

Paradoxically Absurd: Clarifying the Ambiguous in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

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Abstract

Conflict reveals a persistent need for a relevant and effective ethics. It is not surprising, then, that new ethical paradigms would have emerged from the ashes of World War II. With the release of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in 1947, Simone de Beauvoir provided an existentialist ethics that is as much a response to her times as it is something that transcends them. Given that much of the world is mired in conflict today, there is potential value to be derived from a reexamination of this text. Existentialism is often reduced to being the philosophy of the absurd. In her ethics, de Beauvoir focused on the inherent ambiguity of the human condition rather than its absurdity. Whereas there is a great deal of research on and applications of de Beauvoir's existentialist ethics, there is a current lack of a comprehensive, textual analysis focused on disambiguating the central terms of this work. This mixed-method, thematic, textual analysis aimed to address this research gap by examining de Beauvoir's use of the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguity*, and *ambiguous* in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This study identified 59 occurrences of these terms contained in 55 unique statements. From the comparative analysis of word frequencies, the terms *existence* and *freedom* were found to figure prominently across the four categorical terms of this study. The sentiment of these statements was assessed using the AFINN lexicon and revealed an observable degree of consistency in terms of their central tendency and dispersion. A theme of *struggle* was identified for the category of *absurd*, whereas a theme of *contestability* was identified for the category of *ambiguity*. The results of this study suggest that de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity is *paradoxically* absurd, not in the sense that it is self-contradictory, or contrary to common sense, but that her *doxa* of ambiguity can only be understood alongside (i.e., *para*) absurdity. From this perspective, one can conclude that ethical action requires one to understand, confront, and incorporate the ambiguity of existence into the ongoing project of one's *becoming* as

well as into what one ultimately *does*. This is potentially relevant to all, but especially to those in power and to those subjected to its application and consequences.

Keywords

Critique, Existentialism, Freedom, Philosophy, Semantics, Themes

1. Introduction

Existentially, the human condition is frequently described as absurd (Aberšek, 2024; Camus, 1991; Hajiyeve, 2024; Sartre, 1994). For Camus, “the absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions... The absurd merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions” (p. 67). With the publication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in 1947, de Beauvoir (1976) offered an alternative existentialist construction, focused on the ambiguity of the human condition rather than concluding that it is inherently absurd. The distinction she parsed was so essential that de Beauvoir admonished that “the notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity” (p. 129). It is in this sense that the clarification of the ambiguous in this work by de Beauvoir is considered paradoxically absurd. Commonly, the notion of *paradox* is used to describe a statement that goes against common sense, or is contrary to accepted facts, but is yet true, or at least possible (Cowie, 2023; Quine, 1962; Schiffer, 1994). However, at the root of the paradox is the Greek word *doxa*, which means something like a common belief or popular opinion (Morillas & Romani, 2023; Moss, 2021; Scott, 2024). Since *para*, when used as a prefix, primarily means beside or alongside of, a paradox does not necessarily need to suggest something which is in opposition to, but can simply mean alongside of the more commonly accepted position. As the results of this study will show more clearly, de Beauvoir’s employment of *ambiguity* occurs paradoxically with the *absurd*. Such a view is consistent with that of Eco (1979), who articulated that words, as cultural units, “are not defined in terms of their content... but in terms of the way in which they are opposed to other elements of the system and of the position which they occupy within it” (p. 73).

This study is a mixed-method, thematic, textual analysis of an author-created corpus comprised of the comprehensive set of statements, including the four categorical terms: 1) *absurd*, 2) *absurdity*, 3) *ambiguous*, or 4) *ambiguity*, in de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The interpretative question of this study is: How does de Beauvoir’s usage of these four categorical terms as philosophical concepts differ from the lexical co-occurrence of these terms? What implications does this understanding hold for human freedom and ethics? Focusing on key terms and abstracting the relevant statements around them is a specific application of the Key Word In Context (KWIC) textual analysis technique (Isoaho et al., 2021; Jackson, 2025; Jackson & Heath, 2024). Words and bigrams of merit, AFINN-based sentiment, and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), thematic analyses were con-

ducted in RStudio. The results of this approach, as presented in this study, add to the existing research associated with this important existentialist text.

Previous research on de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has covered a wide range of topics and perspectives, including care and reciprocity (Andrew, 1998), childhood freedom (Levy, 2016), education (von Brömssen, 2022), envy (Fell, 2025), ethics (Gayman, 2003; Slattery & Morris, 1999; Sullivan, 2016; Terzi, 2025), feminism (Alcoff, 2000; Carroll, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2012), habit (Bredlau, 2020), Hegel (Sims, 2012), humanities (Bankston, 2015), ontology (Arp, 1999), political violence (Hutchings, 2007), race (Broeck, 2011), singularity (Parker, 2015), skepticism (Klassen, 2013), therapy (Dalal, 2025; Taylor, 2026), and woman's writing (Scholz, 2001). Whereas the aforementioned applications have been both extensive and varied, there has yet to be a comprehensive textual analysis conducted on the key categorical terms related to the essential distinction made by de Beauvoir in this work, that is, between the concepts of the *absurd* and *ambiguity*, and their respective correlates *absurdity* and *ambiguous*. Addressing this gap is important as these terms are philosophically irreducible to each other, but can only be grasped fully in contradistinction. This study aims to address this gap in the existing research.

In addition to this introduction, this study contains a survey of literature (Section 2) containing an analysis of previous research on textual analysis (Section 2.1) and previous research on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Section 2.2), a section on the research method (Section 3), and the results (Section 4). The results section is subdivided to focus on the statements including the terms *absurd* and *absurdity* (Section 4.1), the statements including the terms *ambiguity* and *ambiguous* (Section 4.2), the results of the analysis of the words and bigrams of merit related to the four analytic categorical terms (Section 4.3), and the results of the sentiment and thematic analyses (Section 4.4). A summary of key results of this research, along with the limitations and extensions of this study are presented in the conclusion (Section 5). To provide the necessary context of this study, the survey of literature is presented first.

2. Survey of Literature

This study examined de Beauvoir's (1976) usage of the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity* in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, through an application of a mixed-method, thematic, textual analysis approach. Placing this study in context benefits from an examination of related, existing research. Two distinct threads of research were examined. First, previous research on textual analysis was explored to establish the applicability of that approach to this study (Section 2.1). Second, previous research on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was reviewed to ascertain the need for this research. The research on textual analysis applications/techniques is presented first.

2.1. Previous Research on Textual Analysis

Textual analysis techniques have been applied to a variety of domains including

business (Davydov et al., 2022; Sterling et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025), management (Paiton et al., 2026; Felix et al., 2025; Jing & Zhang, 2025), philosophy (Pence, 2024; Wang, 2025; Wennemann, 2025), politics (Ferreira, 2023; Fiedler & Morrison, 2025; Mourão & Abreu, 2026), and sociology (Bernau, 2026; Brett & Silver, 2025; Tan et al., 2025), to name just a few. Whereas these domains are distinct, there is a degree of consistency in the underlying approach. Under the overarching category of textual analysis reside a variety of distinct analytic techniques (Bernhard & Kornrumpf, 2024; Jockers, 2014; Liu et al., 2025), including word (bigram) frequency analysis, sentiment analysis, and LDA. This section contains a summary of published research making use of these textual analysis techniques.

In some respects, word and by extension, bigram frequency analysis is one of the simplest forms of textual analysis. In its most basic construction, this technique represents the counting of the number of occurrences of a given individual word or phrase (Jockers, 2014; Silge & Robinson, 2017). This is useful, as frequent terms or phrases can suggest the focus of a given document. As indicated by Roy (2023), “word frequency analysis is important for information retrieval and keyword extraction from a particular document” (p. 3). However, one should be careful not to conflate simple word frequency with either importance or reader focus. Whereas one might initially assume that higher-frequency words are attuned to more diligently by a reader, research by Lian et al. (2026) suggests that “high-frequency words receive shorter fixations and are skipped more often than low-frequency words” (p. 3). Further, Atkinson and Palma (2025) found that focusing too much on word frequency can result in one overlooking “the text’s syntactical structure” (para. 2). This is consequential, as what an author feels compelled to elaborate on might actually work against reader attention. In short, one should take care not to infer more than is implied by word or bigram frequency.

