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Disclosure and narrative: what Beauvoir can teach us about racism

William C. PAMERLEAU*

ABSTRACT

In *The ethics of ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir provides a powerful analysis of how we make our lives meaningful by disclosing the world. There are strong similarities between this account and theories of narrative identity: both describe how we select, interpret, and assess value for the events in our lives. Reading Beauvoir's existentialist work through the lens of narrative identity allows us to better appreciate the social dimension of disclosure, however, since social narratives play a vital role in constructing our identity. For example, we find that our identities are partly assembled from life-scripts provided from our culture, which may define social groups in negative and rigid terms. This approach, then, allows us to understand the subtleties of racism and similar forms of oppression. Our ability to disclose a meaningful life is compromised by the imposition of restrictive and harmful narratives or by the refusal of others to recognize our chosen identities. The approach also offers ways to remedy these forms of oppression. In particular, it suggests the need to listen to the narratives of oppressed groups and think critically about how our own narratives impose or deny meanings.

KEYWORDS

Simone de Beauvoir; racism; oppression; narrative identity; existentialism; disclosure

* Professor of philosophy at University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, USA. E-mail: wcp1@pitt.edu.

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It isn't much of a reach to use Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist work to address the problem of racism: building an ethics on promoting freedom and rooting out oppression makes her work an apt tool for that purpose, and she in fact frequently makes direct references to American racism in particular. But her view of freedom does not fully account for the nature and extent of oppression. I propose to augment her views with more recent theories of narrative identity, which describes something very much like Beauvoir's views on disclosure but with a deeper consideration of the social aspects of identity formation. While I argue that Beauvoir's position on oppression is basically correct, approaching it through the lens of narrative identity enriches her philosophy while shedding light on the nature of racism.

The focus on racism towards persons of color in this paper reflects the sense of urgency that issue has garnered in light of recent events, but focusing on a particular form of oppression also allows me to develop substantive insights while keeping the scope of the discussion manageable. However, I think it will be clear that the analysis I pursue here will equally apply to many other oppressed groups.

THE EXISTENTIALIST PERSPECTIVE OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Beauvoir's *The ethics of ambiguity* provides the basis for this discussion. Certainly, other writings, especially *The second sex*, are relevant to a discussion of racism, and it's worth acknowledging the contributions there to discussions of race, providing evidence both for Beauvoir's sensitivity to the issue and, arguably, her insensitivity to it. But the existentialist account of human experience developed in the *Ethics* yields a first-person account of the attitudes and perspectives that continue to offer powerful insights into how we make life meaningful through disclosure, how oppression serves to undermine that meaning, and how empowering her notion of subjectivity can be in overcoming that oppression.

Beauvoir's work in this period is, of course, aligned closely with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, though it departs from Sartre's work in some significant ways. She generally agrees with Sartre that consciousness consists of the power to stand over and against the world as it appears to us and negate it, transcending it toward other possible ways of conceiving it. This, for Sartre and Beauvoir, is why we are fundamentally free beings. But she differs from Sartre in how she describes the pursuit of meaning, which both philosophers refer to in terms of a game that might be won or lost. Sartre famously described humanity as a "useless passion", because we attempt to define ourselves in the concrete sense of being-in-itself (Sartre, 1956). As conscious beings, however, that attempt can never succeed, because consciousness always keeps us apart from,

and over and against, being-in-itself. I want to be a philosopher, but I cannot ever be a philosopher the way a hammer is a hammer, fully and concretely defined. If I could, I would no longer be a conscious being. Beauvoir provides a different approach: consciousness makes the world exist in the sense that it gives things a presence in our experience. "By uprooting himself from the world, man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him" (Beauvoir, 1948: 12). And by doing so, human beings determine the significance of the world they reveal. This is particularly true as we reveal the world in light of our various goals and purposes. "It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged" (Beauvoir, 1948: 15). While this account of value as stemming from the choices of individuals deemphasizes the social origin of values, as will become clear in the next section, the essential point is that the significance of events for ourselves is determined by which events are included in our account of the world.

