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Beauvoir versus Behavior Change: Introducing Existential Ethics to the Politics of Design

Nolen Gertz, Deger Ozkaramanli

Introduction

It is now possible to connect a device to a car's ignition that would allow the engine to start only after the driver has breathed into the device to prove their sobriety. Given this technological possibility and the danger to society that drunk driving represents, why is such a device not installed in every car? Would a device that could save lives ever be seen as controversial or morally unjustified? This question points to a dilemma facing design approaches that aim to change individual behavior for the collective benefit of society. Such approaches include nudging, social design, design with intent, and persuasive technologies,¹ and they have become increasingly popular in application fields such as designing for health and designing for sustainability.² In fact, the aspiration of design to address major social issues—such as combating climate change, improving health, reducing crime, and achieving justice—is intricately linked with designing behavior-steering technologies, that is, creating products that can not only influence (e.g., enable, encourage, motivate, tempt) but may even force people to behave for the good of society. The design of such products is seen as necessary and justified precisely because people are unwilling or unable to behave on their own for the good of society. The dilemma faced by many designers is between respecting individual freedom versus exercising control for the benefit of society. As Debra Lilley and Garrath Wilson put it, “The delegation of moral responsibility and role of the designer in motivating and effecting change for the mutual benefit of society and the environment is a fundamental, contentious and hotly debated issue.”³

Rather than lingering in the discomfort of this dilemma, we observe that many design approaches quickly reframe this question: How do we create products that can successfully exercise control over individuals who value their freedom more than they value what could be achieved by such control? Note that the question of moral justification is not over whether a behavior-steering technology (e.g., a device that may prevent drunk driving) should be created but over how to create it in a way that bypasses

- 1 Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: The Final Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021); Nynke Tromp, Paul Hekkert, and Peter-Paul Verbeek, “Design for Socially Responsible Behavior: A Classification of Influence Based on Intended User Experience,” *Design Issues* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 3–19; Dan Lockton, “Design, Behaviour Change and the *Design with Intent* Toolkit,” in *Design for Behaviour Change: Theories and Practices of Designing for Change*, edited by Kristina Niedderer, Stephen Clune, and Geke Ludden (London: Routledge, 2017), 58–73; B. J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003).
- 2 Kristina Niedderer, Stephen Clune, and Geke Ludden, eds., *Design for Behavior Change: Theories and Practices of Designing for Change* (London: Routledge, 2018); Ida Nilstad Pettersen and Casper Boks, “The Ethics in Balancing Control and Freedom When Engineering Solutions for Sustainable Behaviour,” *International Journal of Sustainable Engineering* 1, no. 4 (2018): 287–97.
- 3 Debra Lilley and Garrath T. Wilson, “Integrating Ethics into Design for Sustainable Behaviour,” *Journal of Design Research* 11, no. 3 (2013): 286.

the feeling of being controlled by technology.⁴ For example, Ida Nilstad Pettersen and Casper Boks argue for “co-creative” means of developing such a device by having relevant stakeholders (e.g., “drivers, consumer organizations, road safety organizations, psychologists, car manufacturers associations, insurance companies, and politicians”) participate in “assessment sessions” where they would “debate whether proposed solutions were too controversial or might be morally justified.”⁵ Such co-creative and participatory design methods promise a democratic way of developing technologies, in which actors can express concerns and collaboratively shape the design outcome. This “democratic” approach has been advocated for by design researchers and by technology ethicists such as Philip Brey and Peter-Paul Verbeek.⁶

Another way of resolving the “control versus freedom” dilemma is to focus on the power of technologies to be influential without being intrusive. This implies creating design interventions that the public is unlikely to reject because people are unlikely to feel bothered by them. This “technocratic” approach has been advocated for by designers such as Donald Norman and B. J. Fogg.⁷ Although Norman has not explicitly worked on behavior-steering design, he states that designers should use “observation” when shaping products and services, because “people themselves are often unaware of their true needs, even unaware of the difficulty they are encountering.”⁸ Similarly, Fogg claims that designers’ good intentions justify not letting people know about how they are being persuaded through technology, especially when this reduces the benefits of persuasion. In short, Norman and Fogg focus on the benign intentions of designers toward people to justify making decisions on behalf of users.

