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## Grey's Anatomy as Philosophy: Ethical Ambiguity in Shades of Grey

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# **Grey's Anatomy as Philosophy: Ethical Ambiguity in Shades of Grey**

Kimberly S. Engels & Katie Becker

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## **Abstract**

*Grey's Anatomy* focuses on the personal and professional life of protagonist Meredith Grey. Throughout the long series a consistent theme is that the audience is confronted with moral dilemmas in Meredith's professional work with patients as well as in her personal life. Grey's decision-making often breaks professional protocol in order to do what she believes is best for her patients and those close to her. We argue that Grey's approach to morality is representative of Simone de Beauvoir's approach in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In this text, Beauvoir argues that an existentialist ethic must reject a child-like approach to morality in which moral rules are absolute and moral dilemmas have obvious answers. Instead, she argues for a rejection of universalist ethics in favor of acknowledging the ambiguity of the moral realm. By tracing Meredith's decision-making throughout the course of different seasons of the show, we argue that Meredith exemplifies an existential authenticity compatible with Beauvoir's existentialist approach to ethics.

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## **Keywords**

Simone de Beauvoir, Moral ambiguity, Spirit of Seriousness, Existentialism, Medical ethics

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## Introduction

So do it. Decide. Is this the life you want to live? Is this the best you can be? Can you be stronger? Kinder? More compassionate? Decide. Breathe in. Breathe out and decide. –Meredith Grey

*Grey's Anatomy* is a medical drama that embraces the homophonic metaphor of its title and titular character, Meredith Grey. Meredith's surname invokes connotations of the color gray that add symbolism to other narrative points in the series. It sets the stage for the Seattle-based weather of the show's landscape. It sets the tone for the "dark and twisty" nature of Meredith's personality. Most importantly, it speaks to the gray areas of right and wrong the show tackles through its many seasons of storytelling. Through both the scenarios the doctors confront when treating patients, as well as the choices they make in their personal lives, *Grey's Anatomy* presents the viewer with many ambiguous moral conundrums.

Existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that the human condition is fundamentally characterized by ambiguity. There is ambiguity in the fact that we possess transcendent free consciousness but are simultaneously bound by a physical body. There is ambiguity in the fact that we experience the world as both transcendent subjects and as objects for others. And there is ambiguity in our moral world: values are not fixed, permanent, or given from outside, but come from human beings and our intersubjective experiences. An existentialist ethics of ambiguity, then, is characterized by a rejection of any set of absolute moral values that could be separated from the context in which they occur. Morality exists only in human affairs, and, like us, is characterized by ambiguity.

An ethics of ambiguity does not result in a pure moral relativism or subjectivism, however. In the existentialist view, human beings are free, creative meaning givers, and thus our moral world demands that we actively will the freedom of the other. When we choose to value the other's freedom as equally important as our own, we must act concretely in the world to remove barriers that may prevent them from being free. The authentic, ethical attitude for Beauvoir, then, is one that embraces the ambiguity, or realization that there are no absolute, pre-given moral truths. Simultaneously one makes a moral choice which they take responsibility for, and which takes the specific context of the situation into consideration.

Beauvoir argues that this true ethical attitude is rare, and many people choose various paths of inauthenticity instead, looking to justify moral values in something other than their own choice and freedom. Beauvoir calls this "the spirit of seriousness." When we are children, Beauvoir says, we are all born into the "serious world," a world in which good and evil exist as surely as the grass is green. Right and wrong are as true as any other fact about the world. Many people embrace the spirit of seriousness because they are comforted by its certainty: right and wrong are clearly delineated, and you navigate the moral realm by following the rules. But these individuals are ultimately living in an inauthentic state, according to Beauvoir. The collapse of the serious world is too much for them to bear, because without the serious world, they will be forced to choose and give their own justification for the choice. This is often accompanied by anguish at the thought that they are ultimately responsible. Thus, many adults prefer the path of seriousness over the difficult, ambiguous path of freedom.

In *Grey's Anatomy*, protagonist Meredith Grey demonstrates a consistent understanding of Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. Over the seasons, Meredith repeatedly shows an understanding that ethical decisions must be considered in their appropriate context and with a

consideration of the relationships between the people involved. Further, she recognizes that a single situation could have multiple moral answers. She is regularly willing to break institutional rules for the sake of positively enabling the freedom of the other, and she recognizes the true ethic lies in valuing the other's freedom as much as your own. Against protocol, Meredith places her hand inside a patient with a bomb in their chest cavity, enables the intentions of a convicted serial killer, breaks the rules of clinical trials, and falsifies insurance documents; all to give chances and choices to people who otherwise have none. ~~Meredith sees morality as more than following a set of strict, inherently moral rules, and views it instead as a process of engaging with the messy, ambiguous social world.~~

Meredith sees morality as more than following a set of strict, inherently moral rules, and views it instead as a process of engaging with the messy, ambiguous social world. This moral ambiguity remains the uniting thread within both the character and the series. Throughout the series, Meredith's moral compass often leads her to break the established rules of her profession, which she reconciles according to her own values. Her willingness to reject the spirit of seriousness affects her personal relationships and her medical career. In this chapter, we explore the ways Meredith navigates the moral shades of gray she recognizes in her personal and professional life. In doing so, we address the inevitable risks and consequences of engaging with moral ambiguity in a hospital setting that is governed by the spirit of seriousness.

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## Summary and Plot

As *Grey's Anatomy* is entering its 16<sup>th</sup> season, the plot is long and complex. The series focuses on “dark and twisty” protagonist Meredith Grey, following her journey from surgical intern to an award-winning surgeon, and eventual chief of general surgery at Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital. Her dark nature is often attributed to her demanding and emotionally abusive mother, Ellis Grey, an award-winning surgeon who trained alongside Meredith’s chief of surgery, Richard Webber.