The main difference in this approach from Sartre's, then, is that while Sartre describes experience as an attempt to attain factual being, Beauvoir describes it as a way to reveal, or disclose, the being of things and imbue them with significance. Yes, the disclosure is always tenuous, susceptible to being abandoned toward another way of thinking, but it's an acceptable price for imbuing the world with meaning.

> But man also wishes himself to be a disclosure of being, and if he coincides with this wish, he wins, for the fact is that the world becomes present by his presence in it. But the disclosure implies a perpetual tension to keep being at a certain distance, to tear oneself from the world, and to assert oneself as a freedom. To wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as freedom are one and the same movement (Beauvoir, 1948: 24).

So freedom, understood as a fundamental aspect of consciousness, is vital to the human search for meaning. But freedom is also a feature of the social world, referring to the extent to which others allow us to live as we choose, or even to disclose the world as we choose. Sartre acknowledges this as well in his account of being-with-others, but Beauvoir provides a more developed account of the social aspects of freedom.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that the meaning I give to the world by disclosing it is reflected in the disclosure of others. That is, others can validate what I choose as significant by affirming it, either by joining me in that disclosure or at least by accepting it and respecting my choices. And when we disclose the world together in community, our collective ends are more easily realized and continued: "only the freedom of other men can extend them beyond our life" (Beauvoir, 1948: 71). Add to this the more obvious fact that

I need others to allow me to pursue the life that is meaningful to me, and it's clear that my attempt to establish a meaningful life depends on a social context which also maximizes freedom:

> Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men. Now he needs such a justification; there is no escaping it [...]. I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship (Beauvoir, 1948: 72).

The primary goal of her ethics, then, is to enable the freedom of myself and others, and to challenge any conditions that deny that freedom, *i.e.*, to fight oppression. The straightforward way to do that is to confront the oppressors and unshackle the oppressed. But ignorance also limits freedom and can be both the result of oppression and a contributing factor to it. We see this ignorance first manifested in children, who do not yet understand that the world they are brought up in is the result of choices made by others. They see values and meanings as unalterable facts, which is what Beauvoir calls the spirit of seriousness — viewing world as a brute given. But this condition will not last: "It is very rare for the infantile world to maintain itself beyond adolescence" (Beauvoir, 1948: 38). Adolescents question things, their ignorance falls away, and they "discover [their] subjectivity" and "that of others" (Beauvoir, 1948: 39).

Adults often embrace a spirit of seriousness too. Often this is a denial of freedom — what Sartre describes as bad faith. But it can also stem from an ignorance of the contingency of things purposely imposed by others.

> This is the case, for example, of slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. The southern planters were not altogether in the wrong in considering the negroes who docilely submitted to their paternalism as "grown-up children" (Beauvoir, 1948: 37).

Beauvoir's solution is that we deliver such persons from their ignorance by pointing out that the world disclosed to them is contingent. We then put them in touch with their freedom.

The application of these views to racism is clear. Racism is a form of oppression on multiple levels, but one way it operates is by imposing a spirit of seriousness: it promotes a way of looking at persons of color as things, clearly defined and with certain essential characteristics. Privileged groups that benefit from racism may also adopt a spirit of seriousness with regards to themselves: that they deserve privilege, that they are not partly responsible for social conditions, etc. Presumably, we should be able to fight these racist mindsets by pointing out that current ways of disclosing the world are in fact contingent and that we are responsible for them. We can deny the legitimacy of those who

consciously impose racism and reveal to those in a spirit of seriousness that they are free to make the world otherwise.