A third way of addressing this dilemma is to focus on making design interventions as beneficial as possible while still allowing the interventions to be rejected if people so choose. This is the “libertarian paternalism” approach advocated by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein.⁹ The technological interventions they advocate are intended to “nudge” people toward choosing certain outcomes considered to be optimal (paternalism) but without being coercive and thus without taking away the ability of the nudged to reject the nudge if that were what they would prefer (libertarianism). Thaler and Sunstein, along with many designers with good intentions, view the interventions they advocate as not truly interfering with people’s freedom but as helping people live better lives. For example, Thaler and Sunstein show that having the option to have one’s health insurance package continued from the previous year should be made the default on insurance renewal forms, rather than having the option to choose a package every year, since the latter carries with it the risk of having no package at all if one forgets to choose.¹⁰

4 It could be argued that the freedom versus control dilemma is not unique to design but is part of life in a democratic society and has always been an accepted part of the role of a designer in a democratic society. However, as Kristina Niedderer, Stephen Clune, and Geke Ludden point out, though “it can be argued that designers have always attempted to utilize design to lead to ‘preferable outcomes,’” the rise of design for behavior change has led to an “emergence of an ongoing and much more explicit discussion about the deliberate influence of design” and a “debate about ethics, ownership, and responsibility” that in “design for behavior change [has] yet to be addressed.” See Kristina Niedderer, Stephen Clune, and Geke Ludden, “Design’s Intrinsic Relationship with Change and Its Challenges for the 21st Century,” in Niedderer, Clune, and Ludden, 12.

5 Pettersen and Boks, “The Ethics in Balancing Control and Freedom,” 294.

6 Lilley and Wilson, “Integrating Ethics,” 292–93; Philip Brey, “Ethical Aspects of Behavior-Steering Technology,” in *User Behavior and Technology Development: Shaping Sustainable Relations Between Consumers and Technologies*, edited by Peter-Paul Verbeek and Adriaan Slob (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 357–64; Peter-Paul Verbeek, “Materializing Morality: Design Ethics and Technological Mediation,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 31, no. 3 (2006): 361–80.

7 Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Fogg, *Persuasive Technology*.

8 Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, 9.

9 Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.

10 Ibid., 53.

Though it is only Thaler and Sunstein who acknowledge the paternalism of their design interventions, all three approaches (democratic, technocratic, and libertarian) can be seen as essentially paternalistic. This is because they all fail to critically reflect on what value gets created for society through behavior-steering design. On the surface, designing to motivate healthy and sustainable choices may seem to be good for society. On deeper analysis, one finds an inadequate or flawed definition of human freedom that reduces design to an instrument to control and correct behaviors deemed undesirable, not by the people but by the sociopolitical circumstances in which they find themselves. Although co-creative approaches may appear to avoid paternalism, it is simply not possible for designers to carry out the imperative to “actively engage with all potential stakeholders.”¹¹ Consequently, even democratically designed interventions necessarily still interfere in the freedom of people who were not involved in the decision-making process behind these interventions and did not get to decide if they wanted their freedom to be interfered with in such a manner. Moreover, the argument to use co-creative methods—“assessment sessions”—can also be read as a means to avoid controversy, seek moral justification, and eventually achieve compliance from those who might otherwise find ways to resist the control of products designed to benefit everyone.

In this article, we problematize the hidden and overt forms of paternalism in design and seek to provide an understanding of freedom that helps properly assess design projects. To achieve this, we turn to the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir’s existential ethics can help us see that freedom is not merely a value to be weighed against other values but is instead the very basis of all values. Because Beauvoir identifies freedom as something that can only be realized through our actions and our ability to engage with the world, her ethical and political project is concerned with how freedom can be suppressed when action and engagement are not made possible. We then examine the Freedom by Design initiative to explore why designers must take more seriously the need to define “freedom” and why Beauvoir’s understanding of freedom would benefit designers.

Conceptualizing the effects of behavior-influencing technologies as impinging on human freedom can help us understand what is actually at stake when designing to change behavior. We conclude by offering suggestions for how designers could and should use Beauvoir’s existential ethics to both inspire and justify their projects. We anticipate that our critical analysis will be useful in multiple ways: to begin addressing the pressing question of paternalism in design, to define what it means to truly design for freedom, and with that, to create and expand critical spaces that draw attention to the political dimensions of design through interdisciplinary dialogue.

