

A Philosopher Manqué?

Simone de Beauvoir, Moral Value and 'The Useless Mouths'

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ABSTRACT In discussing Simone de Beauvoir's ontological ethics in an earlier article in this journal, the author suggested in passing that she could be seen as a 'philosopher manqué', a 'lost' or 'missed' philosopher, a woman who gave up or rejected philosophy to pursue ideas by better means for her purposes. Here the author explores the idea of de Beauvoir as a philosopher manqué in relation to her play *Les Bouches inutiles*, using a translation-in-progress into English, *The Useless Mouths*, to examine ideas about morality, ethics and intersubjectivity expressed within it. De Beauvoir constructs characters around different philosophical positions, which are evaluated by reference to the play's unfolding action. This turns on men's hidden evaluation of the category of women as, by definition, 'the useless mouths' of society, an evaluation revealed by strategies for survival in the *in extremis* situation of a town under siege.

KEY WORDS intersubjectivity ♦ *Les Bouches inutiles* ♦ moral life ♦ ontological ethics ♦ power ♦ problem of men

THE PHILOSOPHER MANQUÉ AND *LES BOUCHES INUTILES*

In recent years, feminist scholarship has produced a radical and exciting rereading of the ideas and writings of Simone de Beauvoir, particularly concerning her philosophy of the self.¹ My own work (here and in Stanley, 1996) draws substantially on this, although I am also struck by what is almost the elision of de Beauvoir's *Les Bouches inutiles* from the oeuvre of her writings within the discussions of scholars otherwise meticulous in their attentiveness to the range of her work.² This article therefore is concerned with de Beauvoir's philosophical thinking in this play, first

performed at the end of October 1945,³ so as to highlight its importance within her developing ideas.

The idea of de Beauvoir as a 'philosopher manqué' suits the complex combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors which led to her separation from the philosophy mainstream. The *Petit Larousse* defines 'manqué' thus:

manqué, e adj -1. [non réussi – attentat] failed [-vie]; wasted; [-occasion] missed, lost; [-tentative] failed, abortive, unsuccessful; [-photo, sauce] spoilt; missed! -2. [aux talents inexploités]: c'est un cuisinier / un médecin – he should have been a cook / doctor.

In its meaning of a 'missed' or 'lost' philosopher, the idea of the philosopher manqué hints at de Beauvoir's disengagement from institutional philosophy, as well as its inability to productively use her philosophical talents.⁴ There are three related aspects of her philosopher manqué approach that particularly interest me. The diverse forms that de Beauvoir's writings take before 1949 and *The Second Sex* suggest that she was interested in exploring ideas across conventional genre boundaries and with crafting ways of writing which enabled her to express them in ways she found more satisfactory. The sheer quantity of writing that de Beauvoir published over this period and the fecundity of her philosophical thinking is undeniable and fascinating. And her interest in 'women' as a category considerably predates *The Second Sex* and is explored in these early writings. These things drive my interest in *Les Bouches inutiles* (de Beauvoir, 1945a). This play self-consciously explores what it means to do 'philosophy by other means'; it fascinatingly extends the ideas developed in de Beauvoir's work earlier than this; it differs interestingly from *The Blood of Others* (de Beauvoir, 1945b), written concurrently but completed slightly later; and it not only places 'the problem of women' at the centre of philosophical discussion, but rewrites this as 'the problem of men', or rather, as I suggest later, as 'the problem of power'.

Les Bouches inutiles was written between autumn 1944 and autumn 1945 and was first performed at the Theatre de Carrefours, directed by Michel Vitold, on 29 October 1945. It ran for around 50 performances and occasioned some positive but predominantly negative reviews; Deirdre Bair provides comments from a number, including Jean-Jacques Gautier in *Figaro* describing it as 'much less theatre than ideas' and Yvon Navy in *Cité-Soir*, who commented that 'What we have here is dramatic art confused with the professoriat' (see Bair, 1990: 310–11).⁵ Catherine Naji and I, intrigued by *Les Bouches inutiles* as a 'missed' or 'lost' work to de Beauvoir's English-speaking readers,⁶ have made a new 'from scratch' translation. This article draws substantially on our translation-in-progress and extracts from it are referenced as Naji and Stanley (forthcoming). 'The plot' of the play (I comment on its ethical structure later) is that:

- the town of Vaucelles has rebelled against its ruler, the Duke of Burgundy, and is now starving under Burgundian siege;
- a belfry is being built by the town's male workers and the Vaucelles flag will be hung from it and its bells rung when the siege is relieved;
- the King of France will send troops to relieve Vaucelles, but not until spring;
- only six weeks' supply of food is left in the town even at starvation levels;
- the town's three burgermeisters and members of the Town Council decide that 'the useless mouths' – the children, the infirm, the old men and all the women – must be expelled so that the town can hold out until spring;
- Catherine, wife of the burgermeister Louis and a major supporter of the revolt against Burgundy, challenges the men's definitions of who is 'useful' and who 'the town' is composed of;
- Jean-Pierre Gauthier, the town's emissary to the King of France, adopts a position of complete disengagement from all action as the only way to 'keep his hands clean', but events in the play propel him into action;
- Louis becomes aware of the ethical consequences of the decision, but only because Catherine attempts to kill him and so take extreme action against an extreme wrong;
- following other revelations, a decision is made that the town will act as a whole, together;
- in the dead of night, the townspeople storm the Burgundian troops, setting fire to Vaucelles as they leave.

