



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Beauvoir's Philosophical Independence in a Dialogue with  
Sartre

Margaret A. Simons

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, New Series, Volume 14, Number 2,  
2000, pp. 87-103 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsp.2000.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/18142>

# Beauvoir's Philosophical Independence in a Dialogue with Sartre

MARGARET A. SIMONS

*Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville*

In *The Second Sex*, her 1949 magnum opus, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are confined to an inferior role, not by nature, but by men who, for their own advantage, define women as the Other through laws and culture: “[W]hat defines woman’s situation in a singular manner is that, being like every human being an autonomous freedom, she discovers herself and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as the Other” (1949, 1:31).<sup>1</sup> To live authentically, she argued, women must assume the existential burden of constructing the meaning of their own lives and work collectively to win their liberation. Only then, she insisted, will authentic reciprocity be fully possible in relationships with men: “[I]n woman freedom remains abstract and empty, it can only be authentically assumed in revolt. . . . [T]hey must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths for themselves to the future; resignation is only an abdication and a flight; there is for woman no other outcome than to work for her liberation. This liberation can only be collective” (2:455). This message resonated in the lives of millions of women and laid the foundations for the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s achievement was celebrated in scholarly conferences throughout Europe and the Americas. But despite this recent acclaim and her profound impact on the lives of millions of women, Beauvoir’s achievement has been slow to find recognition within the male-dominated world of philosophy.

Beauvoir (1908–86) earned a graduate *agrégation* degree in philosophy and authored several philosophical works in addition to *The Second Sex*, including “metaphysical novels,” such as *She Came to Stay*

---

*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2000.

Copyright © 2000 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

(1943), and two essays in existentialist ethics, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). But, for decades, Beauvoir's work was dismissed as merely the application of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Scholars including myself (1981, 1999), Eva Lundgren-Gothlin (1996), Sonia Kruks (1990), Debra B. Bergoffen (1997), and Karen Vintges (1996) have challenged this sexist dismissal; our reassessments of Beauvoir's work differentiate her philosophy from Sartre's, identify her philosophical influences, and recognize her contributions to ethics and social/political philosophy.

Despite this research, scholarly attempts to differentiate Beauvoir's philosophy from that of Sartre have often left intact the claim that Beauvoir's philosophy begins with Sartre, since, the argument goes, *The Second Sex* and her essays on ethics were published after *Being and Nothingness*. Diane Barsoum Raymond, in *Existentialism and the Philosophical Tradition* (1991), for example, characterizes Beauvoir's central thesis in *The Second Sex*, that under patriarchy woman is the Other, as an application of Sartre's "phenomenology of interpersonal relationships" and its "dynamic of consciousness struggling against consciousness" (386). Kruks (1990) writes that Beauvoir "deepened and fleshed out Sartre's notion of situation" (85). Hazel Barnes (1997), who translated *Being and Nothingness*, sees at the heart of *The Second Sex* "Sartre's concept of a free, self-determining for-itself," his view of consciousness as a "self-creating activity" (147–48, 188).

The most radical challenge to the view that Beauvoir's philosophy begins with Sartre was launched by Kate and Edward Fullbrook in *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (1994). They use Beauvoir's and Sartre's posthumously published war diaries and letters to argue that Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay* (1943), widely thought to be a mere illustration of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), had in fact been largely written before Sartre began work on his tome. Indeed, many of the philosophical ideas credited as originating with Sartre's essay, including the theory of relations with the Other, did not appear in Sartre's journal and other writings until after he had read the second draft of Beauvoir's novel.

Reading of the Fullbrooks' discovery in 1994, I thought of a way to test their conclusion. In 1990, the same year as the publication of Beauvoir's war diary and letters to Sartre, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, the writer's adopted daughter and literary executor, donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale, the French national library, Beauvoir's handwritten diaries from 1926 to 1930, the period when Beauvoir was a philosophy student at the Sorbonne. I reasoned that if the Fullbrooks were correct, and Beauvoir had originated the philosophy in *She Came to Stay*, then her student diaries might contain the same philosophical themes in embryonic form. Moreover, since Beauvoir did not meet Sartre until 1929, the diaries, I concluded, would provide a "pre-Sartrean" starting point for an analysis of Beauvoir's philosophical development.

