

RECONSTITUTING EXPERIENCE: BEAUVOIR'S PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF LITERATURE

RECONSTITUINDO A EXPERIÊNCIA: A CONCEPÇÃO FILOSÓFICA DE BEAUVOIR SOBRE A LITERATURA

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the relation between existence, language and communication from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical distinction between conceptual and literary expression. I argue that the background to this distinction is found in Søren Kierkegaard's critique of the philosophical system, especially in his claim that conceptual language cannot express the paradox of subjectivity. I also show that Beauvoir's more general conception of language and communication draw on the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, and is systematically close to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language and subjectivity. On the basis of Beauvoir's essays on philosophy and literature, I then reconstruct a position according to which literary expression—because of its indirect mode of communication—is able to describe and mediate the subjective aspects of existence. Whereas conceptual language can only communicate what is universal, and thereby fails to account for the ambiguity of existence, literature, expresses the universal in its singular, temporal and contingent manifestations. I finally show how Beauvoir develops her philosophical conception of literature in a discussion of the so-called 'metaphysical novel' and by comparing the novel and autobiography as two modes of indirect communication. The novel in particular enables the writer to reconstitute experience in imagination. The phenomenological and existential notions of subjectivity and paradox are underlie Beauvoir's conception of metaphysics as well as that of the metaphysical novel.

KEYWORDS: Beauvoir; Merleau-Ponty; Kierkegaard; expression; 'metaphysical novel'

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RESUMO

Este artigo aborda a relação entre existência, linguagem e comunicação na perspectiva da distinção filosófica de Simone de Beauvoir entre expressão conceitual e literária. Defendo a tese de que o pano de fundo desta distinção é encontrado na crítica de Søren Kierkegaard ao sistema filosófico, especialmente em sua afirmação de que a linguagem conceitual não pode expressar o paradoxo da subjetividade. Também mostro que a concepção de linguagem e comunicação de âmbito mais geral em Beauvoir baseia-se na tradição da fenomenologia husserliana, e é sistematicamente próxima à filosofia da linguagem e da subjetividade de Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Com base nos ensaios de Beauvoir sobre filosofia e literatura, reconstruo então uma posição segundo a qual a expressão literária, por causa de seu modo indireto de comunicação, é capaz de descrever e mediar os aspectos subjetivos da existência. Considerando que a linguagem conceitual pode comunicar apenas o que é universal e, portanto, não leva em conta a ambiguidade da existência, a literatura expressa o universal em suas manifestações singulares, temporais e contingentes. Tento, por fim, mostrar como Beauvoir desenvolve a sua concepção filosófica de literatura em uma discussão sobre o assim chamado “romance metafísico”, e comparando o romance e a autobiografia como dois modos de comunicação indireta. O romance em particular permite o escritor a reconstituir a experiência na imaginação. As noções fenomenológicas e existenciais da subjetividade e do paradoxo são subjacentes à concepção de Beauvoir da metafísica, bem como a do romance metafísico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Beauvoir; Merleau-Ponty; Kierkegaard; expressão; “romance metafísico”

Introduction

From *The Ethics of Ambiguity* onwards, Simone de Beauvoir rejects what she calls ‘system-building philosophy’, by which she means closed systems or structures of thought that cannot account for life’s facticity and change. Beauvoir’s own style of philosophy has been described as non-systematic in a Kierkegaardian sense. For Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, non-systematic philosophy signifies a mode of thinking that emerges from the experience of the *paradox* of existence. This mode of thinking is subjective and on-going in character, rather than objective and final. It can be only communicated indirectly¹. For both

¹ Kierkegaard provides a description of human existence as paradoxical in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s perspective is rooted in his view of Christianity as spirit, inwardness,

thinkers, literature suggests one possible—and privileged—mode of accounting for the paradoxes of existence.

The conceptual key to this privilege is expression, which for Beauvoir primarily means linguistic communication, and—more specifically—literary expression. Literary expression, in her view, is able to describe and mediate the subjective aspects of human existence, that is, the aspects by which human existence is individualised and connected to a particular time and place. These would remain inexpressible if one were left exclusively to conceptual language. Abstracting from both the historicity and contingency of life, conceptual language in its extreme form is capable of expressing only what is universal in character. It therefore fails to account for human existence in its pregnant sense, that is, as a universal *and* singular reality. Literature has a privileged standing in Beauvoir's philosophy of existence by virtue of its ability to express the universal in its singular, temporal and contingent manifestations.

My aim in this article is to explain in detail why Beauvoir considers what she calls the 'metaphysical novel' as the mediator *par excellence* of human existence. My goal is not to defend Beauvoir's views on language or expression (which remain bound to a pre-structuralist conception of language and meaning), but rather to *reconstruct* what I take to be her existential and phenomenological position on these topics.² By focusing on the interdependence between Beauvoir's conceptions of human existence and the metaphysical

subjectivity and a passionate need for personal decision, rather than what he opposes to existential inwardness, namely contemplation, indifference and objectivity (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 33). More precisely, his understanding of human subjectivity originates in Christianity's "constant use of time and the historical in relation to the eternal" (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 88). The way in which the eternal comes into being in time is "the paradox of Christianity", and the religious means, strictly, "becoming aware of the paradox and holding the paradox fast every moment" (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 162, 191). A paradox, in Kierkegaard's view, is not a transitory form of the relation of the religious to the existing subject, but is "essentially conditioned by the fact that a man is in existence", and thus belongs both to time and to eternity (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 162). If the paradox were to be removed by an explanation, existence would also be taken away, and the paradox is to be understood as a determination of existence.