Much of the series including Grey’s ongoing character development revolves around her new relationships and suffering, but the foundation of the character is rooted in Grey’s childhood trauma. Viewers learn that Meredith grew up during the disintegration of her parents’ marriage as a result of her mother’s infidelity with Richard Webber. When Webber refused to leave his wife, Adele, Grey witnessed her mother’s suicide attempt and had to call 911 in order to save her life. Meredith also references an upbringing full of repeated scrutiny from her mother. At the end of the pilot episode, the audience sees Meredith visiting Ellis in a care facility and learns she suffers from early-onset Alzheimer’s, a diagnosis Meredith is instructed to hide from Ellis’s professional friends. This leaves Meredith feeling isolated and overwhelmed in both emotionally caring for her mother and respecting her right to privacy.

The series begins at the start of Meredith’s internship where she develops new relationships but also experiences additional trauma. She meets attending surgeon Derek Shepherd, who becomes her boyfriend and later her husband. She befriends another intern, Cristina Yang, and the two have a 10 season-long bond as each other’s “person” or best friend. She establishes a complicated friendship with a somewhat bully, Alex Karev. Through continued empathy for his rough upbringing and childhood distress, he later becomes “her person” when Yang leaves the hospital. She also develops a complicated relationship with Richard Webber. While this relationship is initially strained because of their shared past, Meredith and Richard

eventually develop a deep and lasting connection. Other notable long term characters include Miranda Bailey, Meredith's resident adviser, who becomes the first black female chief of surgery in the later seasons; and Owen Hunt, trauma surgeon/Iraqi war veteran who is Yang's first husband (although the two later divorce and part for good in Season 10).

Throughout the series, Meredith has many more traumatic experiences. Her mother dies of Alzheimer's-related complications, her stepmom dies of a surgical complication to fix her hiccups, her half-sister Lexi dies in a plane crash, and her husband Derek dies in a car wreck. Her own life is put at risk several times as she is almost killed by a bomb inside a patient in Season 2, almost drowns in Season 4, is almost shot by a gunman in Season 6, survives the plane crash that kills her sister in Season 8, and goes into labor during a superstorm that interferes with hospital resources in Season 10.

Meredith's suffering is a focal point of the show. Her experiences with trauma give her a uniquely empathic understanding of the tragedies of modern life. While the show is a drama that focuses on the lives of the surgeons and their relationships with each other, it also regularly includes medical ethics dilemmas in their interactions with their patients. They navigate complex moral dilemmas and each bring their own experiences and worldviews to their evaluation. An early-series episode focuses on the surgical staff evaluating the treatment of two patients impaled by the same pole, and whether it is justified to focus on saving one patient at the expense of the other ("Into You Like a Train"). The show also tackles tough questions related to race, gender, and contemporary social problems. For example, in Season 14, the show features an episode in which a young black male patient dies after being shot by the police who mistakenly thought he was breaking into his own house, thus addressing the Black Lives Matter movement ("Personal Jesus"). Season 15 features a patient who has been sexually assaulted and does not want to be

subjected to the rape kit examination, engaging with our cultural “Me Too” discussion of the prevalence of sexual assault (“Silent All These Years”). The show does not shy away from using its characters and stories to address current issues of pressing moral concern. The show’s format thus presents the viewer with a messy, ambiguous moral realm that is ripe for an existentialist ethical analysis.

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### **Simone de Beauvoir and *The Ethics of Ambiguity***

In her 1948 work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir introduces readers to both the tenets of existentialism as well as the ethical thought she argues flows from it. While French existentialism is more often associated with Beauvoir’s lifelong companion Jean-Paul Sartre, Beauvoir’s *Ambiguity* stands as a foundational existentialist text as well as the only major published work dedicated to existentialist ethics.

Beauvoir begins the work by describing the ambiguity of the human position: human beings have a free consciousness that is able to transcend or look beyond their immediate situation and build their own essence. Simultaneously, human beings are born into physical bodies and a social/material world that provides them with a “situation”: material bodies and limitations, social norms and conventions, moral rules, institutions, religious beliefs, etc., all provide the context for each individual’s situation in which they develop into a subject with conscious experiences and a set of beliefs about self and world. Thus, while each person is free to build a new essence or choice of self in the world, this will always take place against the existing backdrop of one’s given existential situation. There is also ambiguity in the fact that we



experience the world as both a subject and an object. As an experiencing conscious subject, we experience the world as “there” for us, however we can in turn become an object for others as soon as we interact with our social world (Beauvoir, 1980, 7).

True authenticity requires fully understanding the contingency of the social and moral world and recognizing that values are only values because they come from human beings. Further, the social fabric of the existential situation is ultimately created by human beings and not given by anything outside. The norms, conventions, and rules that may seem inherent or pre-given ultimately come from us. This adds an additional layer of ambiguity: moral reasoning and deliberation is itself ambiguous. However, this understanding is extremely uncomfortable, and most people would rather reject this uncertainty and ambiguity for the belief that there are objective moral truths and only one correct answer for each situation. But it is the very absence of objective and pre-given values, in Beauvoir’s view, that makes what humans do so important. When value and meaning come from us, we are responsible for them, and that means there are stakes. In short, what we do matters:

Existentialism alone gives...a real role to evil, and it is this perhaps, which makes its judgments so gloomy. Men do not like to feel themselves in danger. Yet it is because there are real dangers, real failures, and real earthly damnation that words like victory, wisdom, or joy have meaning. Nothing is decided in advance, and it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win (Beauvoir, 1980, 34).

