**Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguity of Childhood**

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**Abstract:**

This article explores Simone de Beauvoir’s conceptualization of childhood and its importance for her existentialist thought. Beauvoir’s theorization of childhood, I argue, offers a sophisticated portrayal of the child and of the adult-child relationship: the child is not a normal ‘other’ for the adult, but what I call a *temporal other*, perceived by adults as an ambiguous being; in turn, childhood is conceptualized as the origin of the ambiguity of adulthood. This foregrounding of childhood has important implications for Beauvoir’s existentialism, in particular regarding her ethics. Through the adult-child relationship, her vision of an ethical relation to otherness emerges – one which foregrounds both the violence and the mutual liberation involved in encounters with the Other.

**Keywords:** Simone de Beauvoir, childhood, existentialism, futurity, ethics.

Margaret Simons, discussing the intellectual confluences between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, was perhaps the first scholar in English to appreciate Beauvoir’s theorization of childhood as a major contribution to existentialism.[[1]](#endnote-1) This contribution has more often been mentioned than studied in depth, with the exception of Sally Scholz’s article on the Rousseauist roots of Beauvoir’s depiction of childhood and freedom and Ursula Tidd’s thorough reading of Beauvoir’s works.[[2]](#endnote-2) There remains a need to foreground Beauvoir’s reflection on childhood not just in connection to, but as a central pressure-point of her existentialist philosophy. Childhood, throughout Beauvoir’s works, functions both as an etiological explanation for ambiguity and as a unique solution to facticity. The adult-child relationship constitutes the origin of conflicts with others and of a lack of self-coincidence. Yet the child also provides for the adult elusive visions of a freer time to come. This double quality of childhood, I argue here, enables meaningful action and undergirds Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The centrality of childhood in Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy is not immediately obvious. For want of a cohesive theoretical text, Beauvoir’s thoughts on childhood remain fragmented, and sometimes seemingly disconnected from her existentialist thinking. Beauvoir’s ‘children’ are problematically manifold: some are fictional characters, in such works as *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, *The Mandarins* and *Les Belles Images*; some are autobiographical, principally her self-representation in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Children are mentioned more generally throughout Beauvoir’s social, political and philosophical writings, but there is a conceptual gap between the ‘universal’ child she theorises in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* and her analysis of girlhood in *The Second Sex*.[[5]](#endnote-5) Beyond her writings, Beauvoir was notoriously criticized for not wanting children. Her treatment of motherhood has been much discussed,[[6]](#endnote-6) and her apparent indifference to actual children was mentioned with some annoyance by Geneviève Fraisse.[[7]](#endnote-7) Perhaps because of this reported lack of interest, Beauvoir’s representations of childhood have sometimes been interpreted as pointing at something else, as if Beauvoir could never have been centrally preoccupied with childhood as an object of philosophical endeavour.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Yet Beauvoir’s first philosophical essay quite literally begins with childhood. After a short introduction, the opening sentence of her *Ethics of Ambiguity* locates in childhood the origin of human anguish: ‘Man’s unhappiness, says Descartes, is due to his having first been a child. And indeed the unfortunate choices which most men make can only be explained by the fact that they have taken place in childhood’ (EA, 35). The analysis of these ‘unfortunate choices’ and their consequences will form a considerable part of Beauvoir’s works, with changes over time. Her mentions of childhood in her pre-war works are rather abstract, and wishfully universal. They subsequently give way to more specific portrayals, rooted in the socio-political, historical and physical situations which she gradually identifies as crucial variables between human experiences. In and after *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s explorations of childhood become increasingly focused on young girls’ experiences. Her autobiographical turn in the late 1950s could be said to reconcile the early universality of her portrayal of childhood with her later emphasis on the embodied nature of children’s experiences. Throughout, however, it is clear that Beauvoir thought existentialism had much to gain from theorizing childhood; it was she who convinced Sartre to contemplate the role of his own childhood in his intellectual making, leading him to write *Words* in 1963.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Beauvoir’s works unearth a fundamental *ambiguity* of childhood. On the one hand, Beauvoir’s frequent turn to childhood in her fictional, autobiographical and philosophical works testifies to her desire to understand how one’s situation (in existentialist terms, the limitations to one’s freedom) is set and consolidated in the early stages of life. But Beauvoir always simultaneously perceives childhood as a distinctive time of possibility, of potency: childhood allows one to escape from the situation it created. Certainly, ‘it is always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides upon what he wants to be,’ but at the same time ‘the child does not contain the man he will become’ (EA, 40).

