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Risking Life versus Giving Life

Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir

Sameema Zahra | ORCID: 0000-0002-1939-7031

University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

s.zahra@uq.edu.au

Abstract

This article engages closely with Beauvoir's claim that risk is the criterion of value. The article first discusses the meaning of "risk" and its role as the yardstick of values and then questions the contrast Beauvoir establishes between giving life and risking life by examining the experience of pregnancy. The author argues that a close reading of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* demonstrates that, once we remove the lens of patriarchy, the opposition between giving life and risking life crumbles.

Résumé

Cet article discute de l'affirmation de Beauvoir suivant laquelle le risque est le critère déterminant la valeur. Il y est d'abord question de la signification du «risque» et de sa fonction en tant qu'étalon de mesure pour toute valeur. L'article questionne ensuite le contraste que Beauvoir établit entre le fait de donner la vie et de risquer sa vie en interrogeant l'expérience de la grossesse. L'autrice soutient qu'une lecture attentive du *Deuxième Sexe* montre qu'une fois que l'on s'extrait du prisme du patriarcat s'effondre l'opposition entre donner la vie et la risquer.

Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir – pregnancy – motherhood – risk – immanence – transcendence – freedom – *The Second Sex* – *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Simone de Beauvoir has often been accused of androcentrism.¹ One of the reasons for this accusation is her negative representation of motherhood in *The Second Sex*.² For example, she writes:

The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth, but to the one that kills.³

These lines have been used to demonstrate Beauvoir's alleged latent misogyny or her obsession with death that mirrors that of other phallogocentric philosophers.⁴ However, few scholars have scrutinized these ideas closely, especially to elaborate the concept of risk, which plays a crucial role in Beauvoir's claim.⁵ This article engages closely with these lines and analyzes them in the broader framework of Beauvoir's philosophy. I argue that Beauvoir attempts to demonstrate two things here. First, by describing risking life as the signifier of superiority, she points out how values are created. Second, by showing that patriarchy excludes giving life from the realm of risk, she exposes the skewed patriarchal structures that discount exclusively feminine activities from the realm of values. Beauvoir argues that risk is the mode of expressing freedom and thereby transcending the animality of life. Hence risk is considered the mark of humanity. Motherhood, on the other hand, along with all uniquely feminine experiences, is viewed by patriarchy as a natural process and thus a purely immanent fact of being. As such, motherhood is expressive of our animality and not our freedom. An alternative reading emphasizes Beauvoir's claims that humanity

1 Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex,"* trans. Linda Schenk, London, Athlone, 1996 [1991], pp. 80–81.

2 See Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, pp. 74–75, and Charlene Haddock Seigfried, "Second Sex: Second Thoughts," *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1985, 219–229, pp. 223–226.

3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Knopf, 2011 [1949], p. 76. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *ss*.

4 Nancy C.M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1983, 283–310, p. 301.

5 For exceptions, see Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 84–100; Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997, pp. 87–98.

is ambiguous; human activities are neither a purely free activity nor a purely natural phenomenon. Given this, motherhood is not radically different from masculine activities and involves risking, albeit in a different way from the so-called masculine risk.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section engages with the meaning of risk and shows how risk functions as a measure of value. The second section questions the exclusion of the world of mothering from the realm of risk. Here, I focus on the experience of pregnancy, but I believe that similar arguments can be made regarding other aspects of mothering, such as birthing, breastfeeding, and parenting. In the third section, I question the traditional reading of Beauvoir's views of pregnancy and offer an alternate reading that focuses on the essential ambiguity of human existence experienced in pregnancy. Finally, the fourth sections engages with pregnancy as a fundamentally ethical undertaking and therefore in the realm of risk.

1 Risk and Value

Humanity is marked by ambiguity. As Beauvoir claims, "presence in the world vigorously implies the positing of a body that is both a thing of the world and a point of view on this world."⁶ Human beings are both a subject and a thing, and any attempt to reduce one to the other is doomed to failure. The animality of one's life requires maintaining life by actions that guarantee survival, such as nourishment and protection from dangers, and this is termed "immanence" in the existentialist framework, whereas one's freedom demands surpassing this pure animality and going beyond these limits, creating new possibilities, which is identified as "transcendence." Thus, transcendence and immanence are not opposed to each other but rather are "two aspects of existence."⁷ Authentic subjectivity is lived in being grounded in one's immanence and springing forth from there as transcendence.⁸ But how does one live this relationship concretely? One takes a *risk*.

What is risk? Etymologically, risk comes from the French *risque* (noun) and *risquer* (verb), from Italian *risco* (danger) and *rischiare* (run into danger). Therefore, risk is assigned to acts that involve some sort of danger, threat, or

⁶ ss, p. 24.

⁷ Erika Ruonakoski, "When Living Is Only Not Dying: Immanence and Animals in Beauvoir's Discussion of Oppression," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, 105–126, pp. 108–109.

