



Philosophy and Literature

Merleau-Ponty on Beauvoir's Literary-Philosophical Method

Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook

ABSTRACT: Modern philosophy from the mid-nineteenth century on, has been particularly interested in choosing, adapting, and in some cases inventing literary forms to fit the particular philosophical subject under investigation. Simone de Beauvoir, with her explicit rejection of any formalist division between literature and philosophy, is one of the most interesting contributors to the modern development of philosophical writing. The waters surrounding de Beauvoir's contribution to philosophical method are somewhat muddled because the literary forms she used innovatively for philosophy — the novel and the short story — have (unlike, for example, the literary forms of Wittgenstein) resulted in writing which has been chiefly esteemed largely in terms of literature. In fact, many of her compositions rest simultaneously in both the categories of literature and philosophy. The significance of this aspect of her work was recognized by some of her contemporary philosophical associates, most particularly Merleau-Ponty. This paper draws on Merleau-Ponty to explore the philosophical ideas which inspired de Beauvoir's methodology, and considers the nature and ramifications of her originality in terms of philosophy's tradition of methodological diversity.

1. Philosophy's Literary Forms

In this paper we want to examine a category error in which her fiction and philosophy are treated as mutually exclusive and separate categories. The underlying problem at work in contributing to this mistake is that of the conflation of a writerly form with the type of subject matter addressed by it. Falling into this confusion is particularly misleading for readers of Simone de Beauvoir because one of the most significant and fascinating aspects of her methodology lies in her explicit rejection of any formalist division between literature and philosophy. This is an intriguing aspect of her work which places it in an honourable and innovative philosophical position. It is not often enough noted that one part of the Western philosophical tradition — a part which is especially admirable — is the diversity of writerly forms which have proved useful to its major practitioners. The dialogues of Plato and Hume, the fables of the Enlightenment philosophers, the dramatic narratives of Kierkegaard, the parables and aphorisms of Nietzsche, as well as the essays of Kant and Sartre are all part of that heritage. Equally, the mathematician's "paper" used by Tarski and Russell, and the scientific paper adapted and made so fashionable by the logical positivists, and that strange literary form devised by Wittgenstein, so eccentric that it apparently remains without a name and yet has its antecedent in Spinoza's *Ethics*, all form part of the major lineage of ways in which philosophy has been successfully written.

As the above list suggests, no one writerly form can be designated as the only one properly used for the most sophisticated philosophical investigation. And it must be noted that modern philosophy, from the mid-nineteenth-century on, has been particularly interested in choosing, adapting, and, in some cases, inventing literary forms to fit the particular philosophical subject matter under investigation. Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most interesting contributors to the modern development of the diversity of forms of philosophical writing. The significance of this aspect of her work was recognized by some of her contemporary philosophical associates, most particularly by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In what follows we want to consider briefly the nature and ramifications of Beauvoir's originality in terms of philosophy's tradition of methodological diversity.

The waters surrounding Beauvoir's contribution to philosophical method are somewhat muddied because the literary forms she used innovatively for philosophy — the novel and the short story — have (unlike the literary forms of Wittgenstein) resulted in writing which has been chiefly esteemed largely in terms of *literature*. In fact, many of Beauvoir's compositions rest simultaneously in two categories, literature and philosophy.

In the mid-1940s, first Merleau-Ponty and then Beauvoir herself wrote lucid essays explaining her unorthodox but not entirely unprecedented philosophical methodology. (1) These essays not only illuminate Beauvoir's method, but also explain it in terms of the philosophical ideas which inspired it. The reasoning behind Beauvoir's method is fascinating. And to begin to understand it, it is helpful to begin with one of Beauvoir's foundational ideas — one she adopted very early — that is, the notion that the universal point of view is not available to the philosopher.