² The late twentieth century critiques of dichotomous thinking, of any simple and stable distinction between expression and the meaning expressed, and—in general—of self-sufficient systems of meaning and knowledge, are intellectually and politically challenging. However, if the critique is not to remain on the abstract level, and merely voice a general suspicion about (structuralist or modern) concepts such as the self, the subject, expression and communication, it would have to address the specific concepts that Beauvoir uses and develops. A critique of Beauvoir's notions of subjectivity and expressivity, in other words, would have to be based on a clear and justified view of her position on each of these topics. Such a view has—thus far—been wanting, and any critique would therefore have to be judged prematurely. My aim here is to contribute to the primary task of explicating how subjectivity and literary writing are connected in Beauvoir's thought. Such an explicative project is necessarily prior to any adequate structuralist or post-structuralist critique.

novel, I contest the now fashionable view that she ultimately rejected philosophy for literature.³ To the contrary, I argue that she advocated a specific (literary) mode of philosophising, one motivated by her conception of subjectivity. On its most general level, then, this essay raises questions concerning the limits and nature of philosophy as such. It does so by drawing out the implications of one specific non-systematic philosophical style.

I begin by discussing Beauvoir's views on the very possibility of expressing the subjective aspects of existence in language. This theme will be approached through a consideration of Beauvoir's phenomenological conception of communication (with examples from her own writings) followed by an analysis of the more profound convergence in her thought of Cartesian and Kierkegaardian notions of subjectivity. As I show, Beauvoir's phenomenological conception of language and communication is close to that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A brief clarification of the relations between subjectivity, objectivity, singularity, and universality will provide the basis for my discussion of the more specific notion of indirect communication—an idea which underlies Beauvoir's view of metaphysical literature. The final part of my essay is devoted to Beauvoir's philosophical and technical descriptions of the novel and the autobiography, each with their different modes of communicating human existence in its concrete specificity. Throughout, my reconstruction of Beauvoir's position is guided by her existential concepts of metaphysics and metaphysical experience.

Communicating Human Existence

Beauvoir does not offer any systematic account of expressivity or language as such. While the topic of writing is present throughout her philosophical and literary works—especially in her essays on the relation between literature and philosophy—she does, however, devote one section in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* to the more general topic of communication. The frame of Beauvoir's discussion of communication is ethical. Communication is considered in light of the relationship between the self and the other, and as a form of action by which

³ My position is thus close to that of Kate & Edward FULLBROOK (1999). For an argument that rather stresses the opposition between philosophy and literature in Beauvoir's work, see HOLVECK (2002, especially, p. 7, 20-29).

individuals create new values, desires and needs for each other (BEAUVOIR, 2004a, p. 126, 129). From this ethical perspective, language is viewed as an appeal to the other's freedom (2004a, p. 133-134). As a form of action directed to others, communication is neither abstract nor impersonal, but concrete and personal. It is concrete in terms of its dependence on speech and other modes of expression, and their reifications: "[m]y being enters into communication with others only through those objects in which it is engaged", Beauvoir writes, and goes so far as to claim that if one would not make anything exist, communication would also be impossible (2004a, p. 129-130). Communication is personal in the sense that the expressive appeal is not directed to just anyone, but to specific others: "[w]e look for the completion of the project in which our freedom is engaged, and therefore others must project me toward a future that I recognize as mine" (BEAUVOIR, 2004a, p. 133).

In the phenomenological tradition in which Beauvoir was active, cultural objects, like novels and all kinds of art works, are understood as expressive unities to whose meaning we respond, just as we respond to the bodily expressions of living beings. In *Ideas II*, for example, Edmund Husserl discusses the unity of 'expression' and 'the expressed' in the grasping of what he calls spiritual or comprehensive wholes. Whether I look at a human face, experience a work of art or read a book, what I see, experience or comprehend is the sense of a whole or a unity, or a spiritual being which "essentially includes the sensuous" (HUSSERL, 1989, p. 251, 333, 352). To understand the meaning of spiritual unities means to "live" in them, or to "comprehend" the sense that animates and even fuses with their sensuous appearances (1989, p. 248-250).⁴ One of Beauvoir's most explicit remarks on language with reference to this phenomenological tradition is found in her review of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945. Merleau-Ponty, she writes, "offers some very rich suggestions, particularly about the question of sexuality and that of language" (BEAUVOIR, 2004b, p. 163).

Expression and style are (to say the least) central to Merleau-Ponty's conception of subjectivity. Already on the level of sense-experience, the lived body appears as expressive, rather than simply an object bound by causality (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962, p. 160).

⁴ For detailed studies of this aspect of Husserl's phenomenology in relation to Beauvoir's philosophy, see Sara HEINÄMAA (2003) and Ulrika BJÖRK (2008).

Though Merleau-Ponty also speaks about a “vital communication” between the lived body and the world on the level of sense-experience, he distinguishes this fundamental level of expressivity, to which “the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness”, from linguistic communication. Like Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty considers the latter to be a concrete “taking up of other’s thoughts through speech”, a “reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* [*penser d’après autrui*] which enriches our own thoughts” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962, p. 52-53, 179, 354).