⁸ ss, p. 87.

uncertainty. But dangers do not exhaust risk; otherwise, motherhood would have brought the same respect to woman that warrior expeditions bestowed upon man. Risk raises humanity above the pure animality of life because it is the mode of transcendence. Given that Beauvoir defines humanity in opposition to the animal and natural world in regard to risk, risk cannot be reduced to mere physical dangers.

Put differently, all dangerous acts are not the same in ethical terms and therefore cannot all be equated with the risk, which Beauvoir posits as the criterion of value. Take, for example, some dangerous acts not associated with transcendence, such as the exploits of a gladiator. Gladiators would have been our greatest heroes if risk stood for any mere life-threatening situation. The gladiator's whole life is permeated by danger; if they take another breath it is only because they have won it by defeating something extremely dangerous. But they would happily run away from the arena if given a choice, and that is where they are different from a warrior or a hunter.⁹ They do not choose danger freely; they are thrown into it. Taking a risk requires choosing danger and not being forced to face danger. Every dangerous situation, therefore, is not Risk with a capital "R," which signals a risk that functions as a mode of transcendence. Risk is a conscious choice and cannot be forced, nor can one be tricked into taking a Risk through ignorance or mystification.

Given this conception of Risk, can we establish that all voluntary, dangerous acts are Risks? And in that case, since Risk is the measure of values, does the value of an act increase with the deadliness of one's choices? If such is the case, then bullfighters arguably showcase the highest moral attitude as they deliberately take risks that put them into extremely dangerous and often life-threatening situations. Such a description makes Risk appear almost vain, which runs counter to Beauvoir's association of Risk with values. Beauvoir's discussion of the adventurer indicates that Risk is not *merely* choosing danger. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir contrasts the authentic moral attitude with attitudes that fail to demonstrate authenticity. She articulates that the adven-

9 In earlier times, only prisoners and slaves were forced to become gladiators. Because of its popularity, free men and women also started choosing this activity voluntarily. The popularity of gladiators rose to the extent that new laws were enforced to stop the elites from fighting in the arena. For a discussion of the penalties and restrictions imposed upon upper-class men and women for becoming gladiators, see Barbara Levick, "The *Senatus Consultum* from Larinum," *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 73, 1983, pp. 97–115. Although later gladiators were not forced to fight in the arena, they still do not fit the criterion of risk explored here. Their attitude is closer to the attitude of the adventurer discussed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York, Philosophical Library, 2018 [1947]. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *EA*.

turer comes very close to being morally commendable; however, he misses out on a key point and thus falls short of authenticity. The adventurer, according to Beauvoir, acknowledges the absence of absolute values yet has a zest for life and action.¹⁰ He acknowledges the ambiguity of life. Knowing that there are no absolute values, the adventurer does not make a pretext of preferring one act to another. However, he is unable to live authentically as he does not give any value to the content of his acts. She writes:

The man we call an adventurer, on the contrary, is one who remains indifferent to the content, that is, to the human meaning of his action, who thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others. The fate of Italy mattered very little to the Italian condottiere; the massacres of the Indians meant nothing to Pizarro; Don Juan was unaffected by Elvira's tears.¹¹

For Beauvoir, an adventurer would be our greatest hero if we lived in a solipsistic world, where actions mattered only in their moments of isolated subjectivity, without any reference to others.¹² It is one thing to deny any given values and another to say that there can be no values whatsoever.

The description of the adventurer offers an opportunity to elaborate the concept of Risk. As previously discussed, Risk is choosing danger, but that definition does not envelop it entirely. Beauvoir maintains that existentialism is not solipsism, and the attitude of the adventurer is not the ethical attitude. For an adventurer, there is no difference between an act that advances humanity through discoveries and that of breaking the world record of eating the most hot dogs in a minute. In either case, a boundary is pushed, a new future is opened, a new world created, but the content of the action does not increase or diminish the value of the act. The adventurer's risk is not Risk because it does not bring transcendence. Transcendence is not merely questioning any goal that catches the fancy of the existent: it is, rather, questioning "life itself as the horizon."¹³ But on the contrary, the adventurer is not ready to assign any value to actions beyond his own momentary pursuit of individual goals. Risk is deliberately choosing danger, but not all kinds of dangerous choices are valued; humanity values acts that bring forth transcendence as this demonstrates how humanity is different from nature. The natural world is deemed the

10 EA, p. 62.

11 EA, p. 65.

12 EA, p. 63.

13 Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, p. 89.

world of repetition, the world where the same processes keep bearing same or similar results for eternity. Therefore, in order to raise humanity above the natural realm, Risk should be able to break free from this cycle of repetition. Such distinction does not entail the rejection of all repetition, but rather it is not limited to repetition only.¹⁴

