

Structural Violence in the Philippines and Freedom and Responsibility in Simone de Beauvoir's Moral Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper reads the Philippine socio-political context of the Duterte administration (2016-2022)—focusing primarily with the war on drugs and the facilitation of the Marcoses' return—guided by de Beauvoir's freedom and responsibility in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. To claim that Filipinos' political tragedies are simply the result of being victims of the system (bad faith) is a misguided idea, for one cannot disregard the Dutertes' and the Marcoses' agency and accountability for their choices and thus should be held liable for human rights violations. The paper is divided into three parts. First is a discussion about structural violence in the Philippines, focusing on state-sponsored oppression (e.g., the war on drugs). The second part is freedom and responsibility based on Simone de Beauvoir's moral philosophy. For Simone de Beauvoir, our greatest imperative is to create our life's meaning while protecting the freedom of others to do the same. This brings us to the third part, where we explore how recognizing and assuming our freedom and responsibility can overcome the conditions of oppression. Ultimately, in using Simone de Beauvoir's moral philosophy to analyze the Philippine context, this research shows that her contribution to philosophy remains relevant and goes beyond feminism.

Keywords: de Beauvoir, freedom, oppression, structural violence

It has been almost a decade since the former mayor of Davao City, Rodrigo Duterte, became the 16th President of the Philippines. Duterte poised himself as the “The Punisher” of anyone who dared to violate law and order, promising to go after corrupt politicians and criminals should he win the presidency in 2016. “If elected president, give me about three to six months, I will get rid of corruption, drugs and criminality,” he said in his

campaign rally in Batac City, Ilocos Norte¹—the bulwark of dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr, whose son and namesake, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr, succeeded the presidency after Duterte. In his final presidential campaign rally in Manila, Duterte warned, “If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just as I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because, I’d kill you.”²

Thanks to 16 million Filipinos, the promise was somehow fulfilled, albeit not within three to six months. By the end of Duterte’s term in 2022, at least 6,252 individuals were killed in police operations related to the anti-drug flagship campaign of the administration, not including the victims of vigilante-style killings estimated at 27,000 to 30,000 by human rights groups.³ In 2017, Duterte was regarded as the Person of the Year in Organized Crime and Corruption for enabling “extrajudicial killings, endorsing vigilantism, and systemic violations of human rights” by the investigative journalism organization Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).⁴ Corruption also remained. Three days before leaving the highest position of the land, Duterte admitted that “corruption cannot be stopped, only minimized.”⁵

Despite being ruthless to anyone involved with drugs, Duterte had a soft spot for the Marcoses during his term, citing that he owed Imee Marcos, daughter of Marcos Sr, for financing the presidential campaign, which she denied. Accordingly, Duterte promised Imee that if he won, Marcos Sr would be given a hero’s burial and laid at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Heroes’ Cemetery).⁶ Five months after Duterte was sworn in as president, Marcos Sr was finally laid to rest at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* despite the protests of human rights groups and survivors and families of the victims of Martial Law. The administration justified the burial, saying Filipinos should forgive

¹ Ariel Paolo Tejada, “Duterte Vows to End Criminality in 3 Months,” in *Philstar* (16 May 2016), <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/02/20/1555349/duterte-vows-end-criminality-3-months>>.

² Manny Mogato et al., “Blood and Benefits: Duterte Imposes His Formula on the Philippines,” in *Reuters* (28 December 2016), <<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/philippines-davao-model/>>.

³ Jodesz Gavilan, “Duterte’s Violent War on Drugs, as Recorded by Rights Groups, Int’l Bodies,” in *Rappler* (20 July 2022), <<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/list-reports-documentation-rodrigo-duterte-drug-war-killings/>>.

⁴ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, “Rodrigo Duterte,” in *OCCRP* (2017), <<https://www.occrp.org/en/person-of-the-year/rodrigo-duterte>>.

⁵ Azer Parrocha, “Corruption Can’t Be Stopped, Only Minimized: Duterte,” in *Philippine News Agency* (27 June 2022), <<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1177652>>.

