THINKING WITH SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR... AND BEYOND

PENSANDO COM SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR… E PARA ALÉM DE

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ABSTRACT

In my article, I address what I perceive to be Beauvoir's fundamental preoccupation, namely ethics. Her ethical thinking is grounded in ontological and phenomenological considerations that allow her to think through interpersonal relations. Because this is what drives her philosophy, I consider her fundamental preoccupation to be ethical. The problem of alterity is one that Beauvoir seeks to address in her work. Discussing this, I engage with the question of its origin and the problem of influence between Sartre and Beauvoir. This leads me to an analysis of how Beauvoir tackles the problem of alterity in *She Came to Stay*. My claim is that the novel does not offer a theory of alterity and that only seeds of such a theory are to be found therein. Nonetheless, Beauvoir's thinking in the novel was influential on Sartre. But it can also be argued that the influence remains reciprocal.

KEYWORDS: Beauvoir; Sartre; Ethics; Alterity; Ambiguity

RESUMO

Em meu artigo remeto ao que percebo ser a preocupação fundamental de Beauvoir, a ética. Seu pensamento ético está fundamentado em considerações ontológicas e fenomenológicas que lhe permitem pensar as relações interpessoais. Uma vez que é isso que impulsiona sua filosofia, considero que sua preocupação fundamental é ética. O problema da alteridade é um dos que Beauvoir busca abordar em sua obra. Discutindo isso, trato da questão da sua origem e do problema da influência com relação a Sartre e Beauvoir. Isso me leva a uma análise de como Beauvoir aborda o problema da alteridade em *A Convidada*. Minha posição é que o romance não apresenta uma teoria da alteridade, mas sementes de tal teoria encontram-se nele. No entanto, o pensamento de Beauvoir, apresentado nesse romance, exerceu influência sobre Sartre. Mas também se pode argumentar que a influência entre ambos seja recíproca.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Beauvoir; Sartre; Ética; Alteridade; Ambiguidade

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An examination of the themes pursued in Beauvoir's writings shows that the underlying fundamental preoccupation in her works is ethical. She is concerned with the nature of interpersonal relations and the flourishing of human beings as individuals and as beings with-others—as intersubjective beings. While her fundamental concern is ethical, she is not concerned with coming up with ethical prescriptions as such. In fact, she warns us against this in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Toward the conclusion of the book she writes: "It will be said that these considerations remain quite abstract. What must be done practically? Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naïve abstraction. [...] Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods."[1] However, while she is not concerned with devising ethical rules of conduct and guidelines for ethical decision-making, she is concerned with the more fundamental question of how to live authentically as ambiguous beings. Her ethical thinking is grounded in ontological and phenomenological considerations that allow her to think through interpersonal relations. Because this is what drives her philosophy, I consider her fundamental preoccupation to be ethical.

It was because of the attention she paid to ethical questions that I first turned to her writings.[2] Looking for the key to Sartre's ethics, a key that is difficult to unearth in his writings, I looked to Beauvoir for that missing key—a presentation of the ethics missing in Sartre's work. This is a mistake that many Sartreans have made, including Thomas C. Anderson an influential Sartrean scholar.[3] The problem is that Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a phenomenological-ontological inquiry, paints a daunting portrait of

[1] de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press, 1976, p. 134.

[2] A little bit of autobiography is in order to contextualize my approach to Beauvoir's works. When I first encountered Beauvoir as an undergraduate student, little did I know that I would end up spending so much time researching her philosophy. I was enrolled in a Great Books program and we were reading excerpts of *The Second Sex*. I walked away from class convinced by my professor that she was not much of a feminist but that this book was still an interesting assessment of the situation of women in the 1940s. For my graduate work, I turned to the existentialist philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre and spent a few years exploring the similarities between them. Beauvoir became a part of this inquiry as she provided me with invaluable information on Sartre's development through her series of autobiographies. Sartre's letters to her were also a source of potential information on what he was reading when. As part of my inquiry, I was examining the convergences between Nietzsche's and Sartre's ethics. But then the problem arose: what is Sartre's ethics? That is how Beauvoir entered my life again and this time for good as a philosopher.

