., p. 12.

saving our being.”<sup>12</sup> Being a theologian, Tillich names the content of the ultimate concern God; still, Tillich echoes Heidegger when he says that which concerns us ultimately is being-itself.<sup>13</sup> Just as Heidegger maintains that Dasein is essentially concerned with its own being as being-in-the-world as such, and that without a world to be in, Dasein is not, Tillich says that which is ultimately concerning is being-itself, and that ‘being-itself’ is that which determines our being or not-being. Before returning to Sisyphus and Tantalus, one more question remains that is necessary to address in order to adequately talk about the distinction between the two: what is being-itself and being-in-the-world as *such*?

For Heidegger, being-in-the-world as such is essentially “being-possible.”<sup>14</sup> This possibility is neither an abstract, logical possibility, nor is it a vacuous possibility of something being able to happen, but is instead an essential constitution of Dasein’s being.<sup>15</sup> This is to say, at least in the context of this paper, that Dasein is concerned with *something*, but that it has been, and could be, concerned with any number of things. This essential constitution of Dasein as being-possible is the “most primordial” determination of Dasein; this being-in-the-world is discovered in Dasein’s under-standing of itself, which is to say that Dasein discovers “what its very being is about.”<sup>16</sup> What Dasein’s being is about is “the possibility of being free *for* its ownmost potentiality of Being.”<sup>17</sup> Since what Dasein understands is its essence as being-in-the-world as such, that which is most primordial, and what it understands is that its essence is a being-possible, it follows that being in-the-world

12. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Op. Cit., p. 14.

13. In reference to Tillich’s ultimate concern as God, c.f., *Ibid.* p.

211. In reference to Tillich’s ultimate concern as being-itself, c.f., *Ibid.*, p. 235.

14. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Op. Cit., p. 134.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, emphasis as original.

as such is a being-possible. Another way of saying the same thing: being-in-the-world as such is prior to any particular way of being-in-the-world, and therefore is the source of the possibility of any particular way of being-in-the-world.

Tillich echoes Heidegger by calling God, being-itself, the “ground of being [which is] manifest in existence.”<sup>18</sup> The relationship between the ground of being and its manifestations is that the ground of being is present in the course of finite events by finite actions, but also transcends them—in other words, given that the ground of being is infinite, it is the possibility of finite events.<sup>19</sup> Tillich’s first meaning of the name “Word of God” as self-manifestation is helpful here: “the ground is not only an abyss in which every form disappears; it is also the source from which every form emerges. The ground of being has the character of self-manifestation... this is not something added to the divine life; it is the divine life itself.”<sup>20</sup> The “abyss” and “source” that Tillich describes is, if not identical, very similar to the ‘being-possible’ that Heidegger describes, in that Dasein’s essence as being-possible gives rise to every concrete possibility that Dasein *is*, but, at the same time, swallows the particular possibility into the essential possibility. The “self-manifestation” as “divine life” has its parallel in Heidegger as well: Dasein’s essence is the possibility of freedom to be for its own potentiality just as the infinite ground of being manifests itself in its finite manifestations. So, for both Heidegger and Tillich, the most primordial being is possibility.

Returning to Sisyphus and Tantalus, the latter can already be shown to be ultimately concerned: he

18. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, p. 155.

19. For the ground of being and its relation to finite events, cf., *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.

is concerned with the possibility of being-in-the-world, which is being-in-the-world as such. This can be shown in several ways. First, the food and water that Tantalus is surrounded by determines his being or not-being: without food and water, Tantalus will die and cease to be. Secondly, since what determines being or not-being is the possibility of being-in-the-world: the grapes always fall out of reach when Tantalus attempts to grasp them, and the water always recedes when he attempts to bend over and drink. Tantalus sits among his possibilities, but, whenever he chooses to grasp one, it falls away from him. But since Dasein has always already grasped one of its possibilities, why is Tantalus unable to satisfy even just one of his desires?<sup>21</sup> The answer to the question is found in his concern: his concern is not *one* possibility of being-in-the-world, but his concern is aimed toward the possibility of being-in-the-world *as such*. This being-possible is not attainable because, at the same time that it is grasped, it must recede: it is not any one way of being at all, but, as Tillich would say, the ground of being-itself. In other words, Tantalus is solely concerned with his own being as being-in-the-world.