⁶ Patricia Lourdes Viray, “Duterte Admits Being Indebted to Imee Marcos,” in *Philstar* (29 December 2016), <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/12/29/1657805/duterte-admits-being-indebted-imee-marcos>>.

and “move on” since decades have already passed.⁷ This significantly contributed to the redemption of the Marcos family name that boosted Bongbong Marcos Jr’s presidential campaign in 2022.⁸

Both Duterte and Marcos Jr largely owe their presidency to online disinformation. The May 2016 Philippine presidential election results reflected how online political disinformation can shape electoral outcomes.⁹ Filipino Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa labeled the May 2016 elections as the “first social media elections” which employed a “death by a thousand cuts” strategy by “chipping at facts, using half-truths that fabricate an alternative reality by merging the power of bots and fake accounts on social media to manipulate real people.”¹⁰ The Philippines was “patient zero for the war on disinformation,” according to Facebook Global Politics and Government Outreach Director Katie Harbath.¹¹ Marcos Jr used the same method when he ran for the presidency in 2022 and pushed certain narratives rooted in false nostalgia and portrayed their family as the victim of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution to gain sympathy and votes from the people.¹² According to Tsek.ph, a fact-checking initiative group, “as of April 30, 2022 [sic], 92% of fact checks about Marcos were false or misleading information in his favor. The proportion of debunked false claims praising Duterte was even higher at 95%.”¹³

It is easy to claim that Filipinos are only victims of a “relentless stream of disinformation” in multiple formats and platforms.¹⁴ Based on a Social

⁷ Randolph S. David, “Populism and the Continuing Allure of Authoritarianism in the Philippines,” in Edilberto C. De Jesus and Ivyrose S. Baysic eds., *Martial Law in the Philippines: Lessons and Legacies, 1972–2022* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2023), 62–80.

⁸ Michael Beltran, “How a ‘Tsunami of Disinformation’ Helped Marcos Jr Win Back Power,” in *Al Jazeera* (29 June 2022), <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/29/disinformation-reigns-in-philippines-as-marcos-jr-takes-top-job>>.

⁹ CMFR, “Government’s Role in the Spread of Disinformation,” in *CMFR* (14 April 2023), <<https://cmfr-phil.org/in-context/government-s-role-in-the-spread-of-disinformation/>>.

¹⁰ Maria Ressa, “Propaganda War: Weaponizing the Internet,” in *Rappler* (18 May 2023), <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet/>.

¹¹ CMFR, “Government’s Role in the Spread of Disinformation.”

¹² CMFR, “Marcos Follows Duterte’s Model of Disinformation,” in *CMFR* (14 April 2023), <<https://cmfr-phil.org/in-context/marcos-follows-dutertes-model-of-disinformation/>>.

¹³ Noriega Richa, “Tsek.Ph: 92% of False Info Favorable to Marcos, 96% of Disinformation vs Robredo Negative,” in *GMA News Online* (7 May 2022), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/830939/tsek-ph-92-of-false-info-favorable-to-marcos-96-of-disinformation-vs-robredo-negative/story/>>.

¹⁴ Yvonne T Chua, Maria Diosa Labiste, and Felipe Jose Gonzales, “Filipino Voters Were Engulfed in Relentless Stream of Disinformation,” feature story, *University of the Philippines* (11 May 2022), <<https://up.edu.ph/filipino-voters-were-engulfed-in-relentless-stream-of-disinformation/>>.

Weather Stations (SWS) survey¹⁵ conducted in December 2021, 51% of Filipinos find it difficult to identify fake news on television, radio, or social media.¹⁶ Non-elementary graduates (59%) find it more difficult to spot fake news, followed by elementary graduates (58%), junior high school graduates (48%), and college graduates (43%).¹⁷ On the other hand, those who said they often spot fake news are highest among college graduates (26%), junior high school graduates (23%), elementary graduates (17%), and non-elementary graduates (13%).¹⁸ When asked about their perception of how serious of a problem online fake news is, the results were highest among college graduates (75%) and junior high school graduates (74%), followed by elementary graduates (59%) and non-elementary graduates (48%).¹⁹ These numbers, in a way, indicate that education affects how we view facts and lies.