[3] In particular see the following two books: *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1979 and *From Authenticity to Integral Humanity: Sartre's First Two Ethics*, Chicago: Open Court Press, 1993.

interpersonal relations. The being for-others of the individual is alienating and the Other is posited as one who steals the world from me, one who holds a truth about me to which I have no access, one who objectifies me. "The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict."[4] The reader of *Being and Nothingness* is left with one of two impressions, or possibly both: 1) since the essence of our relation to others is conflictual, no ethics is possible or 2) because the essence of our relation to others is conflictual, it is imperative to devise an ethics that will regulate those relations. Sartre believes that it is important to think about ethics and in fact concludes his treatise by promising that the ethical considerations he brought up in the concluding pages would be addressed in a future work. While he did fill ten notebooks with notes for an ethics, the promise was never fulfilled. Sartre's struggle with ethics are documented in the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, published posthumously in 1984 and containing two of the ten notebooks. Two sets of notes from the 1950s, the "Rome Lectures" and the "Notes for Cornell," also give us some insight into his ethical thinking. However, all these efforts leave important questions unanswered and leave some tensions unsatisfactorily addressed. An example is the notion of the conversion to the Other. Realizing the bind in which he has put himself in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre proposes in the *Notebooks for an Ethics* that despite the ontological truth of the conflictual relation with the Other, one must convert to the Other. One must—and the implication is that one can—convert to the other, that is, wilfully reach out to the Other and engage in caring relations in order to become authentic. However, there is no explanation as to how such a leap is possible. And in fact, it is not possible on the basis of the ontology presented in *Being and Nothingness*. While it may not be necessary to reject it wholesale, important revisions need to be made to Sartre's ontological positions for them to cohere with his proposals in the *Notebooks*. The necessary correctives can be found in Beauvoir.

Beauvoir's understanding of the human being as fundamentally ambiguous allows for the possibility of the conversion to the Other that Sartre was looking to establish. Because she understands that we are ambiguous beings engaged in ambiguous relations, that is our relations are both conflictual and harmonious, she sees a possibility for individuals to relate to others in a positive fashion. This is the piece that is missing from

[4] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes, revised edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 451.

Sartre and this explains why Sartreans turn to Beauvoir for help. But when they do and claim that Beauvoir is exposing Sartre's ethics in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, they are mistaken. She is exposing her own ethics based on an ontological and phenomenological understanding of the human that is close to Sartre but essentially different.[5]

Scholars working on Beauvoir's thought very often find themselves in a position where they have to address the philosophical relation with Sartre. This is in many ways inevitable.[6] Beauvoir and Sartre share some ontological positions. Acknowledging this does not diminish what she or he is doing and achieving.[7] In fact, given the type of relation they had—quite a complex and intricate one—it is quite conceivable that they had discussions and shared ideas, each theorizing them in their own way and in light of their own individual preoccupations and other ideas which they did not share or agree on. Understanding their relation in this way opens the door to the possibility that many ideas were initially Beauvoir's and that Sartre theorized them before she did and vice versa. To go as far as to say that he had no philosophical ideas and that they were all hers, as the Fullbrooks have

[5] Part of the reasons why Sartreans may be mistaken in this way may have to do with Beauvoir's own claims that she was not a philosopher and that Sartre was a philosopher, effectively denying that she had had any influence on him. Margaret A. Simons' relentless work on the question of influence and editorial work bringing to light the philosophical development of Beauvoir from her youth onwards has illuminated this influence. Of particular interest are the interviews with Beauvoir reproduced in *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. On the question of influence, see the volume I co-edited with Jacob Golomb, *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

[6] Following the paper I presented at the Simone de Beauvoir Society meeting in Eugene, Oregon, in 2011, I had an interesting exchange with Peg Simons on this matter. She was lamenting the fact that we were unable to deal with Beauvoir in her own terms. For her, the paradigm shift she was seeing (or anticipating?) in Beauvoir studies entailed that we had to stop constantly referencing Sartre while talking about Beauvoir's philosophy and comparing her to him. Simons' worry is understandable given all the work she has done to pull Beauvoir out from under Sartre's shadow (see previous note). I am very thankful to her for the exchange we had and the many challenges she has put forward to me. What follows in this paper is an attempt at answering Simons' concern(s).