The play contains two related 'revelations'. The first is that 'the problem of women' is actually the product of 'the problem of men'. The second is that 'the problem of men' itself is not only a product of ideas about moral values and interpersonal relationships, but their interrelation with ideas about the state and citizenship. My discussion addresses some of the key philosophical questions that the play is concerned with, including 'what is ethically proper conduct?', 'who legitimately decides for whom?', 'who composes the collectivity that a state acts in the interests of?' and 'what is life for?' I conclude by looking at its ethical structure, its approach to moral character and the relationship of this to sex/gender.

SOLIPSISM, COMMITMENT AND ETHICAL ACTION

Jean-Pierre Gauthier returns to the besieged town and is told by soldiers he can have nothing to eat or drink until the rations are distributed – at the foot of a belfry under construction, the women, the children and the

old men are queuing. He realizes how thin and pale his sister Jeanne has become, and he feels oppressed because people now behave very differently:

Jean-Pierre: When I left Vaucelles, there were still children playing in the streets and sometimes a woman singing.

Jeanne: Three months have gone by.

Jean-Pierre: Three centuries! Ah! I'd like to run away far away from here: since I crossed your walls, every breath of air that I breathe has the taste of remorse. Even though none of this is my fault.

Jeanne: Don't torment yourself.

Jean-Pierre: All the looks that I meet seem either reproaches or prayers. Everyone has become a beggar in this town. Me, I've never asked anything from anyone. I want to be left in peace, in peace with myself.

Jeanne: Come on, you'll get used to it. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Second Tableau, Act 1)

However, Jean-Pierre does not want to 'get used to it'. When he was on the mission to the King of France he felt neither responsibility nor guilt, the emotions he feels now back in Vaucelles. Soon after, he meets Clarice, with whom he had earlier had a close relationship. Their conversation concerns commitment and solipsism:

Clarice: Did you think about me during the last three months?

Jean-Pierre: Often.

Clarice: But did you miss me?

Jean-Pierre: What could I miss? It was enough to know that somewhere in the world there were these blue eyes, this smile.

Clarice, disengaging herself: Me, I didn't think of you. I never think about the dead, nor the absent. I don't like ghosts.

Jean-Pierre: I'm no longer a ghost. (*He makes a movement towards her. She pulls back.*) Why are you pulling away from me?

Clarice: We have lived for three months like strangers and we haven't suffered because of it. What's the good of seeing each other again?

Jean-Pierre: It's good that we haven't suffered. If your absence created an emptiness in me, if my image hid the world from you, then that would be a reason not to see each other again.

Clarice: You're right. I hate suffering.

Jean-Pierre, taking her in his arms: You are here, I see you, I smell you: there is nothing more to wish for. I am happy that you haven't thought about me.

Clarice: Are you happy about it?

Jean-Pierre: Ah! If I thought it was my fault that these eyes were sullied by tears . . .

Clarice: What would you do?

Jean-Pierre: Even though I'm smothering in this town, I will stay here with you.

Clarice, after a pause: Why have you come back?

Jean-Pierre: I left so I could come back.

Clarice: I wouldn't have come back.

Jean-Pierre: You would have forgotten your town?

Clarice: I would have forgotten everything. I would have lived alone and free. I would have lived. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming; Second Tableau, Act I)

Echoing Jean-Pierre's earlier statement about wanting to be left alone in peace, Clarice saying that she would have lived 'alone and free' equates 'living' with acting on one's own free and unfettered will, unencumbered by the responsibility and guilt that haunts Jean-Pierre. However, as he leaves the stage, Clarice 'follows him with her eyes' and to his back she says 'Fool! Blind fool!', thereby making it clear to the audience that her feelings about Jean-Pierre are not exactly those expressed to his face.

Clarice's expression of a solipsist viewpoint is not entirely produced by Jean-Pierre's disengagement. Thus, later in the play, when Clarice and Jeanne learn about the decision to throw 'the useless mouths' into the ditches outside the town, Clarice contemplates killing herself and says to Jeanne that she has never 'lived' because she has never made her own free choices. At this point, Clarice has told her family that she is pregnant although Jean-Pierre himself does not know (nor does he even at the end of the play), but Clarice still feels there is nothing to hope for, nothing to keep her alive:

Jeanne: Stop. As long as we're alive, there is still hope.

Clarice: What have I to hope for? There is nothing except this little life moving in my womb and that tomorrow will be torn out of me.

Jeanne: Clarice, don't leave me alone!

Clarice: You are alone, and I am alone! Goodbye!

Jeanne: No, stay with me. The night will be less cold if I sleep in your arms. At least that is left to us; until our last breath, we can still smile at each other, love each other, cry together.