This, however, cannot be said of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is concerned solely with a particular way of being-in-the-world: he is damned to repeat his endless task for eternity. Since the essence of Dasein is being-possible, and Sisyphus is doomed to repeat one task, and that task is what Sisyphus is concerned with, it *should* follow that Sisyphus is not concerned with being-itself—that is, that he is not concerned with being-in-the-world as such. But this is not entirely true. Sisyphus's world, as is the case with

21. Concerning Dasein's always already grasp of itself, cf., Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Op. Cit., p. 135.

22. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Op. Cit., p. 13.



every world according to Heidegger, is characterized by his concern; and there is only one concern that is before Sisyphus: rolling the boulder up the mountain. The boulder is Sisyphus's world and, given that he must be concerned with *something* and that this is the only thing, Sisyphus's *very being* is dependent on the boulder. Since this is the case, Sisyphus can rightly be said to be ultimately concerned with the boulder since it determines his being or not-being. Yet, the proper object of ultimate concern is being-in-the-world as such or the ground of being, which is in both cases 'being-possible,' since in every case, Dasein is concerned with its own being. How is it, then, that Sisyphus is ultimately concerned with only one of his possibilities? Tillich refers to this as idolatry: it is the elevation of a finite possibility to ultimate concern.<sup>22</sup>

Idolatry occurs when something conditioned is considered to be unconditional; the finite appears to be infinite in meaning and significance; and that which is "essentially partial is boosted into universality."<sup>23</sup> Each of these apply to Sisyphus in that the task of rolling the boulder up the mountain is just one possibility of being-in-the-world: it is conditional. The task is also finite in meaning and significance given that Dasein's being is a being-possible—but this is only one possibility and not 'possibility-itself.' The same follows for his task as partial: he has done one of the possibilities, but has elevated this as equivalent with *all* possibilities. Though there is a negative connotation associated with the word 'idolatry,' for Tillich this is just one way of relating 'preliminary' concerns to that which concerns us ultimately.<sup>24</sup> Apart from the story of Sisyphus and his actions against the gods to earn his spot in Tartarus, one

22. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Op. Cit., p. 13.

23. *Ibid.*

cannot blame Sisyphus for his position or his idolatry (in Tillich's understanding of the word): the boulder is all that is given to him. Sisyphus must roll the boulder up the mountain time and time again because, if he does not, then he ceases to be: it is his only possibility of being-in-the-world.

To summarize briefly what I have argued so far: being-in-the-world is Dasein; being-in-the-world is characterized by concern; being-in-the-world as such is characterized by concern for one's own being; being-in-the-world as such is 'being-possible;' therefore, Dasein is concerned for one's own being as possibility. This concern for one's own being as possibility is called one's "ultimate concern." This ultimate concern is concerned with, according to Tillich, the "ground of being," which is "being-itself." The "ground of being" and "being-in-the-world as such" are synonymous in that each gives rise to all possibilities of being-in-the-world, but is itself not any of the possibilities, though it is present in each possibility. Tantalus was said to properly represent this ultimate concern in that he is concerned with what gives him being, symbolically as food and water, but he is unable to grasp either because what gives him being is his possibility of being-in-the-world: the ground of being. I have argued that Sisyphus, on the other hand, represents this ultimate concern in a different way: he idolizes his boulder,

24. The Apostle Paul, as an example of a usage of this negative connotation, uses both the Greek *εικων* and *ειδωλον*, "icon" and "idol" respectively, to describe images of god that are taken to be the reality of god itself. Two prominent examples of this are Romans 1:23, "and they exchanged the glory of the immortal god for images (*εικονες*)," and 1 Corinthians 12:2, "You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed by and led astray to idols (*ειδωλα*) that could not speak." The idea is that God, and the reality God represents, is not expressed through idols or icons. Tillich, without the evident condemnation of the Apostle Paul, echoes this understanding of idolatry, "idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance..." *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

which is his only possibility of being-in-the-world, and universalizes it to the ground of being because it is the only possibility that is before him.