This is all well and good, and we certainly have strong grounds to oppose those who actively impose oppressive policies and attitudes. But despite Beauvoir's enriched account of the social dimension (compared, at least, to Sartre), her view doesn't leave us with much to work with when racism stems from the subtle effects of culturally imposed perceptions and social pressures. She gets close to this in explaining the effects of ignorance, described as being trapped in a childhood mentality. That description may be appropriate for extreme cases, but it seems inaccurate to describe those unwittingly participating in racist attitudes as essentially child-like. Such views are surely more complex, in part due to genuine ignorance, in part due to acts of self-deception, but largely due to shared perspectives that offer various motives to maintain the status quo while concealing those motives. Beauvoir's solution is equally problematic: we simply point out to those suffering oppression due to their own ignorance that they are free and that they have choices, and they are now free to disclose the world as they choose, even if they still have to battle oppressors before those disclosures can be actualized. It feels too all-or-nothing: "All that an external action can propose is to put the oppressed in the presence of his freedom: then he will decide positively and freely" (Beauvoir, 1948: 87). If racism results from a variety of factors, operating at various levels and often difficult to detect, then any approach to a solution must reflect this complexity.

If we are to match Beauvoir's account with a more realistic understanding of how racism works and how it is to be addressed, it will be necessary to develop a more nuanced approach to disclosure and how it is affected by social situations. That approach, I believe, can be found in an account of narrative identity.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Theories of narrative identity became popular in the last quarter of the twentieth century in works by Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricœur, and others. In the last twenty years, there has been substantial criticism and development of those original views across various disciplines. I will draw heavily on MacIntyre's views in *After virtue*, though there are a variety of similar perspectives that establish the same overall point. I will also briefly acknowledge and respond to more recent criticisms about the theoretical adequacy of narrative identity and defend a version of it that will complement Beauvoir's existentialism.

The core notion of identity theory is that we relate our lives not just as discrete events but as connected in a narrative unity. Simply put, we recount the

events of our past and plans for the future as a story, linking the various parts. Many theorists, myself included, consider those links to be largely causal ones (Carroll, 2007; Stueber, 2015), while others argue for the connection on the basis of emotional or other forms of connection (Velleman, 2003). However those links are established, they select and organize events, thereby establishing what is or is not meaningful. Compare a narrative with an attempt to recount our lives in some neutral, objective fashion. I could, for instance, attempt to recount the events of my life as simply a list of all those events in the order they occurred. I can even do that with the events of a single day: 1) alarm clock sounds but I sleep through it; 2) alarm sounds again and I rise; 3) select clothes; 4) shower; 5) dress etc., including events as unrelated as petting the dog, arguing with a colleague, opening the mail. No one explains their life, or a day in their life, in this way. We pick out what is relevant and ignore what is not, arranging events in a fashion that emphasizes what we find to be relevant connections. For example, I might emphasize the negative experiences: sleeping through the alarm, being late to work, arguing with a colleague, etc., and proclaim that I am "having a bad day". I might instead ignore those as irrelevant and focus on other aspects, *e.g.*, how I learned to cope with stressful situations and why I feel like I'm making progress keeping a positive attitude in the face of adversity. The point is that any number of possible narratives might be drawn from the same set of facts.

This is what we constantly do: select events according to what matters and explain them in terms of how the different parts relate to each other. And note also how easily Beauvoir's vocabulary integrates into this: our narratives are ways of d i s c l o s i n g events, selecting among a vast number of possibilities, choosing what is significant and what is not, thus giving m e a n i n g to those events. Freedom, in short, can be understood as the ability to author the story of my life, both in terms of what factual content is relevant and, simultaneously, what makes it meaningful.

But even if we are authors of our lives, we are usually only coauthors. The stories we tell are gathered from the social world. In the same way we inherit a language, we learn from others the various possible ways to tell stories. As MacIntyre says, "there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources" (MacIntyre, 1984: 216). But others don't just offer me narrative scripts the way a painter selects colors from a palette; rather, narrative scripts are engrained in us. My sense of self is heavily constituted by them before I have much opportunity to be an author:

> I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession [...] As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances,

> rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point (MacIntyre, 1984: 211).