Clarice: I don't know how to smile nor to cry. I don't know how to love. They haven't allowed me to live. But they will not rob me of my death. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming; Fifth Tableau, Act II)

Earlier, an important encounter has taken place between Catherine and Jean-Pierre. The changing ethical understanding and commitment of these two characters provides the dynamic which challenges and changes events around the proposed expulsion:

Catherine, to Georges: Leave us alone. (*Georges leaves. To Jean-Pierre.*) Sit down. Is it true that this morning you refused the post of Prefect of Provisions?

Jean-Pierre: It's true.

Catherine: Are you so lazy or such a moral coward?

Jean-Pierre: I'm not able to take things lightly enough, nor am I presumptuous enough to agree to govern the people.

Catherine: Do you want always to remain so uninvolved? Is it for this that I have raised you with so much care?

Jean-Pierre: I know what I owe you. You've been more than a mother to me and my sister. But now let me lead my life without help.

Catherine: Who could look at you wasting your gifts without being impatient? You have a head, a heart, two hands, don't you want to do anything with them?

Jean-Pierre: I would prefer to cut off these hands, pull out this heart; I live, I breathe and already this is enough to make me feel a criminal. Ah! if I could remove myself from this world. . .

Catherine: But you can't.

Jean-Pierre: I could at least try not to leave any imprint on the world. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Third Tableau, Act I)

For Catherine, to be uninvolved is an ethical fault which comes from being lazy or a moral coward. Her insistence on involvement is not because Jean-Pierre is 'special' (the reason Louis and the other burgermeisters want to co-opt him as Prefect of Provisions), but simply because he has 'a head, a heart, two hands' and so should use them for the common good. However, Jean-Pierre wants to make no imprint, to leave the world and people as though he had never been. For him just being, mere life, is 'enough to make me feel a criminal', for it makes him feel responsibility and so guilt:

Catherine: I want to build happiness.

Jean-Pierre: You want it. And do you know what you're doing? There are many hidden threats in each of our gestures, in each of our words; our actions are going to explode far away from us with unknown consequences; I would never have the audacity to impose my will on someone else's life. (A pause.) Jeanne doesn't love your son.

Catherine: She's a child. She will know later that I've acted for her own good. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Third Tableau, Act I)

Catherine is an involved and committed woman. However, it becomes clear that on its own, this is not 'a good thing', for there are unintended consequences of her imposing her will on other people. Catherine's 'for their own good' approach results in her acting as a tyrant, for she denies moral agency and selfhood to Clarice and Jeanne and would like to do so also to Jean-Pierre. Catherine wants Jean-Pierre to marry Clarice, but only if he will join the town's ruling political elite; while he rejects the very idea of commitment:

Jean-Pierre: All commitments are a prison.

Catherine: You believe yourself to be free, you who are capable neither of action nor of love.

Jean-Pierre: I don't want to lie to Clarice nor to myself. Everyone lives alone and dies alone.

Catherine: No. If a man and a woman have the same trajectory towards the same future, in the work that they have built together, in the children they have engendered, in this whole wide world that has shaped their common will, they would find themselves together in an indissoluble way.

Jean-Pierre: Clarice isn't like you. She isn't of this world and expects nothing of the future. It is enough for her to be herself. There's nothing I could get from her and I could give nothing to her.

Catherine: Are you sure you know what Clarice thinks? (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Third Tableau, Act I)

For Jean-Pierre, to be free is to be alone, because he sees commitment as inevitably a prison for the will. Catherine insists that it is not possible for someone to be free like this, for freedom involves acting for and with others, and solipsism can be surmounted when people share 'the same trajectory towards the same future'.

There is an immense irony here, for Catherine's assumption of the 'one trajectory', indissoluble nature of her relationship with Louis is about to be shattered by finding out about the decision to expel 'the useless mouths'. This propels Catherine and also Jean-Pierre into a new course of action. Thus, in the long Fifth Tableau of Act II, another conversation takes place between Catherine and Jean-Pierre after he has discovered what is going to happen:

Jean-Pierre: The people will not permit such a crime. I will speak to them.

Catherine: You're wasting your time. The people are proud of the leaders they have chosen. They will obey them. (*A pause.*) Why are you worried about us?

Jean-Pierre: Am I worried about you? Or am I worried about myself? The smell in the air has changed and the saliva in my mouth has a bitter taste. Ah! I can't stand the colour of this sky. Where are the burgermeisters?

Catherine: They will pass this way. But don't hope to influence them. They can't see and hear.

Jean-Pierre: I will speak to the men of Vaucelles. I will know how to convince them.

Catherine: No! It's too late. It was yesterday that you should have taken the destiny of the town between your hands, yesterday the members of the Council would have listened to your voice, you would have turned them away from the crime. But you wanted to keep yourself pure.

Jean-Pierre: How was I to know that my silence would make a murderer of me?