Applications of textual analysis can be, and frequently are, extended to include sentiment analysis. Depending on the lexicon selected, the sentiment analysis can be constrained to an assessment of the text’s polarity (i.e., positive or negative), its degree of positivity/negativity, or its emotional content (Silge & Robinson, 2017). The AFINN sentiment lexicon (Nielsen, 2011) measures sentiment at the word-level (i.e., unigrams) on a scale of –5 to +5, with no neutral values. Prior applications of sentiment analyses have been wide-ranging. Given its prominence, it is reasonable to question the utility of sentiment analysis, or ask why it has been routinely applied as part of textual analyses. Bernábe Loranca et al. (2026) indicated that sentiment analysis is “highly useful for studying public perception... and provides a timely method to analyze opinion topics” (p. 146). At the term-level, word selection can influence reader response and convey author intent. However, sentiment assessments are not necessarily straightforward exercises. Sibunruang et al. (2026) explained that “sentiment analysis in real-world settings faces the common issue of domain dependency” (p. 2). Interpretation is always context-dependent. This is especially problematic in the domain of philosophy, in which the technical understanding of topics and terms can be radically different from

those commonly held or used (Butchvarov, 1964; Sancho-Adamson, 2023; Tillman, 1965; Wittgenstein, 2019). One approach for dealing with this concern is for one to consider context directly and explicitly. As indicated by Yang et al. (2026), “by capturing how word-level sentiment emerges from surrounding context”, one is able to produce “a more nuanced and transparent understanding of which words or phrases drive the overall sentiment” (p. 321). Consistent with this view, applications of sentiment analysis, especially as it relates to philosophical works, should make the analytic context specific. This can be accomplished by providing the segments of texts being analyzed prior to the application of sentiment analysis techniques so that the context is defined adequately.

LDA was developed by Blei et al. (2003) and is a computer-based approach for conducting thematic analysis. This approach uses an unsupervised machine learning algorithm to identify latent topics, or themes, within a text based on the aggregation of terms that were determined mathematically to occur frequently together (Blei et al., 2003; Silge & Robinson, 2017). This approach has been applied extensively. Through these applications, insights have emerged that are worthy of consideration. First, as indicated by Liccione and Siciliano (2026), “LDA-driven topic modelling has the potential to enrich... research by providing a quantitative summary of key themes and qualitatively unveiling their evolution over time” (p. 596). This is because an application of LDA to a text holds the potential to produce insights that would not be gained otherwise, and due to the algorithm, the produced themes are repeatable and verifiable. However, like sentiment analysis, LDA thematic analysis is not without its risks. Lyu et al. (2026) noted that an application of LDA “risks analytical ambiguity, because topic models primarily capture patterns of word co-use and may conflate issues with frames” and that “fuller frame reconstruction therefore requires additional interpretative or relational analysis beyond topic extraction” (p. 2). Further, research by Inoue et al. (2023) found that LDA “does not read the nuances in the context of phrases” being analyzed (p. 11). As a result, and similar to that of sentiment analysis, an application of LDA benefits from the addition of context and explication as one applies this analytic technique. Consequently, one should consider providing the textual material being analyzed, either in terms of sentiment or themes, to the degree practicable.

Collectively, these approaches (i.e., LDA, sentiment, word, and bigram analyses) have been beneficially applied across a variety of different fields, domains, and contexts. As the previous research suggests, word (bigram) frequency analysis, sentiment analysis, and LDA are commonly applied textual analysis techniques. One can apply these techniques to a variety of domains, including philosophy and existentialism. To determine if an application of these techniques to de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* would be beneficial, it is essential to examine previous research on that work.

2.2. Previous Research on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

As previously indicated, research on de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* has

covered a wide range of topics and perspectives. Existing research has examined topics ranging from education (von Brömssen, 2022) to feminism (Alcoff, 2000; Carroll, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2012), and from political violence (Hutchings, 2007) to race (Broeck, 2011), among others. Whereas each of these studies contributes something potentially meaningful to an understanding of this consequential work by de Beauvoir, it is the research related to the topics of ethics (Gayman, 2003; Slattery & Morris, 1999; Sullivan, 2016; Terzi, 2025) and ontology (Arp, 1999) that are the most directly relevant to the aims of this study. As such, insights from these studies are worthy of further examination and development.

Because the application of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1976) to the area of ontology holds a single published work, and the topic of ontology is in some respects more fundamental than that of ethics, this research is examined first. As explained by Arp (1999), “Beauvoir...builds on the ontological framework set up in *Being and Nothingness*,” but concludes that her “argument does not necessarily presuppose the full-blown version of Sartre’s ontology.” (p. 268). This ontological positioning quickly moves to a consideration of de Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics. Arp explained that as a consequence of the ontology adopted by de Beauvoir, she “concentrates only on the relation between individual human beings and ‘the human world established by man’s projects and ends’, not on the relation between humans and the in-itself” (p. 268). This insight provides a useful transition point to consider the published research focused most directly on de Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics.

It stands to reason that if there was going to be a body of research associated with de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, a significant amount of that research would be focused upon the ethical positions staked within that text. This is certainly the case. Further, the research of Arp (1999) illustrates that it is a relatively small step from looking at the ontological position established by de Beauvoir to examining the ethics presented in her work. Much can be derived from a review of the research, which is primarily focused on that ethical construct. As previously referenced, there is a significant body of work focused on de Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics (Gayman, 2003; Slattery & Morris, 1999; Sullivan, 2016; Terzi, 2025). For Slattery and Morris (1999), “de Beauvoir’s ethics springs from the heart and leads to a relational experience in a constructive moment. Modern utilitarian ethics and universal morality are thus undermined; a context for the emergence of a postmodern ethics of freedom is established,” and that “by exposing the ambiguity of the human context, de Beauvoir successfully unites individual freedom and human solidarity” (p. 21). For Terzi (2025) the term *ambiguity* covered “a wide semantic spectrum,” and that for de Beauvoir the term “designates the co-implication of inner agency and external constraints that, in their partiality, neither abstract rationalism/idealism nor social objectivism/materialism can succeed in unravelling” (p. 13). From Slattery and Morris’ work, the notion of *freedom* stands out as an important point of focus, whereas from Terzi, one is confronted by the complexity associated with de Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity

in her existentialist ethics. Gayman's work (Gayman, 2003), while focused, at least indirectly, on that of de Beauvoir, is most directly an assessment of Arp's treatment of de Beauvoir's work rather than a unique assessment of the work itself. Similarly, Sullivan's focus was on applying de Beauvoir's work to understand Confucian role ethics (Sullivan, 2016). As such, these works are acknowledged, but not interrogated further.

Whereas this research has been both extensive and varied, there is not a comprehensive textual analysis conducted on the key categorical terms related to the essential distinction made by de Beauvoir in this work, that is, between the concepts of the *absurd* and *ambiguity*, and their respective correlates of *absurdity* and *ambiguous*. This is consequential as these terms, as developed by de Beauvoir, are philosophically irreducible to each other, and can only be grasped adequately in contradistinction to each other. This study aims to address this gap in the existing research through the application of the research method presented in the following section (Section 3).

3. Method

As indicated, there is a gap in the existing literature related to a comprehensive assessment of the notions of the absurd and the ambiguous in de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. To address that gap, a mixed-method, thematic, textual analysis of an author-created corpus comprised of the comprehensive set of statements in that work associated with the four categorical terms selected for this study, a) *absurd*, b) *absurdity*, c) *ambiguous*, or d) *ambiguity*, was used in this study. The abstracting process was an application of the KWIC textual analysis technique (Isoaho et al., 2021; Jackson, 2025; Jackson & Heath, 2024). In addition, words and bigrams of merit (Jackson & Heath, 2023a; Selby et al., 2026), AFINN-based sentiment (Nielsen, 2011; Silge & Robinson, 2016), and LDA (Green et al., 2024; Silge & Robinson, 2017), thematic analyses were conducted using preexisting packages in RStudio. Prior to conducting the analysis in RStudio, it was necessary to pre-process the data.

