

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S CASE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL AUTONOMY AND THE POSSIBILITIES WITHIN THE METAPHYSICAL NOVEL

UMA DEFESA DA AUTONOMIA FILOSÓFICA DE SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR E AS POSSIBILIDADES DO ROMANCE METAFÍSICO

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ABSTRACT

The work intends to prove a case of Beauvoir's autonomy in relation to Sartre by offering an account of the fundamental role that Literature, Philosophy and their liaison, played on her development as a philosopher whose intellectual production has an importance of its own.

KEYWORDS: Literature; Philosophy; Beauvoir; Sartre; Metaphysical Novel

RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem por objetivo apresentar uma defesa da autonomia intelectual de Simone de Beauvoir em relação ao pensamento de Jean-Paul Sartre. Para isso, será feita uma breve análise do papel que literatura e filosofia possuem no desenvolvimento da obra beauvoariana, demonstrando que a sua produção intelectual carrega em si uma importância própria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura; filosofia; Beauvoir; Sartre; Romance Metafísico

I

Until much recently, references to Simone de Beauvoir in Philosophy compendia and textbooks were limited to classify her as a woman of letters, the life-long companion of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and his faithful disciple and lover. In the classic literature about Existentialism, she was considered to be a character of limited importance.

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Some thinker "we might mention, without discussing," writes Jean Wahl, "whose theories are similar to those of Sartre, though sometimes applied in different domains of experience" (1949, p. 31). For instance, as Beauvoir scholars claim¹, the story of her incorporation by the philosophical canon unveils itself unhurriedly and, her reputation as a philosopher is a recent achievement that owes its enduring and broader success to the new edition of her works and their latest translations into English. Thus offering more access to her core philosophical ideas and the means to fight against whatever remains of the notion that her intellectual production is anchored in nothing other but Sartrean-like musings.

In spite of the intricate life project that Beauvoir and Sartre had in common, there are very little "Sartrean-like" ideas at play in Beauvoir's philosophical doctrine; in fact, its development will shine a light on the fact that her notions of freedom and alterity differ from their Sartrean counterparts on the basis of her belief that one should overcome a tradition based on subjectivity and build a philosophy or an *ethics* of relations. Thus rendering void the attempts to label her philosophical contribution as a Sartrean-like Existentialism, and denouncing those attempts as another expression of a tradition that, throughout the last century, tried to cast a shadow upon Beauvoir's philosophical project as a means to support its gender biased patterns.

Therefore, in order to establish Beauvoir's philosophical autonomy in relation to Sartre, I would like to offer a brief account of the important relation that Literature and Philosophy had in her work, and how through that relation she was able to mature her notions of freedom and alterity, in order to present an intellectual production that stands on its own.

¹ "The story of Beauvoir's incorporation to the philosophical canon is one of a very slow appearance. She is conspicuously absent from Paul Edward's influential *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), where Sartre benefits from his own six-page-long entry. Anthologies on Continental philosophy and existentialism rarely include her, and when they do, they often present her as a minor contributor to the existentialist movement. One recent exception to this rule is Daigle's collection, *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics* (2006), in which a long chapter on Beauvoir (by Christine Daigle) presents her thought on par with that of other existentialist figures (see 120-141). The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published in 1998, presents a good picture. Beauvoir has her own entry (as does Sartre), and she is discussed as a contributor to phenomenology, existentialism, and in particular existentialist ethics. Beauvoir has been gaining in reputation as a philosopher, but this is a rather recent phenomenon." In: DAIGLE, Christine. GOLOMB, Jacob. **Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence**, p. 10.

II

In 2008, the publication of the *Cahiers de Jeunesse* brought a fresh perspective to the debate concerning the status conferred to the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Where once prevailed the opinion that theirs had been a relationship of influence, now there is a growing understanding that they had maintained a relationship of cooperation that, in spite of its intimacy, did not harm their intellectual autonomy.