What *does* the child ‘contain’, then? A double tension, still indeterminate, towards both freedom and bad faith. For Beauvoir, childhood is a time framed, scrutinized and conditioned by adults, but also characterized by small existential fractures, by an increasingly interrogative relationship with the world. Beauvoir is, I think, the first existentialist to identify that there is something special about childhood, not on an emotive level but on an ontological one; something which dooms the adult to an existence of failed relationships to others, and to a lack of self-coincidence, but which simultaneously confirms the human potential for transcendence. In short, childhood is, for Beauvoir, the primal soup of a pivotal concept in her existentialist reflection – the ambiguity of existence.

The figure of the child and the experiences of childhood, permeated both with ideals of liberation and with threats of coercion, uniquely appeal to Beauvoir because she detects in the adult treatment of children, and in children’s responses to that treatment, a specific articulation of the existentialist problems of time and otherness. The ambiguity of childhood is linked to what I call the perceived *temporal otherness* of the child for the adult. This perception calibrates for the child the two parameters of their future existence: being-in-time and being-for-others. These parameters become part of the adult individual’s facticity, but are also an aspect of their potential liberation; the child is necessarily *thrown under* the authority of adults, and yet this authority is not straightforwardly condemned by Beauvoir, because it is through it that the child might ultimately be *thrown forth*. This double movement clarifies the possibility of a Beauvoirian ethics, liberating and productive, in encounters with otherness.

*Childhood and the failure of freedom*

In Beauvoir’s ongoing project to explore the possibility of moral freedom, childhood is repeatedly pinpointed as the moment when the greatest failure can occur. The child remains within the adult as a haunting, ‘dutiful’ presence of the past; furthering the *situating* fact of birth, childhood sets limitations for the individual. Children are born with a certain body, and within certain socio-political and cultural conditions; both condition the emergence of their subjectivity. For Beauvoir, early childhood experiences wound children by instilling in them a belief in essentialism and in unquestionable authorities. As she argues in *Ethics of Ambiguity*:

The child’s situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit. In his eyes, human inventions, words, customs, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the sky and the trees. (EA, 35)

In childhood one is kept under the illusion, carefully created by adults, that universal moral principles exist. Beauvoir’s denunciation of this early entrapment is partly political, linked to her rejection of the self-replicating bourgeois order. As Simons shows, childhood is represented by Beauvoir, even in her first work of fiction, *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, as geared towards social compliance, at the mercy of adult manipulation: ‘The family is clearly the medium for the transmission of the ideology of bourgeois society to the individual, and childhood is the time.’[[10]](#endnote-10) Children are surrounded with others who pre-date them, and condition their encounters with the world; social and family structures which frame the adult-child relationship momentarily suspend equal relations to others.

As the pronoun ‘he’ indicates, Beauvoir had not yet considered sex an important parameter in her conceptualisation, and referred to childhood as a universal condition. Her later works focused greatly on gender differences; in and after *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s portrayal of childhood discriminates between the experiences of boys and girls. Though all children begin their lives equally harmed by adults’ omnipresence as world-organisers, the young girl within the patriarchal order is more likely than the little boy to prolong, sometimes indefinitely, the subservience of childhood into adulthood.[[11]](#endnote-11) But in both cases, the child’s situation, for Beauvoir, is characterized by an adult-instilled feeling of inadequacy.

Beauvoir ruefully recreates, in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the injustice of being thought an unaccomplished being, waiting to be filled by education. Children, she states, are ‘complete individuals’, but adults often fail to perceive it, mistaking their ‘immature bodies’ for unfinished minds (MDD, 13). The tacit assumption by adults of the fundamental imperfection of childhood foregrounds adulthood as the moment of fulfilment. This belief temporarily comforts children by attributing their faults to young age, and promising that time will bring plenitude. But of course it does not. The *Memoirs* map the transformation of a child waiting for the ‘promise’ of adulthood to be accomplished into an adult shocked by the eternal postponement of this accomplishment. Beauvoir’s seven-year-old self is presented as thinking: ‘I expected, and was expected’ (MDD, 67); but, describing her later self at the onset of puberty, she blankly announces, ‘I had lost the sense of security childhood gives, and nothing had come to take its place’ (MDD,105). Children, made to feel their radical temporal otherness from adulthood, are alienated from their own present. And as they wait, anguish emerges.

This anguish begins, Beauvoir argues, early on in childhood, perturbing an otherwise orderly world. Children’s books, she remembers, generally maintained her young belief in Good and Evil; and yet, sometimes, a book would ‘shake [her] convictions’ (MDD, 51). She thus remembers the ‘frightful death’ of a character, which ‘made nonsense of all the rules of life; (…) anything could happen’ (MDD, 52). In this *anything* resides an early awareness of arbitrariness; if evenchildren’s literature, so polished and controlled, so structured by values, could not be trusted with being predictable, then what of the wider world?