Catherine: A murderer, an executioner. From the moment you were silent, you accepted any outcome. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fifth Tableau, Act II)

For both Catherine and Jean-Pierre, 'the people' who either will or won't 'permit such a crime' are presumptively the *men* of Vaucelles. For Catherine, the people and their leaders are on one side, and the 'us' Jean-Pierre might worry about, the women, are on the other. However, while recognizing the locus of power here, Jean-Pierre cannot tell the difference between being 'worried about you' (that is, 'the useless mouths') and 'worried about myself'. The air has changed, his being has changed, because of the Council's decision. Jean-Pierre's 'How was I to know?' is answered by Catherine categorically: each act exists morally in itself and its outcomes; its moral force or meaning does not lie in an intention to produce different ends. This is, indeed, the very point that Jean-Pierre made earlier about unintended consequences, a remark that now returns with its own unintended consequentiality – silence, Catherine insists, is itself an act, and gives assent to *any* outcome.

Just before this, Catherine has said to Jean-Pierre, 'Go away. I can't stand the sight of a man.' She is very aware that the decision to expel 'the useless mouths' has been made by men, based on a presumption about economic and moral value impressed into the fabric of Vaucelles. Men, as the group who control the state, have decided on a course of action which will kill all the women, because they have defined value and the state in their own interest.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE NATURE OF THE SELF

Human engagement, the nature of freedom and its relationship to free will and choice are elucidated through the two 'solipsist characters' of Jean-Pierre and Clarice. They are also central to the way de Beauvoir unfolds the more fundamental question of what 'a self' is and its relationship to morality and responsibility. Catherine and then later Clarice react to the decision to expel 'the useless mouths' by insisting on its sectarianism. The decision reveals the disguised tyranny at the heart of Vaucelles – the men's assumption that dependence equals uselessness and dependence cannot coexist with value. Clarice insists they decided this to ensure food for their survival. However, a debate between Catherine and Louis sees it as an issue about who is seen to have value or not:

Clarice: This then is what you have come up with? You are going to murder us so that you can eat your fill! . . .

Louis: It's true that we have become executioners. Certainly the points of spears, flames of death would be more merciful to us than the horror which from now on will be our lot. But because it is necessary to kill the innocent

or live as criminals, we choose crime because we choose life.

Catherine: You choose life for yourselves, but death for us.

Louis: It's not about you, nor about us: it's about our community and the future of the entire world.

Catherine: Won't the men of tomorrow be made of the same flesh as us? If in your eyes we are only hungry cattle, what are they? Why sacrifice us for them?

Louis: To choose life is to choose the future. Without this choice which carries us forward we would be nothing but vegetation on the face of the earth. Of what importance is it then whether our hearts beat or are silent. To reduce Vaucelles to ashes, to reduce the future to ashes, this also reduces our past to ashes and is to deny all that has made us what we are. (*A pause.*) (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fourth Tableau, Act I)

Catherine's 'Why sacrifice us for them?' follows her realization that once any individual or group is seen as useless and lacking human value, this can happen with any other group. Once the principle of the equal worth of people is breached, then as a principle it no longer exists. Louis ignores Catherine's identification of the fundamental issue here, because he is instead concerned with his abstract ideals of 'life' and 'the future', which require the deaths of most Vaucellesians, including the children of both sexes who are its literal future. For Louis, moral responsibility comes through the assertion of independent will; it is the lack of independence of children, old men, the infirm and all the women that for him indicates their uselessness, their lack of value. Catherine slowly realizes Louis does not accord her equal value because of his evaluation of dependence. But while Louis reluctantly realizes he is now separated from Catherine in a way he had not been before, he still cannot understand her feelings about this:

Catherine: Can I repudiate my very self? (*A pause.*) You spoke to me, I answered, and I was a living and free woman in front of you. And I spoke to you and you freely replied to me; neither one of us ever carried out an act where the other didn't recognise their own separate will. And now, you have disposed of me as one disposes of a stone; and you are no more than this blind force that is crushing me.

Louis: I ask you again and you can answer me again. Accept our decree, recognise your own separate will in it: our community will is to save Vaucelles at any cost.

Catherine: This is too late. You have decided without me and all the words that I will say will be no more than the words of a slave. I am your victim; you are my executioner. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Sixth Tableau, Act II)

For Catherine, there is no such thing as a 'community will' when value is accorded only to a minority and dependence is seen to negate selfhood – she and all 'the useless mouths' thereby become merely objects to the self-interested will of others. She also comes to realize the moral implications

of her earlier position, that it resulted in the tyrannous imposition of her will over anyone she saw as less capable of making decisions than she.

The culminating realization of what a (true, actualized, ethically founded) self is by Catherine and Jean-Pierre comes through the development of ideas about ontological ethics⁷ at the end of the Eighth Tableau and the end of the play. In response to Catherine's expression of doubts about the rightness of her having spoken out, Jean-Pierre states that 'our lot' – the lot of humanity acting with commitment to actualize self in concert with other selves – inevitably involves risk:

Catherine: How are we going to know?

Jean-Pierre: We can't know. Now I see it clearly: our lot is this risk and this anguish. But why should we hope to be at peace? (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Eighth Tableau, Act II)

Jean-Pierre insists that social action always involves the possibility of unintended negative consequences for others, but this is what life is. Also involved here are ideas about the relationship of individuals to community to state.

WHO AND WHAT IS THE STATE?