11 Lilley and Wilson, “Integrating Ethics,” 293.

Beauvoir's Existential Ethics

According to Beauvoir, to be human is to be ambiguous.¹² This ambiguity is experienced whenever we feel that life is somehow both meaningful and meaningless. Life is meaningful because we can carry out projects of our own choosing. Life is meaningless because whether we succeed or fail in our projects appears to make little difference in the grand scheme of things. Another way of putting this would be to say that we are simultaneously subjective minds and objective bodies. As subjective minds, we are aware that we can see the world from our own perspective and think of it whatever we like, that the power of imagination can give us a *bird's-eye view* of the universe. As objective bodies, we are aware that the world is made up of brute facts that our thoughts and ideas seem powerless to change, and that our bodies make us as susceptible to these brute facts as any rock or leaf.

From Ambiguity to Ethics

Beauvoir argues that whereas other philosophies have sought to hide from ambiguity by focusing only on the subjective and mental side of existence or only on the objective and physical side of existence, existentialism instead embraces ambiguity. Consequently, while critics accuse existentialism of denying the possibility of ethics, Beauvoir argues instead that existentialism is the only philosophy capable of providing an ethics because it is the only one that confronts rather than evades the ambiguity of the human condition.

To embrace ambiguity requires a "conversion" according to Beauvoir, an experience that she compares to the "phenomenological reduction" of Edmund Husserl.¹³ Just as Husserl sought to study the intentionality of human experience by removing from consideration, or "putting in brackets," the aspects of experience that hide intentionality from view, so Beauvoir seeks to study the ethicality of human experience by bracketing out the aspects of experience that hide the individual will from view. According to Beauvoir, as humans we are free—free to make projects for ourselves and free to justify our projects based on values of our own making.¹⁴ More specifically, she focuses on desire and tries to show that we desire something, not because it is desirable, but that something appears desirable because we desire it. Our ability to make something desirable through our desire of it is how Beauvoir describes the way in which our freedom can create our values.¹⁵

According to Beauvoir, as humans we are also not free, we are frequently forced to work on projects not of our own design, and we often justify our decisions based on circumstances not of our own choosing and on values not of our own making.¹⁶ We may encounter such situations when we are asked to work on projects that contribute to the goals of an organization but not necessarily to personal growth. We are even free to make ourselves not free,

12 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), 7.

13 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

14 *Ibid.*, 7.

15 *Ibid.*, 14–15.

16 *Ibid.*, 7.

making ourselves into the means of others' ends, making ourselves adopt the values of others, and making ourselves accept our situation as impossible to change, to not have to bear the burden of our freedom. For instance, a teenager may complain that they were forced by their parents to visit their grandparents, but as any parent knows, if a teenager really does not want to do something, they can often find a way to avoid it. We are free, in other words, to embrace our freedom and to evade our freedom.

Embracing Freedom versus Evading Freedom, or Engineers versus Artists
Recognizing this relationship between freedom and value is central to Beauvoir's ethics because it highlights how in seeing values as ready-made objects, as things that exist prior to us and beyond our control, we thereby deny our freedom. Beauvoir describes such denial of freedom as "seriousness," because she likens it to seeing the world as children do, as a "serious world" created by "serious adults" that the child can do nothing to change, so the child need not feel any responsibility for the way the world is.¹⁷ To see the world in such a "it is the way it is" mindset is thus to take on what Beauvoir calls the "spirit of seriousness." To describe this attitude, she writes:

The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. He imagines that the accession to these values likewise permanently confers value upon himself. Shielded with "rights," he fulfills himself as a *being* who is escaping from the stress of existence. The serious is not defined by the nature of the ends pursued. A frivolous lady of fashion can have this mentality of the serious as well as an engineer. There is the serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims are absolute.¹⁸

Beauvoir likens the ethical attitude to the attitude of an "artist" as opposed to the attitude of "an engineer or a maniac," as the former creates in an effort to reveal freedom while the latter tries to evade freedom.¹⁹ Beauvoir compares the serious attitude to the attitude of an engineer, insofar as an engineer is someone who throws themselves into projects given to them by others and who sees meaning in life through the successful completion of such projects.