Risk is taken for a purpose, and its purpose is to surpass the merely given aspects of life by pushing life's boundaries. According to Beauvoir, the adventurer is not authentic because he is pursuing his aim—either for glory, riches, or fame—or for the sake of the act itself. His actions do not connect concretely to a human future. Beauvoir argues that the adventurer will turn either into a tyrant or a tyrant's accomplice, as others do not exist for him.¹⁵ A free subject's acts are movement toward a future, a future concretely accessible to others. In their act of preserving or providing, they create new instruments, transform nature, and therefore forge a new future.¹⁶ Dangers are not valued for themselves but for what they bring to human existence, and for what they open up for humanity. Beauvoir writes:

If blood were only a food, it would not be worth more than milk: but the hunter is not a butcher: he runs risks in the struggle against wild animals. The warrior risks his own life to raise the prestige of the horde—his clan. This is how he brilliantly proves that life is not the supreme value for man but it must serve ends far greater than it.¹⁷

Killing or taking away life by itself is not a value. The butcher is not valorized; he merely slaughters an incapacitated animal. It is the hunter or the warrior with whom the grandeur lies. But what is the difference between the deeds of a butcher and those of the hunter? Certainly, the hunter is in a more dangerous situation than the butcher. Hunting is not only physically more dangerous compared to butchery, but it also involves more uncertainty; a butcher's performance is usually in a familiar and controlled environment, whereas the hunter is never certain what might come his way. So, the ways these two acts are performed are different and hence have different worth. However, Beauvoir posits that the aim or purpose of the hunter and butcher are also not the same. Again, both put food on the table, but the hunter is doing more than providing food. In risking his life for the sake of his group, he is doing more than the butcher.

14 *EA*, p. 89.

15 *EA*, pp. 63–65.

16 *ss*, p. 76.

17 *ss*, p. 76.

First, he is showing that life itself is not the highest value for him: he is ready to endanger his own life for the sake of the group or clan. Second, in the act of overcoming these natural obstacles, he is also extending humanity's grasp over nature; he is opening a new future for himself and others. That is why he takes a Risk, whereas the butcher only provides food.

In sum, Beauvoir's notion of Risk involves three components. First, Risk questions and endangers the already given; such dangers can range from the possibilities of death and physical harm to the loss of other valuable aspects of being. Second, the given is put into danger to extend humanity's grasp over the future. Risk is taken to maintain the valuable aspects of human subsistence, such as providing food for nourishment and thereby life, but also to create a new future; it pushes the boundary of the present by inventing new methods.¹⁸ Third, Risk is lived as an intersubjective relation and, as such, taking Risk is always an ethical question. Risk is taken in such a way that the most valuable possessions are put into question for the sake of something higher—the group or the clan or the whole of humanity. Therefore, humanity is creative even as it engages in processes of repetition. But this creativity is not lived merely as a personal project; it makes sense only in relation to the Other.

2 Pregnancy in Patriarchy

Now I turn to the contrast between Risking life and giving life by questioning patriarchy's exclusion of exclusively feminine activities from the realm of Risk insofar as they merely perpetuate the existence of the species. For the purpose of this study, I focus solely on the experience of pregnancy and do not discuss birthing, breastfeeding, or women's role as caregivers. I shall first point out the grounds on which pregnancy is excluded from the realm of Risk. Next, by examining pregnancy in the light of the earlier discussion of Risk, I question this exclusion and explore how the experience of pregnancy is both different from and similar to so-called masculine activity. I argue that Beauvoir's discussion of pregnancy can be read as a critique of patriarchy and its exclusion of femininity from the realm of values, as Linda Zerilli claims that "Beauvoir's critique of maternity did not advance but unsettled the universal (read male) subject of modernity."¹⁹ In showing the status of pregnancy in patriarchy, she exposes man's denial of his own corporeality and his fear of immanence. Pregnancy is

¹⁸ ss, p. 76.

¹⁹ Linda Zerilli, "A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity," *Signs*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, 111–135, p. 113.

a reminder of humanity's closeness to nature; it is a reminder of the ambiguity of human existence. In denying that being pregnant is Risk, man seeks to remain oblivious to his own ambiguity and maintain the charade of pure transcendence.²⁰ Viewed in this light, Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood does not reduce pregnancy to a mere biological process. Her famous passage about "risking life" is instead meant to expose the biased lens of patriarchy, which, if removed, dissolves the opposition between giving life and Risking life.

