The Question of Influence: Sartre and Beauvoir

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This paper examines the relationship of Simone Beauvoir to the field of philosophy; her work and her subject position as an author. In addition, this paper examines the relation of Sartre to Beauvoir as an author. I conclude that while Beauvoir may have defined herself as a writer, her training in and her position to, Philosophy should not be negated. Also, I add that Sartre's influence on the content of her body of work should be rejoiced and rather not criticized.

Keywords: Beauvoir, Sartre, philosophy, author, existentialism, feminism

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship of Simone Beauvoir to the field of philosophy; her work and her subject position as an author. The paper focuses on how Beauvoir, despite her personal liaison with Sartre, publically related to him as an intellectual female writer. The paper shows how Beauvoir's relations with Sartre, personal or public, may have influenced her in identifying herself less as a philosopher but more as a writer. Ultimately, the paper aims to justify the view that while Beauvoir may have defined herself as a writer, her training in and her position to, Philosophy should not be negated. I argue this position simply because despite the fact Beauvoir did not necessarily own up to the title of being a "philosopher," her contributions to the field of philosophy are clear and distinct in their own accounts.

The Question of Influence

The common assumption is that Beauvoir's positions as a woman, writer, and thinker are weakened because it is influenced by her relationship with Sartre and Sartre's philosophy and writings. Beauvoir herself claimed Sartre was a philosopher and she was a writer, saying:

Anyhow, Sartre is a philosopher, and I am not, and I have never really wanted to be a philosopher. I like philosophy very much, but I have not created philosophical work. My field is literature. I am interested in novels, memoirs, and essays, such as *The Second Sex*. However, none of these is philosophy. (Simons, 1979, p. 338)

Deferring the position of "the philosopher" to Sartre, Beauvoir explicitly claims she is a literary author.

Beauvoir's position as a writer and not a philosopher also put into question, especially in her feminists texts and in the passages on women in her writing, the influence of Sartre on her career. How could Beauvoir as a female and feminist intellectual claim that parts of the content of her analyses are indebted to the thoughts of a man, to that of Sartre's, to that of a male tradition? As Linnell Secomb observes in her article published in *Hypatia*:

Beauvoir describes herself as a writer and does not claim to create concepts. She does not put her name to her conceptual innovations. Rather, she constantly attributes her work to Sartre and his ideas. Even when her arguments and propositions critique Sartre's or create new perspective in opposition to his, she continues to write in his name. (Secomb, 1999, p. 106)

Beauvoir's position as a writer does not make her an "original" thinker and it even negates the distinctness of her ideas. So for example, the originality of the concepts she uses, such as the concept of freedom, to describe an existential ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in 1948 has been attributed to the philosophy of Sartre published earlier in *Being and Nothingness*. Philosophically then, Beauvoir seems to claim that she brings nothing to the picture. Contemporary intellectuals such as Sara Heinamaa, find this position problematic because the content of Beauvoir's writing is very philosophical (Heinämaa, 1999, p. 114) and distinct in character.

For example, in *The Second Sex*, while it presents a distinct perspective on the situation of women, such as the proposition, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," it is influenced by the philosophy of Hegel, Marx, and Merleau-Ponty in addition to Sartre, for example (Beauvoir, 2011, pp. 23-24, 46, 132-133).¹ Heinamaa, like Nancy Bauer, does not wish to claim that because it can be argued that what's at the heart of Beauvoir's recounting of the woman condition in *The Second Sex* is indebted in certain critical respects to the thought of those philosophers, it follows then that her achievements are fundamentally or importantly philosophical ones (Bauer, 2001, p. 3). Rather, discovering the philosophical import or lack thereof in *The Second Sex* requires an act of philosophical appropriation, based on a studied or expert attention to the philosophical canon that not even Beauvoir can deny (Bauer, 2001, p. 3). So while the proposition "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," is based on "the contingency of existence," which at the time of the publication of *The Second Sex* was an idea already developed in Sartre's writings, Sartre's philosophy on this topic did not relate how, as it is visible in the writing of Beauvoir, the "contingency of existence" in the situation of women specifically cast women as the radical Other within our human history.

The philosophical references or appropriations in Beauvoir's writings show why contemporary intellectuals tend to be shocked to hear from Beauvoir's mouth that she is not a philosopher. For example, in an article co-edited and co-authored by Margaret Simons and Jessica Benjamin and published in *Feminist Studies* in the summer of 1979, these intellectuals observe the following about their interview with Beauvoir:

We were thus surprised to hear Beauvoir say that she has not influenced Sartre at all philosophically, because she feels that she is not a philosopher, but rather a literary writer. Why should she accept this view of her work that defines it as merely reflective of Sartre's perspective rather than as philosophically innovative? (Simons, Benjamin, & Beauvoir, 1979, p. 331)

Not only does Beauvoir claim she is not a philosopher, she also claims that she cannot contribute to the philosophical canon by influencing the thoughts of philosophers, of Sartre's in particular. So when Beauvoir claims Sartre changed his work according to the criticism he received from her, what Beauvoir means to say is that she merely influenced the "editing" process of Sartre's writings (Simons, Benjamin, & Beauvoir, 1979, p. 337). Philosophically then, the words of Beauvoir suggest she only took from Sartre but never gave back.