This isn't to say that the role of author of my own life isn't significant. It means that I don't get to author it from scratch. On top of that, there are incentives to maintain and defend certain traditions. The narrative element connects all these aspects together, making familiar and preferred stories resilient. Yes, I can rethink them, I am capable of disclosing other possibilities, but doing so isn't as easy as stepping into a new story. This account emphasizes what Beauvoir's account of disclosure does not: that disclosures are complicated and connected, and changing them may be resisted both from within my personal narrative structure and from without through the social narratives they are based on. I will expand on these points in the next section.

It should be noted that theories of narrative identity, while popular, are also subject to a number of criticisms. For example, it can be argued that there is more to the self than simply the narrative constructions we impose. As David Joplin points out, the first-person perspective that narratives manifest is necessarily limited: the very selection process described above conceals important activities that might be crucial for self-understanding but are left out of the narrative (Joplin, 2000). That is, there may be more to the self besides the narrative element. And even if we engage in narration, it is unclear how far down the narrative goes. Is our experience a narrative construction from the bottom up, or are there aspects of selfhood in place prior to narrative construction? Some, like John Drummond and Dan Zahavi, argue that a full account of the self requires more than the narrative elements described here (Drummond, 2004: 119; Zahavi, 2005: 114).

Others object to the supposed unity of a narrative identity. Some psychologists have suggested that narratives arise from disparate and situated encounters, and that the larger narratives change to accommodate them (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011). Similarly, Galen Strawson claims that many people simply do not experience their entire lives as part of a unified narrative. He distinguishes between a diachronic self and an episodic self, the former referring to the sort of telos-centered perspective described by theorists like MacIntyre, the latter describing an experience of life in terms of episodes which are not continuous with a past or future (Strawson, 2008). Strawson claims that his experience is of the latter sort, and he simply does not think of past episodes as being part of the self he now experiences.

For my purposes in this essay, I am happy to concede most of these points, or at least to remain agnostic about them. In advocating for narrative identity, I do not require that it address the perennial philosophical issues surrounding concepts of self and identity. It may be that there is more to the self than the narrative part. It may be that there is no grand narrative, unifying my

childhood with my present experiences. It may be that I use multiple narratives, reconfiguring the story of events in different contexts and with different people. Paul Ricœur, for example, contrasts identity as sameness — a persisting substrate over time — with identity as selfhood, which is linked to self-understanding and the question "who am I" (Ricœur, 1990: 12–13). In pursuit of self-understanding, we may in fact weave together different narratives, creating "a cloth woven of stories told" (Ricœur, 1985: 443).

What I do contend is that an important part of our identity is experienced in narrative terms. Whether we engage in this practice at a few critical junctures in our life or on a daily basis, we simply cannot give an objective chronology of all the events of our lives. We must select and disclose those that matter, determining what has significance and what does not. In short, it is the way in which we take up an overwhelming amount of experience and determine what matters most to us. Dan McAdams, in responding to the sort of objections discussed above, captures the essential point:

> people living in complex, postmodern societies still feel a need to construe some modicum of unity, purpose, and integration amidst the swirl and confusion. People still seek meaning in their lives — a meaning that transcends any particular social performance or situation (McAdams, 2015: 105).

Or, to use Beauvoir's terminology, disclosure, which is essentially a way to understand narration (as I will show in the next section), makes the world a meaningful presence. It is how we make the world present by being present in it.

RETHINKING BEAUVOIR THROUGH NARRATIVE

One of the most important benefits of adopting a narrative account of identity is its ability to handle the nuanced issues surrounding racism and other forms of oppression; and for that reason, I believe it helps complement Beauvoir's views on oppression. Before turning explicitly to the issue of racism, however, we need to clarify the relationship between Beauvoir's existentialism and the account of narrative identity explained above.