Beauvoir details this in her discussion of human’s progression from childhood to adolescence and the changes that take place as well as the possible existential attitudes one can take in response. Beauvoir begins by creating the simplicity of the child’s world: when we are children the world makes sense to us. We are told that things are a certain way, that some things are right and some things are wrong, that institutions reflect what is right and wrong, and we

believe it. We are comforted by the security of world that is easy to navigate and we can master as long as we follow the rules. Right and wrong exist as facts just as surely as the sky is blue or the grass is green. Every moral problem has just one solution, and we can rely on moral rules to find it. Adults appear to us as gods who communicate moral truths. This is the serious world (Beauvoir, 1980, 35-36).

Sometimes people are kept in the childlike world through oppressive circumstances. Otherwise, Beauvoir argues we eventually realize that the serious world is not as certain as we once believed. Through adolescence and growth into adulthood, we learn that many things we believed to be objective facts are actually quite contingent. “Men stop appearing as if they were gods, and at the same time the adolescent discovers the human character of the reality about him. Language, customs, ethics, and values have their source in these uncertain creatures” (1980, 39). This is uncomfortable for us because the serious world is one that is easy for us to navigate: decisions have objective reasons behind them. In the serious world, we can be absolved of responsibility for a moral choice if that choice conforms to the prescribed rule. It is not I who decide that it is wrong to cheat on an exam but God/religion/the law/school/etc. The serious world is comforting because it has rules and answers—there is no room for ambiguity within the spirit of seriousness.

The serious man, as Beauvoir refers to him, chooses to stay in the comfort of the serious world. Preferring to believe that values are objective and given from outside, he clings to the comfort of the serious. The things that he values are not only good for him, but good for everyone. “After a more or less long crisis, either he turns back toward the world of his parents and teachers or he adheres to the values which are new but seem to him just as sure” (1980, 47). The serious man takes comfort in his belief that his cause is backed by an objective good. While

an obvious candidate is religious belief, Beauvoir says someone can become just as convinced of the objective value of a political party, an economic system, an institution, or a secular set of moral values. The serious man fails to recognize the subjectivity of his choice.

By virtue of the fact that he refuses to recognize that he is freely establishing the value of the end he sets up, the serious man makes himself the slave of that end. He forgets that every goal is at the same time a point of departure and that human freedom is the ultimate, the unique end to which man should destine himself (1980, 47-48).

The serious person believes that there is only one true answer to each moral dilemma, and that proper deliberation will allow them to arrive at the answer. Even the Kantian and utilitarian moral systems overlook ambiguity, and argue that every situation does have a true moral answer. For Kant, one must ask if one can universalize the maxim they are acting upon, and for utilitarianism, one must calculate whether their action will produce more happiness or unhappiness. In both of these cases, the individual agent is shirking responsibility for their choice, and relying on an external justification rather than their own conscience. Thus the Kantian or utilitarian ethicist is equally wrapped up in the serious world and in denial of ambiguity.

The serious man is not the only inauthentic attitude that one can take, although it is the most common. Other alternatives include nihilism, or the “decision to be nothing” and rejection of all values. Additionally, one may get swept up in being an “adventurer,” who likes to take risks and be adventurous while disregarding the freedom of the other. Or, one may be consumed by passion, and become wrapped up in a cause or value. The difference between the passionate person and the serious person is that the passionate person recognizes the subjectivity of their chosen object of value (1980, 56-74).

All of these attitudes are contrasted with the true, ethical attitude. This attitude rejects the spirit of seriousness and embraces ambiguity in its various forms: the ambiguity of our freedom/facticity, the ambiguity of situation, the ambiguity of being both subject and object, and the ambiguity of the moral world. The genuine moral attitude “wills freedom.” This means that freedom wills its own existence, accepts responsibility for one’s choices, and actively desires one’s own freedom and the freedom of others. “[F]reedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man’s project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behavior” (1980, 78). The authentic ethical attitude recognizes that we cannot do things without others, and it is only in solidarity and cooperation with others that we can fulfill our own freedom. “[T]he freedom of one man almost always concerns that of other individuals” (1980, 143).

Thus, the moral attitude positively wills the freedom of others and for them to be able to pursue their own existential projects. “[T]he individual as such is one of the ends at which our action must aim...He interests us not merely as a member of a class, a nation, or a collectivity, but as an individual man” (1980, 135). The genuine moral attitude rejects oppression in all of its forms, for true freedom is never found in unjustly restricting the freedom of the other. The genuine moral attitude understands the importance of an open future for the present action. Also, importantly, the authentically moral person, or “man of action” as Beauvoir says, knows that they often must act in the world without full knowledge or confidence in the outcome for their choice. Ethics is risky because the future is unknown. This is the direct opposite of the serious man who believes that deliberation will result in knowledge of the proper choice. But the authentic person who aims to advance the freedom of the other knows that their actions shape the outcome and hopefully produce the future they want. “[T]he man of action, in order to make a

decision, will not wait for a perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice; he must first choose and thus help fashion history” (1980, 122). The choice is never arbitrary but always aimed at facilitating an open future and freedom for the other. Beauvoir argues that this is a fundamental ethical tenet that stems from the fact that our situation is always one in which we are engaged and involved with others in the world. Thus any true embracing of our own freedom simultaneously means willing the freedom of others. “The individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others” (1980, 156)

The genuine moral attitude realizes that not every situation has just one “true” or correct answer, and that different courses of actions can be considered equally morally sound. Every situation must consider the individuals involved, the consequences as well as the intentions, and how to positively will the freedom of the other. Additionally, institutional rules hold value only inasmuch as they are facilitating individual freedom and the ability of humans to create meaning, and have no moral value outside of this end. Thus, a genuine moral attitude will not be constrained by institutions or rules if they are not enabling opportunities for the free pursuit of human projects.