However, the view that Filipinos are only victims removes our agency. The question of agency arises when considering how much control we have over our identities in the face of cultural and social influences. If our essence is something we create through our choices, how much of this process is genuinely free and shaped by external forces? French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir suggests that while our environment profoundly influences us, we also possess the capacity for radical freedom. In other words, we can resist and redefine these influences. Yet, it is important to note that this freedom comes with responsibility—that we must take ownership of our actions, acknowledging that our freedom is intertwined with the freedom of others. Hence, for Simone de Beauvoir, our greatest imperative is to create our life's meaning while protecting the freedom of others to do the same.

This paper has three parts: 1) structural violence in the Philippines as manifested by state-sponsored oppression, such as the war on drugs; 2) freedom and responsibility according to Simone de Beauvoir's moral philosophy; and 3) how recognizing and assuming our freedom and responsibility can overcome the conditions of oppression. Ultimately, in using Simone de Beauvoir's moral philosophy to analyze the Philippine

¹⁵ Social Weather Stations, "Social Weather Stations: Fourth Quarter 2021 Social Weather Survey: 69% of Adult Filipinos Say the Problem of Fake News in Media Is Serious," in *Social Weather Stations* (25 February 2022), <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcltdisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20220225130129&mc_cid=368bdea2b7>.

¹⁶ The survey was done through face-to-face interviews with 1,440 adults—360 each in Balance Luzon, Metro Manila, the Visayas, and Mindanao. The sampling error margins are $\pm 2.6\%$ for national percentages and $\pm 5.2\%$ for Balance Luzon, Metro Manila, the Visayas, and Mindanao.

¹⁷ Loreben Tuquero, "51% of Filipinos Find It Difficult to Spot Fake News on Media – SWS," in *Rappler* (26 February 2022), <<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/sws-survey-fake-news-december-2021/>>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

context, this article shows that her contribution to philosophy remains relevant and goes beyond feminism.

Structural Violence in the Philippines

“Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives.”²⁰ It was 23 July 2018, Rodrigo Duterte’s third State of the Nation Address (SONA), at the House of Representatives, Batasang Pambansa. Two years into the presidency, the rhetoric has not changed: the country is still riddled with drugs, and anyone involved with it must die. Almost everyone in the venue applauded and cheered when Duterte delivered this famous line directed to human rights advocates and church leaders. For Duterte, human rights meant “giving Filipinos, especially those at the society’s fringes, a decent and dignified future through the social and physical infrastructures necessary to better their lives.”²¹ He continues, “You worry about the present; I am concerned [about] both the present and the future. I worry about the future because I know what crimes can do to the youth of this country. If not stopped, crimes can make human cesspools of succeeding generations. I will not allow it to happen. Not during my term.”²² A touching but firm statement comparable to how a father disciplines his child. Indeed, Rodrigo Duterte, “Tatay (Father) Digong” to his supporters, loves the country and cares about the welfare of Filipinos to the point of waging a bloody war against anyone who tries to destroy our future. He also encouraged everyone to help him. In his inauguration speech on 30 June 2016, he said, “If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself.”²³ Yet, aren’t the addicts, users, and pushers Filipinos too?