Two implications of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language are of special interest for my interpretation of Beauvoir’s notion of metaphysical literature. First, there is the distinction between authentic or first-order speech and second-order expression; second, there is the distinction between the gestural and the conceptual meaning of speech. Let me briefly outline these two conceptual couples and their connection.

The distinction between first-hand and second-order expression brings to light not only how language must always refer back to itself, but also how speech is capable of reshaping already existing language and expressing what has never been said before. Whereas authentic speech formulates experience “originally” (and in this sense cannot be separated from thought), second-order expression should rather be understood as “speech about speech”—that is, as constituting empirical, factual and habitual language, which embody already established meanings (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962, p. 178n, 179n). Merleau-Ponty’s repeated references to art, music and literature illustrate how authentic expression ‘breaks through’ what is already familiar, known or reasonable, and confronts us with the new, as yet indeterminate and without justification. These illustrations are often modelled on the spontaneous intentionality of the body, and—moreover—imply the distinction between the gestural and the conceptual meaning of language.

In the following quote, the gestural meaning of expression—its mode of expressing indirectly or pointing (like the gesture)—is thematised as a “second-order value” of expression. This second-order value should not be confused with empirical language; rather, it is an integral part of *all* language. Hidden in the words themselves, the second-order value of expression “lead the vague life of colours” and gestures (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 45). The creative writer—or the painter or the musician—reorganises what we already know by means of gestures, silences, colours, and sounds:

[...] the writer transports us without transitions or preparations from the world of established meanings to something else. And as our body guides us among things only on condition that we stop analyzing it and make use of it, language is literary (that is, productive) only on condition that we stop asking justifications of it at each instant and follow it where it goes, letting the words and all the means of expression of the book be enveloped by that halo of signification that they owe to their singular arrangement, and the whole writing veer toward a second-order value where it almost rejoins the mute radiance of painting (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 78).⁵

While Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the gestural and the conceptual meaning of linguistic expression stresses the mediating function of language in general, Beauvoir's primary concern is with the mediating function of the novel, considered as one form of indirect expression. In "Literature and Metaphysics"—another essay from *Les Temps Modernes*, published in 1946—Beauvoir argues that the novel can overcome the separation between subjectivity and objectivity by unifying the singular and universal aspects of experience in its style (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 274-276). The problem of linguistic expression, whether literary or conceptual is, however, not merely a problem of communication for Beauvoir, of being able or not able to share one's experiences with others. More fundamentally, it is a problem of the inexpressivity or "silence" of experience. Silence as defined here differs from its ostensibly creative significance, its capacity, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, to "speak" across or between words (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 45, 76; BEAUVOIR, 2004a, p. 134). As we will see, Beauvoir's conception of silence echoes the existential isolation in Kierkegaard's description of the subjective thinker, since it means the impossibility of articulating and even recognising one's own experiences.

There is one realm of experience in particular by which Beauvoir's illustrates this silence—the realm of pain and suffering. In the preface to *Adieu: A Farewell to Sartre*, she claims that there are experiences that remain inexpressible. It is impossible, she writes, to articulate her experience of Sartre's death: "These things cannot be told; they cannot be put into writing; they cannot be formed in one's mind. They are experienced and that is all"

⁵ As in the above quote, a radical distinction between authentic and second-order expression (that is, already established meaning) is less obvious in Merleau-Ponty's later works on language: in a structuralist framework, speech in general is viewed a mediator in the creation of new meaning (see, e.g., MERLEAU-PONTY, 1988). Here, Merleau-Ponty suggests not only that the writer is capable of original expression, but also that the way in which literary expression breaks and refashions everyday language—by making everyday language recreate the contours of experience—illustrates and extends our conception of the mediating function of speech.

(BEAUVOIR, 1984, p. 3). Yet she does write—and show—*something*. Beauvoir's retrospective account of Sartre's last years, and the interviews added to the first autobiographical part of the book, illustrates the solitude in pain and suffering. Similarly, *A Very Easy Death*—Beauvoir's autobiographical essay relating the events surrounding her mother's death—shows how suffering isolates in two very different senses. Confronted with someone else's suffering, one is isolated from the other as well as from oneself.⁶ In the first sense of isolation, experiencing someone else's suffering means being closed off from the other, or not being able to experience the other's pain for or with him or her.⁷ All one can do is to respond, as if from the outside, to the expressions of the other. As Beauvoir writes in a memory of her mother at the hospital: "I touched her, I talked to her, but it was impossible to enter into her suffering" (BEAUVOIR, 1966, p. 81). Suffering does not isolate the self from the other in the sense that they were not previously separate, but reveals, in its extremity, the impossibility of having first-person access to the other's experiences.⁸

The isolation in suffering in the second sense means, rather, that one is alienated from oneself. When Beauvoir describes her grief in *A Very Easy Death* she manifests a split internal to the experience of suffering: "This time my despair escaped from my control; someone other than myself was weeping in me" (BEAUVOIR, 1966, p. 31). Beauvoir returns to this experience of being "outside of oneself" in a lecture on her experiences as a writer, given two years later.⁹ Here she suggests that suffering—because of this split—*means* to suffer in a double sense. Not only does one suffer the pain that one feels, but also the isolation in that pain (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 443, 456).

⁶ For an interesting and related interpretation of Beauvoir's autobiographical novel, see Erika RUONAKOSKI's contribution in this issue.

⁷ Beauvoir does not distinguish between pain and suffering here, but views both as lived experiences to whose embodied expressions we respond.

