

Ethics, Entanglement, and Radical Freedom:
Toward a New Materialist Reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Many thanks to all of the organizers of this conference and to all of you who have come to listen to our ideas and hopefully build from them your own. And of course thanks to Beauvoir for giving us all the opportunity to continue her projects in such engaged and vital ways.

Before we begin, A note on the oddities of our collaborative processes: We are drawn to collaboration because of the way it keeps us oriented to open futures whose ends cannot be realized outside of the process and practice of ambiguity that entangled approaches to intellect present. As scholars of rhetoric and composition, we see the processes and practices of composition as integral to the formation of final products and we believe that composing processes themselves reflect the values and ethics of the composer. As such our approach to theorizing *The Ethics of Ambiguity* necessarily embodies such ethical principles of ambiguity in the process of coming into being. It is certain that this project could only exist as it does today through the vibrant energies of our entangled ambiguities.

Introduction

In this presentation we seek to add to the emerging scholarship that positions Beauvoir's intellectual genealogy into new and generative futures. We are particularly interested in Beauvoir's articulation of the fundamental ambiguity of what New Materialist and Theoretical Physicist Karen Barad calls our onto-ethico-epistemological entanglements (2003), and we seek to highlight the implications Beauvoir's theory of ambiguity has for the material realization of

radical freedom, particularly in conversation with emerging New Materialist projects. The existing New Materialist readings of Beauvoir by Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Sonia Kruks focus primarily on sex, gender, and sexual differing and as such are largely informed by (re)readings of *The Second Sex*. We argue that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* provides a broader framework for theorizing a New Materialist ethics.

This project arises from a space of imagination and speculation. We wondered what it would look like to perceive the world, and its onto-ethico-epistemological entanglements, through a lens of Beauvoirian ambiguity. How does her articulation of ambiguity help us disrupt routinized patterns of anticipation and expectation, which are tied to the maintenance of rigid moral and ethical frameworks? How might this “perceptual ambiguity” create a new perspectival horizon, one that realizes the multiplicitous and pluralistic world we live in? How might new relations form, new ethical frameworks arise, new spaces for radical freedom unfold? Finally, how might these relations, ethics, and spaces interact with our material world to foster futurities of radical freedom?

While there are numerous directions in which to read and apply the ethical and philosophical developments made in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, as well as many interesting New Materialist thinkers and projects to read alongside Beauvoir, the temporal limitations of our presentation today are decidedly unambiguous and so we’ve done the hard work of focusing and filtering both for what might prove to be the most immediate implications of Beauvoir’s thought on New Materialist projects, as well as those that might be most easily digested in the time before us.

As such, we have decided to focus on three key conceptual developments: Barad’s notion of onto-ethico-epistemology; William E. Connolly’s understanding of perception and

anticipation, and finally a chora between Barad and Connolly in the concept of entanglement. For each we will first present the New Materialist thinker and concept, followed by a brief reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pointing to how it always already contributes to New Materialist thought.

Part 1: Barad's Onto-ethico-epistemology

Evelien Geerts' entry to the New Materialist Almanac on "onto-ethico-epistemology" aptly summarizes Barad's philosophy: "...beings share in their intra-actions with the world, as we are all in and part of the world's becoming – a becoming that, for Barad, in the end, is a matter of morality. This is truly 'an ethics of worlding' that starts from a relational, situated and embodied model of (inter)subjectivity, and that reveals how ethics, being, and knowing no longer can be separated." In short, Barad's notion contests Western Philosophy's tradition of thinking about ethics, being, and knowing as separate branches of thought, in order to emphasize that we are always already engaged in an act of being, knowing, and doing. Furthermore, Barad emphasizes this inseparability in order to expand the notions of our inseparability with our material world. In order to be, know, and do, ethically in our world is to respond to all material beings, human and nonhuman when envisioning our potential entanglements.