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### **Meredith Grey’s Authenticity: Bomb in a Patient**

Throughout the series, Meredith consistently shows an understanding of the ambiguity of the moral realm. One of the early examples of Meredith’s embracing of existential ambiguity comes in “It’s the End of the World” and “As We Know It.” In this two-part story arc, the hospital staff

treats a patient thought to have a gunshot wound, who is later revealed to have an undetonated bomb in his body. The patient is brought to the emergency room with the hand of an emergency medical technician (EMT) inside his chest cavity. The EMT explains that she placed her hand inside the patient to stop him from bleeding out. Her partner reminds her that's against protocol, but she is unmoved by his critique. She later accompanies surgical staff to the operating room (OR). Later, staff learn that the patient was actually shot by a homemade Bazooka, and the EMT is preventing the patient from bleeding out, as well as stabilizing a homemade bomb.

When the floor is cleared of all unnecessary personnel, Grey refuses to evacuate because she believes the lead surgeon will require assistance. As the lead surgeon discusses a plan of action with the bomb squad, the anesthesiologist and EMT panic and leave the room. While other surgeons and the head of the bomb squad take cover, Grey places her hand inside the chest cavity to keep the bomb stabilized. The episode ends with Meredith repeatedly whispering, "what did I do?" Meredith acts in the moment in order to save the patient, breaking protocol in the process. Asking herself "what did I do?" shows she is uncertain about the validity of her choice and recognizes this may not have the end she desires. She takes on the Beauvoirian risk of the ethical.

In "As We Know It," cardiothoracic surgeon, Preston Burke, awaits instructions from the bomb squad on how to proceed. While waiting, he checks in with Shephard, who has also ignored orders to evacuate because he is operating on the husband of his colleague, Dr. Bailey. The surgeons exchange a short conversation, subtly validating each other's choices:

Burke: You know it was really stupid of you not to evacuate.

Shepherd: Hmm, you, too...Now, can you operate and, uh, remove the device from the guy?

Burke: After the bomb squad is through assessing him, I'm going to try.

Shepherd: Gotta say, I don't want to be the guy who kills Bailey's husband.

Burke: Well, I don't want to be the guy that kills us all.

Later, Burke returns to the OR to proceed with the bomb removal and surgery. With the guidance of a bomb squad, the hospital prepares to minimize the casualties and damage of a potential explosion. They shut down oxygen flow, send non-emergent patients to a nearby hospital, and relocate the patient because the OR was directly over the main oxygen line. Eventually, Meredith is able to safely remove the bomb from the body and hand it off to the bomb squad. As the bomb squad official is carrying it away from the operating room, it explodes and kills him. The explosion confirms that the bomb was active and highlights the life-threatening risk of Meredith's actions. Because of her heroism, the patient lives, there is minimal damage to the hospital, and the lives of countless staff are saved.

Meredith makes repeated choices to value the lives of others in spite of protocol and personal risk. She ignores the evacuation order, re-enters the operating room against her attending's order when she hears the EMT panic, and places her hand inside the patient when the EMT flees the room. Her actions prevent the patient from bleeding out and stabilize the bomb. Meredith continues to do what the EMT (and the anesthesiologist) could not. She stays in the room and remains calm and steady.

Throughout the two episodes, many characters make difficult choices but Meredith's original and continued choice stands out. The EMT breaks protocol to save the patient's life, but eventually panics and flees. Shepherd and Burke refuse the evacuation order out of responsibility as head surgeons and, in Shepherd's case, because of a personal relationship. The anesthesiologist breaks protocol and abandons his responsibility out of fear for his life. While

Meredith clearly feels fear and apprehension about the outcome of her choice, she also appears to be the only character who navigates the morally ambiguous realm with a sense of ease, breaking with protocol, professional expectations, and self-preservation, ultimately for the sake of the future of the patient and the lives of many in the hospital.

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### **Grey's Authenticity: Prisoner from Death Row**

Another example of Grey's rejection of the serious and embracing of existential authenticity begins in the Season 5 episode "Wish You Were Here." Shepherd, Grey, Yang, and Hunt are assigned to a trauma patient described as a Prisoner from Death Row (PDR). Grey responds to the patient with care and compassion, while Shepherd and Yang question his motives and description of pain. In an early scene, Meredith encourages others to take his pain seriously. Shepherd and Yang question his pain until scans prove he has an object lodged in his spine. The patient asks if the injury will help him get a stay of execution, but Shepherd assures him it won't. Shepherd and Yang remain frustrated with the patient while Grey has continued sympathy for him.

In "Sympathy for the Devil," Shepherd informs the post-surgery inmate, Dunn, that he has brain injuries, and that his "brain contusions are expanding" and require more surgery. Dunn laughs and replies, "They're going to execute me in five days...might as well take my chances with this brain thing...either way I'm going to die, Dr. Shepherd. Might as well do it on your watch." Dunn refuses surgery so Shepherd orders Yang and Grey to page him as soon as Dunn is



unconscious and unable to refuse surgery. While still conscious, Dunn tells Grey that he was abused as a child, further gaining her sympathy.

This storyline eventually intersects with a secondary storyline of a child in need of organs when Grey, while transporting Dunn, encounters Dr. Bailey transporting the child. The child notices the handcuffs and engages in conversation with the inmate:

Child: Cool, did you do something bad?

Dunn: Traffic violation. What's wrong with you kid?

Child: I need a new liver and a new intestine.

Dunn: Yeah? You want mine?

Bailey and Grey exchange a look indicating both of them are considering the possibility of saving the child with the inmate's organs. Before learning that a donor is secured, the child asks Bailey why he can't have that "nice man's organs" even though he offered them. Bailey tells him, "You know how in school there are rules you have to follow? The same thing applies here. We have to follow the rules, or else we get in big trouble. And what that man offered you was definitely against the rules." Here, Bailey shows commitment to the serious world, a world of protocols and rules, and reinforces those norms to the child.