The revolt of Vaucelles against Burgundian rule underpins the events of the play. Once silence about the decision to expel 'the useless mouths' is broken, it becomes apparent that different groups of Vaucellesians had supported the revolt on the basis of very different assumptions. The assumption made by the old, the infirm, the young and all of the women, that 'we're all in this together, equally', had produced universal support for the revolt, but was actually mistaken. 'The state' – the male oligarchy of Council and burgermeisters – had made a very different assumption based on their ideas about value, as expressed in this decision. Moreover this oligarchy, and the interest group of men it represents, has the ability to enforce its decisions: it controls the police and the army and intends to use them against the townspeople.

The 'moment' that sets in motion the events that lead to the ethical growth of the key characters is Catherine's insistence that, now as always, there should be no secrets between her and Louis:

Catherine, to the three children: Leave us. (*They go out.*) Tell me the truth. (*Silence.*) You know full well that no help will come before spring.

Louis: Don't ask me anything, Catherine.

Catherine: Has there ever been a secret between us? (*Silence.*) If all is lost, if we must die in a hopeless attempt to escape, don't be afraid to tell me: I am ready.

Louis: It would be easy to die clasping you in my arms.

Catherine: Why do you turn your eyes away? One would say you were afraid to look at me.

Louis: Leave me alone. Don't ask me anything.

Catherine: Whatever the future will be, I want to face it with you. Speak.

Louis: As soon as I will have spoken, we will be separated for ever. (*Silence.*) The Council has decided to get rid of the useless mouths. Tomorrow, before sunset the infirm, the old men, the children, will be driven into the ditches. And the women. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Third Tableau, Act I)

Louis's 'And the women' brings to an end the Third Tableau and also Act I. Before he speaks, Catherine thinks she knows the worst that can happen. Once he has spoken, the fundamental division of interest between them is revealed. Louis's list of 'the useless mouths' culminates in a totalizing statement about women. The infirm, the old men and the children are groups that include males who used to have value in the past and/or who will have value in the future; but, by their very being, no woman can ever have value; they are always by definition useless.

As Act II develops, Catherine confronts the men who have made the decision:

Catherine: I know. Don't lower your eyes; that would be too easy. It's me that's here, and I know. (*Silence.*) I'm sat in this chair and you're asking for my advice: you're looking for hope in my eyes: for you and me the same hope. We told each other: our suffering, our victory. We had one future between us. And suddenly, here I am alone, in front of you; you will throw me in the ditch where cold cinders, peelings, bones, old rags, are thrown. But look me in the face then!

Louis: I'm looking at you, Catherine. The existence of this community is your achievement as much as it is ours, and you want its triumph like we do; we can ask you to lay down your life for it.

Catherine: You're not asking. You have condemned me.

Louis: Why do you hate us? When it's necessary, we will agree to die.

Catherine: Am I free to accept? What will you do to me if I refuse? (*Silence.*) I'm no longer permitted to want anything. I was a woman and I am now no more than a useless mouth. You have taken more than life from me. All that is left to me is my hate. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fourth Tableau, Act II)

The town's rulers cannot look Catherine in the eye, for they know they have condemned her. Catherine's opening statement moves through complex changes of verb tenses, to arrive at the future of 'you will throw me in the ditch'. Louis presents the decision as one necessary for 'the community', but Catherine realizes this masks the fact that neither refusal nor even freely chosen acceptance is possible.

At this point, Catherine assumes that 'before' the decision she had value and it is only after it that she has been defined as a 'useless mouth':

Louis: Vaucelles must live! (*A pause.*) . . .

Catherine: Your wives, your fathers, your children will be dead, and Vaucelles will live! Weren't we its flesh and blood? Can we be cut off like a rotting hand? (*She calls.*) Jeanne, Clarice! (*Jeanne and Clarice enter.*) Come here. Look at these men. They have met with thirty other men and they have said: we are the present and the future, we are the entire town, only we exist. We decide that the women, the old men, the children of Vaucelles are no more than useless mouths. They will be driven outside of the town and condemned to die of hunger and cold in the ditches. (*Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fourth Tableau, Act II*)

Catherine forcefully counters Louis's 'Vaucelles must live!' with her insistence that it is 'these men' who have decided about 'the useless mouths'. However, what then happens is that she realizes she had *never* had value, that 'the town' has *always* excluded her and every other woman. What is 'useful' is indicated in the importance of building the belfry, weaving its flag, guarding its walls, deciding on plans for it, keeping order around it. That only adult able-bodied men do these things remains implicit and unexpressed until Catherine's 'I know'. Catherine's angry rejection of the men's assumption of her ontological and ethical worthlessness is expressed, just after this, to Jean-Pierre, who comes in having just heard about the decision:

Jean-Pierre: Just a word.

Catherine: Go away. I can't stand the sight of a man. (*Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fifth Tableau, Act II*)

Then all of 'the women' as a collectivity realize their mere instrumentality, because their husbands readily abandon them to die:

Fourth woman, going toward one of the men: You're my husband, and you're going to let me die. (*The two groups stop.*) Answer me! Speak to me! Have you become deaf?