Oplan (operational plan) *Tokhang*, or simply *Tokhang*, is the Duterte administration’s anti-drug campaign. It is a portmanteau of *toktok* (knock) and *hangyo* (plead). The idea was to knock at the doors of those who have connections to illegal substances and plead with them to change their lives or else face grave sanctions. In reality, the police did not knock nor plead. Even if they knocked, anyone who opened the door on the other side would be met with gunshots—those who refuse to let the authorities in get their doors

²⁰ Rodrigo Duterte, “Full Text: President Duterte’s 2018 State of the Nation Address,” in *Rappler* (23 July 2018), <<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/207989-rodrigo-duterte-sona-2018-philippines-speech/>>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Amnesty International, “Over 7,000 People Killed in Six Months in Philippines ‘War on Drugs,’” in *Amnesty International UK* (18 May 2020), <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/philippines-president-duterte-war-on-drugs-thousands-killed>>.

broken and get more gunshots.²⁴ The Philippine National Police (PNP) admitted that they had killed 6,500 individuals in the name of the drug war.²⁵ The Human Rights Watch, however, estimates that the death toll could be around 23,983.²⁶ Many of the victims of the drug war are the poor, and the extrajudicial killings were usually carried out in urban poor communities. It became normal to find lifeless bodies on the streets, sometimes their faces wrapped in duct tape and most of the time carrying a piece of cardboard saying “*Pusher/Adik ako. Huwag tularan.* (I am a [drug] pusher/addict. Do not emulate.)”²⁷

Former Vice President Leni Robredo also criticized the Duterte administration and called the operation a “war against the poor.”²⁸ Despite this, the poor remain “really polarized and conflicted” about the drug war.²⁹ They feel that “their communities have become safer, and they are thankful for it,” regardless of whether some of their relatives and neighbors were killed under *Tokhang*.³⁰ For them, putting food on the table, education, health, inflation, and jobs are more important than human rights.³¹ Let Tatay Digong do his job—at least he is doing something—a good father protects his children from anyone who might hurt them. Kill them, even if they are our friends and family.

We are all victims (?)

Duterte had warned us three months before he won the May 2016 elections: “If I become president, it will be bloody because we’ll order the killing of all criminals, the drug addicts and the drug lords.”³² Many thought it was only a figure of speech intended to set him apart from other candidates.

²⁴ Daniel Berehulak, “They Are Slaughtering Us Like Animals,” in *The New York Times* (7 December 2016), <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/07/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-drugs-killings.html>>.

²⁵ Asia News Network, “What Is Oplan Tokhang and Why Is It in the News?,” in *Asia News Network* (20 November 2019), <<https://asianews.network/what-is-oplan-tokhang-and-why-is-it-in-the-news/>>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Raffy Lerma, “Dead Serious,” in *Raffy Lerma* (24 December 2016), <<https://www.raffylerma.com/blog-1>>.

²⁸ Asia News Network, “What Is Oplan Tokhang.”

²⁹ Janella Paris, “Duterte and the Poor: What the Surveys Say,” in *Rappler* (30 June 2019), <<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/234195-analysis-public-surveys-about-duterte-from-2016-2019/>>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Iris Gonzales, “Duterte’s Drug War Threatens Philippine Democracy,” in *New Internationalist* (5 July 2017), <<https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2016/09/15/dutertes-drug-war-threatens-philippine-democracy>>.

How will it be possible when we have laws that ensure our rights? On the eve of the election day, more than 300,000 people who attended Duterte's final presidential campaign rally in Manila witnessed his declaration that we should "forget the laws on human rights."³³ The crowd erupted in cheer. Duterte kept his promise.

As a consolation, Filipinos have been told by Duterte and his supporters that "if you have done nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear".³⁴ Yet stories of those left behind by the victims tell otherwise. For Duterte, the killing of innocent people related to the drug war is neither a crime, negligence, or recklessness, but rather, collateral damage.³⁵ Those who had decided to change their lives and stopped using or selling drugs were not exempted, either. Michael Siaron, one of the first victims of the extrajudicial killings under the drug war, had long stopped using drugs, according to his partner Jennilyn Olayres, as they had dreams for a better life.³⁶ On 23 July 2016, not even a month after Duterte's inauguration, Jennilyn found Michael's lifeless body along EDSA Rotonda in Pasay City. Masked men on a motorcycle and three bullet shots took Michael's life while he was trying to earn money for dinner by driving a *pedicab* (cycle rickshaw).³⁷ "*Hindi ba kayo naawa? Hindi ba kayo naawa sa patay?* (Have you no pity? Do you not feel sorry for the dead?)," Jennilyn addressed the crowd while weeping and cradling her dead partner.³⁸

Pity was not enough to change minds. Bodies kept piling up the longer Duterte stayed in power. The violence was justified "to preserve the interest of the next generation"³⁹—a generation clueless about what was happening in the present and whose existence is still in limbo, making it impossible for them to have an interest that must be preserved.