The seriousness of the engineer can be seen in focusing on determining the best methods to complete projects or solve problems, rather than determining whether the project is worth completing or if the problem is something an engineer should be trying to solve. Instead, a serious engineer thinks that the fact that there is a project to be completed is what makes the project worth completing, just as the definition of the engineer as a problem solver entails that any issue identified by others as a problem is something

17 Ibid., 35.

18 Ibid., 46.

19 Ibid., 69.

an engineer should try to solve. To put it another way, for the serious engineer, ethics does not exist beyond the idea that the “ends justify the means.” Because the ends are the concern of others—whether a government agency, a client, or any other stakeholder—the engineer is left free to be concerned only with the means. Or as Beauvoir would put it, the serious engineer is left free from having to be concerned with freedom.

The artist, on the other hand, seeks meaning in the completion of projects created in accordance with one’s own ends and values. Beauvoir does not provide an in-depth analysis of what makes one an artist; as will be discussed later, this is because an artist embraces freedom that one cannot be told how to be an artist.

We can compare Beauvoir’s distinction to a similar distinction drawn by design researcher Kees Dorst. In one of the most cited articles in design methodologies, Dorst reflects on how design is a value-creating discipline and explains the difference between “closed” and “open” forms of problem-solving.²⁰ In closed problem-solving, which is the most conventional form of problem-solving, both the value that the engineer/designer wants to create and how to create that value (i.e., the method or the “working principle” in Dorst’s terms) are known. In such a scenario, the designer/engineer gets to decide on what to design: “This is often what designers and engineers do to create a design that operates with a known working principle, and within a set scenario of value creation.”²¹ This type of closed and conventional problem-solving resonates with Beauvoir’s analogy of the serious engineer who seeks meaning in the completion of projects created by others in accordance with the ends and values of others.

Dorst also explains an open form of problem-solving that is more complex because it not only requires defining what to create (i.e., a thing) but also how to create it (i.e., the method or the working principle) to achieve the desired value. This scenario with two unknowns is, according to Dorst, more closely associated with (conceptual) design than engineering.²² Dorst’s comparison of different types of reasoning or problem-solving resonates with Beauvoir’s distinction between the engineer and the artist. Interestingly, the two scenarios outlined by Dorst fail to question the origins of the aspired value. Thus, if Beauvoir’s typology did include the “designer” implied by these two scenarios, it seems safe to assume that it would not fall far from the engineer on her spectrum of ethical attitudes.

Embracing Freedom Means Embracing the Freedom of Others

Beauvoir argues that embracing one’s freedom actually requires embracing the freedom of others.²³ Embracing my freedom requires embracing the freedom of others because it is only through the freedom of others that my projects can hope to have any lasting meaning beyond my life span and because the freedom of others

20 Kees Dorst, “The Core of ‘Design Thinking’ and Its Application,” *Design Studies* 32, no. 6 (2011): 521–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2011.07.006>.

21 Ibid., 523.

22 Ibid., 524.

23 Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 71.

creates opportunities through their projects for new projects for me to pursue. For Beauvoir, if I am selfish, my selfishness should still want others to be free, even if only because it would then help enlarge the scope of my own freedom.

For Beauvoir, being ethical requires that I embrace my own freedom and embrace the freedom of others, and to do this I must fight oppression. Beauvoir argues, “it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom,” and she rejects the zero-sum view of freedom that sees our freedom as in competition with each other.²⁴ To see an increase in someone else’s freedom as requiring a decrease in my own ignores how limits on the freedom of others are actually limits on our own freedom. My freedom can be realized only through projects that I can create on my own, but I cannot complete projects on my own. The oppression of others should concern me, not because a moral law tells me to be concerned but because my own freedom is at stake in the freedom or oppression of others.

For this reason, Beauvoir argues that existential ethics is not a “formal doctrine,” but it nevertheless can propose “concrete action,” namely, that embracing freedom requires trying to help end the oppression of others.²⁵ We must fight oppression even when others might reject such help because they reject the view that they are oppressed. Beauvoir is careful to reject both intervening in the lives of others through “fascism” (making people do what we want) and through “paternalism” (preventing people from doing what they want).²⁶ Nevertheless, Beauvoir argues that we can still intervene in the lives of others and want for others what they do not yet want for themselves.²⁷ Because others’ freedom and our freedom are entangled, to fight the oppression of others is to fight for our own freedom, which is why such intervention should not be regarded as an act of charity as if it were merely for the benefit of the other alone.