⁸ Cf. Beauvoir's discussion in "What Can Literature Do?" (2011a), an essay based on her contribution to a 1964 round-table sponsored by the communist youth journal *Clarté* on the political relevance of French Literature.

⁹ The lecture, "Mon expérience d'écrivain", was delivered in Japan in 1966, published in French in 1979, and only recently translated into English as "My Experience as a Writer" (BEAUVOIR, 2011b). My interpretation is based on the French original (BEAUVOIR, 1979).

When Beauvoir formulates her feelings about suffering in *A Very Easy Death*, she does this in descriptions of bodily expressions. In her mother's lip, "with its faint downy shadow", she reads "greediness refused, an almost servile humility, hope, distress, loneliness—the loneliness of her death and her life—that did not want to admit its existence" (BEAUVOIR, 1966, p. 28, 31). Involuntarily, her body takes over her mother's expressions, as Sartre (in the narrative) makes Beauvoir aware of:

[...] he told me that my own mouth was not obeying me anymore: I had put Maman's mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements. Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there, and compassion wrung my heart. (BEAUVOIR, 1966, p. 31)

Beauvoir's descriptions of how her face takes over the expressions of her mother's face illustrate how the body expresses a gestural meaning before—or in spite of—the conceptual meaning provided by words. Her example also shows that one is dependent on others' recognition of this gestural meaning in order to identify and gain "conceptual" access to what one feels.

The fact that the other can sometimes recognise my feelings before I can does not mean that there is not also something that will always escape the other. Given Beauvoir's descriptions of and reflections on the experience of pain and suffering, the 'I' cannot experience others' feelings in the way they do, or from their subjective perspective, and they cannot experience what 'I' go through from my first person perspective. The experiences we have of each other are "shared", however, in the sense that they can only be grasped through perception. Perception, as it were, mediates our subjective experience and is thus one variation of indirect communication. To get a clearer sense of the significance of indirect communication for Beauvoir's conception of literature, however, we need to look deeper into the tradition that formed French phenomenology. As I said initially, Kierkegaard's notion of the subjective thinker's specific mode of communicating is critical to Beauvoir's view of the difference between conceptual and literary expression (which I take up in the last section of this essay). Moreover, it furthers our understanding of the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity in her thought. For this reason, I will now turn to the Kierkegaardian notion of indirect communication.

Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication

Beauvoir is nowhere more explicit about her *own* understanding of the concepts subjectivity, objectivity, singularity and universality, and their differences, than in the review of Merleau-Ponty's work. Ultimately, however, the meaning of these concepts must be understood in light of the convergence, in Beauvoir's thought, of a Cartesian understanding of subjectivity with what Kierkegaard describes as the truth or paradox of subjectivity. The former stresses the individual thinker's intuitive discovery of existence, while the latter emphasizes the singular devotedness of personal decision and the impossibility of communicating this decision as objectively comprehensible to others.

In the case of Descartes, subjectivity means the clear intuition of one's existence in thought, as this is expressed in the *cogito*.¹⁰ For the Cartesian thinker (or the subject conceived of as a thinking thing) the problem of communicating the experience of subjectivity seems not to appear, since (on this view) each individual subject—regardless of the contingent aspects of his or her existence—immediately grasps the meaning of the expressions 'I think' and 'I exist', and their relation.¹¹ In the case of Kierkegaard, subjectivity is rather the *opposite* of an intuitive grasp of oneself as thinking, since it means experiencing the paradox as an inexplicable determination of existence. The experience of the paradox would be completely lost if it was to be expressed directly, in what Kierkegaard calls "objective" communication. If the specific "truth of subjectivity" *as* paradox is to be preserved in language—that is, if language is to express the existent's

¹⁰ By intuition, Descartes means the simple and clear perceptions of the intellect, or the unprejudiced 'native intelligence' of each individual. Intuition is distinguished from "the fluctuating testimony of the senses", as well as from "the deceptive judgement of the imagination", and is the conception of "a clear and attentive mind" that cannot be doubted (DESCARTES, 1985, p. 14).

¹¹ When Descartes grasps his existence as a 'thinking thing' for the first time in the second meditation, expressivity at least does not affect the truth of this intuition: "the proposition 'I am, I exist'", he writes, "is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (DESCARTES 1996, p. 17). Lilli Alanen (2003) notes that while Descartes thinks that speech presupposes thought, he offers no account of the precise connection between thought and language. The fact that Cartesian thought (*cogitatio*) "may not require membership in a linguistic community", Alanen also argues, does not mean that the emphasis on the isolation of the thinking ego should be overestimated: the thinker certainly belongs to a "community of rational beings" and the *Meditations*, therefore, presuppose an interlocutor (ALANEN, 2003, p. 103). This interlocutor may be God, an alter ego or even a Super ego, Alanen suggests, represented by reason or truth itself: "Descartes' solitary discourse is a dialogue between his anxious, imperfect, doubt-ridden, finite self and his ideal of a perfect, infinite thinker who never makes mistakes, whose knowledge is not limited but constitutes the true science (*Scientia*) characterized by complete knowledge".

mode of being at once temporal *and* eternal, singular *and* universal—communication can only be indirect.