The following year, on 16 August 2017, 17-year-old high school student Kian delos Santos was murdered by the police.⁴⁰ Kian pleaded for his

³³ Mogato et al., "Blood and Benefits."

³⁴ Gemmo Fernandez, "International Efforts to Hold Duterte to Account Yield Anger from the Philippine Government," in *East Asia Forum* (4 August 2021), <<https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/08/04/international-efforts-to-hold-duterte-to-account-yield-anger-from-the-philippine-government/>>.

³⁵ Kristine Phillips, "Duterte Has a Name for Innocent People Killed in the Philippines' Drug War: Collateral Damage," in *The Washington Post* (18 October 2016), <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/18/duterte-has-a-name-for-innocent-people-killed-in-the-philippines-drug-war-collateral-damage/>>.

³⁶ Lerma, "Dead Serious."

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Phillips, "Duterte Has a Name of Innocent People."

⁴⁰ Jessica Bartolome, "The Kian Delos Santos Case: A Timeline," in *GMA News Online* (29 November 2018), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/specials/content/24/the-kian-delos-santos-case-a-timeline/>>.

life, “*Tama na po, may exam pa ako bukas* (Please stop, I still have an exam tomorrow).”⁴¹ They ignored him, and the following day, Kian’s lifeless body was found at a dead-end in their neighborhood in Caloocan City. The four police officers involved claimed that Kian shot at them as he allegedly had a caliber .45 gun and two sachets of suspected shabu.⁴² In other words, it was a case of *nanlaban* (fought back), forcing the police to fire back. Sixteen witnesses came forward to debunk the story given by the police. For the supporters of the drug war, the police did nothing wrong. It was self-defense against a teenager who could never take his exams and hope for a brighter future.

Yet this violence is more profound than it seems. It is structural. According to American anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer, structural violence is a “broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are unwontedly human rights abuses, some of their punishment for efforts to escape structural violence.”⁴³ The victims are not random, too. The poor “are the chief victims of structural violence... because such suffering is ‘structured’ by historically given (often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire—whether through routine, ritual, or as is more commonly the case, the hard surfaces of life—to constrain agency... for many choices both large and small are limited by... sexism, political violence, and grinding poverty.”⁴⁴

Tokhang is not as simple as killing the innocent and disregarding human rights. “Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intricately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm.”⁴⁵ Those of us who possess more privileges (e.g., money, social status, higher level of education, connections to those in power, etc.) have something to cushion the blows of structural violence. We do not have to wonder how to pay for the next meal, how to get to work if jeepneys are phased out, or worry about paying PHP 625 for a health permit when the minimum wage is only PHP 645. Because our basic needs can be satisfied by our privileges,

⁴¹ Edu Punay, “Kian Begged for His Life before Cops Shot Him,” in *Philstar.com* (3 October 2017), <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/10/03/1745309/kian-begged-his-life-cops-shot-him>>.

⁴² Bartolome, “The Kian Delos Santos Case.”

⁴³ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Structural Violence and the Assault on Human Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

focusing on self-actualization and having conversations or writing papers about human rights is easy.

Such is not the case for the poor, who must devise ingenious ways, which could sometimes be illegal (*pagkapit sa patalim*), to ensure daily survival. Prostitution, petty crimes, and engaging in illegal drug trade can be considered as *paggawa ng paraan* (making a way) to survive— “an entitlement, a right to do even if it comes in conflict with the law.”⁴⁶ Then many of us tell them that they are the scum of the earth for trying to find a living, that it is their fault that they are poor because they are lazy, and that they are nothing but a burden to society. Because they violate the law, especially those with connections to illegal drugs, they deserve to die. “These sons of whores are destroying our children. I warn you, don’t go into that, even if you’re a policeman, because I will really kill you,” Duterte said.⁴⁷ The blame is put on individuals instead of addressing the root causes of why people find it necessary to do something illegal.