Beauvoir's discussion implies that, in patriarchy, pregnancy is exempted from the realm of values, as it does not seem to fulfill the conditions required to qualify as Risk. As demonstrated earlier, Risk is a choice that brings forth a new future for both the Risk-taker and others while simultaneously endangering the already given world and thereby becoming a valuable undertaking. Although pregnancy can be seen as a dangerous situation, it has not been understood as a free choice, but rather as woman's biological destiny. Nonetheless, Beauvoir argues that even if pregnancy is granted the status of a free choice (by making contraception and abortion accessible and acceptable), its status as a transcendent activity would still be highly questionable under the current value system, because in patriarchy, "to give birth and to breast-feed are not *activities*, but natural functions."²¹ From the patriarchal viewpoint, pregnancy is a biological phenomenon and does not involve any volitional activities on woman's part; she grows like a plant grows. Therefore, even if conception is a choice, pregnancy is not an activity. Further, Risk is taken to bring forth a new future, but patriarchy views pregnancy as bringing forth just another life, and "this creation is nothing but a repetition of the same Life in different forms."²² Although a pregnant woman endangers her own life to bring forth a new life, it is not a creation, but rather the preservation of the species. Humanity, unlike groups in the animal world, is not merely a natural species; it seeks to surpass even in acts of repetition.²³ The development of tools is one such example: "*Homo Faber* has been an inventor since the beginning of time: even the stick or the club he armed himself with [...] is an instrument that expands his grasp of the world."²⁴ Seen from this perspective, pregnancy lacks the element of creativity: "it produces nothing new," and therefore appears to be in the realm of the already known and established natural limits of human existence.²⁵ Since the

20 ss, p. 169; Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, pp. 86–88.

21 ss, p. 75.

22 ss, p. 76.

23 ss, p. 75.

24 ss, p. 75.

25 ss, p. 75.

life it creates is not seen as a new creation, pregnancy is not perceived as an intersubjective relationship, but as a mere biological process, and hence outside the domain of ethics. As a result, patriarchy relegates pregnancy to the world of immanence, which is essential for the maintenance of the species; it is considered to be outside the realm of value.

In the last few decades, a growing number of scholars have started to read Beauvoir's views on pregnancy (and motherhood in general) as more nuanced than conceded by Beauvoir scholarship of the past.²⁶ This article is a continuation of that project: I demonstrate that not only does Beauvoir conceive of pregnancy as a nuanced experience, but she also establishes pregnancy (and by extension motherhood) as the most acute expression of the ambiguity of human existence. As such, it is different from other human experiences not in kind but in degree. In the next two sections, I demonstrate that pregnancy is a Risky undertaking because pregnancy 1. endangers the given in more ways than one, 2. is future-directed (opens a new future), and 3. is essentially an intersubjective relation and hence falls in the realm of ethics. Each point relates to the three characteristics of Risk outlined in the previous section.²⁷

3 Pregnancy: A Perilous Activity

Risk is a dangerous choice; however, the definition of Risk encapsulates more than mere physical threats: it extends to putting any valuable aspect of one's being into question. Pregnancy brings woman face to face with danger in both ways. First, it is physically a painful and, in some cases, life-threatening phenomenon. Second, it is an act of making one's own body a host for another being, whose presence significantly affects one's grasp on the world. And finally, it introduces both immediate and major future changes to one's life, changes that destabilize the already given world. Overall, pregnancy risks at least three

26 Nancy Bauer outlines this shift in Beauvoir scholarship in her chapter, "Simone de Beauvoir on Motherhood and Destiny," in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, Chichester, UK, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, 146–159, pp. 146–150.

27 Some of the traits of Risk explored in this article make it appear identical to courage. I believe that there are many similarities between courage and Risk. However, the scope of these concepts is different. Risk involves elements of creativity and future directedness, which are not necessarily part of the definition of courage. For a discussion of courage and pregnancy, see Kayley Vernalis, "Of Courage Born: Reflections on Childbirth and Manly Courage," in *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, ed. Caroline R. Lundquist and Sarah LaChance Adams, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, pp. 47–70.

valuable aspects of one's being: health (or life in some cases), subjective grasp, and the future. Beauvoir's account of pregnancy engages with each of these aspects, but I do not discuss the physical dangers of pregnancy here. Instead, I focus on the other two challenges that woman chooses in pregnancy: sharing her body with another being and choosing an unknown future.

Beauvoir's description of pregnant experience is anything but simple; there is no way that it can be read as a description of mere biological processes without serious omission of important passages. For example, she writes:

But pregnancy is above all a drama playing itself out in a woman between her and herself. She experiences it both as an enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is part of her body and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it and is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, she has the impression of not being anything else.²⁸

This passage brings out the ambiguity that Beauvoir ascribes to the experience of pregnancy, which repudiates the charge that she reduces it to a biological process. The pregnant body is more than just a food source for the fetus as it involves the very subjectivity of the pregnant woman. She experiences a tear in her subjectivity because the fetus is inside her body but it is not her body. The presence of the fetus is not only enriching her present while simultaneously destabilizing it, but also holds both a promise and threat for the future. Pregnancy is lived with a heightened sense of ambivalence, which should be recognized as fulfilling the first condition of Risk: facing the unknown that threatens the boundaries of the known.

Feminist philosophers such as Iris Marion Young, Adrienne Rich, and Mary O'Brien focus on maternal ambivalence, but they often maintain that Beauvoir's writings present a patriarchal and negative presentation of the female body in pregnancy and motherhood.²⁹ However, recent scholarship on maternal ambivalence reads Beauvoir's work in a more positive light. In *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers*, Sarah LaChance Adams acknowledges that Beauvoir's phe-

²⁸ ss, pp. 551–552.