It is not coincidental that one such experience happens for young Simone through children’s literature; childhood reading is presented as a voluptuously transgressive experience, hidden from parents, and triggering both emotional and proto-sexual gratification (see for instance MDD, 110-111). Secrecy and shame are recurrent concepts in her theorization of early breaches by children of their adult-instilled essentialist convictions. Beauvoir makes audaciously child-centred hypotheses as to how children *feel* the ambiguity of their condition, highlighting the existence of the child’s private, independent and rich interiority. Children can *sense* their ontological freedom,[[12]](#endnote-12) and thereby contain inside themselves the ‘secret’ of the possibility of moral freedom, leading to the faint sensation of a gap between their understanding of the world and the vision given to them by adults:

If something deep inside him belies his conviction, he conceals this imperfection. He consoles himself for an inconsistency which he attributes to his young age by pinning his hopes on the future. (...) Normally the child escapes the anguish of freedom. (EA, 36)

The wilful ignorance by children of these early epiphanies is never explicitly condemned. Does Beauvoir believe that children cannot help doing otherwise – cannot *choose* to be liberated – or that they are in bad faith? Her exact thoughts on the matter are difficult to determine. Claudia Card reads Beauvoir’s conceptualization of children as presenting them as blameless victims, like slaves; they cannot be complicit in their own oppression.[[13]](#endnote-13) I differ. Beauvoir’s definition of childhood makes it ‘a *particular* sort of situation: it is a natural situation whose limits are not created by other men and which is thereby not comparable to a situation of oppression’ (EA, 141, my emphasis). If it is *not* comparable to enslavement, then children *do* have an embryonic kind of responsibility for their existence, and are in bad faith if they do not actualize it. The vocabulary in the above passage – ‘conceals’, ‘console’ in particular – and the active voice, which places the child as subject of his actions, recall Sartre’s depictions of behaviours of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness.*[[14]](#endnote-14) However, this extract also foregrounds children’s potential to spot flaws in adult-imparted essentialism.

The simultaneous presence of bad faith and acts of freedom in childhood is illustrated at the beginning of *Memoirs*, when three-year-old Simone, who wants to peel a plum, is forbidden from doing so. This gives rise to a mighty tantrum:

The arbitrary nature of the orders and prohibitions against which I beat unavailing fists was to my mind proof of their inconsistency; yesterday I peeled a peach: then why shouldn’t I peel a plum? (...) At the root of these implacable laws that lay as heavily as lead upon my spirit I glimpsed a sickening void: this was the pit I used to plunge into, my whole being racked with screams of rage. (MDD, 12)

By letting her three-year-old self ‘plunge’ into the ‘pit’, and thereby accept that there *is* a pit, the narrator grants her a form of moral freedom. Of course, physical resistance is futile, but adult control does not pull her out of the ‘pit’; she resists secretly, internally: ‘I knew myself beaten; but I wouldn’t give in. I fought my losing battle to the bitter end’ (MDD, 12).

As Betty Halpern-Guedj argues, this key episode of the *Memoirs* is typical of Beauvoir’s depiction of childhood as founding myth of her later adulthood.[[15]](#endnote-15) I would characterise it also as typical of Beauvoir’s *existentialist* mythology of origins, which, collapsing futurity with facticity into childhood, emphasises what Tidd calls the ‘purposefulness of youth’.[[16]](#endnote-16) The child self of the *Memoirs* is an intensely existentialist figure, supporting the philosophical conviction that freedom always exists in latency within the individual, and will – or at least should – be actualised. The plum episode displays the characteristic slipperiness of Beauvoir’s narrative ‘I’ in the *Memoirs*, which Halpern-Guedj argues is at once ‘naïve’ (rendering the sensations of a young child) and ‘commenting’ (speaking about her childhood to comment about childhood in general),[[17]](#endnote-17) and always sets up an existentialist grid of analysis.[[18]](#endnote-18) It is indeed difficult not to relate this passage to Sartre’s definitions of the For-Itself’s encounters with nothingness at the heart of being (for instance BN, 29), which trigger anguish but also liberation in the face of annihilation.

The screaming child is thus at once personal recollection and existentialist case study; both subject of the narrative and object of the philosophical thought experiment. The generous anticipation of the child’s future liberation within small acts of freedom in the *Memoirs* is not just, therefore, a complacent *Bildungsroman* strategy, but also a philosophical statement about childhood. The child is theorized by Beauvoir as being in bad faith, but a *specific* type of bad faith: one in which existential awareness exists in an embryonic form, and therefore may ‘erupt’ at any time, even as childish tantrums easily mastered by the ‘finished’ bodies of adults.