What many do not realize is our decisions are largely shaped by our facticity or “those aspects of human lives which we cannot choose either for or against and which constitute the human condition”⁴⁸ —the inescapable facts of our existence, such as our bodies, past experiences, and the circumstances into which we are born. These factors impose limits on what we can achieve and shape our opportunities. Thus, the decisions of the poor can be considered as products of abject poverty that they did not choose. This is not an excuse for illegal and immoral actions nor a claim that we are only victims of our circumstances, as it would reduce us into beings without agency. On the other hand, we also possess transcendence or freedom to imagine, aspire, and strive for what is possible beyond these limits.

Freedom and Responsibility in Simone de Beauvoir’s Moral Philosophy

In the same way we can choose to commit something wrong and illegal, we can also choose to do the right thing. What a privileged thing to say and easier said than done. Some philosophies, like determinism,

⁴⁶ Efenita May M. Taqueban, “A Way Out in Eden: Maternal Health Crisis in Manila,” in *Philippine Social Sciences Review*, 65:2 (2013), 28.

⁴⁷ The Guardian, “Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte Urges People to Kill Drug Addicts,” in *The Guardian* (1 July 2016), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-urges-people-to-kill-drug-addicts>>.

⁴⁸ Marguerite La Caze, “Simone de Beauvoir: Freedom and the Scandal of Death,” in *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 21:1 (15 November 2005), 145, <<https://doi.org/10.1163/25897616-02101015>>.

emphasize the inescapability of facticity, denying the role of human agency and freedom. Conversely, utopian or idealistic visions of human freedom ignore the constraints of facticity, imagining a world where individuals are entirely self-determining. For Simone de Beauvoir, human existence is neither wholly determined nor wholly free but both. Balancing facticity and transcendence is the challenge of human existence.

Simone de Beauvoir, although widely known for feminism exemplified in her work *The Second Sex* (1949),⁴⁹ explored the themes of freedom, responsibility, and morality in her earlier work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.⁵⁰ Her existentialist philosophy offers profound insights into the nature of freedom and oppression, rooted in the fundamental ambiguity of human existence. She argues that the human condition is ambiguous: “We are both lonely and connected to each other, a unique subject and an object for others, consciousness and body, free and unfree.”⁵¹ To be authentic means to understand that disclosure—a paradoxical operation in that one is always uprooting oneself from the world one remains rooted in⁵²—is recognizing one’s freedom and responsibility and rejecting absolute truths or ends.⁵³

Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, who saw human beings as isolated individuals,⁵⁴ de Beauvoir claimed that we are interdependent, involved in networks of relationships determined by socio-historical situations, and the other must not be considered a hindrance to my freedom but a condition allowing my freedom to be realized.⁵⁵ As such, authenticity is achieved in interhuman relationships by seeing others as free subjects.⁵⁶ There is no ethics without freedom because human actions are meaningful only insofar as they express freedom. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir explores freedom as central to human morality. Freedom is not simply the absence of constraints but an active process of creating meaning and shaping the world through our

⁴⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Sheila Malovany-Chevallier and Constance Borde (London: Vintage Classic, 2011).

⁵⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York, New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc, 2018).

⁵¹ Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Ethics and Its Relation to Current Moral Philosophy,” in *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 14:1 (25 November 1997), 39, <<https://doi.org/10.1163/25897616-01401006>>.

⁵² Kristana Arp, “The Joys of Disclosure: Simone De Beauvoir and the Phenomenological Tradition,” ed. by Anna Tymieniecka, in *Analecta Husserliana*, LXXXVIII (2005): 393–406.

⁵³ Lundgren-Gothlin, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Ethics and Its Relation to Current Moral Philosophy,” 40.