What is central to Beauvoir in the *Ethics* is her account of disclosure: we make the world present to ourselves by what we disclose and how we disclose it. This is also the central insight in theories of narrative identity: we reveal those aspects of our lives that matter and those that don't by what we include and omit, as well as how we make causal connections and relationships between various events. In both cases there is choice, and the main way in which we shape our own narratives is in how we choose to disclose life events. In the process of disclosure/narration, we also establish what is significant and meaningful about

our life — we take ownership of it. It is irrelevant that forms of disclosure I choose originated in a social world outside of me; the fact that I am able to choose them because they are significant to me is the movement that bestows a personal sense of significance. The role of choice in creating a meaningful life is, I would argue, the most compelling component of the existentialist philosophy of this period, as expressed in Sartre's view that values arise in the world through choice (Sartre, 1956) and Martin Heidegger's distinction between an authentic life that I deliberately choose and the inauthentic one of the they-self imposed on me by others (Heidegger, 1962). One needn't be committed to a view of choice that overstates the ability of individuals to impose meaning on the world — a view that the early Sartre, especially, is often accused of. The crucial point is that individuals ultimately decide how to put together the various elements that make up their life, both those unique elements from their own experience and the cultural elements that originated outside them; and that is precisely the point that theories of narrative identity make.

In fact, when it comes to how the social world compromises our ability to choose/narrate our lives, narrative identity provides an account of the subtle ways this occurs. As we have seen, our social narratives provide a starting point from which we must begin any attempt to author our own narratives. McAdams, reinforcing the philosophical analysis given through his own research in psychology, concludes that "any person's particular narrative identity is a co-authored, psychosocial construction, a joint product of the person him/herself and the culture wherein the person acts, strives, and narrates" (McAdams, 2011: 112). This social element is what is responsible for the misgivings I point out regarding Beauvoir's account. Ultimately, Beauvoir is right to point that we need to oppose oppression by "putting the oppressed in presence of their freedom", but how that is done is more complex than her account suggests. The insights of narrative identity allow us to see that the very means of establishing identity can also enable the development of racism and similar forms of oppression.

The complexity is in part due to the fact that narratives establish meaning in different directions at once. What it means to be a member of any cultural group is a product both of what the group members think of themselves and what other groups think of them. Consider the latter point first. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, identity can be shaped either monologically, whereby we determine our narratives by ourselves, through individual reflection, or dialogically, in interaction with others (Taylor, 1994: 31–33). But Taylor argues, rightly, that it is not possible to develop identity entirely from the monological approach. Firstly, we do not choose the language (taken in a broad sense) from which we construct identities; we inherit the collection of meanings that we may adopt or resist. Secondly, we often need others to recognize us and affirm those identities (Taylor, 1994: 34). As we have seen, Beauvoir makes the same

point: we can harm others by failing to recognize them according to their chosen identities. We can undermine their identity by refusing to acknowledge it or reflecting back at them a distorted view of it.

For example, persons who identify with a group have stories to tell about what that group is like, what they are like, what persons from other groups are like, etc. Anthony Appiah, expanding on Taylor's views, refers to these as "life-scripts", and describes how even our personalized, authentic identities are constructed in large part by which of these scripts we choose and how much weight we give them. In fact, if we want to ensure that people are treated with dignity, Appiah claims, it is important to understand the restrictive or demeaning elements these scripts sometimes embody. For example, when it comes to the negative stereotypes surrounding women, persons of color, or homosexuals, who make use of these scripts in order to construct their own identity, we have to be mindful of how we collectively define these groups.

> Because there was no good reason to treat people of these sorts badly, and because the culture continues to provide degrading images of them nevertheless, they demand that we do cultural work to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions (Appiah, 1994: 159).

So, one important part of racism stems from the way culture fosters the very narratives that people use to identify themselves, and addressing racism will in large part depend on the sort of "cultural work" that Appiah refers to. But the effects on narratives from within the perspective of oppressed groups also needs to be understood, and there has been considerable work in various disciplines along these lines. There are obvious effects, like civic ostracization, which results in an impoverished form of group life (Kim & Sundstrom, 2014: 22). But there are also more subtle effects. For example, there are many stressors involved in racism, and even "minor stressors can have an impact on the person well beyond their apparent magnitude" (Meyer *et al.*, 2011: 207). Importantly, Ilan H. Meyer et al. found that an investigation of the narratives of different ethnic groups and sexual identities helped to reveal the effects of those stressors. Similarly, in studying the narratives of African Americans, Janie Victoria Ward identifies how conflicts are understood from within a perspective that recognizes the collective, historical mistreatment of blacks:

> Therefore we can conclude that blacks learn through their racial conflicts in which they are the victims of unfairness and injustice that rules are man-made (by whites) and as such are subject to and often reflect whites' racist motivations and interventions (Ward, 1991: 80).