*The child as temporal other*

The tantalising latency of freedom in the small child signals the sophistication of Beauvoir’s theorization of childhood. In her writings, the child is *at the same time* in bad faith and attracted by transcendence; both rooted in an adult-enforced interpersonal and educational history, and desirous to question it:

With astonishment, revolt and disrespect the child little by little asks himself, ‘Why must I act that way? What good is it? And what will happen if I act another way?’ He discovers his subjectivity; he discovers that of others. (EA, 39)

Teenage crisis, for Beauvoir, is precisely the shock of finding one’s questions unanswered, of having to accept one’s subjectivity and one’s potential independence from arbitrary adult prescriptions. By questioning the world, teenagers can extract themselves from the behaviours of bad faith encouraged by the ready-made judgements of their families and educators. The prominence of the interrogative mode in Beauvoir’s theorization echoes Heidegger’s definition of *Dasein* as Being who asks itself about Being, and Sartre’s vision of the For-Itself as questioner of being and finder of nothingness. More than either of them, however, Beauvoir places the first manifestations of this existential questioning in childhood, and childhood itself becomes a space of active and somewhat mysterious conflict between what *is* and what *could be*. Inquisitive, dissatisfied, suspicious: the child for Beauvoir embodies the fugitive vision that one can have of freedom and transcendence even as one is carefully conditioned to engage in bad faith. Her portrayal of childhood thus exacerbates a central tension of existentialism: the individual aspiration towards the future, clashing against a quickly solidifying situation.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Beauvoir’s concept of childhood thus oscillates between facticity and futurity and between selfhood and otherness, and emphasizes the ambiguity of these two parameters. Ambiguity, in Beauvoir’s philosophical system, is connected to ethics. With her *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*,[[20]](#endnote-20) Beauvoir endeavoured to extend Sartre’s reflection in *Being and Nothingness* into ethics. In Sartrian ontology, we are, from early childhood onwards, forever distinct from others, a separation which grounds our individuality but also limits our freedom. One both wills the other free and wants to entrap it; one’s project exists only insofar as it is among other projects, but those are threats to one’s own. Furthermore, one cannot apprehend oneself fully in the present, but sees oneself as unaccomplished. In Sartre’s early vision, these tensions of time and otherness are irreparable. Beauvoir’s distinctive opinion, of Hegelian descent, is that from these tensions must spring all ethics, through a process of mutual recognition with the other; but also that – and she is influenced here by Heidegger – the only way of achieving togetherness is to accept the ineluctable ambiguity of all relationships to otherness.[[21]](#endnote-21) Ambiguity is thus reclaimed by Beauvoir as the root of ethical judgements, and therefore of relationships to others.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Beauvoir historicizes the problems of time and of others, leading her to counter Sartre’s early insistence on the universal possibility of freedom. For Beauvoir, there are contextual factors which complicate the development of moral freedom. *The Second Sex* of course exposes the specificities of the relationship between men and women, but her earlier analysis of childhood testifies that she had long identified the existence of multiple modes of being-for-others. The adult-child relationship appears throughout her works as one such mode, conflictual but potentially ethical, and calibrated by the distinct symbolic temporality of childhood as perceived by adults.

This ambiguity is linked to the *temporal uniqueness* of the figure of the child, swaddled throughout Beauvoir’s works in two layers of discourse – one, as developed above, of oppression and bad faith, and one of hope and desire. The latter emerges in the following passage:

If, in all oppressed countries, a child’s face is so moving, it is not that the child is more moving or that he has more of a right to happiness than the others: it is that he is the living affirmation of human transcendence: he is on the watch, he is an eager hand held out to the world, he is a hope, a project. (EA, 102)

The child in this passage is presented as different to the adult not because he is *effectively* more precious or valuable, but because he is *symbolically* so. This different symbolic status is connected to the quality of being a child, for childhood contains a symbolic tension towards the future; this specific manifestation of otherness might be called *temporal otherness*.

Beauvoir proposes here a child-specific development of the Sartrian theorization of the ‘look’. In Sartre’s famous analysis, the other’s look shows me to myself at a certain moment in time. Trapped in the other’s glance, my sense of continuity as a human being is interrupted (BN, 276-326). In Beauvoir’s theorisation, working specifically with childhood, the temporal dimension of the look is different. As developed in the above passage, when an adult looks at a ‘child’s face’, the child’s existence is not equally threatened, because that existence is intensely future-bound; the child cannot quite be frozen in time as the adult might be. This is because the adult’s vision of the present child seems to overlap with a vague ideal of its future manifestations. Children thus resist entrapment; they escape, at least partly, the adult’s reifying gaze, because they escape, at least partly, the adult’s temporality.

