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BECOMING-AMBIGUOUS: BEAUVOIR, DELEUZE, AND THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES

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The humanities is under siege in contemporary society, expected to justify their worth in technocratic terms of utility and productivity. Rather than adopt the language of instrumental reason that threatens their future, Simone de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity demonstrate that the value of the humanities is the value of freedom. Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity contains a temporal logic that breaks with the reifying mechanisms that inform instrumental reason in existential praxis. However, this concept is still framed by the representational logic it resists, relegated to the sovereign subject of man. By forging Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity with Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of becoming, the humanities takes on a new form of agency that is both situationally effective and ontologically free.

1. Introduction

With mounting pressure to justify their worth in terms of economic outcomes and vocational viability, the humanities appears to be at a crisis point. Week after week, articles circulate throughout the press and social media defending or decrying the study of literature, philosophy, the classics, and other concatenated areas of knowledge that comprise the humanities in comparison to other, so-called practical disciplines, from business administration to biology. The widespread neo-positivist frame, which equates worth with utility—and “utility” predefined by that which reinforces prevailing forms of domination—is rooted in an ontological distortion, with effects extending from the structural and to the superstructural levels of society. Against the logic of instrumental reason, Simone de Beauvoir’s existential ethics aligns with Gilles Deleuze’s differential ontology to reveal an inexorable relationship between the humanities and freedom.

The humanities is at the intersection of thought and praxis. They provide the theoretical tools necessary for freedom. The concept of ambiguity as elucidated by Simone de Beauvoir provides us a blueprint for impersonal agency—a kind of radical singular universality—that resists reification and creates the space for liberation practices by way of the humanities. Existentialism is (not just) a humanism for Beauvoir (see Sartre, 2007). Beauvoir’s theory of the ethics of ambiguity extend significantly beyond the trappings
of representational thought and subject-object dualism, unlike Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. Ambiguity overcomes either/or binaries, including those of the human/non-human and subject/object. But like the light from a distant star long extinguished, the image of man remains suspended ghostlike in existentialism, and the death of God shines falsely as the concept of man. As Michel Foucault notes, Friedrich Nietzsche “rediscovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first” (Foucault, 1994, p. 342). Existentialism embraces the death of God without realizing its simultaneous destruction of all transcendental signifiers, including man.

Man as the sovereign subject is at odds with Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity, despite that the seat of ambiguity in situational existence results in a unique agency. For practices to be truly liberating, they must arise from a liberating ontology unbound by principles of sovereignty, which is not fully developed in existential ontology. This metaphysical liberation can be found in the post-structural philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

While existentialism generally concerns human subjectivity, the relational ontology heralded by The Ethics of Ambiguity (1976) foretells Deleuze’s (and sometimes Félix Guattari’s) elucidation of the concept of becoming, dismantling the subject in favor of an impersonal assemblage comprised of identity-breaking features. As such, an assemblage of tendencies replaces the individuated, sovereign essence of a “thing,” extending the existential subject beyond representation. For instance, against the Platonic notion of essence as that which “is,” the Deleuzian assemblage involves capacities as internally differing relations. The typical example used to demonstrate this shift from essence to capacity is that of the workhorse (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 257).

Despite filial categorization, the workhorse is much closer to an ox than it is to a racehorse, by virtue of its tendencies. By developing an ethology premised on affective relations, Deleuze opens up potential becomings that are otherwise foreclosed by pre-established definitions and binary distinctions. Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity marks the interstice between an ontology premised on representational Being (where “Being” in uppercase in the text denotes representational ontology) and an immanent ontology of relations in processual becoming. On the way toward a sub-representational dynamics, Beauvoir still has one foot in the door of subjective agency.

Between Beauvoir and Deleuze is the space for revolutionary action that is catalyzed by external, existential relations. By intersecting Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity with Deleuze’s notion of becoming, it is possible to create a grounded and ungrounding political agency effective in its resistance to oppressive structures of instrumental reason.

The humanities resists the irrational logic of advanced capitalism, which institutes discrete, shortsighted goals that reinforce established powers and are attained through efficient means without consideration for systemic effects