The *Cahiers de Jeunesse* is a set of six private journals written by Beauvoir from 1926 to 1930, during her years as a philosophy student. They offer a record of her life prior to her meeting with Sartre in 1929 and disclose the early blossoming of an intellectual who carefully devoured her readings, schemed her study hours and her routine, whilst trying to develop her own ideas by questioning and struggling to establish her own self-identity.

The diaries are "packed with psychological and philosophical analysis and with notes about her readings and her projects for future work," (MOI, 2002, p. 7) for instance, in one exemplary passage of the journal, Beauvoir expresses the wish

To write "essays about life" which are not romances but philosophy *vaguely* linked to a story. [But] where thought is essential and where I shall try to find the truth about a) the irrationality of life (the given is irrational); b) the impossibility to analyze it; c) the inutility of life. (BEAUVOIR, 2008, p. 344)

These lines belong to an entry from April, 1927 and as much as they foresee the structure of Beauvoir's future literary and philosophical project, they are also important to show that she would have become a writer even if she had not met Sartre.

Writing is a recurring ideal for the young student. In many other entries from 1927 she repeatedly manifests her wish and, as a matter of fact, she opens the year's note-book saying that "she would love to write a novel," (BEAUVOIR, 2008, p. 307) and to dedicate her life to a work she believes in. (MOI, 2002, p. 9)

Beauvoir's conviction on her intellectual project is so intense that she even claims herself ready to sacrifice personal happiness –

Oh! I can really predict my life at the moment: (...) a passionate and desperate research. No love will be able to stop it. If one day I get married, I shall take my philosophy with me. The essential is there and in order to possess it I would even

accept never to get married. No. Because love is part of life, then philosophy must belong to life. (BEAUVOIR, 2008, p. 387)

But even back then, literature itself was not the final goal for Simone de Beauvoir. Instead, she had already given signs that, literature ought to be a vehicle for philosophical ideas which, as she maintains, should be vaguely linked to fiction. This idea is embedded in her claim that philosophy should belong to life (BEAUVOIR, 2008, p. 387) and will find its mature voice in *Literature and Metaphysics* (1946). In the latter work, Beauvoir maintains that there is no insurmountable distinction between literature and philosophy and that both of them are just different ways to achieve "an original grasping of metaphysical reality" (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 273), i.e., of different ways to grasp the fact that metaphysical situations are concrete situations in which the whole meaning of one's life is at stake.

In that essay Beauvoir gives birth to her theorization of the *metaphysical novel*, i.e., a piece of writing which would provide "a disclosure of existence unequalled by any other mode of expression," (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 276) and that would also be able to portray philosophy as an attitude.

With the *metaphysical novel* Beauvoir exposes all the strength and novelty of her philosophical framework. There, whatever she wrote about alterity, ambiguity, freedom and gender, appears in motion, i.e., in its integrity, as part of the whole of reality, as being disclosed in the "living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought." (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 274) But she does it ingenuously, testing the limits of the traditional conception of the novel, avoiding to reduce style into formulas and to run the risk of translating the signification of her fiction into abstract concepts. A metaphysical novel *par excellence* should keep the reader attuned with a metaphysical mood by referring to the reconstruction of an experience "on an imaginary plane that is prior to any elucidation." (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 270)

Much like the late Heidegger's analysis of poetry and the work of art, in which he inquires what is the nearness that brings poetry and thinking together in the same neighborhood, Beauvoir maintains that what brings literature and philosophy into convergence is their character of world-disclosiveness, i.e., the fact that there lies no unsurpassable barrier between subjective and objective knowledge, and that both of them

are bound to show, to make appear or set free the truth about the human condition. Of which the novel, i.e., literature, she says, will be the most appropriate medium to mirror the fact that

In the real world the meaning of an object is not a concept graspable by pure understanding. Its meaning is the object as it is disclosed to us in the overall relation we sustain with it, and which is action, emotion and feeling. We ask novelists to evoke this flesh-and-blood presence whose complexity and singular and infinite richness exceed any subjective interpretation. (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 270)

Thus culminating in the fact that the closest a philosophy draws itself to the study and comprehension of subjectivity, the nearer it will be to literature.

