Simone de Beauvoir's short book *Pyrrhus and Cineas* articulates a response to the problem of absurdity that deserves to be more widely known in both existential philosophy and moral philosophy. Her formulation of the problem is grounded in the existentialist theory that we are the set of projects we pursue and so cannot exist without valuing some ends. But we are aware, she points out, that our ends seem to lose their value when they are no longer pursued. We therefore seem to be in the absurd position of having to value our ends while being aware that they are not really valuable. Beauvoir takes this to be both an existential problem, threatening our lives and endeavours with meaninglessness, and a moral problem, leaving all possible projects equally acceptable. She addresses the existential problem through the moral problem. Valuing our ends, she argues, logically entails the categorical imperative to treat human agency as objectively valuable. Ends that obey that imperative are truly valuable as expressions of human agency. Ends that contravene it are absurd because they are immoral.
Simone de Beauvoir’s first published philosophical treatise was her short book on absurdity and morality, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, in 1944. It is rather unfortunate that this book was not available in English until sixty years later. Her work in moral and political philosophy in the 1940s rests crucially on this book’s central argument, so the reception of that thought in the anglophone world has been stymied by a lack of attention to that argument. And this book contains her only sustained consideration of absurdity and the human condition, so the reception of her existential philosophy has been distorted.

Beauvoir does not make herself easy to understand in this book. Her attention meanders, in the classical French essay style developed by Michel de Montaigne, through various responses to the problem of absurdity in the history of thought, illustrated along the way by examples from Christian theology, medieval European politics, the history of art, and the development of the sciences. All this erudition somewhat obscures the book’s argument, which is, as we will see, well worth articulating in splendid isolation. For it connects the problem of absurdity with the question of the grounding of morality to form a single innovative contribution to both existential and moral philosophy.

1. Absurdity and Existentialism

The book opens with a dialogue between Pyrrhus, King of Epirus in the third century BCE, and his adviser Cineas about a plan for world domination. Pyrrhus declares that he will first conquer Greece and Cineas asks what he will do after that. Pyrrhus responds that he will then conquer Africa, to which Cineas replies with the same question. This continues until Pyrrhus has run out of lands to conquer, at which point, he says, he will rest. But then, asks Cineas, why not just rest straight away? His implication is that this life of rest would be no less meaningful than the world domination that Pyrrhus has planned.
Beauvoir argues that Cineas does have a point. Each project we pursue has a goal that we value while we pursue it, but once we have completed the project we move on to a new goal, a new value, and the old one no longer seems so important. We can even take up this perspective before the project is completed, reflecting on our goal and asking why we value that rather than something else. Should we accept the implication of this reflective stance, that values are only temporary illusions generated by our projects? Should we accept this nihilist conclusion that Cineas is hinting at?

Beauvoir’s view is that we simply cannot accept this. Pursuing projects with values at their core is not an optional feature of human life like keeping pets or reading newspapers. We cannot just give it up. Beauvoir holds to the existentialist view that the pursuit of projects is the very structure of our being. On this view, the structure of our being commits us to taking our values seriously, even though on reflection those values can seem entirely arbitrary. But this ability to step back and question our own values is equally fundamental to our existence, she argues, so we cannot just ignore that either.

We seem to be left not with nihilism, but with absurdity. We seem condemned to taking seriously some set of values while being aware that we have no justification for them. This is the problem Beauvoir sets out to address. In its existential aspect, it poses the question of whether our lives and the activities that comprise them can have any real meaning or value. In its moral aspect, it poses the question of whether there are any objective values that constrain the range of projects that it is acceptable for us to pursue. Beauvoir’s strategy is to solve the existential aspect of the problem through its moral aspect.