At this point, there is a chance to interpret Sisyphus's punishment, as Camus does, as no punishment at all. Why not say that Sisyphus has made the boulder his ultimate concern while knowing that the boulder is not infinitely significant? In other words, why not be idolatrous if he has no access to the real God? There is a power to this position, especially in light of the fact that Sisyphus's world can only be characterized by his task: it is the only possibility he has! Sisyphus ought to be thankful for the boulder, for his toiling in vain to accomplish a task that can never be completed because, if it were possible to complete it, he would cease to exist. He exists, even fully, as he performs his task: he does what gives him being and what gives him being is his doing. Absurd? Yes; but this absurdity gives Sisyphus the ability to conclude that "all is well." This position, however, hinges on the idea that Sisyphus has no access to "the real God." Is this the case?

In the concluding paragraph of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again."<sup>25</sup> The statement reveals perhaps more than Camus intended; what happens to Sisyphus as he stands at the mountain top, watching the stone roll down the mountain? If Sisyphus's world is characterized by his concern, rolling the boulder up the mountain, which is to say his *existence*, then it follows that when the stone rolls down the mountain, Sisyphus ceases to exist. He now lacks that which

25. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Op. Cit., p. 78.

gives him being—or so he thinks. In this moment, his idolatry is revealed to him. He understands that his existence is possible because of the boulder, but he also understands that this is merely a possibility. He is not always rolling the boulder up the mountain. When he reaches the peak, he falters underneath the weight of the boulder, and it rolls down: he does not stop because Sisyphus knows that this stone is his existence; however, when he falters, he remembers that it is not his true existence. In other words, the world as possibility is revealed to him once again: being-itself is disclosed to him. This disclosing of the world as such is the fundamental mood of Dasein: anxiety.<sup>26</sup> Sisyphus becomes anxious of the world itself. Since the only concern Sisyphus has is rolling the boulder up the mountain, Sisyphus loses sight of the world as such: he is set in possibility, that which he essentially is, but he cannot stay, though it is this possibility that allows him to descend the mountain to start again. Sisyphus, then, is always ahead-of-himself in his concern for his being, though he fails to acknowledge the source of his being.<sup>27</sup>

This being-ahead-of-himself shows that, at every moment, Sisyphus has access to “the ground of being,” which is the “real God” mentioned earlier. This is because what is ‘ahead-of-himself’ is ‘being-possible;’ further, this ‘being-possible’ is himself. Sisyphus’s being is ahead of him in his anxiety of losing this possibility (the moment he begins to falter); at that moment, the ground of being is revealed to him again. This is what Tillich means when he says that the ground of being is the source of all possibility and the abyss into which all form disappears. Sisyphus, however, stubbornly resists “the gods”

26. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Op. Cit., p. 174.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

and thinks that his specific task is the source of his being, despite his remembrance that it is not when he inevitably falters at the peak. For Sisyphus, then, it is impossible to imagine him triumphantly descending the mountain, eager to fulfill his concern once again; it is a radical desperation to retrieve the source of his being which he has lost. Sisyphus does find his burden again, yes, but only with a great loss: he loses the real ground of being, possibility-itself.

The punishments of Tantalus and Sisyphus, then, represent two extremes. On the one hand, Tantalus has the proper ultimate concern: being-itself, that which gives rise to the possibility of being-in-the-world; however, Tantalus is unable to attain this, though he constantly attempts to grasp hold of it. It is impossible to grasp being-itself because it is indefinite.<sup>28</sup> One cannot stay in being-in-the-world *as such* because being-in-the-world is never devoid of particular content. Tantalus attempts to grasp that which gives him being, but it is eternally denied him. He must choose a single possibility and become, as it were, concrete. This is not to say that being-itself is an abstraction; rather, it is universal, and Dasein is concrete: Dasein's essence is its concrete existence, but it is free to be for its own potentiality. Dasein can choose what it is concerned with, but it must be concerned with *something*. It cannot just be concerned. Tantalus is denied this concreteness, and this is his punishment: he remains indefinite with no chance of becoming concrete.

Sisyphus, on the other hand, has the inverse punishment. He has an ultimate concern, but his concern is idolatrous: he makes the concrete universal. The universality of being-itself, however, is the source of

28. "That for which Angst is anxious is not a definite kind of being and possibility of Da-sein. The threat itself is, after all, indefinite and cannot penetrate threateningly to this or that factually concrete potentiality of being. What Angst is anxious for is being-in-the-world itself," *Ibid.*, p. 175.

any concrete way of being-in-the-world. Since every Dasein is concerned with its own being essentially, and Dasein's being is this source or ground of being, which is itself the possibility of being-in-the-world, then Sisyphus is not only ontologically dependent upon this ground of being for his particular way of being-in-the-world, but also for this particular way of being-in-the-world to have any significance. The choice that Sisyphus makes would indeed be absurd, and that absurdity would even contain some significance; however, the very possibility of the absurd choice is dependent upon being-possible. Without the universal that is "ahead-of-oneself," one cannot say that he exists because his existence is this possibility; Sisyphus is trapped within his concreteness, with no chance of escape into the universal that would give meaning to even the absurd choice; for there is no absurdity in necessity.