This is a thesis that is maintained by Merleau-Ponty in an essay called *Metaphysics and the Novel*, where he supports the style and preoccupations portrayed by Beauvoir in *She came to Stay*, and notices that even if "for a long time it looked as if philosophy and literature not only had different ways of saying things but had different objects as well," (MERLEAU-PONTY, p. 26) the importance of Simone de Beauvoir's work for the rise of an existentialist phenomenology lays in resuming a tendency already portrayed in the 19th century, when the frontiers between literature and metaphysics started to lose its clear contours as a result of the appearance of "hybrid modes of expression having elements of the intimate diary, the philosophical treatise, and the dialogue." (MERLEAU-PONTY, p. 27)

This statement is not far removed from Beauvoir's claim that even though there may be only one original grasping of metaphysical reality, there are two different ways to make it explicit. That being said, we can legitimately

(...) strive to elucidate its universal meaning in abstract language, thus developing theories where metaphysical experience will be described, and more or less systematized in its essential character, thus as timeless and objective. (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 273)

But as soon as this approach hoists towards unanimity or tries to affirm that its timelessness and objective aspect alone is real, then it suddenly excludes another path toward the manifestation of the truth – an equally primordial path with respect to subjectivity and the historicity of human experience.

In other words "the more keenly a philosopher underscores the role and value of subjectivity, the more he will be led to describe the metaphysical experience in its singular and temporal form." (BEAUVOIR, 2004, p. 274)

In order to prove her point, Beauvoir acknowledges the worth of a 19th century philosopher, Hegel, who posited his thought halfway between the out worldly realm of abstract notions and pure thought, – and the concrete situation of the living experience of men. A paradigmatic example of this approach can be found in the almost literary form that Hegel employs while writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with its use of *literary myth* – metaphors and examples drawn from literature, – either taken from Greek tragedy (Sophocles' *Antigone*) or from German Romanticism (Goethe's *Faust*), in order to offer his readers with the appropriate relatedness to the *fate of self-consciousness*.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that Hegel will appear once again in *All Men are Mortal*, a novel written by Beauvoir and coincidentally published the same year as her essay about literature and metaphysics.

In that particular novel, Beauvoir develops her thoughts about temporality and the necessary affirmation of finitude. This is needed for the emergence of the possibility of acknowledging the other and relating to it through the fundamental ambiguity of our condition, i.e., the fact that at every moment man can "grasp the non-temporal truth of his existence," (BEAUVOIR, 2011, p. 7) while at the same time this truth might escape him in the experience of the present.

But what, according to Beauvoir, does our fundamental ambiguity disclose about the human condition? As I have quickly pointed out in the beginning of our analysis, Beauvoir's philosophy developed itself in the shape of an *ethic of relations*. There, contrary to the *early Sartrean* belief that "the other only truly emerges through the negative limitations he imposes on my freedom," (KAIL, 2009, p. 143) she understands that the world is populated by other freedoms and that the affirmation of our freedom depends on the acknowledgement of the consciousness and freedom of others.

With Beauvoir's approach, the Other becomes not only a component of the situation, but its constituent part. For Beauvoir, the situation is more than simply a confrontation between a subject and an object ruled by an interplay of representations. Consequently, Beauvoir makes it a rule to surpass the problem of the other that is pronounced on at such length in philosophical manuals and to study instead the various possible varieties of alterity. (KAIL, 2009, p. 157)

From the beginning of her ethical investigations in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) Beauvoir maintains that the transcendental goal of human freedom is the constant striving toward the freedom of the others. This is far from Sartre's *duel of the eyes* in which he depicts the moment when the Other appears to me and threatens to tear my world apart through its own organizing power of the world – in a moment of competition that enslaves the individual both as Subject and Object, thus making it impossible for them to relate to each other. Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the '*en-soi*' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency. (BEAUVOIR, 1953, p. 27)