Laurence Thomas suggests a different problem with narrative shared by black Americans. The important part of any group narrative is its ability to

offer a positive, rather than merely negative, sense of self. Specifically, a narrative is "a set of stories which defines values and entirely positive goals, and which defines a set of ennobling rituals to be regularly performed" (Thomas, 1994: 290). Narratives require positive content as a basis for trust and group coordination. But African American narratives, shaped as they are by slavery, do not offer that. The slave narratives that persons of color have inherited do not "specify ennobling rituals or fixed points of historical reference nor do they define a set of positive goals and values to be achieved by blacks independently of racism" (Thomas, 1994: 295). If Thomas is right, the historical context of being black in America undermines this group's ability to adopt a positive narrative.

My goal here is not to give a full account of how racism is embodied in narratives, a project well beyond the scope of this paper, but instead to point out the complex relationship between narrative and identity in a culture where racist attitudes are prevalent. On the one hand, American culture as a whole, like many cultures throughout the world, is complicit in promoting narratives that negatively affect the ability of members of various groups to adopt a meaningful identity. But on the other hand, from within those groups, persons struggle with narratives that may be misrecognized or not recognized at all, and in general may be denied adequate narrative resources with which to construct a desired identity. In other words, racism affects both how other groups look at the racially discriminated groups and how those groups look at themselves.

It is clear, then, that the ability of black persons to choose the meaning of their own lives can be severely compromised in countries burdened with racist attitudes. And that is precisely what makes racism a form of oppression, as Beauvoir understands that term. It is now clear, as well, why putting people in the presence of their freedom requires more than removing overt control or freeing them from their child-like ignorance. Oppression merely requires that we not think too hard about the publicly shared narrative scripts that sustain racism, and those who are in privileged positions have plenty of incentive not to think about them at all. Does this all mean, though, that the idea of individuals choosing for themselves is hopelessly naïve?

I think not. As much as narratives are socially construed, Beauvoir's essential insight is correct: people need to feel a sense that their disclosure is their own in some substantive way to be meaningful for them. This is why Thomas suggests that at the level of groups it is important to own a positive narrative, one that is your narrative. But individuals constitute identities beyond group membership — we all have aspects of our identity unique to ourselves. Or, to put it in narrative terms, we all have our own story to tell. This is illustrated by Appiah's ultimate position on the role of life-scripts in determining identity: as important as they are, it's also important for individuals to determine whether, and to what extent, they want to incorporate those social identities into their

personal ones. It is possible, in fact, to overemphasize the need for social recognition for just this reason:

> If I had to choose between the world of the closet and the world of gay liberation, or between the world of Uncle Tom's Cabin and Black Power, I would, of course, choose in each case the latter. But I would like not to have to choose. I would like other options. The politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self (Appiah, 1994: 163).

As important as social narratives are as resources for constituting one's own identity, how we choose to disclose ourselves to ourselves (and others) is still vital to the process. In sum, our identities are in large part the product of our own efforts of narration, and we must have the freedom to carry out that narration; but to most people group identity will matter to some degree, making aspects of our narrative efforts vulnerable to the oppressive elements in social narratives described above.

What can we learn from all of this in terms of fighting racism and similar forms of oppression? The ultimate goal is still the same: to put the oppressed in the presence of their freedom. After considering the insights gleaned from narrative identity, two clear paths forward emerge. First, we must do the cultural work Appiah refers to: understanding how the social scripts we impose on various groups unfairly and harmfully define them, undermining the effectiveness of social recognition and impoverishing the social resources we all rely on in constructing an identity. This requires critical thinking, avoiding what Beauvoir calls the spirit of seriousness by which we see these narratives as givens and not as the contingent, historically contextualized narratives they are.