Both Barad and Beauvoir agree that an ethics worth pursuing must seek to illuminate, not eliminate, these ambiguities of our existence. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir explains, "As long as there have been men 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, they have tried to mask it...The ethics that they proposed to their disciples always pursued the same goal; it was a matter of eliminating ambiguity by making oneself pure interiority or pure exteriority, by

evading the world of the senses or by being engulfed in it, by attaining eternity or by enclosing oneself in the pure instant” (EOA, 6-7). For Beauvoir, the purpose of an ethics is not to resolve the inherent problems that arise from the ambiguity of our condition, but rather to illuminate those ambiguities and find ways to exist in and among them. Like Barad’s onto-ethico-epistemology -- a vision of a subjectivity that recognizes its situated and embodied relationality - Beauvoir wants to urge us to begin again: to question the ontologies, philosophies, and epistemologies that set their sights to eliminating ambiguity. In this new beginning we can reshape our orientations to our own subjectivities, to the presence of others, and to the collective ensemble in which our lives unfold. To represent this idea in Beauvoirian terms “...the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others” (169). This entanglement of relationality, freedom, and being teaches us how to be in the world ambiguously, requires us to position our actions ethically in terms of the freedom it produces, and opens the boundaries of our relationalities to include all possible agents. These reorientations, based fundamentally in an acceptance of the ambiguity of our conditions, give rise to the means through which we can exist in the full expanse of Barad’s onto-ethico-epistemology.

Part 2: Connolly’s Perceptual Anticipation

We feel that one of the greatest hindrances to the ability to adopt an onto-ethico-epistemology of ambiguity is what New Materialist and political theorist William E. Connolly refers to as the cognitive process of *anticipation* stemming from ingrained patterns of sensation and perception. In his article, “Materialities of Experience” within the collected edition *New*

Materialisms edited by Coole and Frost, Connolly claims that “Perception not only has multiple layers of inter sensory *memory* folded into it, it is suffused with *anticipation*. This does not mean merely that you anticipate a result and then test it against the effect of experience. It means that perception expresses a set of anticipatory expectations that help to constitute what it actually becomes” (184). Essentially, the cognitive process of perception itself seeks to eliminate ambiguity before we are even aware such ambiguity exists. For Connolly, there is an intra-action between the anticipation of experience and experience itself; when we experience a phenomenon our senses intra-act with our anticipation in order to produce perception. If what Connolly claims here is true, then engaging in ambiguity in a material way, one that we can embody in our everyday practices, is a something that must be learned.

The problem arises when the normative act of perception becomes eschewed by exclusionary and oppressive ideologies. Connolly shows us that our minds might be functioning in a way where the results of an interaction have always already been anticipated to a point that overtakes the possibilities of an interaction, limiting the potentialities we have with other individuals. This can be seen in the acts of judging, assuming, presuming -- all of which function on the basis of building a reality prior to the engagement with that reality. Connolly also claims that “the actuality of perception is ‘normative,’ where the word now means the application of a culturally organized attractor to a situation roughly responsive to it” (185). These “norms” of perception, then, provide expedient heuristics to exist in a complex world, but make it more difficult to exist ethically since the norms of perception eliminate the ambiguities that make an onto-ethico-epistemological view of the world possible.

As does New Materialism, existentialism seeks to disrupt ingrained patterns of being in the world. Existentialist philosophy urges us to question the ready-made identities and

institutions such that we might more fully consider the ways in which we engage and participate, such that we might more more fully appreciate the inherited morals and values that guide us through the daily choices and interactions that form the fabric of our entangled subjectivities. However, Beauvoir critiques the projects of existentialism that deconstruct the ingrained patterns of being toward absurd and nihilistic ends. She urges that “the notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won” (139). Ambiguity, then, does not leave room for heuristics of anticipation, since ambiguity is a process of being, one that requires revision and renewal of subject orientations at every turn.