Our situation comprises within itself the aspects of human existence that we either did not choose, e.g., place of birth, gender and other forms of embodiment; or that we cannot change, i.e., our past. It is composed of *others* – out there, in a world of men. Thus the essence of the Subject no longer rests within himself, in the absolute nature of his freedom; instead, he must continuously transcend the facticity of his *en-soi* [being-in-itself] and disclose the truth about his freedom as *being-with-others*. Contrary to Sartre's early comment in *Being and Nothingness* that one grasps the other as an object to which

"(...) if I experience him with evidence, I fail to know him; if I know him, if I act upon him, I only reach his being-as-object and his probable existence in the midst of the world. [Where] No synthesis of these two forms is possible." (SARTRE, 1978, p. 302)

Beauvoir maintains that if the transcendence of man denies the possibility of establishing reciprocal relationships between equally free agents, it is "condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it's cut off from its goals." (BEAUVOIR, 2011, p. 81)

In an essay dating from 1946 Beauvoir claims that the metaphysical basis for the idea of justice lays in a reciprocal acknowledgement of each other's freedom and that the denial of such entails a fundamental form of injustice. Thus, even if she maintains in *The*

Second Sex that "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness," (BEAUVOIR, 1953, p. 17) she also offers that "individuals and groups are obliged to recognize the reciprocity of their relations." (BEAUVOIR, 1953, p. 17)

III

With regards to alterity, the contribution of Beauvoir to French Existentialism remains pivotal and rather original due to her interpretation and early criticism of Heidegger and Hegel and her claim that it would be impossible to fund an ethics upon Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and the aforementioned claim of the impossibility of synthesis between the two possible ways to know the other.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, her second philosophical essay, published in 1945; Beauvoir fulfilled the imperative she had established for herself in her youth journals:

Not to take philosophy as a joke. Systemize my thoughts and believe in the worth of ideas. Read as if it had just happened and not with the unspoken certainty that it might be false. Deepen, take everything seriously. Be even more implacable against myself and less skeptical in regard to others. (BEAUVOIR, 2008, p. 378)

This was an effort that was acknowledged by the jury of the *agrégation* examination in 1929. At that time, Beauvoir, who had been attending a catholic school, became the youngest student ever to pass the exam, second only to Sartre, and although the jury had a hard time setting the merits of their positions, its members acknowledged that "Sartre was brilliant but that she [Beauvoir] was more rigorous and technical. They agreed that, of the two, she was the philosopher!" (COHEN-SOLAL apud DAIGLE & GOLOMB, 2009, p. 2)

Since the beginning of her career, Beauvoir's personal imperative for a serious, unprejudiced and in-depth commitment to ideas became that which allowed her to engage in a technical and rigorous debate with the philosophical tradition. One important and determining example of this debate can be exemplified by Beauvoir's interpretation of Hegel's philosophy and more specifically, of his master-slave dialectic. Much differently from what is commonly accepted, Beauvoir's readings of Hegel are not reduced to the famous introductory lectures of Kojève. Many picture her as having gained their knowledge

of Hegel through Kojève along with Sartre and others famous *normaliens* in the 1930s, although she insisted that she had not taken part in any of his lectures.

Her readings of Hegel are broader and provide us with an all-encompassing interpretation and criticism of the Hegelian system. It is documented that Beauvoir had comprehensive knowledge of Hegel's *Logic*, of his *Philosophy of Nature*, of the *Philosophy of Right*, and of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Meryl Altman wisely claims:

(...) (unlike many of her contemporaries) she [Beauvoir] did not confine herself to following out a single thread or theme in his [Hegel's] work but tried instead to come to terms with his texts in their entire, strange complexity, without ever becoming a prisoner of his system. (ALTMAN, 2007, p. 77)

She developed her reading of Hegel by herself in two distinct moments of her life – as a young student in the 1920s, when she found herself delving into Hegelian philosophy despite the French Academia's disdain toward Hegel at the time;² and during the early 1940s, at the time of the German occupation, when Beauvoir spent her days at the Bibliothèque Nationale trying to understand the German Philosopher. The length of her efforts to understand Hegel and her admiration for his philosophy can be summed up by the following passage of her diaries of the period: "The more I went along, the more I separated from Hegel, without ceasing to admire him." (BEAUVOIR apud ALTMAN, 2007, p. 70)

