Simone de Beauvoir on Ambiguity

“Life in itself is neither good nor evil. It is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it.”
—Montaigne

“The continuous work of our life,” says Montaigne, “is to build death.” He quotes the Latin poets: Prima, quae vitam dedit, hora carpit [“The moment that first granted us life, stole it.” (Seneca)] And again: Nascentes morimur [“Being born, we die,” (Marcus Manilius)] Human beings know and think this tragic ambivalence that the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby introduced into their destiny. “Rational animal,” “thinking reed,” they escape from their natural condition without, however, freeing themselves from it. They are still a part of this world of which they are each a consciousness. They each assert themselves as a pure inwardness against which no external power can take hold, and they also experience themselves as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. At every moment they can grasp the non-temporal truth of their existence. But between the past that no longer is and the future that is not yet, this moment when they exist is nothing. This privilege, which they alone possess, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what they share with all their fellow human beings. In turn an object for others, each of them is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which they depend.

As long as there have been human beings and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. Those who have accepted the dualism have established a hierarchy between body and soul that allows to be considered as negligible the part of the self that cannot be saved. They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or, again they have denied life, considering it as a veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of Nirvana. And the morality they have proposed to their disciples has always pursued the same goal. It has been a matter of suppressing the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment. More ingeniously, Hegel tried to reject none of the aspects of the human condition and to reconcile them all. According to his system, the moment is preserved in the development of time; Nature asserts itself in the face of Spirit that denies it while assuming it; the individual is again found in the collectivity within which he or she is lost; and each human being’s death is fulfilled by being canceled out into the Life of Humanity. One can thus repossess in a marvelous optimism where bloody wars themselves only express the fertile restlessness of Spirit.

At the present time there still exist many doctrines that choose to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too-complex situation. But their attempt to lie to us is in vain. Cowardice doesn’t pay. Those reasonable metaphysics, those consoling ethics with which they would like to entice us only accentuate the disorder from which we suffer. Human beings of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They recognize themselves as the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles—as means. The greater their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Although they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. Each one has the incomparable taste in his or her mouth of his or her own life, and yet each feels himself or herself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth’s. Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their grandeur more brilliantly, and in no other age has this grandeur been so horribly flaunted. In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, on every occasion, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my servitude, of the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each human being and all human beings. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither of the two effaces the other. Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the authentic conditions of our life that we must draw the force of living and reasons to act.

(Excerpted from The Ethics of Ambiguity (Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté), translated by Bernard Frechtman [New York: Citadel Press, 1976 (1948), pp. 7-9; translation modified by Ted Stolze])