We have seen that Beauvoir’s existential ethics involves seeing freedom as not simply something that I have as a product of my having a will, or as something that I have as a product of my having been granted rights, but as something that I realize through projects that I carry out willfully in and through the real world. Consequently, just as I need other people to realize my projects and my freedom depends on the freedom or oppression of others, I need concrete things to realize my projects, and so my freedom also depends on the liberatory or oppressive nature of the material environment.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Beauvoir did see technologies as not only capable of helping us be free but as necessary to the realization of human freedom. According to Beauvoir, “the constructive activities of man take on a valid meaning only when they are assumed as a movement toward freedom; and reciprocally, one sees that such a movement is

24 Ibid., 91.

25 Ibid., 73.

26 Ibid., 138.

27 Ibid., 86.

concrete: discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, paintings, and books people the world concretely and open concrete possibilities to men.”²⁸ The material world allows us to experience our freedom in what we create. Beauvoir thus contends that technologies should be used not to try to make us more efficient or more happy—a false view of freedom—but to try to make us more free. In other words, technologies must be used to fight oppression rather than perpetuate it.

Freedom by Design

Though it seems straightforward to explain how technologies could help us embrace our own freedom, it is less clear how technologies could help us embrace the freedom of others. One example of how this might be achieved can be seen in the Freedom by Design (FBD) program run by the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS). According to AIAS, FBD is a “community service program” in which architecture students work with people in local communities to identify issues that could be resolved with “design solutions” so that they can apply to AIAS for a grant to fund their FBD project.²⁹ These projects use “modest design and construction solutions” to help remove “barriers” that—as the name of the program seems to imply—prevent others from being able to exercise their freedom.

Given that these are design projects carried out by architecture students, it should come as no surprise that these projects do not spell out what they mean by “freedom” and instead seem to take its definition for granted. These projects nevertheless appear to have in common with Beauvoir a view of freedom as something that must be realized in acting and engaging with the world and as something that can be suppressed when such action and engagement are not possible. In other words, “Freedom by Design” appears to mean “Removing Oppressive Barriers by Design.”

We can see the danger of taking for granted what “freedom” means if we look more closely at the FBD project of building better homeless shelters in Colorado. According to an article about the project, it was undertaken after “the Denver City Council approved a measure to allow sanctioned campsites for those experiencing homelessness to be established within the city limits,” because the students involved in the project wanted “to make the communities more dignified places to live.”³⁰ It is certainly admirable that the students wanted to help unhoused people have a better shelter than the “fishing tents” they had previously been given. It is especially admirable that the students recognized that these shelters represented not only an architectural problem but also a problem concerning human dignity. But it must nevertheless be admitted that, if freedom is truly what was meant to be the focus of this project, then the quality of the tents is not the real problem here.

28 Ibid., 80.

29 See <https://www.aias.org/freedom-by-design/>.

30 Carmen New, “Freedom by Design Student Chapter Designs Shelters for Safe Outdoor Spaces,” *CU Denver News*, May 4, 2022, <https://news.ucdenver.edu/freedom-by-design-safe-outdoor-spaces/>.

The FBD project may seem like a one-off, inconsequential example that serves our argument. However, the tendency to use design as a means to address practical challenges faced by vulnerable populations, such as finding or making shelter, addressing language barriers, and securing an income, is common and can be linked to neoliberal market thinking in practice and lack of inter- and transdisciplinarity in research, which places emphasis on problem-solving at the expense of structural, critical analysis.³¹ To illustrate, what is preventing the people at these “sanctioned campsites for those experiencing homelessness” from being able to experience freedom is not the lack of a better shelter, but the lack of a home.

According to the article, “as the Freedom by Design team learned more about the needs of the sites, they began designing to meet three goals—to address the need for heated handwashing stations, to provide a healthier gathering space, and to waterproof the shelters.”³² Addressing “the needs of the sites” does nothing to address the issue of why these sites needed to exist in the first place. Furthermore, by making these sites more sustainable and more hospitable, it could be argued that this project has only helped exacerbate rather than address the underlying issue of homelessness by making it seem less bad than it truly is. In other words, by making these sites more livable, there is likely to be less pressure on lawmakers to work to prevent people from having to live in these sites.