2. The Philosopher's Point of View

Adoption of new or neglected literary forms by philosophers is usually linked to decided views of what are and are not the proper substantive concerns of philosophy. The logical positivists' imitation of the compositional forms of science, for example, grew from their position that philosophy should limit itself to serving as the handmaiden of science. Similarly, Beauvoir's practice, as well as her advocacy of using writerly forms usually associated only with purely literary work for philosophy, is tied to her strong views about what kind of philosophical knowledge is possible. She sets out these views very clearly in her essay "Littérature et métaphysique" which appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946, and which, it must be noted, treats the terms "metaphysics" and "philosophy" almost synonymously. Beauvoir begins her essay by dividing philosophy and philosophers roughly into two camps. The first camp, which includes Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza and Kant, holds that philosophical truth exists only in a "timeless and objective" sense, and thereby regards "as negligible the subjectivity and historicity of experience." (2) In denying the philosophical relevance of the individual and the concrete, this school implicitly presumes that a philosopher is capable of taking a universal rather than merely an individual point of view toward the metaphysical reality he or she seeks to explain. Beauvoir regards this view as seriously deluded. As Eleanore Holveck notes, Beauvoir "argues that philosophers pretend to explain all things universally, but in fact these 'universals' are based in the consciousness of some individual thinker who claims knowledge of the universal, a claim that must be justified." (3) Beauvoir rejects this universalist presumption as largely delusory, egomaniacal and, only apparently tenable. She diagnoses it as a position which only a man, working from a position of masculine privilege, could possibly accept. (4) It is crucial to note Beauvoir's insistence on the masculinist basis of this philosophical error. It is a point to which she returns in her writing throughout her career. For example, very early, in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir argues that personal arrogance formed the sole foundation of Hegel's declaration that individuality is only a moment of a universal future. She writes: "Man cannot escape from his own presence nor from the singular world that his presence

reveals around him; even his effort to uproot himself from the earth makes him dig a hole for himself. Spinozism defines Spinoza, and Hegelianism Hegel." (5)

Against these universalist delusions, Beauvoir juxtaposes the orientation of thinkers who, like herself, insist upon the philosophical relevance of individual human experience. She believes (and this is where her anti-universalist principles accord with and feed into the thought of the philosophical postmodernists) that a fundamental characteristic of human reality is that no one, including all of history's great male philosophers, can take a universal or God-like point of view, whatever they may claim to the contrary. This point is essential for Beauvoir and she states her position clearly in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* in 1944. Her attitude toward the universalist standpoint of most traditional philosophy is one of intellectual and moral contempt, a contempt she announced vehemently: "The universal mind is without voice, and every man who claims to speak in its name only gives to it his own voice. How can he claim the point of view of the universal, since he is not the universal? One can not know a point of view other than one's own." (6)

Beauvoir's own position with regard to the universalist philosophical perspective was, in fact, settled in the 1930s, a fact that her fiction of that decade demonstrates and which Merleau-Ponty shows he understands well in his essay on her work. (7) For Beauvoir, truth, including metaphysical truth, is always relative to a knowing subject. She believed, as she noted succinctly in her preface to *America Day by Day* in 1948, that "concrete experience envelops at once the subject and object." (8) As Margaret Simons, one of the most sensitive readers of Beauvoir's philosophy remarks, Beauvoir always regarded any "attempt to describe reality without reference to the experiencing subject . . . as distorting as trying to describe the subject without reference to the context of circumstances." (9) But if, for Beauvoir, no member of the human race is granted a detached Archimedean point of view of their fellow (and inferior) human beings: if pure thought and the contemplation of equally pure existence are impossible; and if, in addition, the pretence of being able to do so is abandoned, then strong methodological implications follow for philosophy.

3. Merleau-Ponty on Beauvoir

Merleau-Ponty understood (and accepted) Beauvoir's anti-universalist arguments. Further, he understood the techniques she employed in her fiction as one way of practising the new philosophical methodology demanded by acceptance of her argument. The year before the appearance of Beauvoir's essay, Merleau-Ponty had already begun the public explication of her philosophical method. His essay, "Metaphysics and the Novel", explained the importance of *L'Invitée* as a philosophical text. Merleau-Ponty begins by noting that, since the end of the nineteenth century, the boundaries between literature and philosophy had dissolved and that "hybrid modes of expression" had developed in response to the opening up of what he calls "a new dimension of investigation." (10) This new dimension grew from the apprehension that all intellectual works are "concerned with establishing a certain attitude toward the world, of which literature and philosophy . . . are just different expressions." (11)

It is this concern with "establishing a certain attitude toward the world" which Merleau-Ponty identifies as the impulse behind Beauvoir's success at using fiction as a philosophical medium. He, like Beauvoir, distinguishes between two kinds of metaphysics. "Classical metaphysics," he writes, "could pass for a speciality with which literature had nothing to do because metaphysics operated on the basis of uncontested rationalism, convinced it could make the world and human life understood by an arrangement of concepts." (12) Furthermore, even philosophers who begin on the experiential level, end by explaining the world on the basis of abstractions. But Merleau-Ponty continues:

Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its "conditions of possibility," but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought about the world. After this, whatever is metaphysical in man cannot be credited to something outside his empirical being — to God, to Consciousness. Man is metaphysical in his very being, in his loves, in his hates, in his individual and collective history. (13)

"From now on," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "the tasks of literature and philosophy can no longer be separated." He reaches this conclusion, because, like the philosopher/novelist he is writing about, he is committed to approaching philosophical questions from the point of view of the individual, a point of view traditionally adopted by the novel and the short story.