In both cases, the punishment is incompleteness, but the incompleteness is different depending on the particular punishment: Tantalus is incomplete because he lacks concreteness, while Sisyphus is incomplete because he lacks universality. Given this dilemma, it appears that one is damned to one of three positions, each lacking an essential aspect of existence: one must be like Sisyphus and lack universality; one must be like Tantalus and lack concreteness; or one must alternate between the two poles. There is no room for happiness in any of these cases, even if happiness is wrapped up with absurdity. Is there any room for a reconciliation of these extremes?

In addressing the three ways of relating to the ultimate concern, Tillich writes the following: "the

third relation between the ultimate concern and the preliminary concerns makes the latter bearers and vehicles of the former. That which is a finite concern is not elevated to infinite significance, nor is it put beside the infinite, but in it and through it the infinite becomes real. Nothing is excluded from this function.”<sup>29</sup> Tillich contends that Christian theology has received something which is “absolutely concrete and absolutely universal at the same time,” but Tillich contends that Christian theology has received something which is “absolutely concrete and absolutely universal at the same time,” but what satisfies this absolute concreteness and absolute universality?<sup>30</sup> The answer is typically religious: “the Logos that has become flesh.”<sup>31</sup> This answer implies the reality of the Christ, but given the new approach that Tillich takes in relating to traditional, Christian theology, the “reality of Christ” is in need of explanation.

Tillich writes in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* that the reality of Christ brought the “New Being,” which he describes as “new in contrast to the merely potential character of essential being; and it is new over against the estranged character of existential being. It is actual, conquering the estrangement of actual existence.”<sup>32</sup> Tillich diagnoses the root of this problem as “concupiscence,” an estrangement which is rooted in a desire for more than is given.<sup>33</sup> The solution requires a complete unity of finitude, conditionality, and incompleteness into (and not alongside of) infinity, unconditionality, and totality.<sup>34</sup> This is, in every sense, a complete paradox: the

29. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, Op. Cit., p. 13.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

32. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 119.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-35.

34. *Ibid.*

solution requires a unity of the finite into infinity without the dissolution of the finite. Yet Tillich is able to describe, by way of Christ, what this unity looks like: the Gospels depict Jesus as participating fully in the realities of anxiety, tragedy, and death. The New Being does not remove these from Jesus; instead, these realities are brought into the being that transcends each event, which is sustained by God's creative power.<sup>35</sup> Since the unity with God, being-itself, transcends every concrete way of being, then the finite (to take one of the three conditions) is incorporated into the infinite without dissolution. This is possible only because the ground of being is the source of all possibilities, and these possibilities are devoid of any particular person or time, but yet includes all of them without being any particular one or cluster of possibilities. Jesus's actions, words, doubts, and eventual death are both tragic and salvific simultaneously, in that his actions cost him finite separation with those around him, but salvific because this separation is overcome in the infinite ground of being in which both he and those whom he was separated from participate.

If Tillich's conception of the New Being is correct, it would reconcile the extremes present in both Tantalus's and Sisyphus's punishment: Tantalus would receive his concreteness and Sisyphus would receive his universality. Sisyphus wants to assert himself without the gods as much as Tantalus wants to not assert himself at all; neither of these are possible, but it is their eternal attempts at impossible tasks that constitute their punishments of incompleteness. Their reunion into being would be for Tantalus to renounce his asceticism and for Sisyphus to give up his false idol. Tantalus's concupiscence for being-it-

35. *Ibid.*, p.134.



self must be through a vehicle: man is finite and cannot encapsulate the infinite except through an image. Sisyphus, on the other hand, must no longer defy the presence of being-itself that is always ahead-of-him at the top of his mountain. Sisyphus's extreme concreteness, his necessity, contradicts the universality that is the source of his being: the boulder, instead of being taken to be that which is infinite, must be understood to be a vehicle of the infinite; the infinite can become real in it only when one imbues the concrete with it. Given the symbolic nature of Tantalus and Sisyphus, and the extremes they represent, only when one's finite existence is reunited into the infinite ground of being can one imagine Sisyphus happy.