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: The Principle Text of Modern Existentialism*, trans. by Hazel E Barnes (New York, New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

⁵⁵ Lundgren-Gothlin, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Ethics and Its Relation to Current Moral Philosophy,” 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

choices. However, interhuman relationships can lead to either freedom or oppression.

To fully assume our freedom, we must also recognize the freedom of others. Oppression occurs when one person or group denies the freedom of another, reducing them to objects rather than treating them as subjects with their own capacity for self-determination. Oppression is a result of fearful individuals—such as dictators or tyrants—who cannot face the ambiguity of existence and instead seek to control others in an attempt to create a false sense of security and power. For de Beauvoir, if the oppressed are denied a future and are no more than physically “perpetuating itself,” then “living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation.”⁵⁷

It could also happen that the oppressed fail to recognize their situation and their own freedom. One of the signs of the depth of oppression is the inability to recognize being oppressed.⁵⁸ De Beauvoir, following Marxist ideas, uses the term “mystification” to describe how oppressive systems create false consciousness, leading the oppressed to internalize their subjugation.⁵⁹ This internalized oppression, or what we now call internalized sexism, racism, or classism, keeps individuals from realizing their own freedom. The oppressed may even desire their own oppression as they come to accept their situation as natural or inevitable. Yet, as de Beauvoir notes, the drive for freedom persists even under the heaviest oppression.

Therefore, in de Beauvoir’s moral philosophy, the primary aim is to transform abstract freedom into moral freedom. This transformation requires recognizing our own freedom and that of others, actively participating in the liberation of ourselves and others, and rejecting all forms of oppression. To convert freedom into moral freedom, one must assume the responsibility to make choices that affirm freedom for oneself and others. Denying our own freedom or the freedom of others leads to “bad faith,” in which individuals deceive themselves about their potential for freedom and ethical responsibilities.⁶⁰

Existentialism, in this sense, is an ethics of responsibility, urging us to recognize the impact of our choices on ourselves and the world and people

⁵⁷ Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits to Freedom,” in *Social Text*, 17 (1987), 112, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/466482>>.

⁵⁸ Gail Weiss, “Freedom, Oppression and the Possibilities of Ethics for Simone de Beauvoir,” in *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 18:1 (25 November 2002), 14, <<https://doi.org/10.1163/25897616-01801003>>.

⁵⁹ Ian M. Sullivan, “Simone de Beauvoir and Confucian Role Ethics: Role-relational Ambiguity and Confucian Mystification,” in *Hypatia*, 31:3 (2016), 624, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12262>>.

⁶⁰ La Caze, “Simone de Beauvoir,” 144.

around us. For de Beauvoir, freedom is an intrinsic part of human existence, yet it is not merely a state but a process. It is not something we achieve once and for all, but a journey, a constant becoming. It follows the existentialist dogma that “existence precedes essence,” meaning we are not born with a predefined nature or purpose. This means we must constantly strive toward a self-defined future yet never fully achieve completeness because our freedom is ongoing and undefined. Human identity is always a work in progress, and we are free to create ourselves through our choices and relationships with others. However, this freedom comes with anxiety because it confronts us with the infinite possibilities of existence. This reaffirms our ambiguity: being a subject, capable of projecting ourselves into the future and shaping our destiny, and being an object constrained by the material and social conditions of the world.

“A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied,” de Beauvoir writes.⁶¹ True freedom, for de Beauvoir, involves the responsibility of transcending one’s immediate circumstances and contributing to the freedom of others, creating a more open and just future for all.

Overcoming Oppression

“The only solution to oppression is rebellion,” de Beauvoir argues.⁶² In rebelling, we should not force freedom on others but rather provide how they can free themselves by helping people to gain material means and a political voice.⁶³ This process of empowerment requires rejecting the oppressor’s objectification and asserting one’s subjectivity. However, de Beauvoir acknowledges that in some cases, the oppressed may need to temporarily objectify the oppressor to dismantle the structures of domination. Violence, she argues, may sometimes be necessary as a last resort when no other means of achieving freedom are available.⁶⁴ Yet, she warns against making violence a principle, stressing that the goal should always be to recognize the freedom of others and build a future in which all can live freely. Oppressors must come to recognize the freedom of those they oppress, acknowledging the inherent ambiguity of human existence. This recognition leads to an ethical life where individuals strive to extend their own freedom through the freedom of others.