My analysis of Beauvoir's 1927 diary, based on a transcription by Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, and myself, supports the view that Beauvoir originated key elements of her philosophy that have been traditionally ascribed

to Sartre. In the 1927 diary, Beauvoir made a passionate commitment to doing philosophy, "I didn't know that each system is an ardent, tormented thing, . . . that does not engage only the abstract intelligence. But I know it now, and that I can no longer do anything else" (1927, 134). She provided an early statement of her methodology of doing philosophy in literature, anticipating her 1946 essay "Literature and Metaphysics": "To write 'essays on life' that would not be a novel, but philosophy, joining them vaguely by a fiction. But where the thought would be the essential and where I search to find the truth" (1927, 54). Anticipating the concepts of bad faith and authenticity in her mature ethics, Beauvoir described the struggles against despair and the temptation of self-deception brought on by the loss of her childhood faith: "This morning . . . I passionately desired to be the girl who took communion at morning mass and who walked in a serene certainty . . . and yet . . . I do not desire to believe. An act of faith is the most despairing act there is and I want my despair to at least keep its lucidity. I do not want to lie to myself" (35). She described the experience of freedom and choice, which, in her view, creates a self: "[M]y life is . . . an unpaved path that my walk alone will create" (35). And she defined the problem of the Other, which would be the central theme of her later philosophical work, writing of "this opposition of self and other that I have felt since beginning to live" (95).

Beauvoir's 1927 diary is useful for tracing the genesis of the key concept of "situation" in her philosophy as well. The importance of the concept of "situation" is evident in the original title of *The Second Sex*. Catherine Viollet, archivist at the Bibliothèque Nationale, tells me that Beauvoir's manuscript is entitled "Essays on Woman's Situation." In *Prime of Life* (1960), Beauvoir argued that the originality of her thesis in *The Second Sex* lies in her concept of situation: "What distinguishes my thesis from the traditional thesis is that, according to me, femininity is neither an essence nor a nature: it is a situation created by civilizations from certain physiological givens" (417).

Kruks, in her 1990 analysis of the evolution of the concept of situation in Gabriel Honoré Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, defines the concept of situation as "a relation of mutual permeability between subjectivity and its surrounding world" (11). The concept of situation, Kruks argues, challenges the traditional philosophical assumption of an autonomous subject, a detached knower of objects. Situated subjectivity is embodied; intersubjective; shaped by history, culture, and society; and engaged in practical action in the world.

Are these elements of situation evident in Beauvoir's 1927 diary? In one of its opening passages, we find elements of intersubjectivity: the interdependence of self and other. Beauvoir described the consolation found in relations with others: "This void in me . . . I am lonely to the point of anguish today. . . . To console me I must glance at this self of multiple faces reflected in the eyes of my friends" (5). Later in the diary, she wrote, "We cling to one another so tightly that we can support the great vertiginous void; we will not fall into the abyss" (74). In her 1943 essay in existentialist ethics, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir sug-

gested that the other's need can provide a kind of necessity for my being. In her 1927 diary, Beauvoir described a despairing sense of the "uselessness of everything" (12): "Basically, I'm in a paradoxical situation: I sense my intelligence and what positive power it could have; . . . I would love . . . to become impassioned for a philosophical work. . . . Only, these very qualities that want to serve show me what an illusion it is to claim to serve something" (24). Serving others relieves this despair by providing a sense of utility on a human scale, without appeal to an illusory absolute. One of Beauvoir's pleasures in her relationship with her younger sister was "the pleasure that she has need of me" (5). Beauvoir's love for her cousin, Jacques, also stemmed in part from her perception of his need for her: "Jacques needs me" (139). At the end of the diary, her love for Jacques was ending, but her desire to serve continued: "I dream of immense sacrifices; but I have nothing large enough for . . . a gift" (165). The notions of generosity and the gift figure prominently in Beauvoir's later ethics, and they meet with her critique in *The Second Sex*.

Another aspect of situated subjectivity is embodiment. In her 1927 diary, Beauvoir recognized the gendered aspect of embodied subjectivity that define woman's situation. In one passage, she defended herself when criticized by a male philosophy student, Merleau-Ponty, for her emotionality: "And so, my friends, you do not like girls but consider that not only do they have a reason to satisfy but a heavy heart to restrain—and in that respect I want to remain a woman, more masculine yet in the brain, more feminine in sensibility. (Besides everyone recognizes in approaching me that I am not like other girls. Oh Ponty [sic], as you told me so nicely. . . !)" (107). This passage points to an ambiguity in being a woman. Feminine sensibility is both natural and accessible to change. Girls have a "heavy heart" that is both open to restraint and threatened by the necessity of conforming to philosophy's masculine way of thinking. In response to another conversation with Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir wrote: "Certainly I have a more complicated, more nuanced sensibility than his and a more exhausting power of love. These problems that he lives with his brain, I live them with my arms and my legs. . . . I do not want to lose all that" (126). In these diary passages, Beauvoir seemed to rely on an early phenomenological sense of what it means to think philosophically. Describing gender differences in how one "lives" a philosophical problem with one's body and not just one's mind, Beauvoir was already aware of embodiment as an aspect of one situation, and of the dangers involved in transgressing the boundaries of her gender role.