Shepherd and Yang continue to question the inmate's motives and Grey's clarity as she continues to sympathize with him and his lack of dignity and choice. Dunn asks Grey about the child in need of organs and she informs him they found a match. Later, after complications in the child's surgery leaves him with a 24-hour window for a new donor, all of the doctors in the hospital are desperate to save the life of the child. Upon hearing about the failed transplant, Meredith, less than subtly advises the inmate on how to induce brain death. She says,

During surgery Dr. Shepherd removed a piece of your skull, which means your brain is now only covered by dura mater. It's virtually exposed. If, somehow, that area were to be damaged, it would cause intracranial bleeding, which would cause your brain to swell worse than it did today, which would result in brain death. So as your doctor, I need you to be very careful not to damage it. Do you understand what I'm saying?

When Grey leaves the room, Dunn begins slamming his head against his bed. Meredith provides the inmate with a way to bypass all legal barriers and induce his own brain death. She does this because she wants his death to be able to have meaning and also to be able to save the life of the child. Recall Beauvoir's assertion that the absence of absolute moral values is what makes what we do important: it is only because there is no one right answer to this situation that there is so much at stake. It is because there is so much to lose (a child's life) that there is also something to win. But one needs the courage to take the moral risk—Grey has it.

The third episode in the story arc, "Stairway to Heaven," begins with Dunn banging his head on the bed. The patient starts seizing, but Grey doesn't page Shepherd. Later, Grey explains to Bailey that she hasn't paged Shepherd even though the patient has inflicted additional harm to his dura and has had seizure activity. Bailey instructs Grey to follow protocol but is an eventual accomplice to her inaction by not reporting her or paging Shepherd herself. Shepherd eventually learns about the injuries and rushes Dunn to surgery. Bailey enters Shepherd's O.R. and asks him to stop operating so Dunn can be a viable donor. After some convincing, she retreats in her demands. Meanwhile, Webber asks another doctor to check for brain dead cases in the hospital and pressures a family into donating the organs of a patient who wasn't a registered organ donor. This eventually leads to a successful organ donation for the child, relieving Grey and the inmate of any pressure or convenience of organ donation.

The questionable decisions of Grey have no lasting effect on the case of the child; the child is saved through the pressure of Richard Webber. Eventually, the inmate is treated and sent back to the prison. Grey attends his execution at his request. She is emotionally devastated and ends the final episode of the story arc comforted by Shepherd and Yang, while she reflects, “I just wanted to be there for him but it was horrible.”

Whether or not Meredith’s actions had an impact on saving the life of the child, the situation illustrates Beauvoir’s point about the inherent risk of the ethical—Meredith broke protocol and moral convention in pursuit of the true ethic, and it turned out not to matter at all in terms of saving the child. But she acted as she thought she should, given the circumstances and the knowledge she had at the time. A serious person may argue that this outcome shows the importance of following rules and protocols, because in breaking them you never know what the outcome will be. It is only sticking to the moral norm or protocol that ensures you are in the moral right. But Beauvoir’s (and Meredith’s) point is that when the outcome is unknown, you stand to lose just as much as you stand to gain. Had Webber not been able to secure the voluntary donation of organs, the child would have died. The existentialist solution is not to retreat to the spirit of the serious, but to act with the conviction and knowledge that moral ambiguity in our world means you are taking a risk in pursuing the freedom of the other.

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### **Grey’s Authenticity vs. Shepherd’s Seriousness: Alzheimer’s Trial**

The different ways Grey and Shepherd approach patient care is a constant source of tension in their personal and professional relationship. This tension is most notable in a multi-episode story

arc in which Derek is attempting to cure the disease he fears Meredith might one day develop. In “Don’t Deceive Me (Please Don’t Go),” Shepherd starts a medical trial to treat early-onset Alzheimer’s, the disease that ended Ellis Grey’s career and eventually killed her. He opens the assistant role on the trial to all fifth-year residents except for Meredith, because he thinks her presence will cloud his judgement. Karev is chosen to assist, but as the trial begins, he realizes he doesn’t have the patience or optimism to work on such dire cases. He confides his frustrations with Meredith and she offers advice, based on her experience with her mom. He later backs out and gives Grey a personal recommendation because he only made it through day one of the trial by listening to her advice. Shepherd concurs and Grey serves as his resident assistant on the remainder of the trial.

After Webber’s wife Adele starts showing neurological deficits, Shepherd and Grey begin to suspect she may be suffering from Alzheimer’s. In “This is How We Do It,” Adele undergoes testing and is diagnosed to have memory loss consistent with early-onset Alzheimer’s but doesn’t meet the criteria for the trial. Derek explains to Webber the reasons Adele doesn’t qualify. Webber pressures him saying, “I know all of that. I also know that you’ll do whatever you need to do to help my wife.” The obvious decision, following medical protocols and codes of ethics, is to reject Adele’s application and call the next person on the waiting list. Shepherd hesitates and considers admitting her even though she doesn’t meet the criteria. He tells Grey, “I haven’t called yet. Maybe Richard’s right. It’s just one point.” Grey convinces him to follow protocol in this moment by reminding him of the scope of the trial. At this point, Meredith recognizes that preserving the scientific validity of the trial will ultimately help more people.

The Alzheimer’s storyline intersects an episodic storyline of the fifth-year residents competing for “Chief Resident.” In “It’s a Long Way Back,” a patient in the Alzheimer’s clinical

trial experiences complications unrelated to the treatment. The patient dies, creating an opening for Adele in the trial. Hunt, tasked to find the next chief resident, asks Karev what he intends to do to fight for the position of Chief Resident. Karev, on the spot, responds that he intends to bring “Africa patients” to the hospital for treatment, even though he had no prior plan or decision to do so.

Later, Grey notices evidence that Adele’s condition has worsened and advocates for a reassessment of Adele that proves she now qualifies for the trial. In a hallway scene between Grey and Webber, Grey discusses the formalities of Adele’s surgery. As she walks away, Webber calls her back and engages in subtle, but persuasive dialogue encouraging Grey to ensure Adele receives the treatment rather than the placebo. He states, “Thank you for everything you’ve done...it’s taken me a lot of years to realize that all I want to do is be with her. You’ve given us the best chance we can get. You’ve done *everything*.” Shortly after this encounter, Grey, using a code she previously witnessed the lab tech use, sneaks into the trial room and switches envelopes to ensure Adele gets the active agent instead of the placebo.