It is tempting to respond to this criticism with the argument that design projects are necessarily going to have design goals, so we should not disparage design students for trying to improve the freedom of others only to the extent that design makes it possible. As Richard van der Laken, the founder of the What Design Can Do platform, explained when announcing the 2016 Refugee Challenge, “what we hope to achieve is an improvement, however small, to the lives of millions of people. And to restore some of the self-esteem of people who are forced to wait years for asylum in foreign countries, without permission to work, sometimes without access to education, and often limited in their social lives.”³³ Although such an argument would seem to be a reasonable defense of this FBD project, it would also seem to suggest that we should not expect designers, even those working on an FBD project, to be capable of avoiding paternalism and actually addressing freedom. FBD projects would be best interpreted not as a way to help people overcome their oppression but as a way to help people find more comfortable ways to endure their oppression. Here, we find the problem of using design to treat symptoms of oppression rather than the underlying causes of oppression.

31 Christine Schwöbel-Patel and Deger Ozkaramanli, “The Construction of the Grateful Refugee in Law and Design,” *Queen Mary Human Rights Review* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

32 New, “Freedom by Design.”

33 Richard van der Laken, “Designers Cannot Just Stand By and Watch as the Refugee Crisis Unfolds,” *Dezeen*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/04/29/richard-van-der-laken-opinion-what-design-can-do-refugee-challenge-role-designers-humanitarian-design/>.

Designing Freedom

Having seen the potential danger of designers not taking seriously the need to understand freedom, we must now ask: What would have changed had these designers sought to apply Beauvoir's existential ethics to their project? If the aim of the FBD project was to remove the barriers to freedom experienced by those at the campsite, then, as we have just discussed, the quality of the campsite should not have been the focus. To focus on the quality of the campsite is to treat homelessness like a natural disaster, like a tragedy that could not have been prevented, such that all we could do to help would be to alleviate the suffering of the victims as best we can. Beauvoir shows us that designers can do more to help respond to issues like homelessness precisely by avoiding the trap of treating homelessness as merely a sad fact of life and by helping the public avoid this trap as well.

It is easy to see why designers would be tempted to respond to an issue like homelessness by trying to build better shelters because it allows designers to take up what Beauvoir describes as the problem-solving attitude of the serious engineer. By contrast, if designers were to take up what Beauvoir describes as the reality-disclosing attitude of the ethical artist, they would try to reveal to themselves and others the social, political, cultural, and economic underpinnings of the issues confronting them. In this particular case, this would mean revealing that homelessness is not like a natural disaster but is instead a human disaster, a result of political decision making. If people think that issues like ending homelessness are beyond their control, then designing products that take control away from people through short-term problem-solving will only exacerbate people's disconnect from politics. Instead, designers must find ways to help people become more politically active, not less.

Design can reveal the truth of issues like homelessness by helping people undergo the existential "conversion" advocated by Beauvoir. As was discussed earlier, such a conversion experience exposes the relationship between freedom and values by reminding us that values are not absolute and are not given to us by gods, by nature, or by stakeholders, but are the result of human decisions and human desires. If homelessness is treated like an inescapable natural tragedy, then an existential conversion can reveal how the world we live in is the result of having placed other values (e.g., luxury) above human rights. By recognizing that our values and our world are the result of human decisions and desires, the "fact" of homelessness can be seen to be actually escapable, if we want it to be.

Beauvoir's relational ethics offers a solid theoretical basis for reflexive design practices that use design as a medium for forming publics and making social issues and struggles visible.³⁴ Such practices include (but are not limited to) critical design, adversarial

34 Karin Hansson, Laura Forlano, Jaz Hee-jeong Choi, Carl DiSalvo, Teresa Cerratto Pargman, Shaowen Bardzell, Silvia Lindtner, and Somya Joshi, "Provocation, Conflict, and Appropriation: The Role of the Designer in Making Publics," *Design Issues* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 3–7, https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00506.

design, and reflective design.³⁵ The reality-disclosing attitude of the artist that Beauvoir describes is traceable in these practices as forms of materialized critique and provocation. It is arguably not a coincidence that critical design practices have been likened to art for serving a reality-disclosing function, as opposed to the utilitarian function that design is often expected to serve. This narrow understanding of the “function” of design has been called out and is increasingly being problematized through emerging practices such as futuring, decolonizing design movement, and design justice.³⁶ Beauvoir’s in-depth analysis of freedom not only theoretically explains the political motives of these critical perspectives, it also builds a bridge between ethics and design in a way that clarifies the primacy of freedom over other values that often drive design practices (e.g., comfort, efficiency, control).