While this movement might still appear objectifying – the child, after all, is here looked at highly symbolically, and as a kind of projector-screen for adult desires – the child responds by throwing questioning, critical looks at the adult world. Beauvoir’s multiple child characters in her fiction often resort to the interrogative mode, and child-induced adult crises are legion in both *The Mandarins* and *Les Belles Images*. In the latter, Catherine, Laurence’s young daughter, is primarily a question mark in her mother’s existence; she bombards her with questions about the world, partly triggered by her new friendship with a more liberally-educated girl, Brigitte. Those questions worry Laurence for the intricacy of thought that they imply, but also because, as Terry Keefe notes, they foreground Laurence’s own bourgeois upbringing and social conditioning,[[23]](#endnote-23) leading her to question in turn her educational methods. While Brigitte is already allowed by her parents to read the newspapers, Laurence deems Catherine to be ‘too little’ (LBI, 56), and fears that Brigitte might teach Catherine too much about the world. Laurence tells Catherine, in turn, not to talk to her younger sister Louise about such matters; Louise is also ‘too little’.

Yet Laurence’s apparent desire to limit a possible contagion of questioning, and protect her children from ‘adult’ knowledge, barely hides her curiosity for their gradual independence: Catherine, she sees, is now ‘learning things that are not taught in class: empathising, reassuring, receiving and giving’ (LBI, 81). These ‘things’, which are beginning to define Catherine as an autonomous individual, are secretly perceived by Laurence as beneficial consequences of her daughter’s emancipation from parental authority. Those children who both ask questions and trigger adult questioning in Beauvoir’s novels are exclusively female. *The Mandarins* and *Les Belles Images*, both published after *The Second Sex*, testify to the particular interest Beauvoir had taken in the relation between young girls and their mothers, and in the generational transmission of either oppression or freedom from older to younger women.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Laurence’s malaise in *Les Belles Images* will be partly solved as she travels to Greece and watches a dancing child. Laurence aches to think this graceful, ‘inspired’ child might become like her mother, ‘placid and fat’ (LBI, 158). The dervish-like trance of this little girl opens up a temporal whirlpool through which, Elizabeth Fallaize remarks, Laurence momentarily reverts to childhood, and frees herself from ‘the paralysing grip which her childlike belief in her father has exercised over her power to be independent.’[[25]](#endnote-25) Hypnotic and entrancing, the pure freedom of childhood is a redemptive cure. However, her early entrapment remains constitutive of Laurence’s existence; never will she be perfectly free. There is no ideal ‘cure’ for an oppressed childhood; only hard-earned moments of liberation from the adult order.

Beauvoir’s portrayal of childhood thus swings between remarks on its symbolic link to the future, grim descriptions of its oppression by adults, and mentions of its redemptive value for adulthood. Adults are both dismissive of children and reverent towards them; they see them both as incomplete *now* and as complete *later*. *Les Belles Images* ends with Laurence reflecting on her own experience, and on her daughters’:

For me the die has been cast, she thinks, looking at her own image – a little pale, her features stiff. But the children will have their chance. What chance? She does not even know. (183)

For Fallaize, this ending is an acknowledgement of the failure of freedom in adulthood, both linguistically and ideologically; even the child’s potential freedom, she argues, is expressed in the vaguest and most clichéd of phrases.[[26]](#endnote-26) I would say, however, that the ending’s optimism lies precisely in the impossibility for Laurence – and indeed for adults in general – to talk about children’s futures using anything else than hackneyed vocabulary. Laurence’s uncertainty as to the children’s future, contrasted with the glacial solidity of her own ageing image, makes childhood emerge as a space of *unspeakable* potential, in opposition to adulthood, that rigidified state of clear commitments.

The fundamental indeterminacy of childhood has deeply existentialist resonances. Beauvoir’s view of the adult treatment of children here espouses the contours of what Sartre calls the desire for futurity. Futurity entails a lack of representation, though of course the attempt to make *something* appear always exists. *Being and Nothingness* provides an ontological basis for this paradox. The For-Itself is characterized by *not-yet-ness*: it lacks, it is incomplete. This is because it comprehends itself as full of and surrounded with *nothingnesses*: it is ‘a being whose complement of being is at a distance from itself’ (BN, 150). Futurity is therefore, for the individual, ‘the self which it will be by coincidence with what it lacks’ (BN,148): the hoped-for eventual collusion between the individual and its ‘missing piece’. It is the flight beyond being. This translates as a lack, inherent to adulthood, which ‘condemns’ individuals to wish for a *non-representable* future. ‘The Future is not’, Sartre says, but ‘it is *possibilized*’ (BN, 152).

