

1 Beauvoir before Sartre

Born in 1908, Simone de Beauvoir was an early beneficiary of women's nineteenth-century campaigns for access to higher education. From 1926 to 1929, she studied for and gained the *agrégation* (the qualification for becoming a philosophy teacher) on nearly equal terms with a group of young men of her generation – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Nizan, René Maheu, Raymond Aron, and Jean-Paul Sartre – who, collectively, would become dominating influences on mid-twentieth-century French philosophy. She was particularly lucky in having been able to compete as an equal with this group of ambitious young men, for women had only been admitted to study for the *agrégation* in 1924, and by the late 1930s, the exam was segregated, thus for many decades confining women to success in what was taken to be an inferior female league (Imbert, 2004; Moi, 1994, 50–4).

Beauvoir's philosophy developed in conversation with these male contemporaries, whose preoccupations arose from a philosophical background that she shared. Merleau-Ponty's most influential book was *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), which attempts to characterise our perception of the external world, avoiding both empiricism, which postulates immediate causal relationships with sensory atoms (sense-data), and an intellectualism, which assumes that we have perceptual access to rationally comprehensible forms. He was deeply influenced both by Husserl's phenomenology and by gestalt psychology. Lévi-Strauss is remembered for *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), which introduced structuralism and Marxism into anthropology, interpreting the mental structures and kinship relations of pre-colonial peoples through a series of dualistic oppositions and as economic relationships, in which the exchange of women is exemplary. Less famous as a philosopher, but a Marxist author of novels in the tradition of 'committed literature' to which Jean-Paul Sartre also contributed, Paul Nizan was an active communist, unlike the anti-communist Raymond Aron, who saw early the similarity between Fascism and Stalinism and is remembered as an important figure in French liberalism.¹ Of this group, only René Maheu failed to leave behind a substantial legacy of publications. An early advocate of individualism, he became director general of UNESCO in 1961, evincing, like his friends, a political commitment on an international level. Demonstrating similar concerns to these contemporaries, Sartre's major work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), explores the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the external world and to human freedom, while his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1961) attempts to fuse the existentialism of this earlier

¹ By 1955, Beauvoir includes him in her criticism of right-wing thinkers (*PolW*, 117, 127, 138).

work with Marxist concepts of historical dialectic, class consciousness, and ideology.

The works of the generation to which Beauvoir belonged thus cluster around two axes. One involves questions of the nature of the mind, perception, or consciousness, its relationship to reality, and the conflict between realism and idealism – issues that they inherited from a philosophical education deeply indebted to René Descartes’s sceptical challenge, solved by the *cogito*, according to which we cannot doubt that our consciousness exists. Descartes’s solution to scepticism results in his adoption of a problematic metaphysical dualism that divides mind and body into two causally disjoint substances. In the wake of Descartes and Kant, the teachers of Beauvoir’s generation, who included Léon Brunschvicg and Alain (Émile-August Chartier), were Cartesian rationalists who tended towards a neo-Kantian idealism, against which Sartre, in particular, revolted. By contrast, Beauvoir was initially attracted to an idealist acceptance of the reality of mind, rather than matter, and for a time found Brunschvicg’s ideas compatible with her own (*DPS2*, September 27, 1928, October 24, 1928; *CJ*, 463, 501; *MD*, 207).

The other axis that preoccupied members of this generation concerned the political sphere, the lead up to and experience of the Second World War, the fight against Fascism, and the legacy of Marxism. They had largely rejected the existence of God, so important for the Cartesian solution to scepticism, yet were still working with the legacy of Descartes and Kant, while attempting to approach traditional metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical problems from resolutely anti-theological grounds. Their philosophy was distinctive in beginning from the experience of existing in a world of sensible phenomena. As a result, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre earned the reputation of being existentialists and phenomenologists. Indeed, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* is subtitled *An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, thus, like Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, advertising its debt to Husserl and Heidegger’s phenomenology, which they exploited and developed, without being particularly faithful to the intentions or conclusions of either of these German thinkers. The label ‘existentialist’, however, was one that was only applied to their works after the Second World War. It captured, in particular, the thought, which Beauvoir attributes to Heidegger and which Sartre develops in his own way in *Being and Nothingness*, that ‘existence precedes essence’. That is to say, the existence of consciousness implies its essence; our nature is not something that precedes us – found, for instance, eternally in the mind of God – but is something that comes into being as a result of our existing (*PCe*, 123; Heidegger, 1962, I.i.§9, 67; Sartre, 1975, 348; 1993, Introduction, §3, xxxi).