At this point, Karev has also engaged in questionable behavior by negotiating with a wealthy patient to fund his initiative to bring African children to the hospital for treatment. He lied about securing funding and, without external funding, would be caught in that lie. He negotiated with a patient he referred to as the “Dragon Lady,” convincing her to donate \$100,000 to his initiative by bartering care. The two storylines intersect when Alex sees Grey returning to the trial room. Karev attempts to hand a file to Grey and witnesses an envelope fall from her lab coat. He asks her, “What are you doing?” Grey replies, “I’m working.” Karev, who seems to know Grey is tampering with the trial, asks her again, “No, what are you doing?” But Karev halts his questioning because he’s interrupted by another resident revealing to him that he received a

check from “the Dragon Lady.” He is physically relieved and ceases in his questions. Meredith successfully switched the envelopes and Karev secured funding for his initiative.

At the start of the following episode, “White Wedding,” Karev and Grey argue over her behavior. Grey approaches Karev and says, “I didn’t change any data or falsify any results.” Karev interrupts, “Or switch a syringe so some sweet, sad old lady would get the drug and not the placebo...That’s what I thought.” Grey eventually responds, “Nothing I did, will change any results. It doesn’t change the potential effectiveness of the drug. It doesn’t change anything.” Karev interrupts her to say that her tampering with a trial might affect the FDA’s approval of further trials with the hospital, concluding, “It messes with me. It messes with everyone.”

In “I Will Survive,” Karev is increasingly worried he’ll lose the Chief Resident job to Meredith. In a bar scene, he talks with a fellow resident, Yang, who says, “You know it’s going to be Mer, right? It doesn’t mean you’re a bad surgeon or a bad doctor. Some people just fit the bill...She’s organized, People trust her...she’s natural.” Karev scoffs at the mention of Grey being trustworthy. Moments later, Hunt asks Karev if he’s okay because he is noticeably drunk. Karev takes a shot and says, “Meredith messed with the Alzheimer’s trial.”

In “Unaccompanied Minor,” viewers see the fall out of Karev’s confession. Shepherd and Webber question Grey about what she did but she refuses to give any details, stating, “Nothing I did affects the trial. If you don’t know what I did, the trial stays blind.” Shepherd is furious with Grey and tells her “The trial is over. You screwed me, you screwed the whole hospital, and you screwed yourself.” After Karev informs Webber of the timeframe of the incident, Webber realizes it was Adele’s case and his anger over the situation subsides. Shepherd tells Grey, “I know the fact that it’s Adele changes things for Richard, but it doesn’t for me.” The two continue to argue about it. Shepherd implies Grey acted naively and cost millions of people with the

disorder a chance for a cure. Grey explains her thinking about the situation to Shepherd. She says:

I don't think that things are simply right or wrong. Things are more complicated than that. This was more complicated than that. It's complicated that it was Adele and Richard. It's complicated that we have a drug in a box that could help her. There's nothing simple about that. I am very sorry that I messed everything up, but I would do it again.

Shepherd, exemplifying the spirit of seriousness, tells his wife, "I don't know if I can have a child with someone who doesn't know right from wrong."

The actions of Shepherd, Karev, and Webber in this story can be viewed in two different categories. Shepherd follows the institutional rules while Webber and Karev act out of personal interest. In Shepherd's case, aside from his momentary consideration of letting Adele in the study before she met the criteria, he is consistent in abiding by institutional protocol. When he learns that Grey tampered with the trial, he ends it with no consideration of how it will affect Grey, Adele, or any of the people who might potentially benefit from the study. He professionally questions Grey's ability to practice medicine and personally questions her ability to co-parent.

Webber acts out of self-interest by using his personal relationships and his position of superiority to pressure Grey and Shepherd to break the rules. He's only angry at Grey's choices until he learns it was for Adele's (his) benefit. Karev also acts out of self-interest. He begins his initiative with the sole intent of professional gain. He engages in manipulative bartering to fund it. When he thinks Grey tampered with the trial, he only advocates that she come clean because her actions could affect him and other hospital staff. He discloses her impropriety because he fears she'll get the Chief Resident position over him.

Again, Grey's actions stand out because of the motivations behind them and her ability to see that the true ethic lies beyond self-interest or institutional rules. She doesn't rigidly follow the protocols like Shepherd, but she is committed to the success of the trial. When she is compelled to break the rules, she does so for the care of a friend and mentor, and in a way that "won't tamper with the results." She pleads with Karev, Webber, and Shepherd to stay quiet about her rule breaking out of care for Adele and the other patients who might benefit from the treatment. While others are rigidly rule abiding or act out of self-interest, Grey reminds the audience that she doesn't think things are inherently right or wrong and that no decision is simple. She puts her personal relationships and career on the line to help others when following the rules conflicts with what she sees as the true ethic. She displays existential authenticity when she stands by her actions and tells Derek she would do it all over again.

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### **Grey's Authenticity: Immigration Injustice and Insurance Fraud**

After Shepherd dies, the tension between Grey's moral ambiguity and the spirit of seriousness plays out through other authoritative characters, most notably Dr. Bailey, now chief of surgery. In "What I Did For Love," *Grey's Anatomy* introduces a story arc that addresses U.S. immigration policy and the high costs of medical care. At this point in the series, Grey is dating a resident, Dr. Andrew DeLuca. The story begins when a man brings his daughter, who has recurring abdominal pain, to the free clinic. Karev and DeLuca first assess the patient. While attempting to get her medical history, the father informs them he doesn't know much about the last few months because he immigrated to the U.S. a year ago under an asylum visa. He further



tells them, “I waited to send for my family, until I had an apartment and a job. But they were detained at the border. Separated. Caged like animals. My wife, my little Dani, is still there.”