2. Pyrrhus is not Sisyphus

Albert Camus famously crystallises the problem of absurdity, as he sees that problem, into the image of Sisyphus being condemned to continuously roll a rock to the top of a hill only to see it roll back down again. Although his short treatise on absurdity, published two years before Beauvoir’s, provides plenty of other examples, his use of this image as the book’s title and its concluding chapter makes it definitive. Beauvoir’s choice of Pyrrhus as her defining example of the pursuit of projects stands in sharp contrast to The Myth of Sisyphus, even though she does not directly mention that book anywhere in her analysis of absurdity.
For Pyrrhus and Sisyphus differ in three important ways. Pyrrhus is planning a sequence of conquests of different lands, each land presenting different challenges, but Sisyphus merely repeats a single project. Pyrrhus knows full well that one fine day he will run out lands to conquer, but Sisyphus is condemned to roll his rock for all eternity. And, perhaps most importantly, Pyrrhus is engaged in a world filled with other people pursuing their own projects, whereas Sisyphus is embarked on an inherently solipsistic enterprise.

In all three ways, Pyrrhus resembles the human condition where Sisyphus does not. The structure of human existence does not condemn us to repeating a single project over and over again. It is true that for most people a large part of life is absorbed in the repetitive cycle of maintaining the conditions required for staying alive and healthy. But it is not inherent in the human condition that life must be entirely devoted to its own maintenance. Rather, to an extent that depends on the individual’s economic circumstances, staying alive provides the necessary grounds for the pursuit of other projects.

The end of staying alive, so long as it is achieved, is therefore an example of what Beauvoir calls a ‘point of departure’ (point de départ). When an end is achieved, she points out, it does not simply disappear from the world as a new project is undertaken. Rather, it remains available to serve as the required basis for a new project. Not only does Pyrrhus differ from Sisyphus in being engaged in a sequence of different projects, but each project in that sequence provides part of the ground required for the next one. Previous success in rolling the rock up the hill makes no difference to Sisyphus as he embarks on the project again. Pyrrhus, by contrast, could not hope to conquer Africa without first building a larger army by conquering Greece.

3. Points of Departure

Beauvoir’s point is not merely that an achieved end can serve as a means to further ends. It is rather that it thereby remains valuable. But this value does not require it to feature as a means in my own further projects. For that would require that its value as a means derives from the value of the ends pursued in those further projects. Those ends in turn would seem not to be genuinely valuable unless their value would persist once they have been achieved, which would require them to be deployed as means in yet further projects,
and so on. For the value of my achieved end to rest on my using it as a means requires that we are each like Sisyphus in having an infinite chain of projects ahead of us, when in fact like Pyrrhus our ambitions must be finite.

It is thus important that we do not live solipsistic lives like Sisyphus, according to Beauvoir, but are instead like Pyrrhus in pursuing our projects in a world of people who pursue their own projects. The value of our achieved ends is not that they can function as means to our own projects, but that they can function as means to projects generally, whether these are our own projects or the projects of other people.

But this value still cannot depend on the achieved end being deployed as a means. There are two reasons for this. One is essentially the same as the reason why this value cannot be conferred by the end being a means to my own projects: it would require an infinite chain of projects, the end of each being deployed as a means in the next. Even if human history is infinite, it would be vanishingly unlikely that any specific end of mine, once it is achieved, forms part of such an infinite chain. It would thus be overwhelmingly likely that all of my ends are in fact devoid of any real value.

Equally importantly, we have not yet seen any reason why the means deployed in someone else's project should thereby be valuable for me. It would be valuable for that person, because they value their end and the means is required for achieving that end. But this does not make the end objectively valuable. Neither does it make the means valuable for me, even though that means only exists because it was an end that I valued achieving. The device that I have invented, for example, might be valuable to you if it helps you succeed in your project, but that does not make it valuable for me, especially as your project might be opposed to mine.

4. The Value of a Potential Means

Beauvoir argues that the continuing value of an end that has been achieved must therefore lie in its status as a potential means, rather than in its actual use as a means. If the value of my achieved end rests on its mere possibility of being used as a means, then this does not require that any further actual project is valuable, so does not require that my end forms part of an infinite chain of projects. And for the same reason, it does not require that
anyone else’s projects are valuable to me, so does not require that my values coincide with anyone else’s.

Why should we conclude from this that an achieved end has value as a potential means, rather than that it has no value? Beauvoir argues that we cannot accept the idea that an achieved end has no value. It is the structure of human existence, on her view, that we pursue projects, which requires that we value achieving the ends of those projects. We are existentially committed to valuing our ends, which entails that we are committed to valuing achieving them, and so to holding that they will be valuable once they have been achieved. Our only option, therefore, is to accept that our achieved ends are valuable because they are potential means to other projects, whether those projects are our own or other people’s.