First man: The council has decided, Maria, I have nothing to say to you. (*Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Fifth Tableau, Act II*)

A highly consequential meeting between Louis and Catherine occurs in the Sixth Tableau of Act II immediately after this expression of naked male self-interest. Her sense of betrayal changes Catherine's understanding of the past, as well as the present and the future, showing her that her assumption of fundamental equality with Louis was not shared by him:

Louis: You are here, but I am alone.

Catherine: You have betrayed me. To die is nothing, but you have erased me from the world. All the promises of the past, you have turned them into lies. A lie the day that I brought Clarice into the world and that sunny morning when I laid the first stone of the belfry. A lie our kisses and our nights. Our love was only a lie.

Louis: You can save our love, Catherine. You can save the past and the future. Say one word only: accept!

Catherine: Can I repudiate myself? (*A pause.*) You spoke to me, I answered, and I was a living and free woman in front of you. And I spoke to you, and you freely replied to me; neither one of us ever carried out an act where the other one didn't recognise their own separate will. And now you have disposed of me as one disposes of a stone; and you are no more than a blind force that is crushing me. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Sixth Tableau, Act II)

For Louis, their love can be 'saved' if only Catherine will toe the line, accept the decision. But Catherine knows this would mean her accepting the men's evaluation of her and other women as useless and so worthless. When she meets him, she incites Jean-Pierre to rethink his previous inaction as leading to a de facto acceptance of the murder of the women. This in turn leads Jean-Pierre into a course of action that changes his relationship with Clarice and leads him to unmask the attempted seizure of power by François Rosbourg and Georges, Catherine and Louis's son. Catherine also later attempts to kill Louis and so end his usurpation of moral responsibility and selfhood from others.⁸ This extreme act shocks Louis into realizing that, through a decision intended to bring about a good end, he has chosen an evil means that has evil consequences:

Louis: No!

Catherine: What did you say?

Louis: I have denied half my people, and the whole town has turned into a horde without law and without love. How can we reach a higher life if we first of all kill all of our reasons for living? (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Sixth Tableau, Act II)

Later in this Act, Jean-Pierre tries to persuade the deputies to reverse the decision. Louis supports him and expresses his new conception of the community and the town:

Louis: A freely chosen death isn't a bad thing. But these women and these old men that you will throw in the ditch are not allowed to choose. And you will rob them of both their death and their life. We will not do that. On this night, united in a single will, a free people will confront its destiny.

Second deputy: Vaucelles must live!

Louis: Who is Vaucelles? Between each of us and all the others is a pact: if we break it, our community crumbles into dust. (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Seventh Tableau, Act II)

Louis has now recognized that 'Vaucelles' as an ideal standing for independence and freedom from tyrannous rule has to be founded on a unity 'Between each of us and all the others'. If this is broken, then the community is dead; whereas the freely chosen fate of the townspeople 'united in a single will' can ensure that the ideal will survive intact.

As the townspeople prepare to storm the besiegers, Catherine wonders whether saving 'the useless mouths' has merely condemned the men to

death along with everyone else. Jean-Pierre, however, has come to accept a modified and more ethical variant on the position of engagement that Catherine had earlier propounded to him. Catherine then articulates this in responding to Louis's 'Farewell, Catherine!' with her 'Now we are together for ever'. And Louis in turn then proclaims that freedom results from the exercise of their shared will by the whole of the people:

Catherine: Ah! Perhaps it would have been better to have let myself be thrown into the ditch. Have I saved these children and these women? Have I condemned these men to death?

Jean-Pierre: Your silence would have perhaps saved these men. It would certainly have lost these women and children. We are making our mark on the world.

Catherine: How are we going to know?

Jean-Pierre: We can't know. Now I see it clearly: our lot is this risk and this anguish. But why should we hope to be at peace. . .

Louis: Farewell, Catherine!

Catherine: No, not farewell. Now we are together for ever. (*They kiss each other. Two o'clock strikes.*)

Louis: Let joy be ours. We are fighting for freedom, it is freedom which triumphs through our freely given sacrifice. Alive or dead, we are the victors. . . . Open the gate! (Naji and Stanley, forthcoming: Eighth Tableau, Act II)

THE PLAY'S THE THING: MORAL CHARACTER AND SEX/GENDER

In thinking about the ethical structure of *The Useless Mouths*, it is tempting to view Catherine as a moral 'heroine', not least because her 'I know' provides the central ethical dynamic of the play. However, although this is tempting it is also incorrect. As Clarice and Jean-Pierre are variants on solipsism and disengagement, so Louis and Catherine are variants on will, absolute freedom and tyranny. Their oppressive exertion of will removes moral responsibility and therefore selfhood from other people. And as knowledge of the decision to expel 'the useless mouths' propels Jean-Pierre into agency and moral responsibility, so it makes Catherine aware that her earlier sense of self was ethically misconceived. What Catherine comes to know is that a common will and purpose has to be based on equal value. This has to exist at an interpersonal level, as in her relationship with Louis, but also at the level of the relationship between self and state, as between her and the town she is a *de facto* but not a *de jure* member of.