An electronic copy of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was obtained from the Webster University Philosophy Department (<https://l1nq.com/qlj8c5p>) on 26 March 2026. The electronic search function was used for each of the four key categorical terms of this study. The forms of the terms used for the word search were *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity*. All occurrences of the terms were abstracted, including heading titles. To help ensure that each occurrence of these terms was captured, a search was conducted on stemmed versions of the terms *absurd** (for *absurd* and *absurdity*) and *ambig** (for *ambiguous* and *ambiguity*). Whereas this approach does not prove conclusively that every occurrence of the respective categorical terms was identified in the text, it does provide an ability to cross-check the total values by using a modified search approach. Each statement was then transcribed into an Excel workbook, which would subsequently be uploaded into RStudio for analysis. Most of the statement transcriptions were limited to the sen-

tence in which the focus term was included. If a sentence in which a given focus term was included extended from or extended to another sentence, the sentence(s) required for full context were included. If a statement was found to include the same focus term more than once, the sentence was included only once in that section, with the number of occurrences of the term accounted for in its designation. As an example, if the first sentence included the term *absurd* twice, that would be listed as occurrences 1 and 2, and the subsequent sentence would be listed as occurrence number 3. If a statement was found to include two or more different focus terms, that statement was included as a sentence in both sections. As an example, if a sentence included the term *absurd* and *ambiguous*, that sentence would be included in both the statements for the category of statements including the term *absurd* and also in the category of statements including the term *ambiguous*. Once compiled, these transcriptions were then verified in a physical copy of the book (de Beauvoir, 1976), and page references corresponding to the physical book were included for reference.

It is important to note that the corpus contains all uses of the four categorical terms, and does not, as a matter of compilation or processing, distinguish between philosophical usages of the terms and ordinary descriptive uses. As these terms are analyzed, the philosophical usages are given prominence over the ordinary, or idiosyncratic, but each is retained for subsequent analysis. This is a potential limitation of the study, as the philosophical usages are undoubtedly more essential. However, for completeness, the decision was made to retain the comprehensive list of statements for the textual analysis and analyses associated with sentiment and themes.

Once the author-created corpus was created in the Excel workbook, it was uploaded to RStudio for analysis. The following packages were used: *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2026a), *ggplot2* (Wickham et al., 2016), *openxlsx* (Schauberger & Walker, 2026), *textdata* (Hvitfeldt, 2024), *tidyr* (Wickham et al., 2026b), *tidytext* (Silge & Robinson, 2016), *tidyverse* (Wickham et al., 2019), *topicmodels* (Grün & Hornik, 2024), *tm* (Feinerer & Hornik, 2025), and *stringer* (Wickham, 2025). The code used for this study is included in the Appendix. Once in RStudio, three overarching textual analysis techniques were conducted. It is important to note that common terms (e.g., *a*, *the*, *but*, *and*) were removed from the corpus prior to analysis. The terms are often referred to as “stop words,” and excluding these terms is common in textual analysis (Jackson & Heath, 2023b; Jockers, 2014; Silge & Robinson, 2017). After these stop words were removed, the first analysis was focused on an examination of word/phrase frequency by examining the words and bigrams (i.e., a two-word phrase) of merit (Selby et al., 2026). In the context of this study, a word of merit was one that was found to have occurred three or more times in conjunction with the key, categorical term of focus, and a bigram of merit was one that occurred two or more times. The words/bigrams of merit provide insight into what terms or phrases are frequently used in conjunction with the categorical term. This provided two types of insights. Looking within a given categorical term

(e.g., *absurd*), the observed frequency revealed the relative prominence of topics discussed under that category. Looking across the categorical terms (e.g., comparing terms under *absurd* to those under *ambiguous*) provided insight into the degree of variability in focus among these categorical terms. One should take care not to assume that frequency conveys importance. However, word/bi-gram frequency does suggest the degree of rhetorical focus given to certain topics. This understanding can be nuanced by an examination of sentiment and theme.

Statement sentiment was assessed using the AFINN lexicon, which is a list of words that are coded on a range of -5 (extremely negative) to $+5$ (extremely positive), with no neutral (score of 0) sentiment values (Nielsen, 2011; Silge & Robinson, 2016). These values provide insight into a text's emotional valence (Burch et al., 2026; Jackson et al., 2022). The words behind the sentiment assessment, along with their respective sentiment scores, were listed and grouped by categorical term. The descriptive statistics assessed for the sentiment assessment included the minimum value, mean, median, mode, maximum value, and standard deviation. These values were then used to construct a boxplot visualization (Black, 2020) for comparative purposes. By examining the central tendency and dispersion of the sentiment scores, one is able to assess the degree of similarity (or divergence) in sentiment associated with the statements included in the corpus. This assessment provided insight into the lexical polarity used by de Beauvoir (1976) when she developed the concepts of the *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguity*, and *ambiguous* in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Lastly, LDA was used to identify thematic terms that might be useful in identifying themes associated with the four categorical terms of this study. Given the relatively modest number of observations, the number of themes generated, by term, was set to the minimum possible ($k = 2$), and these thematic terms were merged into a meta-pool of terms for refinement and categorization. The initial list of terms, along with their beta values, which convey the probability of a word given a topic, was compiled. The beta value basically indicates how strongly a given word is associated with a given topic (Silge & Robinson, 2017). These lists were then refined by removing the categorical terms and terms shared in common. This refined list of thematic terms was then used as the basis for the subjective appraisal of potential themes.

This mixed-method, thematic, textual analysis of an author-created corpus focused on four categorical terms: a) *absurd*, b) *absurdity*, c) *ambiguous*, and d) *ambiguity*, as observed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1976). The analysis consisted of an assessment of words and bigrams of merit, along with sentiment and thematic analyses. Collectively, these results help to fill the gap in knowledge associated with this important existentialist text, and help to shed light on the common and unique concepts de Beauvoir explored in this work.

4. Results

Based on the method described previously (Section 3), the following results pro-

vide unique insight into de Beauvoir's treatment and use of the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity* within *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir 1976). The four terms listed comprise the four analytic terms of this study. The results of this study are presented in four sections. Section 4.1 contains the comprehensive summary of statements, including the terms *absurd* and *absurdity*. Section 4.2 contains the comprehensive summary of statements, including the terms *ambiguity* and *ambiguous*. The words and bigrams of merit are presented in Section 4.3, and the results of the sentiment and thematic analyses are presented in Section 4.4. Given that the comprehensive summary of statements forms the analytic material for the subsequent analyses, it is essential to present those results first. For reasons of contradistinction, the statements including the terms *absurd* and *absurdity* (Section 4.1) are presented prior to those including the terms *ambiguity* and *ambiguous* (Section 4.2).

4.1. Statements Including the Terms *Absurd* and *Absurdity*

This section contains a comprehensive summary of statements from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1976), focused on the terms *absurd* and *absurdity*. As indicated in the introduction (Section 1), "the notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity" (de Beauvoir, 1976: p. 129). As such, the *absurd* acts as an important point of contradistinction to *ambiguity* in this work. Consequently, these statements are foundational for understanding de Beauvoir's pivot from the *absurd* to the *ambiguous*. The statements associated with the term *absurd* are presented in Table 1, and those associated with the term *absurdity* are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Comprehensive summary of statements including the term *Absurd* in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

No.	Page	Statement
1	10	But it is also claimed that existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd and of despair.
2	25	And it was quite necessary for the atom to arrive somewhere. But its movement was not justified by this result, which had not been chosen. It remained absurd .
3	45	The only thing revealed in this experience is the absurd facticity of an existence which remains forever unjustified if it has not known how to justify itself.
4	47	So much so, that the movement toward the object is, in fact, through his arbitrary act the most radical assertion of subjectivity: to believe for belief's sake, to will for will's sake is, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one's freedom in its empathy and absurd form of freedom of indifference.
5	50	In order to justify the contradictory, absurd , and outrageous aspects of this kind of behavior, the serious man readily takes refuge in disputing the serious, but it is the seriousness of others that he disputes, not his own.
6	79-80	And, furthermore, technics itself is not objectively justified; if it sets up as absolute goals the saving of time and work which it enables us to realize and the comfort and luxury which it enables us to have access to, then it appears useless and <i>absurd</i> , for the time that one gains can not be accumulated in a store house; it is contradictory to want to save up existence, which, the fact is, exists only by being spent, and there is a good case for showing that airplanes, machines, the telephone, and the radio do not make men of today happier than those of former times.