It may be argued that focusing on the causes of social issues (such as homelessness) instead of their symptoms (such as rough sleeping) imposes an either/or distinction that applauds political design and condemns practical design. Is there no design that can be both practical, as in designing better living situations, and political, as in raising awareness about the causes of social issues? This is a discussion worth having in specific projects and design situations. Our understanding of design methodologies and reading of conventional design practices suggest that practical design is geared toward problem-solving and technical solutions, whereas political design demands lingering in the problem space and not settling for solutions that look like a solution. This implies that when designers can transform social issues into practical problems, they are unlikely to look back on their technical solutions to these problems as only partially satisfactory or ethically flawed. Consequently, we see a danger in understanding practical and political design as complementary, as the benefits of the practical may outweigh the hurdles of the political.

Alternatively, it may be argued that there is nothing inherently wrong with designers taking a “designer knows best” paternalistic approach to design interventions as long as designers do indeed know best. If design interventions are seen as “what is best for the collective (and thus on average also for the individual),”³⁷ then it would seem that the accusation of paternalism would not be sufficient to prevent designers from feeling justified in trying to achieve what is “best” for everyone because that would obviously benefit even those who would disagree. It must be realized that this argument presupposes that what is “best for the collective” can be achieved without the support of (or even in opposition to) individual freedom. Freedom is here seen as merely one good among others, as something that can be weighed against other goods, such as sustainability, health, safety, and justice. What if freedom is not merely one good among others? What if freedom is not something people value because they selfishly put their own

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- 35 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Phoebe Sengers, Kirsten Boehner, Shay David, and Joseph “Jofish” Kaye, “Reflective Design,” in *Proceedings of the 4th Decennial Conference on Critical Computing: Between Sense and Sensibility* (2005): 49–58, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1094562.1094569>.
- 36 Matt Malpass, “Criticism and Function in Critical Design Practice,” *Design Issues* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 59–71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43829380>; Pedro Gil Farias, Roy Bendor, and Bregje F. Van Eekelen, “Social Dreaming Together: A Critical Exploration of Participatory Speculative Design,” in *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2* (2022): 147–54, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3537797.3537826>; Frederick M. C. Van Amstel and Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto, “The Anthropophagic Studio: Towards a Critical Pedagogy for Interaction Design,” *Digital Creativity* 31, no. 4 (2020): 259–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2020.1802295>; Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
- 37 Tromp, Hekkert, and Paul Verbeek, “Design for Socially Responsible Behavior,” 7.

interests before the interests of society but is something people recognize as essential to their humanity? By taking freedom for granted as a means to an end, as something that can be replaced by products that could more easily and more efficiently achieve those ends or better ones, designers do not sufficiently appreciate the relationship between what it means to be free and what it means to be human.

Seeing individual freedom as a “barrier” to making the world better is akin to evading (vs. embracing) one’s own freedom to fight oppression.³⁸ By treating freedom this way, designers actually move further from their goals of combating issues, such as climate change, crime, ill health, or homelessness, exacerbating an apolitical way of seeing the world that makes these issues seem impossible for anyone to combat. With the help of Beauvoir, we have seen that designers run the risk of producing more harm than good by trying to overcome freedom rather than by trying to embrace freedom. Beauvoir’s view of freedom as not merely one value among others but as the source of all values helps show us why it is vital for designers to realize that only through helping people become more aware of their freedom can they feel empowered to achieve social goals.

Admittedly, Beauvoir’s existential ethics do not tell us precisely how best to go about awakening people to their freedom or how to know for certain if we are justified in awakening people who do not want to be awakened. Beauvoir instead claims that existentialism is the only proper basis for ethics because it embraces what it means to be human and recognizes that ethics cannot be reduced to a checklist. Such a checklist approach to ethics belongs to the “serious” engineering attitude, which is precisely what Beauvoir was trying to motivate us to avoid in favor of the artistic attitude. As Beauvoir puts it, “Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art.”³⁹

Conclusion

By taking up Beauvoir’s existential ethics, we can see that how to be ethical is no more possible to explain than how to win a Nobel Prize or how to be a great painter. Just as a scientist or painter must experiment and be willing to accept responsibility for failure and success, we must experiment and take responsibility for our failures and our successes to be ethical. According to Beauvoir, “morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.”⁴⁰ In other words, as long as we keep questioning whether what we are doing is justified and accept that there are no easy answers and that there is no one but ourselves who can answer such questions, we can at least be sure we are on the right track.

38 Pettersen and Boks, “The Ethics in Balancing Control and Freedom.”

39 Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 134.

40 Ibid., 133.