In another portion of the same interview, this time between Margaret Simons and Beauvoir, recorded in Paris on March 13th of 1979 and published in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, Simons continues to express to

¹ These pages are just a sample of the place in the text where the works of Hegel, Marx, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre appear in *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir her dissatisfaction with Beauvoir's position on her career (Simons, 1999, pp. 10-11). The interview exchange on the subject matter goes as follows:

Margaret Simons: It bothers me that you say you are not a philosopher. I don't know why. I suppose it is because I spend so much time treating your work philosophically. I don't know, maybe it is the definition in America that is looser.

Simone de Beauvoir: Maybe... Yes... Because for me, a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre: someone who builds a great system, and not simply someone who loves philosophy, who can teach it, who can understand it, and who can use it in essays, etc., but it is someone who *truly* constructs a philosophy. And that, I did not do... I never cared so much about doing it. I decided in my youth that it was not what I wanted.

Margaret Simons: ... And *Ethics of Ambiguity*, that's philosophy.

Simone de Beauvoir: For me, it is not philosophy, it is an essay. Not, but, truly, if I take the word *philosophy* in a slightly elevated sense, I'm saying that the great philosophers are Descartes, Hegel, etc. Sartre, in my opinion, will be among them. But not I. There are very few philosophers in a century; there are perhaps two of them. (Simons, 1999, pp. 10-11)

Beyond Simons' concerns that Beauvoir does not describe her work as philosophy in the "elevated sense" of the term, Beauvoir asserts that she is not a system builder like Sartre and therefore, not a philosopher. Simons may also find Beauvoir's position problematic because even when Beauvoir's work is read as a body of literature, her work is relegated to a subordinate position than that of a philosophy (Heinämaa, 1999, p. 114). So even when Beauvoir claims that, despite her training and interest in philosophy, she is not a philosopher, to the ears of Simons it sounds like Beauvoir is perpetuating the myth of the inaccessibility of philosophy to women thinkers. This concept regularly exiles women philosophers to other fields of inquiry, removes them from the philosophical canon, and puts into question the originality of their thoughts.

As if being a writer were a lesser position to assume, contemporary intellectuals such as Simons, ignore Beauvoir's humble justification of her own intellectual career. There is a feminist reason why Beauvoir argues that she is a writer and rather not a philosopher. In an interview with Helene V. Wenzel published in 1986 in *Yale French Studies*, Beauvoir admits the following:

I wanted to be a writer, I saw nothing better, especially for a woman, than to be a writer. I knew even then that there had been women writers who had succeeded quite well in gaining prestige, like Colette or Madame de Noailles and many others. And then, after all, it was my job since at the same time I was working on literature and philosophy, I was in the university. So it was absolutely normal for me to want to write. (Wenzel, 1986, p. 11)

Since in France there was a tradition of successful French female writers, such as Colette and Madame de Noailles, Beauvoir, as a young woman, could already find a place for herself as a French female writer. So although Beauvoir pursued a degree in philosophy, she believed that a career as a writer was more readily accessible to a French woman than a career as a philosopher. This shows the influence of women writers on Beauvoir's career choice. It does not show, however, that Beauvoir was cutting herself short. And one more time in Beauvoir's own words, she said: "I have already said that [unlike Sartre] I had no philosophical ambition" (Beauvoir, n.d., p. 4). By choosing to be a writer because other French women who have succeeded as writers gave her inspiration, Beauvoir presents the description of her career as a feminist choice. We should then understand Beauvoir's description of herself as a writer as an expression of her feminist career goal, a declaration that as a woman, she knew what she wanted to make of herself.

In this brief essay I argue in support of Beauvoir's description of her career choice as a writer and rather not as a philosopher. The reason I want to support Beauvoir on this position is because, in order to give an author a voice, as I aim to, in including Beauvoir in studies made in the field of philosophy, we have to understand the standpoint from which this author is coming.

Apart from the philosophy of Simone Weil, Beauvoir was not exposed to French women philosophers. Perhaps because Beauvoir started her career interested in problems concerning human existence—in the moral and abstract sense—rather than problems concerning social politics, her encounter with Weil did not entice Beauvoir to emulate Weil. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir recounts her meeting with Weil and the ways this encounter in the late 1920s related to her own philosophical position at the time. Beauvoir briefly remarks,

I continued to rate social questions lower than problems of metaphysics and morals: what was the use of bothering about suffering humanity if there was no point in its existence? This obstinate refusal prevented me from deriving any benefit from my meeting with Simone Weil. (Beauvoir, 1959, pp. 238-239)

In the 1920s, Weil was political and Beauvoir was not. On the other hand, Beauvoir was able to find what she was looking for in Colette (Beauvoir, 1959, p. 155). To Beauvoir, the content of Colette's novels and her writings about human existence were more imaginative and original than Weil's position on the human condition (Richardson, 1983, p. x).