For Jean-Pierre, at the start of the play solipsism is a principled choice to enable him to feel neither responsibility nor guilt for 'the things that

happen' in the world, not only by not exerting his will over anyone, but more extremely by him eschewing making any imprint on the world through any action or involvement. Clarice, by contrast, feels an inner radical solipsism as a consequence of never being allowed to make her own decisions; and she also adopts a responsive and duplicitous solipsism to echo Jean-Pierre's statements about his essential lack of commitment to their relationship.

Jean-Pierre initially avoids 'action' in the de Beauvoirian sense of 'making an imprint' or 'a mark' on the world, seeing this as a way of disengaging from action and so responsibility and guilt. However, for de Beauvoir, Jean-Pierre's two premises are incorrect. First, 'life' does not exist without commitment and the exertion of will in a common purpose, because at basis this is what authentic selfhood consists of. Second, inaction is in fact a form of action, one which gives assent by default to whatever eventuates and no matter how terrible this is. Jean-Pierre is jolted into sudden realization and a change of mind by the same thing as Catherine; the decision to expel 'the useless mouths'.

The question of value in *The Useless Mouths* turns on apparently objective criteria concerned with ensuring the future of Vaucelles: some people must die to ensure that others more useful than they can live. Beneath the surface, the definition of usefulness serves the self-interest of one particular group of the population; and it has been promulgated by a ruling oligarchy drawn exclusively from the ranks of the group whose interests are served. The ruling men deny value to anyone who cannot contribute to 'the future' in the highly particular ways – building the belfry, making its flags, defending the walls and policing the town – they have defined this. Only the adult men work, so no one else can be useful or produce value; everyone else is dependent on the men's work; and dependence is equated with uselessness.

De Beauvoir distinguishes between different kinds of action: in the conversations between Catherine and Jean-Pierre, between Georges and Jean-Pierre, then between Catherine and Louis. Jean-Pierre and Catherine, for instance, both begin by conflating action in the world, action making a mark on the world, and action to exert one's will over the world through the tyrannous use of power, although they do so from different starting positions and moral evaluations. Jean-Pierre sees all action as tyrannous because having consequences for other people which they have not freely chosen for themselves, while Catherine sees all action in terms of someone making their mark on the world because feeling responsible for the 'common trajectory' of communal life. Catherine also sees the exertion of will on the world, in the sense of making an imprint, as a defining attribute of what a self and a life is but is unable to distinguish this from the tyrannous erosion of the will of others. Jean-Pierre eventually comes to a similar view of action and responsibility, although eschewing the

dangerous assumption made by Catherine – shared in more extreme formulations by Louis, François and Georges – of ‘knowing best’ and therefore legitimately able to make decisions for other people.

Louis not only sees it as entirely legitimate for him to make decisions for people, he cannot even ‘see’ that he does this, so accustomed is he to stage-managing the responses of the men and treating these as those of ‘the town’ as a whole. The burgermeister François Rosbourg quite explicitly sees his will as embodying the will of the town. The ‘will to power’ expressed by Georges is more naked still. The decision to expel ‘the useless mouths’ opens up a radical questioning of all notions of value, law and convention. It creates a ‘lawless horde’ and unfetters Georges from interpersonal as well as social and political conventions. The consequence is that Georges’s sexual desire for his sister Clarice, and his contempt for his cousin Jeanne, are expressed through force or the threat of force, while his political desire to exert his unfettered will over others is expressed through his murderous contempt for the starving townspeople and his plotting with Rosbourg to usurp supreme power.

‘The community’ is invoked in a number of related but different ways during the course of the play. ‘The community’ of the townspeople in an apparently unified way revolted against the tyrannous Burgundian rule. Following the revolt, Vaucelles acts through its government, which apparently represents the entirety of the people. However, revelation of the decision to expel ‘the useless mouths’ shows that the assumption of commonality masks the ruling oligarchy acting in the interests of men. Earlier it was in the self-interest of the men to have the women and other useless mouths dependent on them, apparently equal but actually subservient to their will. Later, it is in the self-interest of the men to make their definition of who is useful and has value nakedly apparent, for this legitimates their privileged treatment and survival.

‘Life’ in an ethical sense (rather than merely living) consists in the freedom to choose and, through the exertion of one’s freely chosen will, in acting together for the common good. A self alone is not ‘a self’ in an ethical sense, and nor does it have ‘a life’ in the terms of the ethical framework of intersubjectivity developed in *The Useless Mouths*. Anyone whose will is denied does not have ‘a life’ in an agentic sense either because they cannot make free choices. What propels Catherine out of the disguised tyranny she exerts over others is her realization that once one person’s will is ignored or overridden, then this becomes possible for all, for what is ‘valuable’ and ‘useful’ is consequently defined from a particular viewpoint and to serve particular interests. And what propels Jean-Paul out of solipsism is his realization that the decision to expel ‘the useless mouths’ negatively affects him, for his life is so bound up in that of another, Clarice, that her death would deny him life in a fundamental ontological sense. ‘Self’, then, does not exist in a vacuum, cannot exist apart from its

relationship and fundamental commitment to other selves in the de Beauvoirian inscription of intersubjectivity.