[7] Debra Bergoffen makes an excellent point about this in her recension of Penelope Deutscher's recent book, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. She applauds Deutscher's analysis of the web of influences (including Sartre) that operated on Beauvoir's thinking. Bergoffen says that it is important to acknowledge that Beauvoir, *just like any other philosopher*, was influenced by an array of thinkers and that from there she was able to elaborate her own philosophy. She also applauds Deutscher's critique of Beauvoir, underlying that the critique does not lead to a dismissal of Beauvoir. If we are indeed beyond sorting out the question of influence and demonstrating that Beauvoir was a philosopher in her own right, we have a duty to proceed to this critique as we would with other philosophers. See Bergoffen's recension: *philoSOPHIA. A Journal of Continental Feminism*, volume 1.2, pp. 251-256.

argued,[8] is too extreme just as it is too extreme to say that Beauvoir was Sartre's clone, as many commentators on Sartre and continental philosophy have claimed. That she had philosophical ideas, was interested in philosophy, and in fact effaced herself in favor of Sartre has all been demonstrated.[9]

What has triggered a lot of interest with regards to the question of who originated the philosophical ideas is the exploration of the question of other consciousnesses in *She Came To Stay*. This was a problem she had been puzzled by and interested in for many years, as the early diaries show. The novel revolves around Françoise's discovery of the dynamic between consciousnesses as Xavière enters her life and disrupts the unity she had built between herself and Pierre. Xavière is the alienating Other; she is the opaque consciousness that sees Françoise and holds thoughts about her to which she is denied access. Françoise is confronted to this very abruptly. This amounts to her discovery of her intersubjective being, namely her ambiguous being-with-others. Arguably, she fails to handle the discovery of this facet of her being since the novel closes on the murder of Xavière by Françoise. She cannot stand this alienating Other.

This literary exploration of the problem of other consciousnesses is very interesting. While it exposes some of Beauvoir's ontological beliefs, it does not commit her to an ethical position on the nature of the interpersonal relations she describes, successful ones or failed ones. The way she exposed the problem shows that she was interested in it and not that she had a theory about it. She may have had one at the time, or an early formulation of one, but *She Came to Stay* is a literary text and not a clear indication of a theory. It is true that there is no sharp distinction between literature and metaphysics for Beauvoir. In the essay "Literature and Metaphysics" she explains that a novel can be philosophical and help unveil concepts and orient our thinking about them and thus eventually formulate a theory. Novelistic writing is a method of philosophizing that fares better than systematic writing as we find it in treatises because it allows one - the writer and the reader - to capture the concrete and lived aspects of concepts and theories. Therefore, the literary nature of her exploration of the problem of other consciousnesses does not entail the absence of a theory

[8] See their *Sex and Philosophy: Rethinking de Beauvoir and Sartre*. London and New York: Continuum, 2008.

[9] Again, see Margaret A. Simons' works as well as Daigle and Golomb, *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*.

of alterity in *She Came to Stay*. My claim, however, is not that it is absent. Rather, I claim that there are seeds of a theory of alterity in the novel but that it is not complete and that it is also somewhat problematic and inconsistent.

In the novel, the "claim"[10] is made that Xavière's insertion in the relation between Pierre and Françoise is the upsurge of the Other for Françoise. She posits it as a challenge to her understanding of herself as a unique consciousness. However, Françoise is already engaged in a relation with an Other: Pierre. So the real problem that Françoise is facing is not, as she claimed, that she suddenly is faced with an Other which unveils to her that she is not unique, rather the problem she is facing is that this Other, Xavière, resists Françoise's desire to merge. What differentiates her relation with Pierre from that with Xavière is that she has a feeling of being one with Pierre. Xavière's presence disrupts this harmonious symbiosis. Françoise's relation with Xavière is conflictual. This is why this relation to an Other is difficult and ultimately unbearable for Françoise. So what Beauvoir is in fact theorizing, or rather exploring, in the novel is not the problem of other consciousness and how it shatters solipsism, but rather the different ways one can relate to an Other, namely the ambiguity inherent in any relation with others.

She Came to Stay is a literary/philosophical exploration of the problem of the existence of other consciousnesses. But if it is philosophical, we may ask what its argument is, or rather, what "claims" are being made or explored. Its main claim is that human consciousness is a being with-others and that interpersonal relations are fundamentally ambiguous. This argument entails a critique of solipsism. Françoise is a solipsist in that she fancies that she is a unique consciousness. Confronted with her own bad faith, i.e. conceiving of herself as a lone consciousness, she fails to deal with it and to recognize herself as the being with-others that she *is*. Because of that, she murders Xavière. The murder is not an indication that Françoise is an isolated consciousness but rather an indication that she fails to conceive of herself as a being with-others, namely she, *in bad faith*, conceives of herself as isolated and wants to remain isolated. This plot exemplifies Beauvoir's interest in ethical questions especially during the war as it unearthed issues of