The attitudes that make up the popular understanding of existentialism – denial of the existence of God, the consequent problem of the meaninglessness of human existence, and the absurdity of being – had been adopted by Beauvoir well before she met up with Sartre and his friends (*MD*, 228–9). Already in her first years of studying philosophy she was reading Schopenhauer, choosing to quote in her diary from his *World as Will and Representation*, ‘Existence itself, is a constant suffering, and is partly woeful, partly fearful’ (*CJ*, May 9, 1927, 336; *DPS*, 252; Schopenhauer, 1958, 3. §52.267). These diaries show her struggling with an all too common adolescent angst, vacillating between a somewhat arrogant confidence in her intellectual capacity and a sense of oppression by the demands of life. She laments ‘the metaphysical anxiety of man alone in the unknown’ (*CJ*, September 4, 1927, 403; *DPS*, 309). But she also already demonstrates a sense of responsibility for what she makes of herself:

I must affirm to myself that the truth is in my strength and not in my weakness, that this evening I am right, and not in the morning when upon opening my eyes, the anxiety of having to live again oppresses me even when the day’s program is attractive. (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 349; *DPS*, 263)

Another influence, at this stage of her life, is the now almost entirely forgotten philosophy of Jules Lagneau, who had had a considerable influence on the philosopher Alain. She finds Lagneau’s expression ‘I have no support but my absolute despair’ beautiful (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 348; *DPS*, 262). Already, she is committed to an attitude to life that will re-emerge in a more sophisticated form in her later writing, saying,

But knowing that this noumenal world exists, that I cannot attain, in which alone it can be explained to me why I live, I will build my life in the phenomenal world, which is nevertheless not negligible. I will take myself as an end. (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 348; *DPS*, 262)

This renunciation of the possibility of justification coming from the world beyond human experience, an external absolute, or things as they are in themselves (the noumenal world) and its replacement with a self-justification grounded in experience (the phenomenal world) will re-emerge in more sophisticated form in Beauvoir’s later writing. The sense of the urgency of the question ‘Why do I exist?’ remains a theme even in her last novella, *Les Belles Images*, in which she puts this question in the mouth of a child and questions the capacity of consumerist society to offer an adequate response (*Blé*, 20).

The philosophy of Henri Bergson is also important for Beauvoir’s early philosophical formation (Simons, 2003). She takes from him the view that words, with their ‘well-defined outlines’, cannot capture ‘the delicate and fugitive

impressions of our individual consciousness', a thought that will also recur in her later fiction (*CJ*, August 13, 1926, 57; *DPS*, 58). This sense, that each private consciousness is closed in on itself and can never directly communicate with the consciousness of another, is part of the legacy of Descartes. It is a consequence of his dualism that while each of us knows immediately that we are thinking things, and so knows that our own ideas and impressions of the world exist, the minds of others cannot be immediately accessed. The problem of solipsism, the question of how we can know that we are not the one and only consciousness, thus looms large. Communicating with others, through the use of public, material signs, cannot give us full access to the other's private interiority. It may be because Beauvoir was already interested in this problem that her teacher, Brunschvicg, encouraged her to write a dissertation on Leibniz, who, in his *Monadology*, accepts that each individual perspective on the world is shut off from the other, constituting a 'windowless monad' that can only know its own ideas or subjective perceptions (*MD*, 266). To explain the correspondence that exists between our perceptions and those of other people, Leibniz proposes that God coordinates all the individual perspectives in harmony, so that we acquire the illusion of existing in an objectively existing material world. Beauvoir says little about this dissertation in her diaries but seems dissatisfied with Leibniz, which is understandable, given that she had lost her faith in God. So, the problem of solipsism continued to loom large for her, and she remained for some time a solipsist (*WD*, 320). The temptation to adopt a solipsistic attitude towards the world will be a feature of central characters in many of her novels. They will only be wrenched out of their solipsism by being forced to recognise the existence of the consciousness of others as it impinges on their own self-assessment and projects.