Continued

7	82-83	Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns itself.
8	93	But on the other hand, we know that if the past concerns us, it does so not as a brute fact, but insofar as it has human signification; if this signification can be recognized only by a project which refuses the legacy of the past, then this legacy must be refused; it would be absurd to uphold against man a datum which is precious only insofar as the freedom of man is expressed in it.
9	113	But what makes the problem so difficult is that it is a matter of choosing between the negation of one freedom or another: every war supposes a discipline, every revolution a dictatorship, every political move a certain amount of lying; action implies all forms of enslaving, from murder to mystification. Is it, therefore, absurd in every case?
10	128	And utility can no longer be defined absolutely. Thus, are we not ending by condemning action as criminal and absurd , though at the same time condemning man to action?
11	129	To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.
12	155	Indeed, on the one hand, it would be absurd to oppose a liberating action with the pretext that it implies crime and tyranny; for without crime and tyranny, there could be no liberation of man; one can not escape that dialectic which goes from freedom to freedom through dictatorship and oppression.

Much existential insight can be gained from a review of de Beauvoir's statements on the *absurd* (de Beauvoir, 1976). There were 12 such occurrences in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which accounts for 20% of the occurrences analyzed in this study. Whereas not each of the sentences in **Table 1** will be referenced, selecting a few of the key statements is useful for exploring de Beauvoir's treatment of the absurd. First, de Beauvoir noted that "existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd" (p. 10). Second, within this existential perspective, one must justify one's own existence or be condemned to "the absurd facticity of an existence which remains forever unjustified" (de Beauvoir, 1976: p. 45). Freedom figures prominently in the existential project. As de Beauvoir said, one can "realize one's freedom in its empathy and absurd form of freedom of indifference" (p. 47). This existential freedom is situated most directly in the living of one's life. For de Beauvoir, "a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing" (p. 83). There are limits and consequences to this freedom. As de Beauvoir explained, one is forced to choose "between the negation of one freedom or another," and that "every war supposes a discipline, every revolution a dictatorship, every political move a certain amount of lying" (p. 113). The fulcrum point of de Beauvoir's argument is that "to declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning" (p. 129). This statement (number 11 in **Table 1**) includes the term *ambiguous*, and therefore occurs again in **Table 4** (in which it is statement 7).

Collectively, these statements suggest that for de Beauvoir, existence is not reducible to the absurd, but that it is shaped, necessarily, by confronting it. This understanding is extended by analyzing statements including the term *absurdity*.

Table 2. Comprehensive summary of statements including the term absurdity in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

No.	Page	Statement
1-2	26	One escapes the absurdity of the clinamen only by escaping the absurdity of the pure moment.
3	52	Transcending all goals, reflection wonders, “What’s the use?” There then blazes forth the absurdity of a life which has sought outside of itself the justifications which it alone could give itself.
4	71	Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity.
5	94	Here we see, in its extreme form, the absurdity of a choice which prefers the Thing to Man from whom alone the thing can receive its value.
6	97	We know only too well that we can not count upon a collective conversion. However, by virtue of the fact that the oppressors refuse to co-operate in the affirmation of freedom, they embody, in the eyes of all men of good will, the absurdity of facticity; by calling for the triumph of freedom over facticity, ethics also demands that they be suppressed; and since their subjectivity, by definition, escapes our control, it will be possible to act only on their objective presence; others will here have to be treated like things, with violence; the sad fact of the separation of men will thereby be confirmed.
7	104-105	Hegel himself recognizes that if this passage continued indefinitely, Totality would never be achieved, the real would peter out in the same measure: one can not, without absurdity , indefinitely sacrifice each generation to the following one; human history would then be only an endless succession of negations which would never return to the positive; all action would be destruction and life would be a vain flight.
8	113-114	I have known a Kantian rationalist who passionately maintained that it is as immoral to choose the death of a single man as to let ten thousand die; he was right in the sense that in each murder the outrage is total; ten thousand dead—there are never ten thousand copies of a single death; no multiplication is relevant to subjectivity. But he forgot that for the one who had the decision to make, men are given, nevertheless, as objects that can be counted; it is therefore logical, though this logic implies an outrageous absurdity , to prefer the salvation of the greater number.
9	122	A conception of this kind does not contradict that of a historical unintelligibility; for it is not true that the mind has to choose between the contingent absurdity of the discontinuous and the rationalistic necessity of the continuous; on the contrary, it is part of its function to make a multiplicity of coherent ensembles stand out against the unique background of the world and, inversely, to comprehend these ensembles in the perspective of an ideal unity of the world.
10	124	The means, it is said, will be justified by the end; but it is the means which define it, and if it is contradicted at the moment that it is set up, the whole enterprise sinks into absurdity .
11	129	The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity .
12	129	Absurdity challenges every ethics, but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man’s condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence.

Within **Table 2** there are 12 occurrences of the term *absurdity*, from de Beauvoir’s text (de Beauvoir, 1976), which represents 20% of the occurrences analyzed. Similar to the analysis of the statements including the term *absurd*, this overview focused attention on a few statements that reflect key attributes of de Beauvoir’s treatment of existential absurdity. As indicated previously (Section 1), for de Beauvoir, “the notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity” (p. 129). Much of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is focused on parsing this distinction. For de Beauvoir, absurdity is associated with “the pure moment” (p. 26), “a life which sought outside of itself the justifications which it alone could give” (p. 52), “facticity” (pp. 71, 97), and “choice” (p. 94). It is probably not too reductionist to

assert that existentialism is focused on life, the living of one's life, and the questioning of accepted ideologies associated with what constitutes a *good* life. A commonly accepted convention is that parents owe a degree of sacrifice to their children. De Beauvoir considers such a construct absurd, noting that "one can not, without absurdity, indefinitely sacrifice each generation to the following one; human history would then be only an endless succession of negations which would never return to the positive; all action would be destruction and life would be a vain flight" (p. 105). Such a view challenges much of accepted ideology and praxis. However, as de Beauvoir stated, "absurdity challenges every ethics" (p. 129).

Within **Table 2**, statement 11 contains the term *ambiguity*, and is therefore included in **Table 3** (in which it is statement 19), and statement 12 contains the term *ambiguous*, and is therefore included in **Table 4** (in which it is statement 8). Through this analysis of de Beauvoir's treatment of the *absurd* and *absurdity* (de Beauvoir, 1976), one is able to situate them beneficially with and against the concepts of *ambiguity* and the *ambiguous*. This understanding is extended further in the following section.

4.2. Statements Including the Terms *Ambiguity* and the *Ambiguous*

Like the previous section, this section contains a comprehensive summary of statements from de Beauvoir's (1976) *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, though in this section, the focus is on the statements containing the terms *ambiguity* and *ambiguous*. As suggested by the title of her book, *ambiguity* is the focal point of inquiry. As such, these statements form the essential core of this study. The statements associated with the term *ambiguity* are presented in **Table 3**, and those associated with the term *ambiguous* are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 3. Comprehensive summary of statements including the term *ambiguity* in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

No.	Page	Statement
1	7	Ambiguity and Freedom
2	7	As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it.
3	8	And the ethics which they have proposed to their disciples have always pursued the same goal. It has been a matter of eliminating the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment.
4	9	Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity . It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.
5	9	From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity .
6-7	9-10	It was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre, in <i>Being and Nothingness</i> , fundamentally defined man, that being whose being is not to be, that subjectivity which realizes itself only as a presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others.