²⁹ Iris Marion Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics," in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, 73–91, pp. 75–79, essay originally published in 1985; O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, pp. 74–75; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1995. Though Rich focuses on maternal ambivalence, she does not engage with Beauvoir in any noticeable way.

nomenological description of pregnancy treats maternal ambivalence not as a flaw but as a sign of motherhood's relation to ethics.³⁰ Similarly, Sara Cohen Shabot examines the ambivalence of giving birth in the light of Beauvoir's account of the ambiguity and authenticity of the erotic.³¹ Reading such works alongside Beauvoir's analysis of Risk can lead not only to a richer understating of pregnant experience, but also to a better description of human existence in general.

According to Beauvoir, one's body is the site of one's agency as it is one's "grasp on the world."³² In being pregnant, the woman agrees to share this site with another. This sharing introduces her to the deepest levels of ambiguity as she is "decentred, split, or doubled in several ways."³³ Pregnancy, as Julie Piering explains, is thus an alienating experience for the pregnant woman, as her body becomes foreign to herself and "she is not the author of this change."³⁴ In Margaret Little's words:

To be pregnant is to be inhabited. It is to be occupied. It is to be in a state of physical intimacy of a particularly thorough-going nature. The fetus intrudes on the body massively; whatever medical risks one faces or avoids, the brute fact remains that the fetus shifts and alters the very physical boundaries of the woman's self.³⁵

The ambivalence of pregnancy can become overwhelming depending upon woman's socioeconomic situation, her involvement in the decision to become

30 Sarah LaChance Adams, *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014. See also Sarah LaChance Adams, Tanya Cassidy, and Susan Hogan, eds., *The Maternal Tug: Ambivalence, Identity, and Agency*, Bradford, Ontario, Demeter Press, 2020.

31 Sara Cohen Shabot, "On Ambivalence and Giving Birth: Reflecting on Labour through Beauvoir's Erotic," in *The Maternal Tug*, ed. Adams, Cassidy, and Hogan, 89–104, and "On Motherhood as Ambiguity and Transcendence: Reevaluating Motherhood through the Beauvoirian Erotic," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 2021, pp. 1–13. doi:10.1080/17570638.2021.2002645.

32 ss, p. 46.

33 Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, 160–174, p. 160. Essay originally published in 1984.

34 Julie Piering, "The Pregnant Body as a Public Body: An Occasion for Community Care, Instrumental Coercion, and Singular Collectivity," in *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering: Maternal Subjects*, ed. Sheila Lintott and Maureen Sander-Staudt, New York, Routledge, 2012, 178–190, p. 185.

35 Margaret Little, "Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1999, 295–312, p. 301.

pregnant, and so on. However, even in the case of a desired and well-supported pregnancy, it cannot be understood as “an unmixed blessing.”³⁶ One’s body is one’s grip on the world, and by making that grip a space for the development of another being, one agrees to share their subjective hold with the other. The growth of a fetus is an event in a woman’s body; however, it is not fully available to her either. No subject has a full grasp on their body, but the pregnant woman’s body appears even more opaque to her because she is sharing it with another subjectivity.³⁷ Although it is impossible to draw a line where the woman ends and the fetus begins, she is also aware that she and the fetus are not one; they are two but together.³⁸

“What is unique about pregnancy,” Beauvoir writes, “is that at the very moment her body transcends itself, it is grasped as immanent.”³⁹ Since this transcendence is so closely entangled with the body, patriarchy fails to acknowledge that pregnancy is anything more than a biological process. Thus one of the biggest challenges in establishing that giving life and Risking life are not opposed lies in establishing pregnancy as an activity. A large body of feminist literature argues against a patriarchal understanding of pregnancy as a passive process.⁴⁰ However, pregnancy does pose an enigma if one tries to group it as an “activity” in the same sense that one understands activities in general because the woman’s body is both the agent and the site of this activity. In this regard, Beauvoir’s discussion of flesh, as the site of both transcendence and immanence, simultaneously helps us to explore the ambiguous activity of pregnancy.

Beauvoir—and later Maurice Merleau-Ponty—uses the notion of flesh to describe the ambiguous body.⁴¹ In Beauvoir’s account, “*flesh* names a kind of being that embodies opposing urges and tendencies—one that is both subject and object, individual and generality, body and spirit, physical instantiation

36 Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Mothering Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*, Milsons Point, New South Wales, Random House, 1997, p. 72.

37 Adams, *Bad Mothers, Mad Mothers*, p. 184.

38 Sheila Lintott, “The Sublimity of Gestating and Giving Birth: Toward a Feminist Conception of the Sublime,” in *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy*, ed. Lintott and Sander-Staudt, 237–250, p. 243.

39 *ss*, p. 552.