As well as tracing her philosophical formation, her student diaries are dominated by two themes that are not inherited from this philosophical background. The first is love, in particular her love for her cousin, Jacques Champigneulle, and the second the related question of our relations with others. In the autobiography that she began publishing in her fiftieth year, the relationship with Jacques plays a relatively minor role, while her friendship with Elizabeth Lacoïn, whom she calls Elizabeth Mabile, or 'Zaza', enters earlier into the account of her youth and extends throughout the narrative (*MD*, 91–6). By contrast, Jacques is presented as a cousin whom her family thought she might marry, and whom she believed, on and off, that she loved, but who also annoyed her (*MD*, 198–211, 232–4, 241–3, 263–4). Yet it is clear from the diaries she kept from 1926 to 1929 that her infatuation with him occupied a dominant, even obsessive, place in her mental life and developing sense of self during this period. She begins by being 'completely involved in the great joy' of this friendship and feeling that they have a mutual understanding, a communion of souls (*CJ*, October 29, 1926, 148; *DPS*, 142). By

November 1926, her soul's 'mystical attraction' to his soul demands a love that will never die (*CJ*, November 16, 1926, 193; *DPS*, 180). He introduced her to Alain-Fournier's novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and she identifies him with its eponymous hero (*MD*, 201). Her experience and account of this relationship is mediated through the works she was then reading, in particular the correspondence between Jacques Rivière and Alain-Fournier (Rivière & Alain-Fournier, 1926–8). Echoing the tortured self-affirmation of the first and the nostalgic romanticism of the second, her prose is particularly reminiscent of Alain-Fournier when she evokes soft summer evenings and tender moments shared in the Luxembourg Gardens. Rivière, who came from Bordeaux, near where she spent holidays at the Beauvoir family estate of Meyrignac, had a special significance for her, being closely bound up with her infatuation with Jacques. Rivière had been secretary of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* between 1912 and 1914, and then editor from 1919 to 1925, and through his literary criticism he introduced Beauvoir's generation to the works of Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Sigmund Freud, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Éluard Mauriac. She later notes that when young she hardly read anything other than the writers associated with this review (*MD*, 229). It was during this period of infatuation with Jacques that she was developing her literary taste and orientation, reading and quoting from these and other similar authors, such as Paul Claudel, Maurice Barrès, André Gide, and Rainer Maria Rilke. These were members of a generation of writers whom she later characterised as having 'refused to accept the wisdom of their elders' but who 'did not attempt to find another to take its place' (*MD*, 194). Her love for this literature, which is bound up with this first early love, will endure. Traces abound in her novels as well as in her later analyses of the situation of women. Yet she would attempt to go beyond these writers by offering something to replace the traditional moralism they had rejected.

Many years later, when feminist scholars were beginning to disengage Beauvoir's ideas from those of Sartre, whose reputation and philosophy had, during the initial critical reception of their works, completely engulfed and overshadowed hers, Jessica Benjamin extracted from her the admission that, indeed, 'the problem of the consciousness of the Other, was my problem' (Benjamin & Simons, 1999, 10). The student diaries confirm that from very early on Beauvoir was drawn to the theme of 'this opposition of self and other that I felt upon starting to live' (*CJ*, July 10, 1927, 367; *DPS*, 279). In the diaries, the confused ideas that she expresses on the question of self and other are often tied to her ruminations over her relationship with Jacques, who continued to prey on her mind well into 1929. At this stage, as well as sometimes feeling a solipsistic alienation from others, she also expressed a need, in order to achieve an authentic sense of self, to depend on someone who loved her:

There is only one being who might give me back the authentic consciousness of myself, only one being who might define me and be the resistance for me to lean on, receiving my imprint, not this emptiness that lets me pass by without identifying traits that I seek almost with anxiety. I have hungered and thirsted for you, Jacques, these past few days, when I say words, there is no response, but sometimes suddenly a few words that you have really said emerge from the past with exactly your voice. (*DPS2*, March 24, 1929; *CJ*, 596–7)

She tells herself that she continues to love him, even after she becomes aware that he has had a lover, ‘Magda’, whom he abandoned and whom she meets up with, consoling herself that Jacques could not have felt the same love for this woman as he felt for her (*MD*, 315–16). Yet, although she does not admit it to herself, it is likely as a result of this discovery that by the summer of 1929 she has begun to transfer her affection from Jacques to the married René Maheu, whom she calls ‘Herbaud’ in her published autobiography and ‘Lama’ in the diaries, and who invents for her the nickname that Sartre will soon be using, ‘Castor’ (French for ‘beaver’) (*MD*, 310–14, 321–5; Kirkpatrick, 2019, 85–93). Maheu’s friendship with Sartre then leads to her intense intellectual and marginally erotic relationship with the latter, who will exercise an enormous influence on the rest of her life, while she will have a reciprocally important impact on him. Initially, she felt intellectually dominated by him, yet, at the same time, it is clear that her own intellectual self-confidence demanded a lover who could match or exceed her (*MD*, 343–4).

In the 1979 interview conducted by Margaret Simons and Jessica Benjamin, Beauvoir rather upsets them by insisting that she was a writer, not a philosopher. She was as much drawn to literature as to philosophy, and, though she underplays its significance, her first love for Jacques and the literary culture she imbibed while committed to him continues to influence her outlook throughout her career as a novelist. After meeting Sartre, her philosophical attitudes will change, but her love for literature and her early sentiments continue to bubble below the surface. She will attempt to fuse the literary and philosophical sides of her background by writing novels in which dry philosophical theory engages with rich concrete experience, as she explains in the article *Literature and Metaphysics*, in which she defends the philosophical novel, arguing that it ‘provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression’ (*LitM*, 1165; *LitMe*, 276). In emphasising her literary vocation and modestly declining to be considered a philosopher, Beauvoir suggests that to be a philosopher one has to build a great system; it is not enough to simply love or apply philosophical ideas (Benjamin & Simons, 1999, 11). This implies that she did not see herself as having built a philosophical system. However, in this account of her ideas, I propose that in fact, during the war, she did construct

a system as a result of her close reading of Hegel. The somewhat confused ideas that she had cobbled together concerning self and other during her university years then developed into a precise schematism, which began to emerge in the structure of her novels and which she elaborated in her more theoretical works, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*.

During the decade from 1929 to 1939, which separated their joint success in coming first (Sartre) and second (Beauvoir) in the *agrégation* and the beginning of the Second World War, both Beauvoir and Sartre would be employed as philosophy teachers, first separately, Beauvoir in Marseilles and Sartre in Le Havre, and then reunited, Beauvoir initially moving to Rouen and later both finding work in Paris. Sartre would publish his first novel, *Nausea* (1938), and a number of philosophical works, which laid the groundwork for the first parts of *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir's first attempt at literature, a collection of short stories, *Quand prime le spirituel*, was initially not accepted for publication and only appeared in 1979, and translated into English as, *When Things of the Spirit Come First* in 1982 (*QS*; *WS*). This early work demonstrates many of the preoccupations that had exercised her in the years prior to her relationship with Sartre, but it lacks the clear philosophical articulation that was to result from the fusion of his influence with that of Hegel. The stories build on her experiences as a student and as a young lycée teacher in provincial France. One is a fictionalised account of Zaza's relationship with Merleau-Ponty, called 'Pradelle' in the autobiography, and her tragic death from meningitis (*WS*, 119–66; *MD*, 349–60). The philosophies that had influenced her during this period are evoked. 'Marcelle', for instance, 'gazed despairingly at that stranger's body within which a soul was hidden, precious and inaccessible' (*WS*, 25), while Beauvoir evokes Bergson when 'Chantal' muses that 'dissecting our fleeting expressions, shutting them up in words, and turning them into thoughts very often means coarsely destroying the impalpable shimmer that gives them all their value' (*WS*, 55). But Beauvoir had not yet found a way to successfully integrate her philosophical ideas into her fiction. She would not achieve this until 1943, when she published *L'Invitée*, translated as *She Came to Stay* (*Inv*; *CS*).