Continued

8	13	To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it.
9	18	An ethics of ambiguity will be one that refuses to deny a priori that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.
10	57	The nihilist attitude manifests a certain truth. In this attitude, one experiences the ambiguity of the human condition.
11	58	Whether the taste for adventure appears to be based on nihilistic despair or whether it is born directly from the experience of the happy days of childhood, it always implies that freedom is realized as an independence in regard to the serious world and that, on the other hand, the ambiguity of existence is felt not as a lack but in its positive aspect.
12	68	Some men, instead of building their existence upon the indefinite unfolding of time, propose to assert it in its eternal aspect and to achieve it as an absolute. They hope, thereby, to surmount the ambiguity of their condition.
13	68-69	He understands, dominates, and rejects, in the name of total truth, the necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses. But ambiguity is at the heart of his very attitude, for the independent man is still a man with his particular situation in the world, and what he defines as objective truth is the object of his own choice.
14	74	The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity
15	84	Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term “aufheben”; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity ; that is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development; this confusion is the source and also the consequence; it is a perfect epitome of that idealistic and verbose flabbiness with which Marx charged Hegel and to which he opposed a realistic toughness.
16	112	And it is true that each is bound to all; but that is precisely the ambiguity of his condition: in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects.
17	118	The fundamental ambiguity of the human condition will always open up to men the possibility of opposing choices; there will always be within them the desire to be that being of whom they have made themselves a lack, the flight from the anguish of freedom; the plane of hell, of struggle, will never be eliminated; freedom will never be given; it will always have to be won: that is what Trotsky was saying when he envisaged the future as a permanent revolution.
18	127	What stops them is that as soon as they give the word “end” its double meaning of goal and fulfillment they clearly perceive this ambiguity of their condition, which is the most fundamental of all: that every living movement is a sliding toward death.
19	129	The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity.
20	136	The ambiguity of freedom, which very often is occupied only in fleeing from itself, introduces a difficult equivocation into relationships with each individual taken one by one.
21	139	Actually, to vote is not to govern; and to govern is not merely to maneuver; there is an ambiguity today, and particularly in France, because we think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it; all that our internal politics does is reflect the play of external forces, no party hopes to determine the fate of the country but merely to foresee the future which is being prepared in the world by foreign powers and to use, as best we can, the bit of indetermination which still escapes their foresight.
22	141-142	There is a very annoying naturalistic optimism in Emile; in the rearing of the child, as in any relationship with others, the ambiguity of freedom implies the outrage of violence; in a sense, all education is a failure.
23	152	The objection will surely be made that hesitation and misgivings only impede victory. Since, in any case, there is an element of failure in all success, since the ambiguity , at any rate, must be surmounted, why not refuse to take notice of it?
24	153	Malaparte relates that the young Nazis, in order to become insensitive to the suffering of others, practiced by plucking out the eyes of live cats; there is no more radical way of avoiding the pitfalls of ambiguity .

Continued

25	153	Vigilance alone can keep alive the validity of the goals and the genuine assertion of freedom. Moreover, ambiguity can not fail to appear on the scene; it is felt by the victim, and his revolt or his complaints also make it exist for his tyrant; the latter will then be tempted to put everything into question, to renounce, thus denying both himself and his ends; or, if he persists, he will continue to blind himself only by multiplying crimes and by perverting his original design more and more.
26	154	If the fusion of the Commissar and the Yogi were realized, there would be a self-criticism in the man of action which would expose to him the ambiguity of his will, thus arresting the imperious drive of his subjectivity and, by the same token, contesting the unconditioned value of the goal.

Given that the title of de Beauvoir's work is *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is perhaps not surprising that there are more statements made containing the term *ambiguity* than the other terms selected for analysis. As indicated in **Table 3**, there are 26 occurrences containing the term *ambiguity* in the text. This accounts for 44% of the total occurrences analyzed in this study. Of these 26 occurrences, two (statements 1 & 15) are section headings, statement 19, as previously indicated, is also included as statement 11 in **Table 2**, and statement 15 includes the term *ambiguous*, and is included in **Table 4** (as statement number 4).

De Beauvoir (1976) contended that "as long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition." (p. 7). This places ambiguity close to the core of existentialist philosophy. As de Beauvoir explained, "from the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity" (p. 8). More precisely, as developed by de Beauvoir, existentialist ethics stands in contrast to the approach by those who have accepted dualism which has been focused on "eliminating the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment" (p. 8). However, as de Beauvoir explained, from an existentialist perspective, "to attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it" (p. 13). As such, "an ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all" (p. 18). Ambiguity, for de Beauvoir, resides at the core of "existence" (p. 58) and the "human condition" (p. 57). Within this existence, freedom has a place of prominence.

Freedom is essential to existentialism. For de Beauvoir (1976), "the ambiguity of freedom...introduces a difficult equivocation into relationships with each individual taken one by one" (p. 136). This "ambiguity of freedom," for de Beauvoir, "implies the outrage of violence" (p. 142). The term *ambiguity* is used by de Beauvoir to situate humans in their existence and to provide insight into the nature of their freedom. In fact, *ambiguity* is the point of inquiry and focus in de Beauvoir's ethics. The insights developed here can be further contextualized by examining de Beauvoir's use of *ambiguous*, which is presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Comprehensive summary of statements including the term ambiguous in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

No.	Page	Statement
1	11	The failure described in Being and Nothingness is definitive, but it is also ambiguous .
2	23	The characteristic feature of all ethics is to consider human life as a game that can be won or lost and to teach man the means of winning. Now, we have seen that the original scheme of man is ambiguous : he wants to be, and to the extent that he coincides with this wish, he fails.
3	24-25	This objection would mean something only if freedom were a thing or a quality naturally attached to a thing. Then, in effect, one would either have it or not have it. But the fact is that it merges with the very movement of this ambiguous reality, which is called existence, and which is only by making itself be; to such an extent that it is precisely only by having to be conquered that it gives itself.
4	84	Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term “aufheben”; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity; that is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development; this confusion is the source and also the consequence; it is a perfect epitome of that idealistic and verbose flabbiness with which Marx charged Hegel and to which he opposed a realistic toughness.
5	102	We see the sophism on which his conduct is based: of the ambiguous condition which is that of all men, he retains for himself the only aspect of a transcendence which is capable of justifying itself; for the others, the contingent and unjustified aspect of immanence.
6	115	The word future has two meanings corresponding to the two aspects of the ambiguous condition of man, which is lack of being and which is existence; it alludes to both being and existence.
7	129	To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.
8	129	Absurdity challenges every ethics, but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man’s condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence.
9	149	In an underground revolutionary movement, when one discovers the presence of a stool-pigeon, one does not hesitate to beat him up; he is a present and future danger who has to be gotten rid of, but if a man is merely suspected of treason, the case is more ambiguous .

Within **Table 4**, there are 9 occurrences (15% of the total occurrences), of which 3 statements (statements 4, 7 & 8) have been presented previously. As such, the remaining 6 statements will be focused on more closely here. For de Beauvoir, “the characteristic feature of all ethics is to consider human life as a game that can be won or lost, and to teach man the means of winning,” but that this “original scheme of man is ambiguous” (p. 23). Additionally, de Beauvoir described both “reality” (p. 25) and the human “condition” (pp. 102, 115) as *ambiguous*. Ambiguous situations make definitive action problematic. As de Beauvoir explained, “in an underground revolutionary movement, when one discovers the presence of a stool-pigeon, one does not hesitate to beat him up; he is a present and future danger who has to be gotten rid of; but if a man is merely suspected of treason, the case is more ambiguous” (p. 149). As this quote makes clear, the ambiguity problematizes ethics, which holds very real implications for human action.

Section 4.2 contained a comprehensive summary of the 59 occurrences made by de Beauvoir (1976) in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* related to the terms: a) *absurd* ($n = 12$), *absurdity* ($n = 12$), *ambiguity* ($n = 26$), and *ambiguous* ($n = 9$). Collec-

tively, these statements suggest much about the existentialist ethics developed by de Beauvoir. This understanding can be extended further by analysing the frequent words and bigrams of merit associated with these statements.