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# You are OK

*by* Kali Breska



# Woman as Situation

by Kara Zhang

## Abstract

In her seminal feminist work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir presented a revolutionary philosophical analysis of the concept and current status of 'woman,' providing a non-essentializing account that nonetheless recognized the physical and social realities of women. De Beauvoir explains woman's oppression in existentialist terms of Other, negation, and difference, delineates the ways in which woman's situation as a marginalized group is unique, and highlights the complex relation of intersubjectivity between woman and man. This paper explains how de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity applies to society on the issue of feminism and critiques her proposed solution, which places liberation's primary burden on women. De Beauvoir concludes that since women are most suited to lead a reimagining of gender, they should be held responsible for doing so—a well-intentioned existentialism that ignores de Beauvoir's own recognition of the social realities of differences of power that flow from differences of identity.

## de Beauvoir's Woman as Situation

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses some of the challenges that the sexuality and gender revolution of the late 20th century faced surrounding the notion of 'woman.'<sup>1</sup> For example, vague and abstract notions of 'femininity' such as the 'eternal feminine' seem to pervade popular definitions and understandings of the term 'woman.' Referencing the biological and social sciences' denunciation of "unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics," de Beauvoir rejects this essentializing definition of woman.<sup>2</sup> Yet it would simultaneously be ignorant to deny that there are tangible biological differences between women and men, despite the socially constructed origins of the categories. Additionally, these gender categories, no matter how constructed, are the basis of many social institutions and realities. Striving to address this embodiment conundrum and advance a non-essentializing account, de Beauvoir presents woman as 'situation.'

Furthermore, the philosophical question of 'woman' undermines the universal human nature claimed by enlightenment, rationalist, and nominalist traditions.<sup>3</sup> While men and women are both human beings, de Beauvoir argues that "women simply *are not* men"<sup>4</sup> and humanity exists "divided into two classes of individuals."<sup>5</sup> Instead of legitimizing biological differences to essentialize 'woman' and limit her freedom of self-definition, de Beauvoir occupies a middle ground between the universal eradication of woman and the feminine essentialization of woman. Instead, she recognizes woman as situationally and thus contingently different from man. She astutely observes that the exhortation to 'be, become, and

1. Simone de Beauvoir, introduction to *The Second Sex*, 87

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 88.

remain women' implies that the biological status 'female human being' is not synonymous with the social status 'woman.'<sup>6</sup> This confluence of facticity and freedom is undergirded by the non-essentialist understanding that "every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual."<sup>7</sup>

De Beauvoir notes that the very question 'what is a woman?' elucidates the current state of affairs as *de facto* man. That is, the male body is a "direct and normal connection with the world," whereas the female body is "a hindrance... weighed down by everything peculiar to it."<sup>8</sup> She exists only insofar as she is not-man, defined by difference and negation. While "humanity is male," woman is only relative to man.<sup>9</sup> This also suggests that the universal and unembodied account of humanity has failed at neutrality: woman-as-difference must be abnormal-negative-wrong, the negation of normal-positive-right man.<sup>10</sup>

In existentialist terms, if man is both Subject and Absolute, woman becomes permanently Other.<sup>11</sup> The Other is a basic feature of human thought, not unique to the gender binary, that the full Self and that group identity require.<sup>12</sup> However, the expected reciprocal recognition of Other-as-Subject has not occurred between men and women.<sup>13</sup> Theirs is not a fluid relationship of intersubjectivity, but a solidified Absolute-Subject / Other-Object relation.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the essentialization of woman, whereby she is defined by social relations and power dynamics rather than her mere being as a Self, is especially problematic in a world where power relations dictate that women are perpetually Other. This is de Beauvoir's explanation

6. *Ibid.*, 87.

7. *Ibid.*, 87.

8. *Ibid.*, 88.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 89.

of the subjugation and oppression of woman, which she uses as a starting point to expound her anti-essentialist account of woman.