40 See, for example, Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith, eds., *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Huddinge, Sweden, Södertörns högskola, 2016; Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, Milton Keynes, UK, Open University Press, 1987; Shabot, “On Ambivalence and Giving Birth”; Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

41 Jennifer McWeeny, “Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty,” in *A Companion to Simone De Beauvoir*, ed. Hengehold and Bauer, pp. 211–223.

and idea.⁴² These polarities are not dissolved but rather lived through the ambiguous body.

In her discussion of childbirth, Shabot attends to the idea of flesh at play in Beauvoir's discussion of erotic experience; however, Beauvoir uses the ambiguous notion of flesh in her description of pregnancy as well.⁴³ She writes:

If flesh is pure inertia, it cannot embody transcendence, even in a degraded form; it is idleness and ennui, but as soon as it burgeons, it becomes progenitor, source, flower, it goes beyond itself, it is movement towards the future while being a thickened presence at the same time.⁴⁴

Pregnancy, viewed through patriarchal myths, taboos, and medical practices, appears to be a process of growing bigger day-by-day like a vegetable. Bodily developments are similar to the change of seasons from such a point of view—something that can be measured and predicted, yet mysterious and beyond one's volition. However, the pregnant woman does not live her body as pure inertia, idleness, or passive waiting.⁴⁵ Man desires to forget the immanent aspects of his being by claiming to have complete control over the animality of his body. Pregnancy is a reminder of the impossibility of such forgetfulness, and that is why it fills him with disgust.⁴⁶ The identification of the pregnant woman as “expectant” or “expecting” reinforces the notion that pregnancy is a passive waiting period.⁴⁷ Such portrayals of pregnancy are imposed both by culture and by medical practices that undermine woman's agency in this experience. For the woman herself, pregnancy is not a passive waiting but rather a fleshy presence: her body, while simultaneously extending her hold on the world, limits her. Her body transforms during pregnancy, and with these transformations new challenges emerge; the habitual body is replaced by an unknown body. Bodily transformation, although persistent throughout pregnancy, does not remain the same at all stages. In early pregnancy the presence of the fetus is felt through missed periods, nausea, and vomiting. But as the pregnancy progresses, bodily transformations become more noticeable and so do the woman's challenges. Breathing becomes a task, getting out of bed is now a new skill, as she has to remember to lie on her side. She must relearn to bal-

42 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

43 Shabot, “On Ambivalence and Giving Birth,” pp. 94–96.

44 *ss*, p. 552.

45 Young, “On Pregnant Embodiment,” p. 167.

46 *ss*, p. 552.

47 Young, “On Pregnant Embodiment,” p. 167.

ance her body while walking. Her sense of space is distorted; she bumps into things. The food her body used to accept now makes her bloated or nauseated. It is a whole new world that she has to master. This learning continues until childbirth, which itself is anything but passive. When subjectivity is understood as the fleshy presence that embodies the opposing tendencies of existence, pregnancy does not appear as distinct from other human activities. Nonetheless, during pregnancy these ambiguities are exaggerated, and this ambiguity is mobilized inauthentically to relegate pregnancy to passivity.

Pregnancy challenges the clear boundaries drawn between activity and passivity. However, phenomenological analyses of pregnancy show that it is not radically different from other undertakings, as all activities spring forth in the background of given situations beyond the control of the subject.⁴⁸ Returning to Beauvoir's example, to hunt successfully, the hunter has to be responsive to his environment—both to the world and his own body. He employs the skills he has mastered but also creates and learns new skills as the situation changes, because the world does not always offer the same conditions. Depending upon the nature of the prey, he has to keep on learning new ways of using his body, from climbing high trees to crawling on the ground. So, mastering his own body for his purpose becomes a task—a project. He appears to be more in control of his body and the overall situation compared to the pregnant woman. However, this control is largely illusory. He is both limited and enriched by his body as a situation; it is both the source of his agency and an obstacle. If he is too tall, he needs to find ways to remain unseen; if he is too heavy, he needs to learn to balance and walk quietly. Not only his own body but also the external world poses challenges that he should submit to or overcome. He sits and waits, watches and observes until it is the right moment to pounce; if he moves too quickly, he risks alerting the prey, but if he moves too late, he might lose the target. It is not up to him to decide when to pounce; it is all about finding the balance between the external environment and his own body to succeed.

No activity in the human realm is pure transcendence, as it always springs forth in the background of a given world; it is up to the existent to signify it as an obstacle or an opportunity. The drama of pregnancy heightens one's dependence on nature because it is played out in woman's body. The pregnant body as immanence becomes visible to others through the growing belly, and thus its transcendence is easily forgotten or dismissed.⁴⁹ In the case of the hunter, the biggest visible obstacle is external nature; his body is conceived as pure

48 Apart from inner bodily functions, all human activities are ambiguous, involving both agency and a passive response to one's body and the outside world.