But second, we need to understand how narratives are constructed from within these groups to the best of our ability. If we want to promote a freedom for people to narrate their own lives, we have to understand how others tell stories about events in a different way than we do — that they have their own ways of establishing connections, perceiving outcomes, and in general providing a story about how they relate to society. These will likely be different narratives than those outside that group tell about the same events. Members of privileged groups, especially, need to listen to the narratives told by oppressed persons. Beauvoir suggests that by willing the freedom of others, we promote a world in which our own free choices can be recognized. The inverse is equally true: if we're concerned about the freedom of others, we must be willing to listen to how their different narratives constitute a meaningful life that we ourselves may be unfamiliar with. We need also to listen to how attempts to disclose meaning are undermined by the ways in which members outside of those

groups define them. Even if we may not directly intend to distort or deny how others narrate their lives, we may not be adequately aware of the oppressive nature of privileged and culturally dominant narratives. Listening, in short, is a fundamental form of respect.

In that vein, I will close by taking a brief look at *Between the world and me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. A mix of memoir and essay, written in the form of a letter to his son, this remarkable book reveals the narratives Coates inherits from his youth in inner-city Baltimore and how he comes to challenge those perspectives and search for new ones. Take, for instance, this description of his childhood life navigating the streets of Baltimore:

> [E]ach day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not — all of which is to say that I practices the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body (Coates, 2015: 23).

Similar accounts show the extent to which his daily life was dominated by fear. For those who live with privileged narratives, this reveals a view of America we don't often see, and demonstrates how limiting and oppressive this form of disclosure is.

Coates, however, would not be contained by those early narratives. A voracious reader, his perspectives evolved under the influence of thinkers like Malcolm X and eventually his fellow students and the faculty of Howard University (a historically black university in Washington D.C.). As he begins to appreciate the depth and variety of black culture, he is, as Beauvoir would say, put in the presence of his freedom, and refers to this quite explicitly in narrative terms: "What was required was a new story, a new history told through the lens of our struggle" (Coates, 2015: 43).

But Coates is also very conscious of the narrative that "those who believe they are white" convey. He refers to it as "the Dream", a view of the American success story that is taken for granted by many Americans but is also a blatant reminder of exclusion for many black Americans:

> I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts [...]. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies (Coates, 2015: 11).

From his perspective outside the privileged narrative, Coates is able to identify how easy it is for many Americans to be lulled into what Beauvoir calls the spirit of seriousness: the Dream's "adherents must not just believe in it but

believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works". And at the same time, there is incentive to turn away from the narrative's costs in terms of black lives: "To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown". Those who benefit from the Dream, then, have incentives to treat it as a given truth rather than the contingent social construct it is. And it is precisely this narrative that Coates sees as an ongoing threat. As he warns his son, "The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are" (Coates, 2015: 98).

Between the world and me stands as an example, then, of how racism is largely constituted by the narratives that shape our identities. It illustrates how narratives can empower and oppress, and how individuals like Coates himself can nevertheless gain freedom to search for different narratives. In fact, much of the book is about Coates's growing ability to disclose the world in new and different ways, which is itself a meaningful experience. Beauvoir explains that "to will man free is to will there to be being, it is to will the disclosure of being in the joy of existence" (Beauvoir, 1948: 135). Coates, too, articulates this joy in the power of disclosure, challenged as it is by a racist culture: "If my life ended today, I would tell you it was a happy life — that I drew great joy from the study, from the struggle toward which I now urge you" (Coates, 2015: 115).

Coates offers a voice of struggle against the oppression of racism from within black narratives. And as vital as that is, the struggle has to be bolstered by those who operate from within, and benefit from, the privileged narrative — what Coates refers to as "the Dream". As I have argued, a positive step in that direction is to listen to the narratives of those, like Coates, whose freedom has been compromised for its sake.

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