Beauvoir provides an addendum to Sartre’s categorisation by installing the other at the core of one’s wish for futurity. One’s project can be passed to an other, who may prolong it into the future, if the other’s freedom is absolutely respected. This movement is developed at the end of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*:

It is in uncertainty and risk that we must assume our actions; and that is precisely the essence of freedom; […] it signs no pact with the future. […] What the other will create from me will belong to him and not does belong to me. I act only by assuming the risks of this future. (PC,312)

The child is at a privileged place to take up the adult’s project, because it has, to put it simply, a longer time left than the adult; this temporal superiority infuses the very concept of childhood. Childhood is the property of beings who *are*, but are also alluringly *in becoming*. Children have the currency of time at their disposal, and their possibilities remain unknowable. Beauvoir identifies childhood as the closest vision we can get of futurity. The child gives shape to a shapeless longing for an unpredictable future, the shape of an other who could carry *beyond my own existence* the continuation of my project; and do so while realising his or her freedom.

*Childhood as the locus of ethics*

It may appear paradoxical to think that one could (and indeed should) will the other *both* to take up one’s project *and* to do so freely. This paradox is central to Beauvoir’s ethics; she even builds upon it by confidently asserting that we *cannot help but* desire the other to be free, since the other’s freedom is a condition of our own, and that we want to be free ourselves: ‘Every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense, always wants it, even though he may be a tyrant’ (EA, 71). Any adult-child relationship, however oppressive in appearance, must thereby contain unarticulated adult desires for the child’s freedom. The child’s freedom is a condition of the adult’s: it is a prerequisite for the adult’s project to be carried forward. Thus it is not just altruism that transpires in the adult’s desire for the child to be free, but an existentially more central desire to ensure one’s own freedom:

If my son is a determined being who endures my action without resistance, I am determined too, I do not act; and if I am free, my son is too. But then my action cannot be transmitted through the generations as if it was slipping through quiet waters: upon this action, other men will act in their turn. (PC, 243-4)

Beauvoir carefully (and rather poetically) depicts here the torments of this process; the adult will inevitably be torn between the temptation to ‘determine’ the child’s existence, and the desire to accept its indeterminacy. This tension mirrors another, which characterises the existentialist self: the desire to be free against the comfort of bad faith. In Beauvoir’s writings, this existential predicament finds itself crystallised in the adult-child relationship. It is as if the child reflected for the adult onlooker the adult’s own paradoxical existential status; the adult displaces onto the child the desire both to *ex-ist* (namely, etymologically, stand outside of itself) and to remain cosily inert.

This relationship might still appear oppressive, or, at least, intractably painful. But the adult ambivalence towards children, and their tendency to oppress and control them even as they may desire their freedom, is not thought of by Beauvoir as *radically* different to all other relationships; it only represents a specific manifestation of those relationships, and a particularly interesting one for what it says of human existence. Adults are equally ambivalent, oppressive and controlling towards one another. The educational relationship, like all relationships, is characterised by the problem of others: it is formed of individuals who are at a distance from one another and, perhaps even more problematically, at a distance from themselves. All this seems to condemn adult and child to an utterly unsatisfying relationship, but it is no more unsatisfying than any other relationship. Indeed Beauvoir provocatively states: ‘In the rearing of the child, as in any relationship with others, the ambiguity of freedom implies the outrage of violence; in a sense, all education is a failure’ (EA, 142).

However, the adult-child relationship does have some characteristics which distinguish it from other relationships, and give unique density to its ‘failures’. Childhood, indeed, is

a situation which is common to all men and which is temporary for all; therefore, it does not represent a limit which cuts off the individual from his possibilities, but, on the contrary, the moment of a development in which new possibilities are won. The child is ignorant because he has not yet had the time to acquire knowledge, not because this time has been refused him. To treat him as a child is not to bar him from the future but to open it to him; he needs to be taken in hand, he invites authority, it is the form which the resistance of facticity, through which all liberation is brought about, takes for him. (EA, 141)

Because childhood is both ‘common to all men’ and ‘temporary’, it constitutes a peculiar iteration of otherness, with its own theorization. The passage above proposes a striking justification of adult authority, which might appear at odds with Beauvoir’s existentialism, but which in fact chimes with her perception of the child’s specific otherness. Childhood is a temporary, short and early part of one’s existence, but its temporariness, shortness and earliness are positive characteristics; a sign of an otherness that is opportune, open. The child does not ‘lack’ knowledge; there has simply been *little time* *past* for him to accumulate it, and this *little time* *past* all the while suggests a *greater time left*. When Beauvoir finally states that the child ‘invites authority’, she has set up the terrain to present authority as a positive limitation, a frontierof otherness which the child will meet, respond to, interrogate. The Beauvoirian mantra that liberation can *only* occur – but *can* occur – within limitations set by others is given particular force.