4. Beauvoir's Philosophical Domain

It should be noted that in narrowing the domain to which philosophy is seen as properly addressed, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty are following a well-travelled definitional path. They prescribe methods of doing philosophy which match their chosen philosophical interests and proscribe others. In "Littérature et métaphysique," Beauvoir, at her subversive best, outlines a philosophical method that inverts the philosopher's traditional universalist presumption. If the world, as she insists, can be viewed only from a particular point of view, then the philosophical enterprise must begin with particular and concrete descriptions of subjects' relations with the world and with other consciousnesses. Beauvoir's chosen philosophical domain is what she calls "the metaphysical dimension" of human reality, that is, "one's presence in the world, for example, one's abandonment in the world, one's freedom, the opacity of things, the resistance of foreign consciousnesses." "To make" philosophy, she says, is "to be" philosophical in the sense of sensitizing oneself to these individual metaphysical experiences, and then describing them. (14) If these particular statements are recognized by others as true for them, they can then be used to construct general statements about "the essence at the heart of existence." (15)

Beauvoir "was able," argues Eleanore Holveck, "to ground her abstract philosophical positions in the real world of lived experience, a lived experience she created imaginatively in ordinary language that was more concrete, more rich than any abstract philosophical language." (16) With Beauvoir's rejection of *a priorism* and of a universal point of view, a good *philosophical argument* becomes, for Beauvoir, a description of a particular individual's metaphysical relations with the world which the reader recognizes as characterizing his or her own experience. Beauvoir identifies fiction as a medium especially well suited to this end and she takes care to explain what she means by this in "Littérature et métaphysique." Although she notes that philosophers may use the essay to give "to the reader an intellectual reconstruction of their experience, it is this experience itself, such that it presents itself before any elucidation, that the novelist claims to reproduce on an imaginary plane." (17) Beauvoir continues:

In the real world the sense of an object is not a concept knowable by pure understanding: it is the object in as much that it unveils itself to us in the global relation that we maintain with it and that is action, emotion, sentiment; one asks of the novelists to evoke this presence of flesh and bone whose complexity, singular and infinite richness, overflows all subjective interpretation. (18)

Despite the remarks at the beginning of this section which point out philosophers' tendency to define philosophy in terms of their own most pressing interests, it is important not to underestimate the seriousness with which Beauvoir proposes, as does Merleau-Ponty, the world of the concrete as the correct field of a major philosophical research programme. It was not just Beauvoir's distaste for the male presumption behind the universal point of view which led her in this direction. She believed passionately in the exploration of the

individual and in the concrete as the route to true philosophical understanding. She believed — and from an early age acted on her belief — that close observance of one's relations in-the-world could bring new illumination to old philosophical problems, like the existence of other consciousnesses.

5. The Freedom of the Reader

Beauvoir's famous concern with the consciousness of others powerfully shapes her philosophical method. It underwrites one of two ethical issues which she, never far from the ethical plane, weaves through her essay on methodology. Beauvoir wants to guard against what she sees as philosophy's traditional authoritarianism and mystification, whereby what she calls "the theoretician" (19) presents concepts as articles of faith to passive readers. Instead, she identifies a constituency of readers who are out of sympathy with the tradition of the philosophical messiah, who "want to guard the freedom of their thought," who "find repugnant this intellectual docility" demanded of them. (20) This kind of reader, says Beauvoir, is only willing to accept others' propositions after

a movement of his whole being before forming judgements that he pulls from himself without someone having had the presumption of dictating them to him. It is this which is the value of a good novel. It is capable of inducing imaginary experiences as complete, as disquieting as lived experiences. The reader interrogates, doubts, he takes sides and this hesitant elaboration of his thought is for him an enrichment that no doctrinal teaching could replace. (21)

It is not surprising that this radical vision which Beauvoir spelled out in 1946 for the full enfranchisement of the reader continues to meet with incomprehension and dogged resistance. It violates all traditions of received philosophical authority and automatic respect for intellectual hierarchies. It remains, when fully comprehended, (as Beauvoir fully realized and intended) something of a philosophical scandal.