Beauvoir's 1927 diary reveals some awareness of the structure of gender roles, as she struggled to come to terms with a future outside woman's traditional role of wife and mother. Forced by economic necessity to prepare for a career, since she lacked a dowry, Beauvoir took pride in her abilities and academic success. But she also often felt isolated and afraid of a lonely future denied the warmth and intimacy of woman's role: "Yesterday how I envied M. de Wendel so pretty and unaffected! Without pride as without envy I cried in thinking of the lot which was reserved for me, and of all the force, and the tension

required so that I could find it preferable to any other. . . . Friday I established with force a life's program: in such instants my solitude is an intoxication: I am, I dominate, I love myself and depise the rest. But I would so like to have the right, me as well, of being simple and very weak, of being a woman; in what a 'desert world' I walk, so arid, with the only oasis my intermittent esteem for myself. . . . I count on myself; I know that I can count on myself. But I would love to have no need to count on myself" (57). Her longing to have the "right" of "being a woman" reflects an awareness, in some sense, of not being one. Written in the margins is a note dated 18 May 1929: "Could I again bear to suffer as I suffered in writing these lines?" (57). In the anguish of these words, one sees the temptation to bad faith in assuming oneself as a woman, as the Other that Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex*. But, in 1927, Beauvoir lacked a full understanding of the historical and social dimensions of woman's situation.

Despite her struggles with issues of gender identity as she prepared for a profession traditionally closed to women, Beauvoir was apolitical. Distancing herself from a friend who revealed that he was a communist, Beauvoir explained her lack of interest in politics: "[W]hat price could I attach to the search for the happiness of humanity when the much more serious problem of its reason for being haunts me? I will make no gesture towards this terrestrial realm; the interior world alone counts" (66). The 1927 diary is thus missing crucial elements from Beauvoir's later concept of situation in *The Second Sex*, namely, an understanding of how history, culture, and society shape one's experience and a practical and political engagement in the world. The obvious question is how and when they would first appear in her thought.

Beauvoir traced the history of her thinking about the concept of situation in her memoir, *Prime of Life*, where she described it as a solution to the philosophical dilemma of essentialism versus universalism. Her story begins with a conversation in the mid-1930s, when she was asked by a young student friend to explain what it meant to be Jewish: "I responded with authority: 'Nothing. The Jews do not exist: there are only men.' She told me, much later, what a great success she had when she entered the violinist's room and declared: 'My friends, you do not exist! My philosophy professor told me so'" (1960, 191). "On a large number of points, I was . . . deplorably abstract," Beauvoir explained:

I recognized the reality of the social classes; but in reaction against the ideologies of my father, I protested whenever one spoke to me of the French, the German, the Jew: only singular persons existed. I was right to refuse essentialism. I already knew what abuses followed from such notions as the slavish soul, the Jewish character, the primitive mentality, the eternal feminine. But the universalism to which I rallied carried me far from reality. What I lacked was the idea of 'situation' which alone allows us to concretely define human groups [*ensembles*] without making them subservient to an intemporal fatality. But no one in those days furnished me with this idea, once one left the cadre of the class struggle. (191)

In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir framed the problem of “what is a woman” similarly, with the concept of situation offering a solution to the dilemma of conceptualism (essentialism) versus nominalism (universalism):

In the time of St. Thomas, [femininity] appeared as an essence. . . . But conceptualism has lost ground: the biological and social sciences no longer believe in the existence of immutably fixed entities that define given characters such as those of the woman, the Jew or the Black; they consider character as a secondary reaction to a *situation*. . . . Does that mean that the word ‘woman’ has no content? That is what is vigorously affirmed by the partisans of enlightenment philosophy, of rationalism, of nominalism: women would be only those human beings arbitrarily designated by the word ‘woman.’ . . . But nominalism is a bit limited as a doctrine; and antifeminists delight in showing that women *are* not men. Assuredly woman is, like man, a human being: but such an affirmation is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always singularly situated. Refusing notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, Blacks, and women. This negation does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but an inauthentic flight. It is clear that no woman can claim without bad faith to situate herself beyond her sex. (1949, 1:12–13)

Thus, an understanding of woman’s situation, and its similarities with racism, are key elements in Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy.