[10] To refer to it as a "claim" is actually overstating it. There are no "claims" as such in the novel. There are suggestions, allusions, explorations, which are, because of their literary form, necessarily tentative. For Beauvoir, however, this does not disqualify them as philosophical tools of inquiry. Philosophical thinking that constrains itself to argumentative reasoning is necessarily limited and fails to address concrete experience.

violence and its possibility. Françoise's failure and her murder is an illustration that people will engage in violent and unethical acts when they fail to recognize their own being-with-otherness. This is why Beauvoir then argues in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex* that individuals have to recognize their own intersubjectivity and the fact that we are intertwined with others. It becomes the great ethical imperative of Beauvoir's thought.

This imperative is at work in seed form in *She Came to Stay* in the exploration of the conflictual relation between Françoise and Xavière but also in the experience Françoise has of her more positive relation with Pierre. In the beginning of the novel, she understands her relation with Pierre to be one of harmonious symbiosis. She does not quite posit herself as a unique consciousness but as lost in the unique consciousness that they, Pierre with Françoise, form. This is problematic because, as Beauvoir will delineate later in other works, one cannot surrender one's own subjectivity and freedom. Even if Françoise does willingly surrender, it nonetheless remains problematic as the chapter on the woman in love in *The Second Sex* demonstrates. Françoise is most often thought of as the incarnation of the free and powerful independent woman. But I think she in fact stands closer to Paula in *The Mandarins*. Both Françoise and Paula may be criticized for losing themselves in their relationships with men. In so doing, they lose grip of themselves as the free ambiguous beings they in fact are. Françoise discovers this loss once Pierre pulls away from her through his fascination with Xavière. Once a member of the harmonious unity parts ways from it, what is left for Françoise? Nothing, since she only conceived of herself in terms of her unity with Pierre. With this, the novel is implicitly arguing that in order to flourish as a human being, one must not live by oneself or lose oneself in a relation with an other. One must nurture both one's own free individuality and one's being with-others. This is lived ambiguity, as Beauvoir will later explain in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

The claim has been made that Sartre's theory of the Other in *Being and Nothingness* was entirely taken from Beauvoir's first novel. Given what I have said above, I do not wish to deny that Sartre picked up on the problem while he was reading the manuscript of *She Came to Stay* when on leave in the early months of 1940. He did indeed pick up on the problem presented by Beauvoir and admitted to it in his *War Diaries*, but his theorizing of the problem is entirely his own. He did not steal Beauvoir's ideas because the ideas on the

being for-others are his and they are different from Beauvoir's who conceives of our being with-others not as conflictual but as ambiguous. What Sartre takes from the novel is the conflictual relation between Françoise and Xavière. It appeals to his own theoretical inclinations. However, he does not take what appears to be the more positive relation between Françoise and Pierre into consideration nor does he take into consideration the ambiguity of interpersonal relations that Beauvoir illustrates. Beauvoir's position is richer and allows for the elaboration of an ethics.

At the same time that Sartre is finalizing his theory on being for-others and relations with others as conflictual, Beauvoir is already acknowledging the shortcomings of solipsism, viz. being in bad faith about one's own being with-others, and indicates that it can only lead to conflict, violence, and, in Françoise's case, murder. Beauvoir moves toward a theorization of the being with-others in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and the works that follow. Interestingly, Sartre comes to recognize that his views lead to violence and oppressive relations between individuals and that they are an ethical dead-end. This is why he tries to work out an ethics of authenticity that entails a conversion to the Other in the *Notebooks*. He has to go back to Beauvoir in order to work it out. It is Beauvoir's emphasis on being with-others that is operative in this work.[11, 12]

If Beauvoir is able to flesh out her notion of ambiguous being with-others, it is thanks to her different appreciation of situation and embodiment. Sonia Kruks has demonstrated very convincingly that Beauvoir's understanding of situation lead her to adopt a view of freedom that was much more ambiguous than what Sartre could conceive in the context of *Being and Nothingness*.[13] Kruks aptly titled her essay "Teaching Sartre About

[11] In an other essay, I have argued that it is thanks to her different reception and appropriation of Hegel and Heidegger that Beauvoir is more successful in understanding interpersonal relations and moving beyond the strictly conflictual with her ambiguous being with-others. See my "The Ethics of Authenticity". *Reading Sartre*. Jonathan Webber (ed.), London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 1-14.