4.3. Words and Bigrams of Merit Related to the Four Analytic Categories

Whereas care should be taken not to reduce meaning to frequency, as essential insights can always be quite rare in terms of their respective degree of repetition within a text, understanding term frequency can be useful for establishing, at least in a provisional and limited sense, key elements of focus. This section contains the results of the analysis of words and bigrams of merit. The initial words of merit, occurring 3 or more times, related to the four analytic categories are presented in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Initial words of merit related to the four analytic categories.

Absurd (n)	Absurdity (n)	Ambiguity (n)	Ambiguous (n)
Absurd (12)	Absurdity (12)	Ambiguity (26)	Ambiguous (9)
Freedom (6)	Ethics (3)	Freedom (8)	Existence (5)
Action (4)	Facticity (3)	Condition (6)	Condition (3)
Existence (4)	Freedom (3)	World (6)	Ethics (3)
Surpassing (3)	Ten (3)	Truth (4)	Failure (3)
Time (3)	Thousand (3)	Aspect (3)	Future (3)
		Attitude (3)	
		Existence (3)	
		Failure (3)	
		Fundamental (3)	
		Future (3)	
		Goal (3)	
		Hegel (3)	
		Human (3)	
		Oneself (3)	
		Pure (3)	

In examining the most frequent words of merit, occurring 3 or more times, related to de Beauvoir's (1976) statements containing the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguity*, or *ambiguous* (**Table 5**), the term of focus was the most frequent word of merit across each of the four categories. This result is not surprising as the selection protocol dictated that the selected term must be in each of the respective statements. The next insight is that there was a significant degree of similarity in the most frequent words of merit across the four categories. As an example, the

term *freedom* was prevalent in statements containing, *absurd*, *absurdity*, and *ambiguity*. Such a result suggests two things. First, freedom is an important construct for de Beauvoir's construction of existentialist ethics, since it cuts across most of the analyzed categories. Second, freedom is not a particularly useful distinguishing topic since it appears frequently across the respective categories. Similar assessments can be made for terms like, *existence*, *ethics*, *condition*, *failure*, and *future*. The terms ten ($n = 3$) and thousand ($n = 3$) under category of *absurdity*, was actually a bigram (Table 7), and occurred somewhat idiosyncratically within one sentence. More specifically, it was a hypothetical, numeric example that was referenced multiple times within the statement to carry the point through to its intended conclusion. The point being made, rather than the numeric value, was the actual focus of the statement. Removing the categorical terms of assessment, common terms across the categories, and the idiosyncratic terms provided a refined set of terms for analysis. The refined terms are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Refined words of merit related to the four analytic categories.

Absurd (n)	Absurdity (n)	Ambiguity (n)	Ambiguous (n)
Action (4)	Facticity (3)	World (6)	N/A
Surpassing (3)		Truth (4)	
Time (3)		Aspect (3)	
		Attitude (3)	
		Fundamental (3)	
		Goal (3)	
		Hegel (3)	
		Human (3)	
		Oneself (3)	
		Pure (3)	

Focusing on the most refined frequent words of merit, occurring 3 or more times, for the categorical terms of analysis resulted in a more focused point of inquiry. Under the category of *absurd*, one finds the terms *action* ($n = 4$), *surpassing* ($n = 3$), and *time* ($n = 3$). These terms are well grounded in existentialism (Ali, 2025; Belliotti, 2025; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 2008). Existence is time-bound, and the existentialist project is a form of action in which one surpasses *being* in the project of one's *becoming*. It is perhaps unsurprising that these quintessential existentialist terms were found under the *absurd*, which is the existentialist concept against which de Beauvoir (1976) situated her ethics. Under the category of *absurdity*, the only word of merit that remained was *facticity* ($n = 3$). Among these occurrences, De Beauvoir described “the absurdity of facticity”, and “the triumph of freedom over facticity” (p. 97).

The category of *ambiguity* holds the greatest number of frequent words of merit.

Among those to be found under this category are *world* ($n = 6$), *truth* ($n = 4$), *attitude* ($n = 3$), *human* ($n = 3$), *oneself* ($n = 3$), and *pure* ($n = 3$). Within this context, de Beauvoir (1976) referenced *pure inwardness*, *pure externality*, and *pure moment*. Again, terms like *world*, *human*, and *oneself* are not altogether atypical for those operating within existentialist philosophy. There is little to be gained from interrogating those terms much further here. However, there is some worthy insight to be derived from looking at de Beauvoir's notions of *truth* and *attitude*. In terms of *truth*, de Beauvoir asserted that "to attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it" (p. 13), that "the nihilist attitude manifests a certain truth," (p. 57), and that one, "understands, dominates, and rejects, in the name of total truth, the necessary partial truths which every human engagement discloses" (p. 68). In terms of *attitude*, de Beauvoir contended that it is within the nihilist "attitude that one experiences the ambiguity of the human condition," (p. 57), and that "ambiguity is at the heart of his very attitude" (p. 68). There were no unique words of merit associated with the category of *ambiguity*.

The insights gained from an analysis of the words of merit can be extended by an analysis of the most frequent bigrams of merit. The results of that analysis are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Most frequent bigrams of merit related to the four analytic categories.

Absurd (n)	Absurdity (n)	Ambiguity (n)	Ambiguous (n)
N/A	Ten thousand (3)	Fundamental ambiguity (2)	Ambiguous condition (2)
		Human condition (2)	
		Positive aspect (2)	

Because bigrams tend to occur less frequently than words (Fox et al., 2023; Selby et al., 2026; Troyer et al., 2024), it made sense to be less restrictive in the frequency required to report the bigrams of merit. Whereas a filter of 3 or more occurrences was used in assessing the words of merit, a filter of 2 or more occurrences was used in assessing the bigrams of merit. Even still, very few bigrams of merit were generated, and some of those were idiosyncratic. There were no bigrams of merit for the category of *absurd*. For the category of *absurdity*, the only bigram of merit was the phrase *ten thousand* ($n = 3$). As previously discussed, that phrase was a specific hypothetical used to convey a point developed by de Beauvoir (1976). As such, the phrase itself holds little utility as a unit of inquiry.

In terms of the category *ambiguity*, there were three bigrams of merit: a) *fundamental ambiguity* ($n = 2$), b) *human condition* ($n = 2$), and c) *positive aspect* ($n = 2$). Given its centrality to existentialism, a focus on the human condition is not surprising. However, addressing *fundamental ambiguity* is more promising. De Beauvoir admonished that we should "assume our fundamental ambiguity" as "it is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting" (p. 9), and that "the fundamental am-

biguity of the human condition will always open up to men the possibility of opposing choices” and that “freedom will never be given; it will always have to be won,” and that this is what was meant by understanding “the future as a permanent revolution” (p. 118). As revealed by this articulation, the concept of *fundamental ambiguity* can be seen as doing a significant amount of existential and philosophical work in de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In terms of *positive aspects*, de Beauvoir noted that “the taste for adventure... always implies that freedom is realized as an independence in regard to the serious world and that, on the other hand, the ambiguity of existence is felt not as a lack but in its positive aspect” (p. 58). The development of this positive aspect of ambiguity was important enough to de Beauvoir that she entitled a section of her work “The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity” (p. 74).

For the category of *ambiguous*, the only bigram of merit with 2 or more occurrences was the phrase *ambiguous condition* ($n = 2$). In this context, de Beauvoir (1976) explained that “we see the sophism on which his [*a tyrant*’s] is based: of the ambiguous condition which is that of all men, he retains for himself the only aspect of a transcendence which is capable of justifying itself; for the others, the contingent and unjustified aspect of immanence” (p. 102), and that “the word future has two meanings corresponding to the two aspect of the ambiguous condition of man which is lack of being and which is existence; it alludes to both being and existence” (p. 115). Thusly situated, much of the existential work of being, for de Beauvoir, occurs within the ambiguous condition of existence.

The most frequent words and bigrams of merit reveal something of the content of de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity and the way she situated (de Beauvoir, 1976), developed, and contextualized it in contradistinction to the *absurd*. The understanding developed in this section can be extended beneficially by examining the results of the sentiment and thematic analyses conducted on the four analytic categories of this study.

