8 De Beauvoir's *Ethics*: A Critical Appraisal

In the previous chapters I have identified three main defences of existentialism which were offered in the 1940s: those issuing from Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the works examined, defending existentialism more or less came to mean establishing the capacity of existentialist philosophy to produce an ethics for a shattered postwar world. I have argued that Simone de Beauvoir rose to this challenge with greater authority than her contemporaries, and in the process distanced herself philosophically from Sartre to an extent that is oceanic. But it is time now to consider the merits of her moral philosophy in its own right, and not merely as a divergent philosophy to that presented by Sartre.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity* is divided into three parts, which are not at all alike. There is, first of all, a polemical section (to employ de Beauvoir's own terminology), followed by an attempt at formulating a character ethics (as I have chosen to call it), and, finally, there is a detailed exploration of the ethics of violence and, in particular, discussion of the means–end principle. In later years de Beauvoir herself remained supportive of the polemical section (if unsupportive of the work as a whole): it still seemed valid, she wrote in 1963. It remained valid because in the immediate postwar period 'Existentialism was being treated as nihilist philosophy, wilfully pessimistic, frivolous, licentious, despairing and ignoble.' Some defence had to be made, she says, notwithstanding the fact that she herself considered the reproaches against existentialism to be absurd.

Undoubtedly the reproaches cited were absurd and to that extent any defence of existentialism was bound to sound convincing. However, if we look at the defence on its own merits, that is, as a contribution to philosophical knowledge, then, as de Beauvoir herself suspected, it is not nearly as impressive. The polemical section has four main weaknesses, relating to (i) its account of evil, (ii) its renunciation of absolutes, (iii) its claim that value derives its being from its exigency, and (iv) its critique of Marxism.

Evil is not the offspring of ignorance, argues de Beauvoir, but comes from weakness of the will. You can will yourself not to be free, or to be less free, or you can allow yourself to yield to temptation, to
laziness, stubbornness, resignation or any of a plethora of minor vices. However, if evil is primarily a matter, not of a failure to reach certain standards for yourself, but of a failure to respect certain standards in one’s behaviour towards others, then de Beauvoir’s answer, in the polemical section of her essay, will not suffice. In her contemporaneous article ‘An Eye for an Eye’, de Beauvoir identifies one category of evil as an absolute evil (*un mal absolu*), and she defines it as the degradation of human beings into disposable objects. She implies that no one can reasonably fail to be aware of this fundamental standard for human conduct, that everyone retains the capacity to meet this standard in his or her behaviour, and that therefore the failure to respect the dignity of human beings is something which cannot be pardoned. From this perspective, evil in its most palpable form is a consequence of a refusal to respect the dignity of human beings, by reducing them to the status of disposable objects. ‘For human life to have meaning’, she writes, ‘human beings must be held responsible for the evil they do as much as for the good’, and that, she continues, is why she refused to sign the petition on behalf of Brasillach. Here evil is explained (a) by the existence of a category of absolute evil, (b) by the fact, or supposition, that no human agent can fail to know what absolute evil is, (c) by the capacity of any human agent to resist absolute evil, and (d) by the readiness of some human agents to descend to these levels of depravity. This is a more satisfactory account of evil than that presented in the polemical section of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

De Beauvoir is adamant that absolute standards are for absolute beings, and that as human beings are suffused with ambiguity absolute standards are not for them. In one sense this is a very reasonable claim to make: human beings could behave better, to say the least, but if we set our moral expectations too high we are unlikely, ever, to see these standards met, and the task of moral education will become an impossible one. But the word *absolute* has other connotations, as I noted at the time, and de Beauvoir herself does not hesitate to utilize these additional meanings. Thus *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is replete with references to standards which ought not to be transgressed and limits which ought not to be violated. We are informed, for example, that the individual as such is one of the ends at which our actions must aim; that one must will oneself free; that freedom is the source of all values, and that an action that wants to serve man ought to be careful not to forget him on the way. In the contemporaneous essay ‘An Eye for an Eye’, de Beauvoir writes that