[12] Interestingly then, Sartre did the same as the later Sartreans I referred to earlier: he went to Beauvoir for help devising his own ethical thinking. But this entails for him major revisions to some of his views, namely revisions to the being for-others. However, as I have indicated in my essay "The Ethics of Authenticity," revising some of his notions from *Being and Nothingness* does not entail rejecting the whole ontology. It is possible that he saw the possibility to do this given that Beauvoir shared some ontological positions and yet was able to work out an ethics when he was not.

[13] See Kruks, Sonia, "Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre About Freedom," in Aronson, Ronald and Adrian van den Hoven (eds), *Sartre Alive*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. A previous version in French

Freedom." Beauvoir's assessment of interpersonal relations rests on the appreciation that individuals are situated beings. We are beings-in-the-world, which entails that our freedom is situated, thus constrained to a degree by the "force of circumstances." We are free individuals but our freedom is not absolute: it is situated, embedded in the world, intertwined with that of others with whom we are always in relation. This understanding of freedom as situated is also connected to her views on embodiment. In other essays, I have shown how Beauvoir's approach to the body as ambiguous and to consciousness as necessarily and always embodied represents an improvement over Sartre's instrumental views of the body and of consciousness as ultimately transcendent.[14] The overarching point that is made in these essays is that because Beauvoir conceives of the human being as ambiguous and because this ambiguity is manifold and carries through to our relations with the world and with others, she is in a better theoretical position to address the ethical problems related to interpersonal relations. She is not trying to superimpose an omnipotent absolutely free consciousness on the world and engaged in relations with equally omnipotent and absolutely free individuals. Rather, she sees that the interpersonal realm will always be permeated with tensions as individuals cannot conceive of themselves as self-enclosed and self-sufficient. These tensions, however, are both positive and negative and one must learn to dwell in one's own ambiguity. This is the ideal of authenticity for Beauvoir.[15]

Although I will not proceed to argue this here,[16] I think it can be demonstrated that Sartre's later philosophy of the 1950s and onward is deeply informed by Beauvoir's philosophy. Sartre does move toward an understanding of the human being as situated and

was published in *Les Temps modernes* of November 1989 as “Simone de Beauvoir entre Sartre et Merleau-Ponty" where Kruks was mis-identified as Sonia Kraüs.

[14] See my “Where Influence Fails: Embodiment in Beauvoir and Sartre”. *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*. C. Daigle and J. Golomb (eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, pp. 30-48. See also the following article, co-authored with Christinia Landry, "An Analysis of Sartre's and Beauvoir's Views on Transcendence. Exploring Intersubjective Relations", *PhaenEx*, Spring/Summer 2013.

[15] For more on this see my “The Ethics of Authenticity.” See also my “Beauvoir philosophe: pour une phénoménologie de l’ambiguïté”. *(Re)découvrir l’oeuvre de Simone de Beauvoir. Du* Deuxième sexe *à* La Cérémonie des adieux. J. Kristeva, P. Fautrier, P.-L. Fort and A. Strasser (eds.). Paris: Le Bord de l’eau, 2008, pp. 149-157, as well as my “The Ambiguous Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir”. *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics*. C. Daigle (ed.). Kingston and Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 2006, pp. 120-141.

[16] Doing so would require an in-depth and detailed analysis of Sartre's writings beyond *Being and Nothingness* and the *Notebooks for an Ethics*. The gesture will have to suffice for now.

caught up in the socio-historical web of events. While incorporating the idea that freedom is situated and thus constrained, he reduces the role and scope of absolute freedom to a great degree. The individual that is part of series and fused groups (*le groupe en fusion*) in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* has very little to do with the free individual as described in *Being and Nothingness*. I think Beauvoir's influence is at work in the evolution of Sartre's thinking. But I think it can also be argued that the influence remains reciprocal as they continue to engage in those conversations, share writings, and develop ideas together and separately. Sartre spent his career thinking with Beauvoir, and beyond.

As scholars, we should take this as an example of what to do with Beauvoir's philosophy and writings in general. Scholars tend to revere the authors they study and their works. But if we are to be philosophers like Beauvoir, we ought to be irreverent. The works we receive must resonate and we have a duty to take these works and use them as a springboard for our own thinking and for our own action. Beauvoir is appealing to our freedom so that we may undertake to act and change the world. She is not looking for docile disciples but for free individuals who will think with her and, most importantly, carry on and think beyond her. We owe it to her to respond in this fashion.

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