Finally, because of the interconnection between Beauvoir's career and Sartre's, something needs to be said about Beauvoir's suggestion that Sartre influenced her more philosophically than she did him. Even though Beauvoir claims that she was more Sartre's critic and literary editor than his philosophical equal (Simons, Benjamin, & Beauvoir, 1979, pp. 337-338), Beauvoir had a more honest appreciation of her relation with Sartre than he ever did.

In an exchange between Sartre and Beauvoir, she admits the following about her relation with Sartre:

Simone de Beauvoir: I have to say that you have never oppressed me, and that you have never acted superior to me. To offset the idea of your macho, it is important to realize that we have never had an inferiority-superiority relationship, as men and women so often do.

Sartre: It was this very relationship, which taught me, which showed me that there were relationships between men and women that demonstrated the profound equality between the two sexes. I did not consider myself superior to you, or more intelligent, or more active, so that I put myself on the same footing. (Sartre, 1977, p. 97)

This exchange should not be confused as a private conversation between two old lovers in bed with one another. Rather this conversation reflects a purposefully recorded exchange between two colleagues with distinct intellectual careers. To Beauvoir then, despite the fact that he never wrote on feminism or questioned patriarchy as an oppressive force in society, Sartre was a fair and "decent" man. So even when she described Sartre as macho, his machismo according to Beauvoir did not affect their relation. As a woman then, Beauvoir played an exceptional role in Sartre's life, because he may have been "macho" with other women.

According to Beauvoir, Sartre encouraged her to write *The Second Sex* (Sartre, 1977, p. 96) and after World War II, it was Sartre who motivated them both to care more for and participate more in socio-political matters. By publically accepting the influence of Sartre's philosophy in her work, and thus by also including the influence of the male philosophy tradition in her writing, Beauvoir constructed her literary works and essays as a form of relational inquiry.

By constructing her literary works and essays as being relational, Beauvoir's body of work suggests the impossibility of being a thinker without being subject to the influence of others. Since Beauvoir never denied being a feminist, the influence of Sartre on the content of her body of work and her relation to Sartre ought to be rejoiced rather than negated. Through her honest relation with Sartre, Beauvoir was able to determine what belonged to her and what belonged to Sartre. When Margaret Simons in 1979 asks Beauvoir what parts of her writing on the woman's situation and of the Other, are really of Sartre's creation, she replies the following:

Oh! No! Absolutely not. The ideas about women are my own. Sartre has never been very interested in the question of women. As a matter of fact I had a dialogue with him published in *L'Arc* two years ago, in which I asked him why he had not interested himself in the question. No, these ideas are my own, indeed. ...I have been influenced by [Sartre] in the philosophical domain, but I was not at all influenced by him in the literary field. When I wrote my memoirs... When I wrote my novels. I was never influenced by Sartre because I was writing from my lived and felt experiences. (Simons, Benjamin, & Beauvoir, 1979, pp. 338-339)

What tends to come out from the focus on Beauvoir's relation with Sartre, I argue, is that it obliterates the influence of the other men and women who have contributed to the making of Simone Beauvoir as a writer. In addition to being influenced by the philosophy of Sartre, Beauvoir was influenced by a wide array of individuals and groups, including Richard Wright, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, the French feminist suffragettes, her childhood friend Zaza, her family, and her close peers, such as Gisele Halimi, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus.

Conclusion

The outcome of my analysis on "the question of influence" is that instead of focusing on Sartre's influence on Beauvoir and on her description of herself as a writer, we should broaden our horizon and also look at the women, such as Colette, Woolf and Halimi, who have influenced the development of Beauvoir's career. Beauvoir did not write her feminist position in the vacuum of a genderless literary and intellectual society. So as Deirdre Bair, for example, notes, Beauvoir drew upon earlier feminist writers to develop her perspective for *The Second Sex*, among them Woolf, with whom she shares the same view of the relationship between economic independence and intellectual freedom (Bair, 1986, pp. 153-154). Furthermore, when Simons asks Beauvoir what the feminist theoretical foundations for *The Second Sex* were, Beauvoir responds that the closest person to have influenced her in this matter would certainly be Virginia Woolf (Simons, Benjamin, & Beauvoir, 1979, pp. 336-337). Women too were included in Beauvoir's literary canon. The sphere of influence in Beauvoir's literary career was broader than her relation with Sartre—thus broader than her philosophical interests.

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