49 Piering, "The Pregnant Body," p. 179.

agency. Nonetheless, like the body of the pregnant woman, the hunter's body is an immanent body, which becomes the site of his agency. Pregnancy does not breach the ontological structure of the experience of the body as the site of agency. Rather, it reveals its ambiguity by exaggerating its opposing features. The pregnant woman makes her body—the seat of her subjectivity—a host for another body. She engages with this experience both in the passivity and the activity of living flesh. Since the pregnant woman endangers her given world with this undertaking, it is a perilous activity and therefore meets the first condition of Risk. It also meets the second condition of Risk: risk of the future.

4 Pregnancy, the Future, and the Other

Pregnancy is not a narcissistic experience between woman and her body, but rather her body becomes the site where the future is unfolded. Therefore, the experience of pregnancy cannot be explored properly without referring to what it aims to achieve: bringing forth a new life into this world. Risk of pregnancy does not merely disrupt her bodily integrity and her present life, it also indicates future disruptions: she Risks her future. However, it is not merely her own future that is in question here. The result of pregnancy is a child; therefore, it arguably involves at least one more future: the child's future that must be taken into account.⁵⁰ The endangering of the future cannot be fully explored, then, without discussing this future as an intersubjective relation.

Patriarchy identifies pregnancy neither as a creative act nor as an intersubjective relation; it is seen merely as the maintenance of species.⁵¹ However, human pregnancy cannot be fathomed as the biological urge to reproduce or as the evolutionary process for the preservation of the species. When pregnancy is viewed from the pregnant women's perspective, there can be varied aim/s behind getting pregnant (and also behind keeping the pregnancy in case of an unplanned conception): the search for an heir, a companion, a double, insurance for one's old age, or the desire to bring forth a new, valuable member to humanity. The pregnant woman does not perform pregnancy as her biological destiny. Rather, she is aware that she is bringing forth a freedom into this world. She does not live her pregnancy cut off from the being who is growing inside her

⁵⁰ I do not claim that pregnancy is merely a dyadic relationship between the woman and the fetus/child. However, the intimacy of these two is unparalleled to the others who are involved in different capacities.

⁵¹ ss, p. 76.

body and without the awareness that in the near future, this being will be in the world affecting and being affected by those around them. Beauvoir acknowledges that some women relish the experience of just being pregnant; she calls them “breeders” and not mothers.⁵² However, not all women live pregnancy in this way. The pregnant woman has the awareness that her pregnancy will result in the birth of a child who will exist in this world as a freedom separate from her and her plans. She does not relate to her fetus as the same life repeating itself; rather, it is a new and unique individual whose destiny is entirely uncertain. The pregnant woman’s ambivalence regarding what and who the fetus will turn out to be exhibits that she does not relate to her fetus as *mere* life, but rather as an individual.⁵³

Contemporary medical practice reduces the discussion of pregnancy to the point of giving birth to a healthy baby, but for the pregnant woman, it is above all a freedom, and she is responsible for it.⁵⁴ Whether she is acting as a surrogate or wants to give the baby up for adoption or plans to raise the child herself, the decision to be the host for this new individual is an ethical one. Pregnancy aims at bringing forth a new future, both for oneself and the Other and, as such, is a Risky undertaking in the realm of values.

To claim pregnancy is a Risk is to posit it as authentic project. Against this position, some critics would argue that Beauvoir views motherhood as a botched attempt at gaining transcendence via another being, which is the sign of inauthenticity.⁵⁵ Passages in *The Second Sex* arguably suggest that the woman who brings forth a child does not transcend the present herself, but rather lends her body to the service of the being, the child, who transcends. She is not forging a new future; she is attaching herself to someone who will forge a future for her.⁵⁶ She is trying to transcend by proxy. I agree that Beauvoir gives the example of the mother who is both tyrannical toward her children and attempts to flee her own freedom through her devotion to them.⁵⁷ However, I

52 SS, p. 552.

53 SS, p. 553.

54 Bertha Alvarez Manninen, “A Healthy Baby Is Not All That Matters: Exploring My Ambivalence after a Caesarian Section,” in *The Maternal Tug*, ed. Adams, Cassidy, and Hogan, 105–127, pp. 120–124.

55 Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, “Seeing *The Second Sex* through the Second Wave,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1980, 247–276, pp. 263–264; Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Re-Writing of the Philosophers*, London, Routledge, 1994, pp. 68–69. I am not shifting my focus from pregnant experience to parenting. However, the discussion of the intersubjectivity of pregnancy requires looking at it within the context of motherhood in general.

56 SS, p. 552.

57 SS, p. 573.

believe that Beauvoir does not reduce motherhood to such inauthenticity. To differentiate between these two positions—inauthentic, devoted motherhood and authentic motherhood—we need to look more closely at what is meant by creating a new future and for whom this future is created. To put it differently, how does one's projects relate to others? Furthermore, does the project affect the other differently if the other is within one's body?