As Kierkegaard writes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the “double reflection” of the subjective thinker (by which means his or her double experience of “infinity” and “isolation”) becomes a contradiction in communication with other individuals. This is because communication assumes that the individual who exists in the isolation of his or her singular experience of inwardness, and who desires “through this inwardness to express the life of eternity”, nevertheless wishes to communicate with others (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 68, translation modified). Kierkegaard’s response to the contradiction is to make a distinction between direct and indirect communication. This distinction in turn goes together with the distinction between objectivity (as the common or shared experience of the temporal) and subjectivity (as the singular experience of the eternal).¹²

Indifferent to subjectivity, objective thinking’s mode of communication (which includes ordinary or everyday communication) is direct and presupposes certainty (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 68, 70). This does not mean that direct communication is easy, only that it lacks the “elusiveness and the art of double reflection”—the human solicitude in communicating itself—which belongs to subjective thinking (1941, p. 70). Because subjectivity or inwardness is characterised by becoming, and thus by ambiguity and uncertainty, the individual who wishes to express his or her subjectivity cannot use direct communication. Rather, subjective thought must be communicated in a way that preserves itself as becoming or, as Kierkegaard writes, essentially secret” [*væsentlig Hemmelighed*] (1941, p. 73). What is “essentially secret” is not secret in the way something said in a secret meeting is first unknown, and then understood as soon as it is revealed. This would only be “accidentally secret”. An essential secret remains a secret for “everyone who is not in the

¹² The eternal here should be understood in terms of a personal genesis of being in time, rather than an impersonal, changeless infinity. The religious background of Kierkegaard’s thought illuminates this concept of the eternal. As Edith Kern (1970) writes, Kierkegaard “believed in an eternal essential truth of which the individual in his most passionate inwardness was able to partake, a truth which was totally subjective and yet transcended subjectivity” (KERN, 1970, p. 4-5).

same way doubly reflected within himself” (KIERKEGAARD, 1941, p. 73). Subjective thought, in other words, retains part of its secrecy even when it is communicated.¹³

In the phenomenological reinterpretation and development of Cartesian philosophy, the *cogito* is extended to a level prior to reflective thought and understood as constituted in affectivity, perception, temporality and expressivity. When Beauvoir, who clearly belongs to this interpretative tradition, reformulates the *cogito* from the perspective of the Kierkegaardian paradox, the human individual is conceptualised as a subjectivity that can realise itself only as a presence or being in the world (BEAUVOIR, 1948, 1976, p. 10). This way of understanding subjectivity echoes the core of her affirmative review of *Phenomenology of Perception*. To know oneself, in Beauvoir’s phenomenological and existential reinterpretation of Descartes’ discovery of subjectivity, means to know oneself *in and through the world*; a world with which one is *involved* in embodied experience before reflective thought has formulated the *cogito*. Any authentic expression in language of subjectivity in this sense must therefore be an expression of the world as felt and acted in, rather than merely thought. Since there is no immediate *intellectual* access to this spontaneous (but nevertheless subjective) level of experience, its expression can be neither direct nor complete. It must remain indirect, open and uncertain, like lived experience itself.

There are, as we have seen, certain difficulties connected to the convergence of Cartesian and Kierkegaardian notions of subjectivity in Beauvoir’s thought.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is both possible and important to distinguish subjectivity and objectivity (on the one hand) from singularity and universality (on the other). The first opposition refers to subjectively lived experience or existence, as distinct from the objective systematisation of this experience in science or philosophy. The second refers to the two different dimensions or aspects of existence: its individual, temporal and contingent aspect (singularity) and its shared or non-individual, a-temporal and necessary aspect (universality). In her essays on

¹³ Thus there is a subjective dimension, in the Kierkegaardian sense, even in Descartes’ *Meditations*: the turn to the thinking I, or to subjectivity, is executed by the method of doubt, and the autobiographical form of the text represents this singular gesture. My claim is not that the *Meditations* should be read as a personal narrative about the particular individual ‘René’ but that the mode of writing expresses indirectly what the text speaks about directly: the withdrawal to oneself, and the discovery—in intuitive reasoning—of what is common or universal, or what is evident to all rational beings (DESCARTES, 1996; ALANEN, 2003, p. 106).

¹⁴ These difficulties concern, first, the meaning of subjectivity in Descartes and Kierkegaard and, second, the possibility of expressing this meaning to other subjects. For a more detailed discussion, see BJÖRK (2008).

literature, and as we will see in the last section of this essay, Beauvoir argues that the novel and the autobiography are able to mediate and thus indirectly communicate these two aspects of existence. While direct communication “speaks” its meaning abstractly and by means of conceptual language, indirect communication does not speak. Rather, it “shows” or makes meaning manifest by the presence of contingent details and the use of different narrative voices.

Beauvoir on Metaphysical Literature

In “Literature and Metaphysics” Beauvoir presents her position as a defence of the metaphysical novel. At the base of this defence is a discussion of the possibility of expressing *metaphysical experience*. But how should one understand this concept? What is the meaning of “metaphysics” here? Obviously, Beauvoir’s notion of metaphysics differs fundamentally from Aristotle’s, since in his understanding “the first science” is concerned with the a-temporal essence or nature of that which is, or with being as such.¹⁵ She points to the absurdity of imagining an Aristotelian novel—or a Spinozan or Leibnizian novel—since, as she writes, “neither subjectivity nor temporality has a real place in these metaphysics” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 274). It is, moreover, doubtful whether metaphysics could be a science in Descartes’ sense, that is, a science that is intuitive and deductive in the sense of “seeing” evident truths and their necessary relationships intellectually. The notion of metaphysics that Beauvoir has in mind is not comparable in method to axiomatic-deductive sciences either, where one proceeds by abstract proofs and demonstrations from a general truth to particular instances of this truth. As Beauvoir writes, one does not “do” metaphysics as one does mathematics or physics. Metaphysics in Beauvoir’s sense is more a matter of existential realisation than of intellectual—scientific or philosophical—methodology:

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle’s definition of first philosophy as “a science which studies Being *qua* Being and the attributes that belong to it in virtue of its own nature” (ARISTOTELES, 1928, *Metaphysica* 1003a).