The next step in Beauvoir’s argument is her claim that this value of a potential means entails the value of the capacity to use it as a means. For the possibility of something being used as a means depends on there being the capacity to use it as a means. If that possibility is itself valuable, then so must be the capacity on which it depends. Since we have to accept that our achieved ends are valuable as potential means, therefore, we also have to accept that the capacity to set ends and deploy means in pursuit of them is itself valuable.

This capacity is, of course, nothing other than human agency as existentialism conceives of it. Beauvoir’s argument has therefore led from the value of one’s own ends to the value of human agency in general. If the argument is valid, then since you do accept the value of your own ends, you must accept the value of their achievement, so you must accept their value as potential means, so you must accept the value of human agency as the capacity to deploy your achieved ends as means.

This argument does not rely on human agency itself being a means or an end in anyone’s project. The value of human agency that it establishes, therefore, cannot be a subjective value dependent on having some specific project. Rather, what the argument concludes is that you must accept the value of human agency regardless of which projects you in fact pursue. That is, you must accept that human agency is objectively valuable. This is the basic moral conclusion that Beauvoir draws from her consideration of absurdity.
Immanuel Kant argued that morality consists in a single categorical imperative, to which we are subject precisely because we are rational agents who set our own subjective ends. This imperative can be formulated in various ways, he argues in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, including what has become known as the formula of humanity, which declares that we must treat human agency as objectively valuable in itself. Beauvoir's conclusion in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is a categorical imperative that closely resembles Kant's formula of humanity. Her argument for it resembles Kant's in broad outline, since both derive their categorical imperative from the structure of human agency itself.

This broad strategy avoids the need to postulate any source of moral command external to our own agency. If successful, it explains why we are subject to morality when other creatures are not. Perhaps most importantly, this strategy promises to show that obedience to the demands of morality is no threat to our own freedom. It is because the categorical imperative is entailed by the structure of our own agency, argues Kant, that we are not autonomous unless we obey it. Beauvoir's view is that authenticity, the recognition and expression of our true structure as human existents, requires that we respect the categorical imperative. For that structure of our existence entails that we are subject to that imperative.

This is not to say that Beauvoir has simply restated Kant's argument in different language. Beauvoir attempts to derive her categorical imperative directly from the structure of human agency as the pursuit of ends, whereas Kant's argument rests on a more general metaphysical theory of the realm of rational understanding and the world of sensory experience. Beauvoir's form of the argument thus does not require Kant's strict distinction between the rational and the sensory or his broader metaphysical theory. Neither does her argument entail the rejection of those aspects of Kant's philosophy. It would seem to be a strength of her argument that it does not entail any commitment on those controversial matters.

It is a little odd, however, that *Pyrrhus and Cineas* contains only a few brief and scattered comments on Kant and that these do not seem to acknowledge the parallels between her
metaethical thought here and his. These sparse comments focus not on Kant’s basic moral philosophy itself, but rather on his application of it, especially his assumption that it is always possible to obey the categorical imperative. Beauvoir’s view is more pessimistic: given the conflicts between people around us, she thinks, we are inevitably condemned to sometimes breaking the moral law. We cannot always avoid acting immorally, she argues, which she equates with acting violently.

6. Morality and the Meaning of Life

Beauvoir’s argument does conclude, however, that we must treat human agency as objectively valuable. This is not undermined by the fact that it will sometimes generate genuine dilemmas. Her argument also implies the further claim that we must consider this structure of human agency to be the foundation of all other values. For those other values can be divided between two kinds.

One kind are the objects, designs, ideas, theories, stories, and other items in the world that have been created by human agency, along with the items that make up the natural world. These are all potential means to our ends. Since there is no clear factual limit to the range of ends that people might formulate and pursue, there is no reason to limit this status to any specific set of items. We might agree that a potential means would not be valuable if the only ends it could be used to pursue were themselves ruled immoral by the categorical imperative. But given that the range of possible human ends vastly outstrips anyone’s capacity to imagine it, perhaps we should not be confident that any item fits this description. If this is right, then we should consider all potential means to be valuable, with their value deriving from the value of the human capacity to deploy them as means.