For instance, although Beauvoir claims that *All Men are Mortal* is clearly a novel developed out of her intensive dialogue with Hegelian philosophy, in which she explores the possibility of the Hegelian notion of the mutual acknowledgement given through the development of the categories of interaction, of work and of language, she also manages to add her own criticism to the formula. By describing a main character who has become immortal and therefore has seen his particularity subsumed in a universality which does not account for the ambiguous nature of man's life – for the tragedy inherent in one's own finitude, Beauvoir criticizes what she considers to be Hegel's optimism, i.e., his faith in the Absolute and in History – his lack of sensibility to the fact that difference and contradiction

²Simone de Beauvoir was a student of Jean Wahl, the author of *Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel* (1929). There is also evidence that Beauvoir would have been introduced to Hegel's thought already at *Cours Désir*, through Father Charles Lahr's *Manuel de Philosophie*. Simons and Peters write that "Despite its weakness Lahr's textbook did introduce Beauvoir to Hegel's theory of the opposition of the self and the nonself (...)" See SIMONS, Margaret A. and PETERS, Hélène N. in SIMONS, Margaret A. (org.). **Simone de Beauvoir**: Philosophical Writings, p. 16.

within the subject are the witnesses to our fundamental ambiguity, i.e., the notion that the series of phenomena that discloses the truth about man's existence is marked by the fact that man is finite and at the same time tries to run away from his own finitude; that man is free, but at the same time ventures with the possibility to abdicate his own liberty, that man is fundamentally alone but at the same time logically dependent upon others.

In the novel, the acknowledgement of the finitude of man – his existence in time and the inevitability of his death – is what accounts for the fact that he can build reciprocal relations with other men partaking in that same situation. While in Hegel's work the particularity of man and his finitude are dialectically suppressed in the universal, for Beauvoir an existentialist ethics should account for a plurality of finite men transcending in direction of their own projects, through their experience of their own situation as "individuals within which particularity is as radical and irreducible as their own subjectivity." (BEAUVOIR, 1953, p. 17)

With Heidegger, Beauvoir maintains that her philosophy is based on difference – instead of investigating being by taking the absolute concept as an object of thought. Beauvoir seeks to take difference *qua* difference as an object of thinking: a thinking that emerges and develops itself in finitude.

For Beauvoir, the bounds of love - the bounds out of which our ethical and philosophical experience is made possible - can only be established in the recognition of our fundamental separateness and finitude and their acceptance by other beings who partake in that same situation.

Man belongs to his own time; the morality covering his human acts is the morality of his time. Thus, when he loses grip of his finitude, man becomes detached from society and, consequently, from community life. Only as finitude and by the disclosure of this finitude are human actions capable to have meaning for others. In a life conjugated in the present, where the present moment can be seen as an intersection between past and future, our existence is absolute because it is capable to negate our own path. The meaning of our actions does not emerge from universality, from a Hegelian spiritual community of self-consciousness, but from the relation of two radically finite subjects willing to disclose the truth of their project and to allow others to do the same. (ALBUQUERQUE KATZ, 2009, p. 46).³

³ Author's own translation.

These notions were developed by Beauvoir in the first half of the 20th century. She provided us with an existentialist ethics which not only criticized the philosophical work of her partner but which also questioned a whole philosophical tradition. By doing so, she offered us a mind-blowing picture of the fragmentary reality in which we live and applied this picture to many domains of social life, e.g., the perception and acknowledgement of gender identity, death and old age. Thus it would be unfair to leave her out of the philosophical canon, to ignore her ideas or simply regard her as Sartre's follower.

There is a need for a continuing tradition of Beauvoirian studies not only linked to gender, feminist and literature scholarships but to philosophy itself. Only by means of the serious studies of her works and of their relevance to the present situation of man or to the development of philosophical inquiry, will we be able to overcome the implicit bias related to her trajectory – and maybe, indirectly, to overcome the implicit bias related to the trajectory of many other intellectual women: turning philosophy and the public perception of philosophical activity into a more gender friendly realm.

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