6. The Ethics of Philosophical Research

Beauvoir's concern for the reader's freedom interconnects with her essay's second ethical dimension. She envisions novels which appeal directly to the reader's liberty as serving as a valuable form of philosophical research. This research role, she argues, imposes an ethical obligation of reciprocity on the philosopher-novelist. It

demands that the novelist himself participates in this research to which he admits his reader: if he foresees in advance the conclusions which the reader must reach, if he indiscreetly places pressure on him to give up his adherence to pre-established theses, if he grants him only one degree of freedom, then the novelistic work is only an incongruous mystification; the novel takes on value and dignity only if it constitutes for the author as for the reader a living discovery. (22)

It is notable that Beauvoir invokes the prestigious word "research" to characterize her ideas in this matter which, again, is crucially one of ethics. The ethical principle which Beauvoir demands of philosopher-novelists, namely that the results of their research should not be predetermined, is, indeed, cognate with the professional code of the laboratory scientist. By linking the codes of experimental science and those of the philosopher-novelist, Beauvoir underscores both the precision of her demand and its intellectual and social value.

Beauvoir considers her analogy between philosophical fiction and experimental science so apt that she pursues it further. The validity of a scientific law is based on the series of experiments which have established it and which it summarizes. Beauvoir insists that, in a similar manner, the collection of singular experiences examined by the philosopher-novelist and/or philosopher-essayist is the only legitimate foundation for metaphysical truth. Moreover, just as the ethically rigorous sciences continue to confront established laws with

new and more sophisticated empirical data, so too the philosopher must continue to appraise her general philosophical propositions against the results of fresh applications to concrete existence. The novel, because of its grounding in the concrete, facilitates this movement beyond the traditional dogmatic (and unacceptable) abstraction of philosophy and philosophers. But the literary-philosophical method, warns Beauvoir, only works if the author remains willing to reflect on the problems and unforeseen developments which the philosophical novel, like the scientific experiment, may generate.

7. Conclusion

Beauvoir's pursuit of the abstract and the general via the concrete and the particular is, of course, the common currency of existentialism. Beauvoir's methodological contribution, realized in *L'Invitée* and explained and historicized in Merleau-Ponty's "Metaphysics and the Novel" and in her own "Littérature et métaphysique," merged, in the existential/phenomenological context, the methods of the philosopher and the fiction writer. We have seen how Beauvoir explains her choice of the novel as a literary form in which to do philosophy as motivated by several key ideas. She rejects the universal point of view as a sham; she chooses the individual and the concrete as her domain of philosophical inquiry; she enacts her ethical regard for the reader's freedom; and she announces her stance regarding ethical practice in philosophical research.

Notes

(1) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel" in *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 26-40, originally published as "Le Roman et la métaphysique" *Cahiers du Sud*, No. 270, mars 1945. Simone de Beauvoir, "Littérature et métaphysique," *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), originally published in *Les Temps modernes*, vol. 1, no. 7, avril 1946, pp. 1153-1163.

(2) "Littérature et métaphysique," p. 116. All translations from this essay are our own.

(3) Eleanore Holveck, "Can a Woman be a Philosopher?: Reflections of a Beauvoiran Housemaid" in Simons, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 70.

(4) See *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p. 221, and "Littérature et métaphysique," pp. 106-7.

(5) *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), pp. 34-5. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from this text are our own.

(6) *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, p. 58.

(7) Beauvoir wrote "Deux chapitres inédits de *L'Invitée*" (*Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 275-316) in 1937-8. This text treats many of the philosophical issues covered in *L'Invitée*.

(8) Beauvoir, "Preface," *America Day by Day*, trans. Patrick Dudley (London: Duckworth, 1952), n.p..

(9) Margaret A. Simons, "Joining Another's Fight: Beauvoir's Post-Modern Challenge to Racism in *America Day by Day*," paper delivered to the Midwest Division, Society for Women in Philosophy, October 1994, p. 5.

- (10) "Metaphysics and the Novel," p. 27.
- (11) Ibid., p. 27.
- (12) Ibid., p. 27.
- (13) Ibid., pp. 27-8.
- (14) "Littérature et métaphysique," p. 114.
- (15) Ibid., p. 119.
- (16) "Can a Woman be a Philosopher?," p. 72.
- (17) "Littérature et métaphysique," p. 105.
- (18) Ibid., pp. 105-6.
- (19) Ibid., p. 106.
- (20) Ibid., p. 106.
- (21) Ibid., pp. 106-7.
- (22) Ibid., p. 109.