4.4. Sentiment and Thematic Analysis of the Four Analytic Categories

Computer-based algorithms can be useful for assessing the sentiment and thematic content of texts objectively. As indicated previously (Section 3), the AFINN lexicon was used to assess the rhetorical sentiment of the comprehensive statements within each of the four respective analytic categories of this study, whereas LDA was used as the basis for determining the thematic terms. The distribution of sentiment scores, by category, is presented in Figure 1.

As indicated previously (Section 3), AFINN sentiment scores are bound by a range of -5 (extremely negative) to $+5$ (extremely positive), with no neutral terms (i.e., 0 sentiment score). As indicated in Figure 1, there is little observable difference in terms of sentiment across the four categories. For the statements for the term *absurd*, there was a mean AFINN sentiment score of -0.1 ($SD = 2.1$, $Mdn = -1$, mode = 2, range = -3 to 3), for the statements for the term *absurdity*, there

was a mean AFINN sentiment score of -0.6 ($SD = 2.2$, $Mdn = -1$, mode = -2 , range = -3 to 4), for the statements for the term *ambiguity*, there was a mean AFINN sentiment score of -0.3 ($SD = 2.0$, $Mdn = -1$, mode = -2 , range = -4 to 3), and for the statements for the term *ambiguous*, there was a mean AFINN sentiment score of -0.5 ($SD = 2.3$, $Mdn = -2$, mode = -2 , range = -3 to 4). In terms of either the data visualization (**Figure 1**) or the underlying descriptive statistics provided, there is very little difference in the central tendency and dispersion of the AFINN sentiment scores across the four analytic categories.

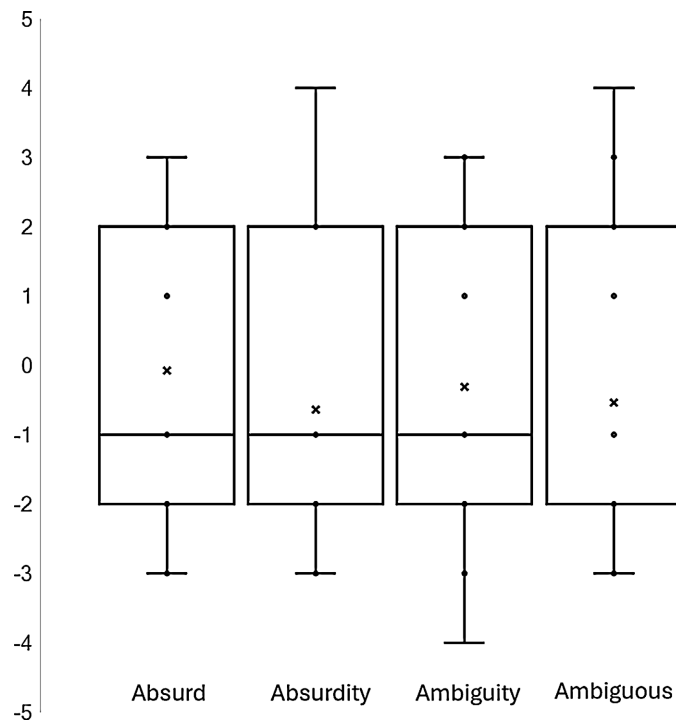


Figure 1. Boxplot of AFINN sentiment scores for the four analytic categories.

For context, it is potentially useful to highlight some of the more extreme positive and negative terms driving the AFINN sentiment score for each of the four analytic categories. For each category, these extreme terms are provided with the AFINN sentiment score listed parenthetically. For the term *absurd*, key negative terms included *crime* (-3) and *criminal* (-3), and the most positive term was *won* (3). For the term *absurdity*, key negative terms were *dead* (-3), *destruction* (-3), *die* (-3), *outrage* (-3), and *violence* (-3), and the most positive term was *triumph* (4). The most negative term for the category of *ambiguity* was *hell* (-4), with the key positive terms being *happy* (3), *perfect* (3), and *won* (3). Lastly, for the category of *ambiguous*, the most positive term was *winning* (4), and the key negative terms were *charged* (-3), *lost* (-3), and *treason* (-3).

Taken together, the analytic category terms, the corresponding words and bi-grams of merit, along with their sentiment-driving terms, can form a basis for a thematic analysis of the category statements. The results of that thematic analysis are presented in **Table 8**.

Table 8. Initial thematic terms related to the four analytic categories.

Absurd (Beta)	Absurdity (Beta)	Ambiguity (Beta)	Ambiguous (Beta)
Absurd (0.046)	Absurdity (0.034)	Ambiguity (0.053)	Ambiguous (0.048)
Man (0.038)	Ten (0.034)	One (0.022)	Existence (0.043)
Action (0.031)	Thousand (0.034)	Will (0.029)	Man (0.041)
Every (0.031)	Will (0.031)	Freedom (0.022)	Failure (0.030)
Freedom (0.031)	One (0.025)	World (0.018)	Ethics (0.028)
Existence (0.031)			
Surpassing (0.023)			

As previously indicated (Section 3), LDA is an algorithm-based method for identifying underlying themes, based on statistical patterns existing among the co-occurrence of words, in a given text. In general, words that appear together frequently might indicate a potential theme. Given the relatively few statements analyzed, the minimum number of themes available (i.e., two) was selected, and these were subsequently combined into a meta-theme for each of the four analytic categories. The initial results are presented in **Table 8**. To reiterate, beta values reflect a given term's probability of occurring in a given topic. For the category of *absurd*, the thematic terms (beta values) were *absurd* (0.046), *man* (0.038), *action* (0.031), *every* (0.031), *freedom* (0.031), *existence* (0.031), and *surpassing* (0.023). The category of *absurdity* contained the terms *absurdity* (0.034), *ten* (0.034), *thousand* (0.034), *will* (0.031), and *one* (0.025). For the category of *ambiguity*, the thematic terms were *ambiguity* (0.053), *one* (0.022), *will* (0.029), *freedom* (0.022), and *world* (0.018). Lastly, the analytic category of *ambiguous* included the terms *ambiguous* (0.048), *existence* (0.043), *man* (0.041), *failure* (0.030), and *ethics* (0.028).

These initial thematic terms provided a useful starting point for the thematic analysis. First, the four categorical terms (e.g., *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguity*, and *ambiguous*) were the most probable terms in each of the respect categories. This is not too insightful, but it provides some evidence by which to assess that the algorithm is functioning properly. Second, there is a degree of commonality in the thematic terms generated across the four analytic categories. This does not mean that the categories are the same, but rather reflects that *de Beauvoir* (1976) dealt with common themes in developing her ethics of *ambiguity* vis-à-vis the *absurd*. As an example, the thematic terms of *man* and *existence* were found in both the analytic categories of the *absurd* and the *ambiguous*, and *freedom* was found in both *absurd* and *ambiguity*. These thematic terms could be interpreted as the fulcrum points of *de Beauvoir's* theory and argument. These thematic terms were refined by removing the categorical terms and those terms found to be common among the categories. Those results are presented in **Table 9**.

Refining the initial thematic terms related to the four analytic categories (**Table 8**) resulted in a reduced set of terms (**Table 9**). In fact, the list went from 22 terms

Table 9. Refined thematic terms related to the four analytic categories.

Absurd	Absurdity	Ambiguity	Ambiguous
Action	N/A	World	Failure
Surpassing			Ethics

down to 5 (~77% reduction). The refined thematic terms for the category of the *absurd* were *action* and *surpassing*. No terms emerged from the refinement process for the category of *absurdity*. Only the thematic term *world* remained for the category of *ambiguity*, whereas the terms *failure* and *ethics* were retained for the category of *ambiguous*. Again, these thematic terms were the ones that were unique and potentially informative to their respective categories. For the category of *absurd*, the terms *action* and *surpassing* could be categorized under a theme of *struggle*. For the category of *ambiguity*, the thematic term *world* could suggest the inherent context of the existential struggle. Lastly, the terms *failure* and *ethics* for the term *ambiguous*, might suggest a theme of *contestability*, both in terms of outcomes and respective valuations.