2 Sartre and the Discovery of Hegel

Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre had a profound effect on her philosophy, but she also played an enormous part in the development of his ideas. Working on Hegel's philosophy during the first year of the war, while Sartre was first a soldier, then a prisoner of war, and so absent from Paris, Beauvoir wrote that

she worked in his name as much as in her own (*WD*, 320). This results in elements of his published work that owe a great deal to her. Revisionist interpretations of their philosophical relationship, published since the 1990s, have moved away from representing her as simply Sartre's disciple, and this is to be applauded; however, some have gone too far in the direction of denying his originality and influence on her, emphasising her impact on him, or the influence on her of other thinkers, to the exclusion of giving him credit for important aspects of the philosophy they jointly developed (Barnes, 1998–9; Fullbrook & Fullbrook, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 2019; Kruks, 1991; Simons, 1997). As a recent discussion of their relationship observes, 'their intellectual development unfolds as a complex dialogue' (Daigle, 2017, 260). Beauvoir had been exposed to similar philosophical trends before meeting Sartre. She had been trained in the same tradition as he, and many of their shared preoccupations were derived from common sources, in particular Alain, Bergson, and Nietzsche (Sartre, 2012, xv; *FA*, 23–5; *PL*, 16–18). But once their relationship had matured, Beauvoir would adopt much of Sartre's vocabulary, in particular the contingency of being and his notion that consciousness introduces nothingness into the heart of being, which without consciousness (being-for-itself) would be an undifferentiated plenitude (being-in-itself). This is related to his claim that it is by virtue of introducing negativity (nothingness) into the heart of being that humanity is not determined but is free. These ideas are intimately linked with the existentialist doctrine that the existence of human consciousness precedes any human essence. We can be conscious of laws that determine how things will act, but, in being conscious of some such law, we transcend it, for we are different from (we transcend) the thing of which we are conscious. So, Sartre concludes, while we can be conscious of laws, there can be no law of consciousness, no essence that constrains what we can become, since we constantly transcend what simply is, towards what is not (Sartre, 1993, Introduction, §3, xxxi–xxxii).

This language and orientation are particularly evident in Beauvoir's earliest published philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, grounded in the question, what is worth pursuing (*PC*)? This is also the theme of her second novel, *The Blood of Others*. It is a question that became urgent for a generation that had given up the security of traditional answers offered by family, status, and religion and had then been faced with the rise of Fascism and the Second World War. Beauvoir agrees with Camus's alienated outsider that 'all those ties that others want to impose on him from the outside' are without value (*PCe*, 92). She, like Sartre, insists that it is only by making some goal one's own that it becomes worth pursuing. Value derives from the human capacity to pursue ends, to transcend what is in the light of some objective, and this is a constant

surging forward, a transcendence of what is and what has been, towards a chosen future. Those who claim that they act because God wills it or because they are determined by objective values existing in the world outside them are lying to themselves, since they choose to believe in God or the objectivity of the values that they allow to guide their actions. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to distinguish the false from the true God (*PCe*, 102–5).