In *The Useless Mouths* there is no simple binary division of 'good' and 'bad' moral character or of ethical positions according to sex/gender. At the start of the play, all the major characters have adopted or embody flawed positions premised on false assumptions; and by learning from the events and the effects of actions that occur they could come to a more appropriate ethical position if they so willed this. Within the play, it 'just happens' that value has been defined around the dependency of one group, women, upon another, men; and it also 'just happens' that the group which is depended upon controls and rules the polity as well. The two central characters are a woman and a man, they become equally opposed to tyranny, and they equally act against this. It is consequently difficult, then, not to conclude that for de Beauvoir it is power and tyranny that 'matter', in the sense of being foundational, and that she is not concerned with sex/gender 'as such', but rather as a byproduct of the organization and enactment of power,

While sex/gender is absolutely crucial and indeed pivotal in *The Useless Mouths*, a mainspring without which there would be no action regarding the ethical issues it explores, at a more fundamental level it acts as a symbol or mask for something else. The significance of sex/gender within the play is organized around the configuration of power (who decides?), with this being a product of the definition of value (who is useful?). De Beauvoir makes it clear that power does not have to be configured in this way because value can be defined differently. Thus at the end of the play, while the women and children are still 'at the back' of the exodus from the town and the men are armed and at the front, nonetheless notions of value and use are radically different. The same people, the same divisions of labour, the same pattern of dependence and interdependence, the same government, have all come to mean something very different.

This raises the question of if and how de Beauvoir explains 'the problem of men' in acting in their narrow self-interest and removing selfhood from women as a consequence. That is, while sex/gender may indeed be 'essentially' irrelevant, as de Beauvoir proposes, the problem still remains of why it 'just happens' that men's sense of self is a kind of master/slave one which depends upon denying selfhood to women. Seeing value, action and what 'a self' is as something defined by men around notions of dependency, as de Beauvoir does here, constitutes a restatement of the intellectual, political and ethical problem, and not its solution; and nor does it tackle the question of whether all oppressions 'collapse into' power, or whether they each have separate significance in their own right. The philosophical move that de Beauvoir makes in *The Useless Mouths* is one which denies sex/gender independent significance, and treats the meanings attached to it as 'really' the byproducts of power.

However, while de Beauvoir's argument in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) proceeds from the same foundational view of the ontological basis of 'the self' as 'by definition' involving a symbiotic relationship with 'the other', her thinking about power and its relationship to sex/gender – and the other 'isms' of 'race', sexuality, ethnicity – had undergone some crucial shifts, for in this later essay they are seen as having different sources and dynamics and are by no means collapsed into 'just power'. Clearly, de Beauvoir's analytic ideas were still in the process of development in *The Useless Mouths*, another reason for its importance in understanding her work as a whole.

NOTES

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1. Work which has particularly influenced my own includes Bergoffen (1991, 1996, 1997), Le Doeuff (1991), Fichera (1987), Fullbrook and Fullbrook (1993, 1998), Kruks (1987, 1992), Mahon (1997), Simons (1985, 1995, 1999) and Vintges (1996).
2. For example, Fullbrook and Fullbrook's (1998) excellent 'critical introduction' gives one index entry and two sentences of text to it.
3. *Les Bouches inutiles* was translated by Francis and Gontier, published in the USA as *Who Shall Die?* and has been out of print for some time. A new translation in progress, *The Useless Mouths*, by Catherine Naji and myself, will be published by Illinois University Press. The difference in the title between Francis and Gontier's *Who Shall Die?* and Naji and Stanley's *The Useless Mouths* is indicative. Our title is, we think, literally truer to de Beauvoir's title and also truer to the philosophical 'point' of the play, which is not about the surface matter of who dies and who decides this, but the more fundamental issue of who is and is not accorded value and consequently who is 'useless'. De Beauvoir is specifically concerned with how the category of women is imbricated with meaning and value (or lack of it), and thus our use of a categorical in the title ('the useless mouths') rather than a descriptive ('useless mouths') form.
4. Part I of Toril Moi's (1994) *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* provides an account of the context de Beauvoir was working in and the ingrained misogyny of French intellectual life.
5. These cuttings are archived in a scrapbook in the Bibliothèque Arsenal, Paris; see here Bair (1990: 643, footnote 33). Bair's comment on the play, that if de Beauvoir's characters were not *in extremis* circumstances they would be very odd, misses the point, which is that de Beauvoir was writing about philosophical ideas and positions rather than 'people, as such'. However, the difficulties in this may have led to de Beauvoir abandoning the play as a genre for conveying ideas in favour of the novel and memoir.
6. One distinguished exception to the rule is Fichera (1987); she pinpoints its

- importance to de Beauvoir's developing analytical concerns and also, unlike the Francis and Gontier translation but like the Naji and Stanley one, she sees the ethical issues turning on the question of 'who has value?' rather than 'who shall die?'.
7. Stanley (1996) provides a detailed discussion of de Beauvoir's ontological ethics across her writings before *The Second Sex*.
 8. There are strong echoes here of the murder of Xavière by Françoise in de Beauvoir's (1943) *She Came To Stay*, an equally Hegelian act carried out *in extremis*.

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