In *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir provided more history of her thinking about the concept of situation. She wrote that it was Sartre, during a military leave in February 1940, who convinced her of the necessity of assuming one’s situation in political action:

At the beginning of February, I met Sartre at the train station. . . . He had indeed decided no longer to stay out of political life. His new ethics, that he endeavored to put into practice, was based on the notion of authenticity and demanded that man ‘assume’ his ‘situation.’ And the only way to do that was to go beyond it by engaging in an action: any other attitude was a flight, an empty pretension, a masquerade founded on bad faith. One saw that a serious change had occurred in him, and also in me, who rallied immediately to his idea; because our first concern formerly had been to keep our situation at a distance by games, delusions, and lies. (1960, 492)

Later in *Prime of Life*, in a discussion of her essay *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Sartre is credited with “introducing the idea of situation” in *Being and Nothingness*: “I showed the truth and importance of the idea of ‘situation’ introduced by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*” (626). Thus, Beauvoir’s autobiographical text, published in 1960, seems to credit Sartre with originating the concept of situation in her philosophy.

However, their posthumously published war diaries and letters show a more complicated picture. Instead of a Sartrean monologue, it reveals a philosophical dialogue between Beauvoir and Sartre, a dialogue drawing on other philosophical influences and revealing their philosophical differences. The discussion of one's situation in their diaries is centered around the coming war, with Sartre reflecting on his situation as a mobilized soldier, as well as on other aspects of his situation. In an early diary entry dated 20 November 1939, Sartre discussed "the being-in-the-world of man and his being-in-situation" (Sartre 1984, 22). Indeed, in the entry dated 1 February 1940, shortly before the military leave that Beauvoir mentioned in *Prime of Life*, Sartre discussed "assuming my situation" (186), which means, as he explained elsewhere, "to claim responsibility" for it (113).

Beauvoir also reflected on her situation in her war diary. In a 3 September 1939 entry, for example, Beauvoir described the experience of being left in Paris after the mobilization: "Impression of being linked to everyone. . . . One feels no personal life, but the community lives in oneself as among the primitives" (1990a, 20). Reading histories of World War I, Beauvoir was struck by the contingencies of war, where periods of waiting were broken only by completely useless massacres: "It is as absurd as possible, and more contingent than I could have ever believed" (69). However, it was not the political situation that led her to reflect on the "contingent" situations shaping her life, but rather the passion and jealousy she experienced with a lover, Jacques Bost, whom she had to share with another woman.

In a 3 November 1939 diary entry, written during her visit to Sartre's military post, she recounted Sartre's efforts to convince her that she had chosen the relationship with Bost such as it was. Beauvoir rejected his attempt, refusing to be like those women who "make a pretense of choosing that to which they submit" (125). Despite Sartre's ridicule ("Sartre finds that I am sincerely discovering America" [126]), she was committed to analyze the contingent, psychological dimensions of her embodied situation:

The fact is that it is new to me, this interior psychological life. I used to have, above all, a moral attitude. I tried to believe myself to be what I wanted to be. Since this year, the presence of the contingent, the passionate due to Bost has been glaringly obvious. . . . Now it amuses me like a new domain . . . which is always amusing to discover and track down in myself. It is one step towards a knowledge of myself that begins to interest me. I sense that I am becoming something well defined: in this I feel my age, I'm going to be 32 years old. I feel myself to be a grown woman; I would love to know which one. Yesterday, I spoke at length with Sartre on a point which truly interests me in myself, that is my "femininity," the manner in which I am and am not of my sex. That must be defined, and also in general what I ask of my life, of my thought, and how I am situated in the world. If I have the time, I will occupy myself with these matters in this notebook. (1990a, 124–26)

Thus Beauvoir's November 1939 reflections on her situation are reminiscent of passages from her 1927 diary. The ambiguity of her experience of femininity



is striking: “the manner in which I am and am not of my sex” (126). There is an element of refusal or defiance that anticipates *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir continued her analysis in a diary entry from December 1939: “Suddenly, awareness of my physique, and of my liaison with my parents, my milieu. . . . I feel myself French and provincial, a middle-class, déclassé bourgeoisie; . . . a state functionary and intellectual with links to Montparnasse; all of that is in my manner of dress and hairstyle. That must be studied as well, I desire more and more to do this study of myself” (1990a, 188–89). So, by December of 1939, Beauvoir was already interested not only in her femininity, but also in her economic class and her nationality.