In reality, “to do” metaphysics is “to be” metaphysical; it is to realize in oneself the metaphysical attitude, which consists in positing oneself in one’s totality before the totality of the world (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 273).

As the realisation of an attitude, metaphysics needs to be distinguished not only from the exact sciences, but also from the empirical sciences. Every human event has a metaphysical signification beyond its psychological and social meaning, according to Beauvoir, because each event concerns this total taking or positing of oneself as deeply related to the world (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 273). This signification is more personal than any psychological description would be, since it concerns what is unique for each individual or for his or her life. Even if one realises one’s metaphysical situation through experiences that could be explained psychologically—through “joys, sorrows, resignations, revolts, fears, and hopes”—a psychological description cannot account for the total meaning of this situation (2004c, p. 273). A psychological investigation of emotions or feelings (according to the opposition Beauvoir establishes) studies particular feelings in objective isolation from one another and in their causal or motivational association with other physical or mental data. It then generalises from these cases. A “metaphysical description,” on the other hand, reveals how a particular feeling—like the feeling of pain or suffering—colours and gives meaning to the entire being and situation of a singular individual.

As an attitude that one realises in oneself, Beauvoir’s notion of metaphysics is close to Merleau-Ponty’s description of a “metaphysics in action” [*métaphysique en acte*] (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964b, p. 83). Described in terms of a “radical subjectivity” that one forgets in one’s natural or everyday life, and a type of knowledge where one’s experiences are inseparable from their meaning, this metaphysics is considered as tacitly present in the human sciences, as well as in literature and poetry (1964b, p. 83, 92-93). What Merleau-Ponty calls metaphysical consciousness indeed comes close to what Beauvoir describes as the metaphysical attitude. It means not a “natural” experience of the world, other people and history, nor taking an attitude of objectivity towards them. Rather, it means the rediscovery of “the miracle of their appearing” in subjective experience (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964b, p. 94). The motif of rediscovering subjectivity is central to Beauvoir’s understanding of the metaphysical novel. If the description of essence is a matter for philosophy properly speaking, the novel evokes the genesis of subjectivity as the “original

up springing [*jaillissement*] of existence in its complete, singular, and temporal truth” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 274).

It can be said that Beauvoir shares the general French existentialist ideal of ‘committed literature’, a literature that engages itself in the political debates of its time and which demands the writer’s total presence in what he or she has written. As she explicitly states in a defence of existential philosophy (originally published in 1947) existentialism wants to be *more* than a theoretical enterprise. It wants to be a living attitude to the contemporary political situation, in which “the individual is seeking with anguish to find his place in a world turned upside down” (BEAUVOIR, 2004d, p. 325). Beauvoir’s own commitment as a writer, however, consists neither in documenting historical events nor in creating fiction that takes sides or which tries to teach the reader how to act in specific situations. What fundamentally motivates her novel-writing is the wish to evoke existence through the communication of her own (unique) experience in relation to such universal structures as intersubjectivity and temporality (BEAUVOIR, 1962, p. 266). In the creation of an intrigue, therefore, she begins with a concrete psychological experience. Her task as a writer, as she describes it in “Mon expérience d’écrivain”, is then to find a form for her singularly lived experience, a form that enables each reader to recognise herself in the literary work and (thus) communicate subjectively with the subjectivity of the writer (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 441).¹⁶ Beauvoir is here developing one aspect of the so called “singular universal”—which Jean-Paul Sartre discussed in a lecture the same year—with reference to the life and work of Kierkegaard.¹⁷ It is, however, possible to distinguish four rather distinct meanings of the “singular universal” in Beauvoir’s thought, of which two are especially relevant here.

¹⁶ Cf. the following autobiographical remark on the motivation to write: “What I wanted was to penetrate so deeply into other people’s lives that when they heard my voice they would get the impression they were talking to themselves. If my words multiplied through millions of human hearts, it seemed to me that my existence, though reshaped and transfigured, would still, in a manner of speaking, survive” (BEAUVOIR, 1962, p. 680).

¹⁷ The “scandal and paradox” of Kierkegaard as a thinker, Sartre argues, is his transhistoricity: the fact that a singular historical being can communicate, through his works, with succeeding generations in the mode of an “absolute subject” (SARTRE, 1974, p. 152). Sartre describes the singular universal as chance that, in living, has assumed the form of necessity, or the “non-significance accidents of being” as transcended toward a significance they did not first have, or again, man as the singular being “through which the universal comes into the world” (SARTRE, 1974, p. 158). For a related discussion of the meaning of this concept, see Erika ROUNAKOSKI’s article in this issue on *Sapere Aude*, v.3,n. 6).