The adult-child relationship is thus representative of *all* interactions with others in its conflictual and ambivalent nature, but it is also uniquely pregnant with ethical potential. For Beauvoir, encounters with otherness, though they will never culminate in ideal coalescence with a perfect *alter ego*, can be worked on. There can be, she says, a process of mutual recognition whereby the other comes to be appreciated in full awareness of their ambiguity. This is the ethical move: seeing others in their otherness, and therefore undecidability and freedom. Beauvoir’s vision of childhood is deeply ethical; far from flattening the child into a conveniently superficial other, it probes its secrets, explores its interiority. But her vision of adulthood also evades moralism. Her theorization of the adult-child relationship is not normative, advocating care, protection, respect; nor is it solely denunciatory, bemoaning the oppression and unkindness of adults for children. Rather, she recognises that childhood condenses existential concerns for the adult. For her, the dynamics of oppression and liberation of the adult-child relationship reflect a similar tension, on the part of the adult, towards freedom and towards facticity.

Mutual recognition is thus possible when both child and adult encounter and test their own limits in relation to one another. Children ‘invite authority’ because this authority is the condition of their future freedom; their future freedom, in return, is the condition of the adult’s continued project. Beauvoir offers here a measured and early articulation of progressive educational thought, by providing a vision of an ethical educational relation, respectful of child freedom and unafraid of adult authority. This ethical vision foregrounds the ambiguity of existence, and the mission of the educational relationship becomes, in part, to present and celebrate this ambiguity. If education is ‘a failure’ – indeed, it *should* be ‘a failure’ – it is perhaps because it must expose to the child the problems of others and of time, the ambiguity of existence, and ultimately fail to propose a solution.

But in this theorisation, what can we make of the very real instances of adult oppression and abuse of children? A ‘founding myth’ of Beauvoir’s self-narration is the death of her childhood friend Elisabeth Lacoin (‘Zaza Mabille’ in the *Memoirs*). Zaza, who is brought up by a tyrannical mother in a very conservative family, dies at an early age, for reasons unclear even to doctors; her death ends the *Memoirs*, and haunts the rest of Beauvoir’s autobiography. We could take the Zaza tragedy as an example in Beauvoir’s corpus of a ‘successful’ – rather than happily ‘failed’ – education, keeping the child in terrified respect of strict values, of a set and determined future. The Zaza story constitutes a cautionary tale among Beauvoir’s stories of childhood, a powerful call to adults to preserve the unpredictability of childhood – to *fail*, rather than succeed too well, at transmitting to them their values, dreams and desires.

Childhood, for Beauvoir, contains the fundamental ‘pulls’ of human existence – the desire to *become* against the tendency towards inertia, the desire to project oneself into an other against the temptation of solipsism. Childhood is the moment when the ambiguity of being emerges; yet it also provides the opportunity to learn to negotiate this ambiguity, to accept it, indeed to *relish* it.[[27]](#endnote-27) Both as a time of life and as an object of philosophical reflection, childhood is thus intensely tied to the ethical stance. The adult-child relationship is traversed with equal tensions, and ethical possibilities. At once loving and constrictive, wishful and regulatory, the adult look forces the child into a struggle with otherness. But the child, in return, offers the adult moments of unhindered freedom, moments to recapitulate one’s personal history, in all its facticity and bad faith. For Beauvoir, there can be no ambiguity without childhood encounters with oppression and false promises; and there can be no ethical relation without the understanding that these oppressions, these false promises, betray the presence of another consciousness as divided as one’s own.

This relationship is difficult, because it both imposes representations of the world on the child, and asks the child to do something non-representable with them in the future; but the ensuing tensions in the child are only reflective of the adult’s own. In the right conditions, there is co-dependency in this relationship. Just as the child depends on the adult to provide knowledge, the adult depends on the child to act upon that knowledge. The child must be made acquainted with a *time past* of immense magnitude, while the adult senses in the child an appealingly unknowable futurity. This relationship cannot go without violence, but it is also awesome in what it assumes of the capacity for one individual to continue their project through another being – and for this other being to do so in unpredictable ways.