In this essay, written during 1943 and published in the following year, she, like Sartre, denies that the other can rob us of our freedom. ‘The automobile and the airplane change nothing about our freedom, and the slave’s chains change nothing about it either’ (*PCe*, 124). She distinguishes the freedom intended here, the freedom to resign oneself to slavery or to revolt, from power. The freedom in question is metaphysical, not practical. Noting the close correlation between Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s views at this juncture, Sonia Kruks deems this essay to be ‘too closely aligned with the idealism and voluntarism of Sartre’s early ontology’ and suggests that, nevertheless, Beauvoir goes beyond Sartre in distinguishing metaphysical freedom from practical power, an interpretation also adopted by Ursula Tidd (Kruks, 2012, 12–13; Tidd, 2004, 34). But it is unfair to Sartre to deem him an idealist. As we have seen, Beauvoir was herself tempted by idealism before she met Sartre, while, from his earliest published works, he rejected idealism. In *L’Imagination* (1936) and *L’Imaginaire* (1940), both grounded in his thesis, Sartre had developed a theory of the difference between perception and imagination that insisted that both, as states of intentional consciousness, are experienced as directed towards objects existing in the real world. Idealism makes the chair I perceive an idea existing in my consciousness, but Sartre objects that it is ‘absurd to say the chair is in my perception’ (Sartre, 2004, 6–7). In perceiving, we are conscious of what exists outside us. But consciousness can also be directed towards things that do not exist in the present, immediately perceptible, world. Imaginary objects and images of absent things bring with them this element of non-being, nothingness, which, according to Sartre, grounds our freedom. In the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, he argues, further, that idealism collapses, for if one claims that only ideas exist, then once one asks about the nature of the existence of the being that has those ideas, one is faced with an impasse. Either this being is itself an idea, and one is left with an evanescent set of immaterial Russian dolls – ideas containing ideas, containing ideas – or one must admit that something exists beyond ideas. Berkeley’s idealism is supported by the real existence of God and spirit, but without God, idealism collapses. The ideas that come to us from the world we perceive are clearly not within our control; their source exists independently of us, and so we can conclude that being is

something that transcends our minds – it exists in itself and does not depend on us (Sartre, 1993, Introduction, §§3–6). However, since it is what it is in-itself and cannot point beyond itself, contingent being is valueless. It is only consciousness – being in the form of being conscious of being – that introduces the nothingness that transcends what merely is and can introduce value and purpose into existence (Sartre, 1943, II.1.i, 109; 1993, 73).

Just as it is a mistake to attribute idealism to Sartre, so too it is a mistake to imply that he fails to distinguish metaphysical freedom from practical power. As Beauvoir insists, when she defends Sartre against a similar critique to Kruks's, developed by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* speaks of both freedom and facticity; of the imperative to choose and the material, social, and objective reality that constrains action and limits our power (*PolW*, 206–57). Often, we are free merely in relation to the attitude that we take to an objectively existing situation, but this does not imply that we are fully determined by that situation. These are ideas that Beauvoir and Sartre share at this period and that are at least partly original to him, though they also derive from a shared influence, that of Heidegger.

It is difficult to determine to what extent Beauvoir engaged with Heidegger independently of Sartre, for this question has only rarely been raised (Lundgren-Gothlin, 2003). A good deal of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* uses but transforms Heidegger's philosophy, in particular his speaking of nothingness. For both, the apprehension of nothingness is connected to anxiety (Heidegger, 1968, 60; Sartre, 1943, I.1.v, 64; 1993, 29). For Heidegger, nothing is the transphenomenal ground of being, while for Sartre, it is curled in the heart of being (Heidegger, 1968, 62). Heidegger attempts to escape the traditional Platonic and Cartesian philosophical stance, according to which thinking is a technique that works on a kind of being distinct from it, while Sartre remains within the Cartesian tradition but rejects substance dualism, attempting to distinguish consciousness from being-in-itself by making it no more than being's internal negation. He accuses Heidegger, in so far as he deprives *Dasein* of the features of consciousness, of turning human reality into a blind thing-like being, arguing that, in so far as human reality involves an ecstatic projection of the self, this must be a conscious projection (Sartre, 1943, II.1.i, 109–10; 1993, 73–4). Yet the language both he and Beauvoir use is often Heideggerian; in particular, their term 'réalité-humaine' is one that is taken over from the French translation of some of his works, which first appeared in 1938 (Heidegger, 1968, 14). So, on his own account and through their joint appropriation of Heideggerian terms, Sartre influenced Beauvoir. But this is not to say that he was not also influenced by her.