⁶¹ De Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 91.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ La Caze, “Simone de Beauvoir,” 150.

⁶⁴ Lori J. Marso, “Simone de Beauvoir on Violence and Politics,” in Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer ed., *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2017), 299.

So, how do we stand up to oppression? I want to answer this by quoting Maria Ressa:

By embracing values, defined early—they're the subtitles of the chapters you've read: honesty, vulnerability, empathy, moving away from emotions, embracing your fear, believing in the good. You can't do it alone. You have to create a team, strengthen your area of influence. Then connect the bright spots and weave a mesh together. Avoid thinking in terms of 'us against them.' Stand in someone else's shoes. And do unto others as you would have them do unto you.⁶⁵

Vilifying the poor for their continued support of Duterte is not going to end oppression and would only perpetuate violence. While it can be said that many of us were only tricked by lies, choosing to continue to support oppressors and their inhumane policies also contributes to violence. We must hold accountable those who take advantage of structural injustices and limit our freedom. While there is no fixed formula for living an ethical life, we must constantly question our actions and motives, aware that our choices have consequences for ourselves and others. True morality, de Beauvoir tells us, resides in the "painfulness of an indefinite questioning"⁶⁶—a continuous process of reflecting on our actions in light of the freedom and dignity of others. True freedom is not an isolated accomplishment but a continuous process that necessitates recognizing the freedom of others.

We cannot be free unless others are free, so our responsibility is to create conditions that allow for the mutual realization of freedom. As de Beauvoir explains, "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."⁶⁷ In this way, the freedom of others does not limit our own but its precondition. By acknowledging our ambiguity, we affirm our freedom and duty to ourselves and others, leading to authentic and ethical lives. Ultimately, her philosophy encourages us to find meaning in the contradictions of human life and to live with purpose amidst uncertainty.

⁶⁵ Maria Ressa, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future* (New York: Harper, 2022), 261.

⁶⁶ De Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 133.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir's moral philosophy and the examination of structural violence in the Philippines highlight the profound complexities of human existence and the ethical implications of our choices. Rodrigo Duterte's administration revealed how systemic violence and oppression disproportionately affect marginalized communities, illustrating that genuine progress cannot be achieved without acknowledging the structural injustices that underpin such violence. Meanwhile, De Beauvoir's assertion that true freedom is not merely the absence of constraints but an active engagement in recognizing and fostering the freedom of others underlines the moral responsibility that we have to challenge oppressive systems and continuously reflect on our actions' impact. These underscore the necessity of moving beyond simplistic views of morality and ethics to embrace a more nuanced understanding of freedom that includes the liberation of all individuals.

In a world where freedom and oppression coexist, the call to action is clear: we must strive for a moral framework that prioritizes empathy, solidarity, and the mutual recognition of each person's inherent dignity. Only by collectively addressing the root causes of oppression and actively working toward a more just society can we realize the potential for a future where everyone can experience true freedom. The pursuit of ethical living requires not only personal accountability but also a commitment to transforming societal structures that perpetuate inequality and suffering. Freedom must be envisioned as a shared journey where the liberation of one is inextricably linked to the liberation of all.

The struggle for freedom is ongoing, and the drive for liberation never entirely disappears, even in the most oppressive circumstances. De Beauvoir observes that children, in their innocence and joy, serve as living symbols of human transcendence. As long as this hope persists, the desire for freedom will endure:

Yet, with all this sordid resignation, there were children who played and laughed; and their smile exposed the lie of their oppressors: it was an appeal and a promise; it projected a future before the child, a man's future. 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.⁶⁸

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