1. Margaret Simons, ‘Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship’, *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986), 165-179. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sally Scholz, ‘That All Children Should Be Free: Beauvoir, Rousseau, and Childhood’, *Hypatia* 25:2 (2010), 394-411; Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some of the reflection on childhood in Beauvoir’s works present in this article is articulated within my monograph on existentialist approaches to children’s literature theory: Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children’s Literature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, translated by Patrick O’Brian (London: Flamingo, 1983); *The Mandarins*, translated by Leonard M. Friedman (London: Flamingo, 1984); *Les Belles Images* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) (hereafter LBI; all translations mine); *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, translated by James Kirkup (London: Penguin, 1963). (Hereafter MDD.) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1994) (hereafter EA); *The Second Sex*, translated by H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Yolanda A. Patterson, ‘Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood’, *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986) 87-105. For case studies of maternity in Beauvoir’s works see Laurie Corbin, *The Mother Mirror* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); Alex Hughes, ‘Murdering the Mother in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter’* in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Fallaize (London: Routledge, 1998), 120-131; Alison Fell, *Liberty, equality, maternity in Beauvoir, Leduc and Ernaux* (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 2003). For a discussion of motherhood as a task of immanence, see Andrea Veltman, ‘Transcendence and Immanence in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir’ in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by M.A. Simons (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 113-131, and Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), particularly 101-105. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Geneviève Fraisse, *Le Privilège de Simone de Beauvoir* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Betty Halpern-Guedj contends that Beauvoir’s *Memoirs* are less concerned with the question of childhood than with the aspiration to transcendence. Halpern-Guedj, *Le Temps et le transcendant dans l’oeuvre de Simone de Beauvoir* (Tübingen: Narr, 1998), all translations mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, translated by Irene Clephene (London: Penguin, 2000). Sartre’s interest in the infantile origins of adult behaviour was already palpable in his short story ‘L’Enfance d’un chef’, published in *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). He later wrote the quite childhood-focused *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: New American Library, 1971). But Sartre was never as focused as Beauvoir on the *concept* of childhood and its importance for existentialism. Serious considerations of childhood are conspicuously absent from *Being and Nothingness*. Annabelle Martin Golay notes that Sartre was ‘always turned towards the future’, while Beauvoir ‘could not help but look in the rear-view mirror.’ Martin Golay, *Beauvoir intime et politique: La fabrique des* Mémoires, (Villeneuve d’Asq: Septentrion, 2013), 22, my translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Simons, 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On the differences between little boys and little girls in *The Second Sex*, see Tidd, 52, and Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 177-180. The most thorough exploration of *The Second Sex* remains Eva Lundgren-Gothlin’s *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s* The Second Sex(London: Athlone, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kristana Arp justifies the use of this term as an alternative to Beauvoir’s own label of ‘natural freedom’. It stands in contrast with ‘moral freedom’: acting upon one’s ontological freedom. See ‘Simone de Beauvoir’s Existentialism: Freedom and ambiguity in the human world’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, edited by S. Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252-273. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Claudia Card, ‘Introduction: Beauvoir and the ambiguity of “ambiguity” in ethics’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir,* edited by C. Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2005). (Hereafter BN.) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Halpern-Guedj, 215-126. Susan Bainbrigge further sees the child character in the *Memoirs* as a ‘self-to-the-future’, who ‘anticipates her successful liberation and independence.’*Writing Against Death: The Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir* (Amsterdam: Faux Titre, 2005), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Tidd, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Halpern-Guedj, 171-173. She also mentions the ‘confessional’ nature of Beauvoir’s autobiography, more entrenched in the Rousseauist inspirations of her work. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. ‘By 1958 existentialism has long since become Simone de Beauvoir’s spontaneous outlook on herself and the world’, says Moi (49). Bainbrigge also highlights Beauvoir’s reliance on the reader to decode her unformulated existentialist outlook throughout her autobiographies (34-35). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Scholz defines these two conflicting visions of childhood as, firstly, the ideal, Rousseauist child striving for freedom, and secondly, the oppressed, Cartesian child, condemned by others to an ‘apprenticeship to seriousness’ (395). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), hereafter *PC*, all translations mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Nancy Bauer provides a careful reading of Beauvoir’s Heideggerian influences, particularly regarding the possibility of non-hostile relations to otherness, which for Bauer are solved through the introduction of ambiguity in Heidegger’s concept of *Mitsein*. See ‘Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology’ in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 65-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ambiguity in Beauvoir’s works has been abundantly discussed. See Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Terry Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Study of Her Writings* (London: Harrap, 1983), 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Fallaize, unlike Fraisse, argues that Beauvoir was genuinely interested in actual children. See Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 1988), 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Fallaize, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Fallaize, 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Deutscher (40) notes that Beauvoir is concerned with how one can learn to desire ambiguity rather than pushing it aside; a necessary movement towards ethics. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)