We saw that Risk is future-directed, but for Beauvoir this future always has a reference to others. She writes:

This truth is found in another form when we say that freedom cannot will itself without aiming at an open future. The ends which it gives itself must be unable to be transcended by any reflection, but only the freedom of other men can extend them beyond our life.⁵⁸

So the future that one creates is created with and for others. The future that one opens is opened for the whole of humanity, not as a fixed given but as a vantage point. No human project makes sense in the absence of others. Even the adventurer cannot remain fully detached from others, as Beauvoir claims that he writes books about his exploits because it is only in the lives of others that his achievements live.⁵⁹ One cannot act in isolation, without having any recourse to others; all acts appeal “to the existence of others.”⁶⁰ This way my projects do not fall into facticity. However, none of these actions do anything for the Other; all they do is to give them new vantage points. These acts open up a future, but it is up to others to decide how and what they themselves want to create based on what is offered to them.

Does the pregnant woman act in a similar fashion to the adventurer in opening this new future? The pregnant woman, if authentic, knows that she is bringing forth a freedom into the world; she knows that she does not control it. Once born, this freedom will engage with the world as an individual, and the woman has to accept the separation between herself and the child. Any attempt to find justification for one's existence in one's creation is a failure, as this means that one has made one's goal one's absolute. Whether it is the pregnant woman who finds her justification in being pregnant, and thereby attempts to become a ready-made value, or an artist finding validation through their creation, both are equally inauthentic. Those who attach themselves to their projects want

58 *EA*, p. 71.

59 *EA*, pp. 67–68.

60 *EA*, p. 72.

to reach the fixed nature of the in-itself: a ready-made value, a god. Beauvoir likens such artists to the serious man, who accepts values as objectively given absolutes. She writes:

If the work becomes an idol whereby the artist thinks that he is fulfilling himself as being, he is closing himself up in the universe of the serious; he is falling into the illusion which Hegel exposed when he described the race of “intellectual animals.”⁶¹

Both the artist and the mother are separate from their creation. Accordingly, it is not just the mother who fails in her attempt to find transcendence through a child. Rather, any attempt to evade ambiguity is doomed to failure. Beauvoir writes that a child is just like any undertaking that requires one to acknowledge their separation from their creation.⁶²

However, unlike other projects, in pregnancy one is in the act of bringing forth another freedom, and therefore the temptations to evade the ambiguity and devote oneself to their creation are much stronger.⁶³ Beauvoir argues that motherhood is both difficult and great because it expects no reciprocal return from the child.⁶⁴ It offers another possibility of being-with-others that is generous, but, unlike devotion, it can be lived authentically as a Risk. Devotion to anyone with the intention of making them one's project and thereby denying their freedom is tyranny, according to Beauvoir.⁶⁵ True generosity lies in acknowledging that one cannot do anything for the other more than creating a point of departure. It is genuine generosity if one attempts neither to reduce one's own freedom to that of the other nor to the in-itself. The limited scope of this article does not allow for an elaboration of the nature of generosity and its relation to Risk. Here, it suffices to point out that in pregnancy, woman takes a Risk to open a future for the Other. As long as she does not attempt to flee from her own freedom or refuse to acknowledge the freedom of the other—in this case, the freedom of the child—such a Risk is authentic.

All actions are to be considered in their relation to the Other, and pregnancy and motherhood, with all their complex stages, are no different. A project that is undertaken in freedom in order to extend the boundaries of the present and that also puts into question mere existence is worthy of being called a

61 *EA*, p. 69.

62 *SS*, p. 580.

63 Bauer, “Motherhood and Destiny,” p. 153.

64 *SS*, p. 570.

65 *SS*, pp. 577–578.

“Risk.” Pregnancy is an intersubjective experience and hence poses an ethical question; therefore it is not outside the realm of values.⁶⁶ Pregnancy, and by extension motherhood, if lived in freedom, can be lived as a Risk. It is denied this status because it reminds man of his own ambiguity—the ambiguity he wants to forget—while living the illusion of pure agency.

Pregnancy has been seen as a natural process both culturally and via the lens of contemporary medical practice. Although pregnancy (and motherhood) are viewed as extremely important aspects of our social being, insofar as they are considered *natural functions*, they fall outside the realm of ethics. Mothers (and thereby pregnant women) are seen as carrying forward a noble yet natural process that depends on their instincts and does not enter the realm of ethics. With the help of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of Risk, my discussion demonstrates that pregnancy is primarily an intersubjective relation and therefore is within the realm of ethics. However, unlike other intersubjective relations, in pregnancy the other is closely bound to the body and the future of the pregnant subject, which leads to a heightened sense of ambiguity. This characteristic of pregnancy makes for a pronounced ethical situation because the opposing aspects of ambiguous experience are felt more acutely. Nonetheless, it is this heightened sense of ambiguity that makes pregnancy (and motherhood) a difficult and therefore valuable undertaking.

66 Little, “The Duty to Gestate,” p. 309.