Karev orders labs and tests and instructs DeLuca to page Grey for a consult. The father expresses concern about the cost of the tests and treatment. He explains that he has a job and pays taxes, but that he can’t afford an insurance policy yet. Karev reassures him that they’ll still treat her, saying, “In Washington, we take care of sick kids, no questions asked.”

Throughout the episode, both the patient, Gabby, and her father, Luis, are noticeably scared. Gabby is afraid to be away from her father because of the trauma of being separated from her mom. Luis is scared for his daughter, his wife, and scared about how he will pay for treatment. Grey, Karev, and DeLuca attempt to calm his fears by allowing him to remain with Gabby the entire time and by assisting him with forms to obtain state insurance coverage that “is effective immediately.”

While Karev and Grey wait for Gabby’s scans, DeLuca enters and informs them that Luis makes too much money to qualify for the state coverage. Grey responds, “Are you kidding me...He makes too much for insurance and not enough to get treatment? That’s insane.” At that moment, Gabby’s scans appear and the surgeons see that she has a mass that will require surgery. When they inform Luis, he again questions how he can pay for treatment. Grey assures him that they will come up with a plan and tells him not to worry.

While the surgeons scrub in for Gabby’s surgery, Webber enters the scrub room to ask Grey if her daughter Ellis (named after her deceased mother) is alright after noticing that she’s scheduled for an ex-lap, the procedure they’re about to perform on Gabby. The other doctors quickly realize that Grey falsified the insurance forms. Grey defends her actions, saying:

I'm not shipping this little girl off to county. She may need follow-up surgeries, top-level care...And what is her father supposed to do? Tell me. Is he supposed to quit his job so then he can't feed his family? He did everything right. The system failed him. The system is broken. We know it is. So what does that say about us if we don't fix it?

Richard responds by telling her, "there's a right way and a wrong way to go about doing these things." Grey doesn't back down and tells him she's doing the surgery anyway and it's his call whether he reports her. Later, during surgery, they learn that Gabby has a form of cancer that will require chemo treatments and additional surgeries.

After surgery, Grey meets with Webber to discuss what he plans to do. Although Webber is upset with Grey for what she did and how it affects him, he ultimately decides to help her. He tells her they need to make it look like Gabby is sicker. He further explains, "If we can keep Gabby in the hospital for thirty consecutive days, a new state policy automatically kicks in, regardless of income." Richard reminds Grey that he's not doing it for her. He's doing it so the father won't get deported because of Grey's bad decision-making. Grey informs Luis of the treatment plan and ensures him that they will take excellent care of Gabby. She advises him to keep working and says he can sleep on a cot in her room while she undergoes testing and additional treatments.

In the following episode, "Drawn to the Blood," members of the hospital staff speculate about a closed-door meeting between the Chief of Surgery, Dr. Bailey; the head of the foundation who owns the hospital, Dr. Fox; and a group of unknown people. Grey spends most of the episode outside the hospital helping a fellow surgeon with emotional problems. She later returns to the hospital to talk to Bailey and Karev. While she finds Karev to talk about a matter unrelated to Gabby's case, DeLuca is called into the meeting with Bailey and Fox. They question him about Gabby's case and reveal that the other people in the room are investigators for the insurance company. The scene ends with Dr. Fox saying, "It has come to light that Dr. Meredith

Grey submitted her own daughter's name to pay for Gabriella's surgery and care, which is both a fraud and a felony. So we're going to need you to be a lot more specific."

Meanwhile, Grey and Karev enter a pressurized chamber to help save Karev's dying patient. While they're talking, DeLuca appears outside the window of the chamber accompanied by Dr. Fox. Grey tells him it's not a good time to talk. He interrupts her and falsely confesses to her that he lied about Gabby Rivera's case. He continues, "I wanted her to get the surgery very badly. And so, I didn't tell anyone, and I put another name down on her paperwork. Your daughter's name, Ellis. And I'm so sorry..." Meredith tries to stop him, but he turns and leaves with Dr. Fox. Since Grey is unable to leave the pressurized chamber, she can only watch him walk away, prepared to be charged with a felony in order to protect her.

In "Jump Into the Fog," Webber sees DeLuca handcuffed and escorted by police. He approaches and asks him what's going on. When DeLuca refuses to answer, Webber asks Bailey, who informs him that DeLuca falsified insurance forms. Bailey notices Webber's odd reaction to the news and later implies he knows more about the situation. While in surgery with Webber, she says, "I don't think he did it alone. Meredith Grey's name was on that chart. I think she participated and DeLuca's covering for her...You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" After surgery, Webber approaches Karev outside the now de-pressurized chamber and asks to talk about Grey.

Later, while Grey confesses to Bailey and Fox in an effort to save DeLuca, Karev and Webber enter the room. They all admit to the part they played in the case. They acknowledge that Grey is the person who did it, but that they all knew about it and said nothing. They appeal to the personal history they all have with Bailey and Fox, but it doesn't work. Bailey fires all

three of them on the spot. The episode (and Season 15) ends with Grey visiting DeLuca in jail.

She tells DeLuca,

Let me clean up my own messes and live in my own truth. Because what I did was wrong. But what I was trying to remedy was so much more wrong. And I stand by that...I have to find a judge and get you out of here.

She then tells him she loves him and leaves the visitation room. Grey owns and recognizes the subjectivity of her choice—she acknowledges it as her own truth. Simultaneously she acknowledges that any wrong she committed (whether by societal norm or something like Kantian ethics) was in favor of serving what she sees as a deeper moral truth.