Fundamentally, the singular universal implies that the truth of human existence can only be known in and through one's own experience of reality. Second, since the truth of human existence as singularly lived can only be communicated to others in a medium that preserves both its universal meaning and what from the perspective of the universal appear as contingent and insignificant details of a particular life, a literary work can take the role of the singular universal. While the central philosophical problem of Beauvoir's first novel *She Came to Stay*, for example, is the existence of other consciousnesses or subjects, for whom the 'I' appears as an object, her actual motivation to write the novel came from an unfortunate and difficult emotional event: her personal experience of the so-called trio (BEAUVOIR 1990; 1979, p. 440-441; 1962, p. 305-312, 381, 440).¹⁸ A literary work—the novel as well as the autobiography—becomes a mediator between the uniqueness of one's singular life and the shared, universal structures of human existence (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 446).¹⁹

Indeed, the main *similarity* between the autobiography and the novel, according to Beauvoir, consists in that they are both expressions of subjectivity in the Kierkegaardian sense. The writer does not express the lived meaning [*le sens vécu*] of subjectivity in the form of conceptual knowledge [*savoir*], but under the form of the intimate and singularly lived experiences themselves. The universal is expressed indirectly and by means of the contingent details of life, the “nonsense” [*non-sens*] in and by which the “sense” of existence can appear (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 441). The fact that both autobiography and the novel communicate through non-knowledge [*non-savoir*] or the subjective makes them “the privileged place of intersubjectivity” (1979, p. 456; BEAUVOIR 2011a). In this sense the work of the writer is comparable to that of the painter. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “[t]he painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled

¹⁸ The novel was originally published as *L'Invitée* in 1943. For philosophical interpretations of its intrigue, see, e.g., MERLEAU-PONTY (1964b, p. 26-40) and, more recently, Toril MOI (1994) and BJÖRK (2010).

¹⁹ The two final meanings of the singular universal both depend on the difference between the novel and autobiography, and concern, first, the possibility of the latter to express a historical universality through the singular perspective of the autobiographical 'I': the autobiographical description [*récit*] departs from a singular life but makes present the flavour [*goût*] of an epoch through the flavour of this particular life (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 449, 450). The second meaning concerns the universal meaning of sexual identity and difference: when Beauvoir uses 'I' in her own autobiography, this 'I' is specifically a woman. Any individual is invited to identify with the singular perspective of the writer, and by implication share her “sexed” universality and generality. For a more extensive discussion of literature, singularity and sexual difference, see BJÖRK (2010).

up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things" (1964b, p. 17-18). The work of the writer is not comparable to that of the painter, however, if one follows Sartre in making a fundamental distinction between prose and poetry. Whereas the writer of prose "speaks" [*parler*], in Sartre's view, and utilises language in order to express meaning, the painter, the musician and the poet are all "mute." This does not mean that they are silent, but rather that colours, tones and the poetical meaning of words refer to nothing outside themselves. At most, they "mirror" the world (SARTRE, 2001, p. 4-7). Beauvoir does not explicitly consider the difference between prose and poetry, but her stress on the literary value of non-significant details for communicating singularity suggests that there is, for her, something like a poetic or gestural meaning in her understanding of literature. The novel does not say things directly [*dire*], but presents the contradictions, difficulties and ambiguities of situations and objects that do not speak [*parler*] (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 444, 447).

One of the main *differences* between the novel and the autobiography concerns the role of details in them, or their way of representing contingency. Beauvoir generally understands autobiographical writing as the activity of recreating past events in the form of memory, of "reanimating" the vague images of the past (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 452). Contingent, non-significant and abundant details are of particular importance in this recreation of the past, since its primary aim is to reveal the sheer facticity of human existence. Factual details have a function in the novel as well. But since the aim of the novel is not to recreate the past, but to imitate the real perceptual world more freely in the imagination, only the details that are crucial to this imaginary creation are reintroduced into the work. The real, as distinguished from the imaginary, always appears to a singular individual in Beauvoir's view. Its appearance, in other words, entails a unique perspective and presumes a temporally givenness. One central aim of literature is to make visible the equivocal and separate truths that no single moment or perspective is able represent in their totality (BEAUVOIR, 1964-1965a, p. 263). The advantage of the novel in this respect is that it can exhibit two or more contrasting perspectives (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 444, 456). The novel does not express these different perspectives directly, but instead organises a collection of difficulties, ambiguities and contradictions that constitute the lived meaning of co-existence. Beauvoir discusses this at length in her autobiography, arguing that existence

“cannot be reduced to ideas, it cannot be stated in words: it can only be evoked through the medium of an imaginary object” (BEAUVOIR 1964-1965b, p. 41; 1964-1965a, p. 263, 358).

Any thesis or doctrine that the writer attempts to convey in a work of fiction, then, would immediately destroy the work’s effect. It would make the work appear as a means rather than an end in itself. In Beauvoir’s view, the real world and the imaginary world of the novel exclude one another. This becomes especially clear when she compares the effect of a novel to that of a dream in “Literature and Metaphysics”:

Just as a dream breaks into pieces if the dreamer has the slightest perception that it is a dream, the belief in the imaginary vanishes as soon as one considers confronting it with reality; one cannot posit the existence of the novelist without denying that of his protagonists (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 270-271).

Compared to any abstract or theoretical statement, the strength of the metaphysical novel is that it expresses reality in its totality—that is, as both “a concrete, temporal world, peopled with singular characters and events” *and* as timeless and unlimited (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 269). It is because the metaphysical novel is neither “pure literature” nor “pure philosophy”, but a living unity and ambiguity, that it can express this existential totality.