Collectively, these results suggest a topical and thematic coherence, if not consistency, among the four analytic categories studied in de Beauvoir's (1976) *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This was established first through an analysis of de Beauvoir's statements containing the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguity*, and *ambiguous*, and subsequently through an analysis of the corresponding words and bigrams of merit, sentiment, and thematic analyses. Whereas in the aggregate these statements tended toward a slight negative sentiment, there was not a pronounced difference among the four analytic categories. Additionally, there was an observed consistency in the thematic terms, with notions like *existence* and *freedom* figuring prominently.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, focus was given to de Beauvoir's use of the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity* in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1976). Within that work, there were a total of 55 unique statements, which resulted in 59 total statements when the four sentences containing more than one of the key categorical terms were allocated to each term for analysis. From an analysis of these statements, individually and collectively, the notions of *existence* and *freedom* were found to figure prominently across the four categorical terms. This finding was made more directly through the analysis of the words of merit. From that analysis, the term *ambiguity* was found to have the greatest number of unique words of merit ($n = 10$), with the term *absurd* having the next greatest number ($n = 3$). From that perspective, the term *absurd* was found to contain the notions of *action* and *surpassing*, whereas there were no unique themes associated with the term *absurdity*. The term *ambiguity* contained only the thematic notion of *world*, whereas the term *ambiguous* was found to contain the notions of *failure* and *ethics*.

This understanding was extended and nuanced by an analysis of the bigrams of merit, where it was established that de Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity held concepts like *fundamental ambiguity*, *human condition*, and *positive aspect(s)* (de Beauvoir 1976). The sentiment analysis revealed that there was a slight negative sentiment associated with the statements, and that the central tendency and range across each of the four analytic categories were consistent. This result suggests that whereas de Beauvoir's focus was on distinguishing *ambiguity* from the *absurd*, the way she parsed that distinction was semantically neutral among the categories. The thematic analysis resulted in a provisional theme of *struggle for absurdity*, and *contestability for ambiguity*. These results, while useful for understanding de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, are not without their limitations.

First, this study was based on an English translation of de Beauvoir's book. There are undoubtedly nuances that were missed and artifacts that were created through the translation process. This study, and its results, are limited to those omissions and creations. Second, this study was based on only four terms (i.e., *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity*). Whereas these terms are essential to the position developed by de Beauvoir in this work, they provide just one perspective (of which there are many potentially valid ones) that one could bring to this work. This analysis is a comprehensive examination of statements containing those four terms. Anything outside of those statements was unexamined here. Third, this analysis was based primarily on a computer-read (i.e., algorithmic-based) assessment of the statements. The benefit of the selected approach is that the results generated are verifiable and replicable. A significant limitation of the approach is that it lacks much of the value derived from a more subjective approach. Lastly, this study examined *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in isolation and fails to capture the benefits derived from intertextuality. The limitations of this study are significant, but do not negate its value. Future studies could add to the understanding developed here by addressing these limitations and by extending this study in other ways.

There are different ways this study could be beneficially extended. As indicated, future studies could address the inherent limitations of this study. Such an approach would produce additional insights, potentially corroborate these results, and provide nuance and context. Beyond addressing these limitations, the study could be extended in more adventurous ways. Along those lines, one could analyze citations of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1976) since its publication and chart its relative currency over time, and against other works presenting a practical ethics. Alternatively, since *freedom* was found to be so central in this work, that concept could be used as the primary term of inquiry, and one could trace the development of that concept throughout the text. Lastly, within the statements compiled for this study, there were numerous references to philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, among others. It might prove interesting and beneficial to examine who is referenced within *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, along with the content and function of those references. Each of the extensions listed,

and others, could add to the understanding of de Beauvoir's ethics.

The results of this study provide insight into the interrelationships and distinctions among the terms *absurd*, *absurdity*, *ambiguous*, and *ambiguity* within de Beauvoir's (1976) *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In this work, *freedom* was found to be an essential element of focus as humans confront the ambiguities of existence and the human condition. It is understandable that when one confronts the magnitude of this concern, one might either despair or conclude that the situation is hopelessly absurd. De Beauvoir offered something more nuanced and liberating: *ambiguity*. It is in confrontations with the ambiguous that humans can create the meanings that ultimately sustain them. As de Beauvoir explained, we should "assume our fundamental ambiguity," for "it is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting" (p. 9). Each of us has the freedom to act. There is no means of evasion, and no place to hide from this fundamental responsibility. Acting ethically, as developed by de Beauvoir, requires that one understand, confront, and incorporate the ambiguity of existence not only into the ongoing project of one's *becoming* but also into what one actually *does* on a daily basis. This insight should be relevant to all, but especially to those in positions of power and the multitude of those who are subjugated by it.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

```
library(dplyr)

library(ggplot2)
library(openxlsx)
library(textdata)
library(tidyr)
library(tidytext)
library(tidyverse)
library(topicmodels)
library(tm)
library(stringr)

#File Identification, Review, and Preparation
#File Check: Returns list of Excel Files in Folder
filelist <- list.files(pattern="*.xlsx")
filelist
#Corpus construction: Each Row is a News Article
posts <- read.xlsx("Ambiguity_R.xlsx")
posts
```

```
#Word Frequency Analysis
#Break Corpus Down into words
tidy_posts <- posts %>%
  unnest_tokens(word, Statement)
tidy_posts
#Remove Stop Words
data(stop_words)
tidy_posts <- tidy_posts %>%
  anti_join(stop_words)
tidy_posts
#Count Top 100 Words of Merit (WOM)
tidy_posts %>%
  group_by(Term) %>%
  count(word, sort = TRUE) %>%
  top_n(100)
```

```
#Bigram Analysis:
bigrams <- posts %>%
  unnest_tokens(bigram, Statement, token = "ngrams", n = 2)
bigrams
bigrams %>%
  group_by(Term) %>%
  count(bigram, sort = TRUE)
```

```
#taking out common words
bigrams_seperated <- bigrams %>%
  separate(bigram, c("word1", "word2"), sep = " ")
bigrams_filtered <- bigrams_seperated %>%
  filter(!word1 %in% stop_words$word) %>%
  filter(!word2 %in% stop_words$word)
bigrams_filtered_counts <- bigrams_filtered %>%
  count(word1, word2, sort = TRUE)
bigrams_filtered_counts
bigrams_united <- bigrams_filtered %>%
  unite(bigram, word1, word2, sep = " ")
bigrams_united
```

#Sentiment Analysis:

```
get_sentiments("afinn")
tidy_posts
Ambiguity_sentiment <- tidy_posts %>%
  inner_join(get_sentiments("afinn"))
Ambiguity_sentiment
```

#Topic Modeling

```
#Number of topics per Term
k <- 2
#Store Results
lda_results <- list()
#Loop Through Each Terms
for(current_term in unique(posts$Term)){
  cat("\n===== \n")
  cat("Current Term:", current_term, "\n")
  #Subset data
  temp <- posts %>%
    filter(Term == current_term)
  cat("Documents:", nrow(temp), "\n")
# Create corpus
corpus <- VCorpus(VectorSource(temp$Statement))
# Clean text
corpus <- tm_map(corpus, content_transformer(tolower))
corpus <- tm_map(corpus, removePunctuation)
corpus <- tm_map(corpus, removeNumbers)
corpus <- tm_map(corpus, removeWords, stopwords("english"))
corpus <- tm_map(corpus, stripWhitespace)
# Document-Term Matrix
dtm <- DocumentTermMatrix(corpus)
```

```
# Remove sparse words
dtm <- removeSparseTerms(dtm, 0.99)
cat("Words remaining:", ncol(dtm), "\n")
#Skip if too few words for LDA
if(ncol(dtm) < k){
  cat("Skipping", current_term, "\n")
  next}
# Run LDA model
lda <- LDA(dtm, k = k, control = list(seed = 1234))
# Extract top words
topics <- tidy(lda, matrix = "beta")
top_terms <- topics %>%
  group_by(topic) %>%
  slice_max(beta, n = 3) %>%
  ungroup()
#Add Term Identifier
top_terms$Term <- current_term
#Save Results
lda_results[[current_term]] <- top_terms
cat("Completed:", current_term, "\n")
#Combine All Terms
lda_output <- bind_rows(lda_results)
#View Results
print(lda_output)
```