In the premier episode of Season 16, “Nothing Left to Cling To,” the story continues with the fall out of Grey’s actions. She consults with a lawyer who tells her, “We’ll schedule a hearing. You’ll be deeply repentant. You’ll get a couple of weeks of community service at a free clinic, and you’ll pay a fine.” When Grey inquires about her medical license, her lawyer tells her “that’s up to the board if they want to pursue action, but I’d say it’s highly unlikely.” As the episode progresses through weeks, DeLuca returns to Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital, Karev and Webber start working at a community hospital, and Grey has her trial.

At the start of the trial, her lawyer instructs her to be repentant. But when the judge questions her actions, given she’s partial owner in the hospital and could afford to pay for the surgery or do it pro bono, Grey responds,

The little girl has cancer. She needs hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of care over a period of years, and I didn’t think that her very proud, hardworking father would accept charity from me. And I didn’t think he should have to. The system should have supported them, and the system is broken.

The judge interrupts her to ask if she regrets her choices. Against counsel, Grey stands by her actions, stating, “To the extent that I can, knowing there’s a very sick little girl out there who’s beginning to feel better.” Grey’s lawyer quickly pleads with the judge, reminding him that Grey has three children, and shouldn’t serve prison time. The audience later sees Grey picking up garbage on the street. She receives an email informing her that the medical board is evaluating her license. While it is unclear what will come of Grey and her ability to practice medicine, she is confident in having acted in good faith.

Throughout this story, the audience sees Luis and the surgeons struggle to act ethically in an unethical system. Luis followed the conventions for societal success, but is stuck in an impossible loop of working to give his family greater security and making too much money to qualify for government insurance in a state with more progressive policies and resources than most in the country. His wife and daughter attempted to follow the same rules, legally seeking asylum, but since the rules were changed, they were treated like criminals.

The surgeons, most notably Grey, recognize that the system is flawed. As doctors, they are expected to follow certain protocols and follow the law. Grey recognizes that the only way the child can receive the quality care she deserves as a human is to break the law. By using her privilege and her child’s privilege to secure care for Gabby, Grey highlights the injustice of policies that prioritize some lives over others. Although Grey acts alone, her actions are quickly discovered by the other surgeons. They offer her support by verbally validating her choices, keeping her secret, helping her develop a plan moving forward, and taking the fall for and with her. Grey refutes their efforts to shield her from consequence. She stands by her actions with pride at doing the right thing under seemingly impossible circumstances.

In contrast, the leaders of the hospital, Bailey and Fox, display a stricter, rule-abiding approach reflective of the serious world. There is evidence of their shared concern for Gabby and Luis, but they display the spirit of seriousness in dealing with the actions of the surgeons. Despite any sympathy they might have for the ethical motivations of the parties involved, and despite the strong personal relationships they have with all of them, they rigidly follow protocol and issue strict consequences to the surgeons who did not.

Grey's approach to the moral scenario shows that she values the freedom and potential future of the other over institutional rules. Importantly, she approaches the moral problem in its specificity and considers the individuals involved. Her courtroom testimony mentions the girl's father's hard work and pride. Grey sought a moral solution that considered the desired ends of the other agents involved. Knowing accepting charity would be humiliating for the father, she creatively designs a solution to the moral dilemma that includes his valued ends. Importantly, Grey does not back down from her conviction that what she did was the right thing for *her* to do. Had she told the judge that she regretted her choice, she may have been granted a more lenient sentence. But Grey, in a stunning moment of existential authenticity, refuses to express regret for her actions. She acknowledges what she did. She acknowledges it was *her* choice. She does not back down from her conviction that the true ethic lies in positively facilitating the freedom and future of the other, rather than following institutional rules.

There are few things more illustrative of the serious world than a court of law: there are the agents of the legal system, the rules that have been broken, the witnesses who see you have broken the rules, the judge, the ultimate authority figure, the enforcer of the moral authority of the law, who will sentence you, all working together to form the pinnacle of the serious. But as has been shown repeatedly over the groundbreaking 16 seasons of the show, Meredith Grey has

never been enthralled by the spirit of seriousness. Perhaps this originates in her atypical upbringing in which she witnessed moral ambiguity from an extremely young age. Beauvoir argues that adults find comfort in the serious world because it reminds them of the world of their childhood. But the serious world was never comfortable to Meredith. She had to call 911 after her mother's attempted suicide at the age of only five. She watched her mother and Webber's relationship fall apart. She spent long hours in the hospital alone while her mother performed surgeries. The serious world resembles the childlike world, but Meredith's childhood was never childlike. She never found the black and white world of the "godlike" adults comforting. They were never gods to her. She realized as a very young child that the comfort of the serious world is but an illusion, that life is messy and complex, that it is human beings who give life meaning and purpose, and that the deepest moral truth is the pursuit of a meaningful, open future for others.

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## **Conclusion**

Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that the true existentialist ethic required navigating a complex moral realm, embracing our existential freedom, and positively willing the freedom of the other. Importantly it also means giving up the comfort of the serious world and accepting the risk and responsibility that comes with living an ethical life. True existential authenticity recognizes that it is you who are responsible for your moral choice, not religion, society, intuitions, laws, or universal moral formulas. Ethics comes from us. It also requires recognizing that our own freedom is facilitated by positively willing a freedom and future for others.

Meredith Grey, starting with her atypical childhood and progressing through a lifetime of challenges and tragedies, perfectly exemplifies Beauvoir's authentic person. She rejects the spirit of seriousness, having never found it convincing. She approaches moral problems in their specificity, noting her relationships with the people involved. She is willing to bypass legal and institutional rules and protocols in order to pursue a deeper moral truth. She is willing to accept the risk and responsibility of engaging with the moral realm, knowing you never come to perfect knowledge that you are doing the right thing and it is possible for things to turn out other than you intended. And she stands behind her actions, acknowledges them as her own, and takes responsibility for her choice.

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## References

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