Finally, Beauvoir is also concerned with the abilities of ambiguity in novel and routinized interactions with others such that they create freedom. Beauvoir explains that “to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my own situation and is even the condition of my own freedom” (EOA 97). Freedom that stems from a critical engagement with ambiguity is always oriented to “open futures.” Ingrained patterns of perspectival anticipation -- as Connolly theorizes -- prevents the subject from seeing the freedom of their subjectivity as inherently tied to the freedom of others. This leads us toward important avenues for how to construct and maintain ethical entanglements -- or as Beauvoir would call them, ensembles -- that aim toward increasing freedom for self and other.

Part 3: Entanglement and intra-action

In the article “Nature’s Queer Performativity” Karen Barad explains that “phenomena are entanglements of spacetime-mattering, not in the colloquial sense of a connection or intertwining of individual entities, but rather in the technical sense of ‘quantum entanglements,’ which are the (ontological) inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’” (32; 2012). The emphasis she places on the idea of intra-action is important for her body of work and for our project here. An entanglement is more than a simple relation; it’s a phenomenon whose relationship cannot be reduced because of its reliance on one another, whether this reliance is positive or negative. For Barad, components in the world do not have independent *a priori* relations. Instead, the outcome of a relation and the components of it, arise in the intra-action.

We argue that reading Beauvoir alongside the New Materialists is useful because Beauvoir’s philosophy teaches us how to embody and practice ambiguity at the level of spacetime-mattering in a way that produces ethical relations that honor and respect individual and collective subjectivities. Beauvoir argues that “separation does not exclude relation, nor vice versa. Society exists only by means of the existence of particular individuals; likewise human adventures stand out against the background of time, each finite to each, though they are all open to the infinity of the future and their individual forms thereby imply each other without destroying each other” (131-132). In this way, a Beauvoirian approach to entanglement and intra-action attempts to “make a multiplicity of coherent ensembles stand out against the unique background of the world and, inversely, to comprehend these ensembles in the perspective of an ideal unity of the world” (132).

This articulation provides us with a framework by which we can imagine potential ethical entanglements, as Barad and Connolly are trying to do. To imagine an ideal unity with multiplicities whose nature may seem ambiguous and even foreign to us is difficult, but it is a

responsible and ethical approach to coming into contact with others and their projects while also giving others space to interact with the still ambiguous directions of our own projects. This approach embodies the type of ambiguity necessary to remove judgement from an individual's subjectivity and to provide subjects with the opportunity to flourish in an entanglement whose existence would not be possible without risk, something Beauvoir identifies as essential to the process of intra-acting with our world so that we create space for its unfolding.

Beauvoir explains that whenever we decide to act, we must “attempt to measure [the act's] effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present” (132). She likens this process to formulating “a hypothesis that excludes neither reflection nor even method; but it is also free, and it implies risks that must be assumed as such” (133). The idea of making decisions whose opportunnness is impossible to measure prior to an interaction proposes a type of good-will imbued with our actions that strive for the unity of our world, but does not close off the possibility of interacting with an individual's multiplicity, which they themselves cannot fully know. This freedom manifests itself within the risks inherent in accepting the situation's ambiguity. This risky ambiguous positionality with any entanglement provides it the freedom necessary to unfold its multiplicitous potentialities to the world.

Conclusion

We had moments in the process of constructing this presentation where we struggled coming to terms with the conceptual focus of this presentation. We spent time narrowing, cutting, discarding, focusing, and theorizing the direction of this project. But the difficulty we had is a testimony to just how valuable Beauvoir is in contemporary New Materialist scholarship. Our hope is that by the end of this presentation we could at least show that New

Materialism has a lot to learn from Beauvoir in terms of how ambiguity can open our understanding of potential entanglements, materializing ethical action, and ethical perspectives.

With *The Second Sex* firmly established in the Feminist canon it seems generative to engage with Beauvoir with a wider lens and explore how her non canonical texts fulfil her projects as an intellectual, so that her freedom and her legacy continues.