The other kind of value is had by the ends that we pursue. Our ends are genuinely valuable, if Beauvoir’s argument is right, precisely because they are expressions of human agency. This value is therefore also derived from the value of human agency. This is how Beauvoir grounds her response to the existential aspect of the problem of absurdity in her response to its moral aspect. We are not, after all, condemned to value ends that are not really valuable. Our ends derive genuine value from being our ends. But this does not mean that any end we choose to pursue would be equally valuable. Because the value of our ends is moderated by the moral law, ends pursued at the expense of other people’s
agency are not valuable. Their value as expressions of human agency is cancelled by their disvalue as suppressions of human agency.

Living a meaningful life in pursuit of genuinely valuable ends therefore requires obeying the categorical imperative to respect human agency. Projects that violate that imperative are absurd. Their ends are not valuable. But this is not the reason why one must respect human agency. For the conclusion of Beauvoir’s moral argument in this short book is not the hypothetical imperative that if you want to avoid existential absurdity, then you must respect human agency. Neither is it the hypothetical imperative that if you value your ends, then you must respect human agency. It is the categorical imperative that you must respect human agency. Once this moral conclusion has been established, it can ground the existential point that projects are absurd if and only if they contravene that imperative.

7. The Demands of Authenticity

What does obedience to this categorical imperative amount to? Beauvoir does not provide a detailed answer to this question in Pyrrhus and Cineas, but addresses it in subsequent moral and political writings of the 1940s. She limits herself in this book to arguing that this imperative demands more than that our projects do not destroy or damage other people’s agency. Rather, she argues, it requires us to secure for all people the conditions required to exercise their agency effectively. Poverty can absorb this capacity to formulate and pursue projects into the basic project of staying alive. Illness can sap the energy required to pursue projects. Lack of education can limit one’s ability to imagine and develop new projects. We are therefore obliged, she argues, to promote wealth, health, and education for all people.

Beauvoir does not make her argument for this obligation clear. Why should our respect for the objective value of human agency require us to promote human agency, rather than simply to avoid suppressing it? It might be thought that the answer to this lies in human agency being the foundation of all other values. The more people can exercise their agency, the more valuable ends and potential means there will be, so the more value there will be in the world.
Beauvoir’s argument, however, could not support this consequentialist reasoning. For this reasoning could support an obligation to promote human agency only we are subject to an imperative to maximise value. Beauvoir’s argument does not entail such an imperative. And even if there were an imperative to maximise value, our efforts to liberate human agency from poverty, illness, and lack of education might not have the intended effect. For we could not control or predict whether the people we liberate will obey the moral law, so we would not know whether their liberation will have positive or negative consequences overall.

Perhaps her thought is rather that a project violates the moral law if any of the myriad means that it rests on have been produced in ways that suppress or destroy human agency. It is not obvious that this would entail an obligation to promote better lives for everyone, rather than only for those involved in the production of the means that one deploys. But perhaps such a generalising move could be supplied by considering the complex holism of the global economy, reasons to keep one’s range of potential projects as open as possible, or both. Perhaps such considerations could also help to explain how one should decide in a situation where all the available options violate the categorical imperative.

However these questions are to be resolved, it seems clear that Beauvoir’s argument in Pyrrhus and Cineas is an innovative response to the existential problem of absurdity and a novel argument for the grounding of moral obligation. Her argument merits serious attention in both existential philosophy and moral philosophy. I have provided some more detailed analysis of it in my book Rethinking Existentialism, but there is much more work to be done to draw out the full philosophical significance of Beauvoir’s unfortunately neglected argument.

To conclude this introductory analysis, we should return to the book’s title characters. Which of them is right? The answer given by Beauvoir’s overall argument is: neither. Cineas is wrong to imply that all projects are absurd, though he does succeed in bringing an important existential problem to light. Pyrrhus is wrong to value the project of conquering other lands, since the violence of this project violates the moral law needlessly. His project is absurd, but not for the reason Cineas implies. Rather, it is absurd because it is immoral.