Exploring the current solidified state of gender relations, de Beauvoir notes that women have not, like the proletariat, Blacks, or Jews, yet struggled for their own subjectivity and liberation. Unlike other marginalized groups, women are not a numerical minority; they are naturally, non-socially different; and there is no significant historical event that marks their induction into subjugation.<sup>15</sup> There is neither an apparent collective history nor a geographical concentration of women to encourage a sense of in-group solidarity—in other words, women lack the means and conditions for successful organization.<sup>16</sup> Despite the seeming commonality of the female gender, the multiplicity and intersectionality of women has resulted in a diaspora of isolation, rather than a coming-together, overcoming of difference, and coalescing of women.

Compounding this initial disadvantage of unclear organization, the gender power dynamic plays into the frequent privileging of other social identities over ‘woman.’ As men have the material means and social capital to organize more effectively, additional identities of women such as their socioeconomic class, race, and religion, ones that are shared with or originate from the social identities of men, become more prominent. The situation is especially complicated as women and men are involved in interdependent relationships. Men do not have absolute power of women, for example in a traditional husband-wife relationship where the male depends on the female for household work, emotional care,

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 89-90.

15. *Ibid.*, 90.

16. *Ibid.*, 87.

and child-rearing. Yet, similar to a master-slave relationship, even in reciprocity and interdependency, woman is undeniably subordinate in the context of the larger social fabric. The power dynamic allows men to satisfy their wants, such as reproduction and heirs, and accords him absolute control over whether women's needs, such as survival, are satisfied.<sup>18</sup> Woman is trapped in a position of powerless, vulnerable dependency, and, as neither woman nor man can be fully independent, she cannot exterminate man.<sup>19</sup>

Further complicating the situation, de Beauvoir describes how accepting the position of Other and participating in a male-centric world can confer both material protection from economic risk and moral justification from metaphysical responsibility.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the distribution of benefits is not on the basis of any recognition of woman as-Subject, but rather according to the status of the men with whom a woman is connected, such as in the institutions of marriage and socioeconomic class. Yet, a state of dependency can be appealing in justifying an avoidance of authenticity, given the perennial temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing.<sup>21</sup> A lack of intersubjectivity due to woman's failure to assert herself as the essential can be traced to inadequate means of organizing and the complexity of reciprocal relations.<sup>22</sup>

While woman has failed to posit herself as the essential, man has wasted no time positing her as the inessential. De Beauvoir argues that the circulating theological, philosophical, scientific, and ethical accounts of the inferiority of women are attempts by

17. *Ibid.*, 91.

18. *Ibid.*, 91.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 91-92.

21. *Ibid.*, 92.

22. *Ibid.*, 90.



men to self-justify the subordination and exploitation of women.<sup>23</sup> “Women on the whole *are* today inferior to men” because they are kept in a situation where their freedom is rigorously and systematically denied.<sup>24</sup> Her possibilities are so severely limited that the “moral and intellectual effects [of her subjugation] appear to spring from her original nature.”<sup>25</sup> If women seem inferior, it is because men, holding power, have tried and succeeded to make it so. Yet, de Beauvoir is generously sympathetic to the status quo male attitude; she argues that men’s passive participation in implicitly postulating woman as inferior is not ill intentioned, but merely ignorant as men cannot be expected to give up the benefits they gain from women’s oppression.<sup>26</sup> She recounts man’s perspective: in the conjugal life of the private sphere, women seem equally if not more powerful than men; any differences in the public sphere are attributed to the natural causes propagated by prevailing attitudes.<sup>27</sup> On the whole, men and women are different but roughly equal. However, de Beauvoir points out the underlying double standard: in cooperative relations, women are abstractly equal and thus expected to contribute; in conflicting relations, women are concretely different and thus not granted the same privileges.<sup>28</sup>

Unsatisfied with man’s account of woman’s situation, de Beauvoir appeals to women to shift discussions of gender out of the normative binary rut.<sup>29</sup> She argues that women are better situated—that is, more knowledgeable and more immediately interested—than men to philosophize about the subjugation of women.<sup>30</sup> De Beauvoir recognizes that it

23. *Ibid.*, 92.

24. *Ibid.*, 93.

25. *Ibid.*, 93.

26. *Ibid.*, 95.

27. *Ibid.*, 94.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 93, 94–95.

30. *Ibid.*, 95.