In contrast with the philosopher who gives the reader “an intellectual reconstruction [*reconstruction*] of their experience”, the novelist “claims to reconstitute [*restituer*] on an imaginary plane this experience itself as it appears prior to any elucidation” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 270). The novelist creates “a story that imitates [*imite*] life’s opacity, ambiguity, and impartiality”. If the imitation is successful, the reader reacts as if faced with lived events. The wish to be “taken in” [*être pris*] by a novel, according to Beauvoir, is a wish “to surpass on the imaginary level the always too narrow limits of actual lived experience” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 271). This expectation demands that the novel constitutes a living discovery for the author as well as for the reader. As the story unfolds, the novelist “sees truths appear that were previously unknown to him, questions whose solutions he does not possess” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 272).

In this context, Beauvoir interestingly nuances the opposition between existential philosophy and science, establishing an analogy between the metaphysical writer and the experimental scientist. Just as a scientific hypothesis needs to be verified by controlled and

repeatable observation, so the sketches of the writer need to be confronted with their realisation in writing and reading. The result of the “literary experiment” is not primarily the literary object itself—the physical thing or the cultural product—but the imaginary and intersubjective event that the work makes possible. A successful novel makes the reader undergo imaginary experiences that are “as complete and disturbing” as real experiences, and through such “authentic imitation” establishes genuine communication between the writer and the reader (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 272).

In this regard—and to return to my introductory comments—authenticity is also the criterion which Beauvoir uses to compare the novel to the philosophical system, and to assert their relative autonomy. On the one hand, she claims that the metaphysical novel is renounced to the extent that philosophy is defined as a fully constituted system. On the other, she asserts that the “adventure of the mind” [*l’aventure spirituelle*] is indeed lived out in the course of the building of a philosophical system. Any novel that sets out to illustrate such a system will therefore end up “exploiting its frozen riches, without risk and without real invention” (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 272). Beauvoir thus defends the integrity of metaphysical literature as well as that of “living” conceptual philosophy. It may be impossible to introduce theories into fiction without harming the free development of the novel. But it is equally impossible for the novel to serve ideas that have already found their proper conceptual expression in philosophy.

Conclusions

In this article I have investigated the relation between existence, language, and communication in Beauvoir’s thought. I have explicated her reasons and motivations for expressing the subjective aspects of existence in literary forms, and argued that her philosophical conception of literature is essentially phenomenological and existential, in the traditions of Husserl and Kierkegaard.

Literature is central to Beauvoir’s philosophy, because it makes possible an understanding of the paradoxicality of the human condition, that is, our condition of having to exist as both singular and universal, as concrete and spiritual, as finite and infinite and as

separate from and bound to other human beings. As we saw in Beauvoir's autobiographical novel *A Very Easy Death*, the expressive possibilities of the novel and the autobiography enable them to reveal these fundamental ambiguities of human existence in a way that conceptual language cannot, because of the limits of its expressive means. Conceptual explications are necessary, in Beauvoir's view, as they articulate the universal structures of existence, but they do not suffice for giving a full account of the temporality and concreteness of lived experience.

In the essays where Beauvoir explicates her view on the relation between literature and philosophy, she repeatedly refers to Kierkegaard as an example of a metaphysical writer. Metaphysics and metaphysical experience, as I have outlined, is to be understood in line with the phenomenological notion of experience as an intentional and temporal directedness to the world and to others. Moreover, Beauvoir explicitly takes up Kierkegaard's distinction between *direct* and *indirect communication* in order to account for the difference between conceptual and non-conceptual philosophy, and for her own use of the novel and the autobiography as mediators of the singular and universal aspects of existence. In Kierkegaard, direct and indirect communication respectively refer to the mode of expression of objective thought, which is characterised by exactness, certainty and transparency, and subjective thought, characterised by the subjective thinker's paradoxical wish to communicate his or her experience of inward becoming objectively. In order to preserve the paradox and fluidity of the subjective truth, Kierkegaard holds, its expressions must necessarily be indirect.

In Beauvoir's re-articulation of this distinction, direct language "speaks", or expresses its meaning explicitly and conceptually, while indirect language "shows" or makes meaning manifest by the presence of contingent and ambiguous details, and by the use of different narrative voices. As I have shown, Merleau-Ponty's distinctions between authentic first- and inauthentic second-order expression, and between the gestural and the conceptual meaning of speech, further illuminate Beauvoir's understanding of the difference between indirect and direct language. Whereas authentic expression is creative and formulates meaning "as for the first time", second-order expression refers to already established meaning. As related to this first distinction, Merleau-Ponty's second distinction articulates the difference between the sensuous and pre-predicative level of indirect or

gestural meaning, present in all speech, and the level of predicative meaning. The creative writer reorganises already established modes of expression by means of the gestural or indirect meaning of language, such as its sounds and silences.

Beauvoir does not provide a systematic philosophy of language, but indirect expression and the gestural meaning of language are crucial keys to her understanding of the different philosophical aims and functions of the novel and the autobiography. The task of the existential writer, in her account, is to arrange the world in a personal pattern, which requires that he or she grasps the “meaning of things” and expresses them in language. This meaning is not merely thought, but initially revealed through the objects of sensations, feelings and actions. The goal of what Beauvoir calls the metaphysical novel is to let the reader undergo imaginary experiences that imitate the form of real experiences, but that also reach beyond and widen our conception of reality, through the reconstitution of experience in imaginary creations.

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