31. *Ibid.*, 96.

is impossible to escape bias and does not claim to; instead, she openly states the foundational principles and perspectives of her approach. De Beauvoir begins with a conception of the public good “which assures the private good of the citizens,” and advances private good as synonymous with an individual’s concrete opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

De Beauvoir notes that happiness is an inappropriate goal for social organization because it can mask normative systems that merely benefit those in power.<sup>32</sup> For example, oppressors may falsely claim that the oppressed are content explicitly, or more subtly through the phenomenon of adaptive preferences. This concern references de Beauvoir’s deeper rejection of notions of political benevolence, which she critiques as “thoughtlessly [sacrificing] the future to the present” by limiting individuals’ possibilities through assumed omniscience.<sup>33</sup> Human transcendence can never be totally, finally, and perfectly realized, so present existence is only justified through striving towards infinite and indefinite future possibility—this is de Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics of ambiguity.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, society should condemn the constraints of paternalism and strive towards feminism, with women tasked to spearhead efforts to reconceptualize gender relations—though they must be supported by men.

Politically, existential ethics supports liberalism. From ‘existence precedes essence,’ de Beauvoir concludes that existence is ambiguous; “its meaning is never fixed [and] must be constantly won.”<sup>35</sup> Good must be the end, but we cannot know and “are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*.”<sup>36</sup> Thus,

31. *Ibid.*, 96.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Simone de Beauvoir, “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” 418-19.

34. *Ibid.*, 414.

35. *Ibid.*, 413.

36. *Ibid.*

existential ethics gives methods but not principles; the precept will be that others must be treated as freedom so their end may be freedom.<sup>37</sup> We are obligated both to try to act in authentic freedom, and to respect others' attempts to do so. Hence, de Beauvoir promotes a liberalism that allows individuals the opportunity to pursue a fulfilling existence with no constraints regarding what that life will look like.

"The brutish life of subjection to given conditions,"<sup>38</sup> or woman's thrown situation as the inessential, forecloses the possibility of fulfilling "the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential."<sup>39</sup> For-itself existence has been degraded and coerced into in-itself existence.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, patriarchy dehumanizes women by constraining them to assume the stagnant, finite status of Object: stripped of possibility, "forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign," doomed to immanence.<sup>41</sup> De Beauvoir, in accordance with existential ethics, wants to give woman the possibility of succeeding—that is, assuming a subjective attitude, taking metaphysical responsibility, and leading a fulfilling life on her own terms.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, she champions liberty.

De Beauvoir neither ignores nor essentializes the philosophical problem of 'woman.' Instead, she offers a nuanced and thoughtful account of the intricacies of woman's unique situation, contradistinct to other marginalized groups. De Beauvoir, grounded in the material and social reality of woman, and does not offer radical freedom or gender-blindness as a viable solution. She seems to motion towards intersubjectivity, where men and women are both

37. *Ibid.*

38. de Beauvoir, introduction to *The Second Sex*, 96.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 97.

Subjects; while the Other cannot be extinguished and power dynamics are still present, the situation is non-static and allows woman the possibility of leading an authentic, meaningful life. Both bear responsibility in striving towards a better future.

However, de Beauvoir does not criticize men and women for accepting the status quo according to equal criteria. She condemns violence as “inadmissible if it uses the pretext of ignorance to deny a freedom,”<sup>43</sup> but sympathizes with the prevailing modern male attitude (sexism is dead) of naivety. Yet, she resolutely states that woman’s complacency as-Object is moral downfall despite the myriad of legitimate reasons she gives for why women seized subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> She correctly argues that only women have the ability to bring about their change from inessential to essential but fails to account for the implications of their lack of power.

Furthermore, there is no acknowledgement of how multiplicities of identity will affect an individual’s situation. As members of unique combinations of social groups, different women will have different amounts of power. This should be accounted for when expecting women to claim their own subjectivity, as the costs of rejecting man-as-Absolute-Subject will be varied in a patterned and predictable way—according to the power and privilege that her particular intersection of identities confers. In discussing a solution, de Beauvoir conflates questions of ability with question of responsibility and fails to account for differences of power that flow from differences of identity; given her recognition of the concrete barriers to women realizing freedom, de Beauvoir does not address the feasibility of charging woman with claiming her subjectivity.

43. de Beauvoir, “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” 420.

44. de Beauvoir, introduction to *The Second Sex*, 96.

## References

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