The reflections by Beauvoir and Sartre on their situations share an obvious commonality: they both draw on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. The expressions “the being-in-the-world of man and his being-in-situation” (Sartre 1984, 22) from Sartre’s 20 November 1939 diary entry, for example, are famous elements of Heidegger’s philosophy. Beauvoir’s concern with “how I am situated in the world” (1990a, 126) also reflects a Heideggerian perspective, as does her discussion, in a 2 January 1940 entry, about the situation of the nineteenth-century German Jewish émigré writer Heinrich Heine: “I am reading the end of the Heine biography — it interests me because one can not be more ‘in situation’ than this guy, a Jew, German refuge, showing solidarity with the exiles in France, etc.” (227). In this case, the phrase “*en situation*” in quotation marks indicates her use of Heidegger’s expression.

Sartre’s discussion of “assuming one’s situation” also reflects a Heideggerian perspective. The notion of “assumption” of one’s situation is related to Heidegger’s concept of authenticity: “assumption is presented as a value of authenticity” (Sartre 1984, 113). Indeed, Sartre’s reference to “assuming my situation” (1984, 186) in the 1 February 1940 diary entry mentioned in *Prime of Life* comes in an extended reflection on “the influence exerted upon me by Heidegger” (182): “This influence has in recent times sometimes struck me as providential, since it supervened to teach me authenticity and historicity just at the very moment when war was about to make these notions indispensable to me. If I try to imagine what I’d have made of my thought without these tools, I am gripped by retrospective fear. . . . I’d still be marking time . . . perhaps still fighting against war and rejecting it with all my being” (182). He added, “I can rediscover Heidegger’s assumption of his destiny as a German, in that wretched Germany of the postwar years, in order to help me assume my destiny as a Frenchman in the France of ’40” (187).

In *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir credited Heidegger with showing her the necessity of assuming responsibility for one’s situation. Describing her life under the Nazi Occupation, she wrote:

I knew at present that I was linked to my contemporaries to the marrow of my bones; I discovered the inverse of this dependence: my responsibility. Heidegger had convinced me that “human reality” is accomplished and expressed in each

existent: inversely, each one is entirely engaged and compromised; the individual grasps himself as a man among men, or as an ant in an anthill: but we all have the power to bring into question the collective choice, to challenge it or to ratify it. I experienced everyday this equivocal solidarity. (1960, 538)

In Beauvoir's war diary, there is an entry dated 9 January 1941, which would seem to be the source of this passage from *Prime of Life*. In that entry, Beauvoir criticized "the tragic metaphysics of fascism," which "confounds the human with its animal, biological aspect" (1990a, 361). But she also found in Heidegger's notion of human reality and the idea of human species a metaphysical solidarity with others: "And after this other idea of Heidegger's that I and the human species are the same thing, it is truly *I* who am in play" (361). She rejected an antihumanism position, writing that she had found "a *metaphysical* solidarity that is a new discovery for me, I who was a solipsist" (361–62). She continued, "Making oneself an ant among ants, or a free consciousness in front of consciousness. . . . I can not be consciousness, spirit, among ants. I understand in what ways our anti-humanism fell short. To admire man as a given (fine intelligent animal, etc.), is imbecilic—but there is no other reality than human reality—all values are founded on it" (362). The reference to the impossibility of living as a human among ants suggests that Beauvoir drew from this diary passage in her autobiography where she wrote about her "equivocal solidarity."

It seems that Beauvoir may have learned a different lesson from Heidegger than did Sartre. Beauvoir, like Sartre, drew upon the Heideggerian notion of an ethics founded on human reality. But she, unlike Sartre, saw that engagement as founded upon a humanism. Heidegger's concept of human reality, and its emphasis of being-in-the-world, provided a social dimension to Beauvoir's earlier understanding of embodiment. Furthermore, for Beauvoir, assuming responsibility meant recognizing that one "has the power to bring into question the collective choice, to challenge it or to ratify it" (1960, 538). This ambiguity is reminiscent of her 1927 description of being a woman as both natural and accessible to change, both the source of her valued emotional sensitivities and a threat to her freedom.

Writing in November 1939, Sartre seemed to draw the opposite conclusion, reading Heidegger's concept of human reality as an alternative to "humanism," to seeing man "as a natural species," "this abasement of human nature that I condemn" (Sartre 1984, 21). He wrote, "Through the idea of species, man is thrown out of himself not *into* the world, in the Heideggerian sense, but amid the world, or more accurately, upon the earth. The intimacy of his connection with the world is indeed sensed, but in the degraded form of a symbiosis with the earth and the physical universe" (26). Sartre criticized Beauvoir for using this concept of "human species": "The notion of human species has made incredible ravages; even the Beaver noticed in conversation one day that she has two fixed reference-points in the infinite series of time: the appearance of the human species, in the past; and the disappearance of the human species, in the

future. . . . To me, this is nothing and is *boring*" (22). Indeed, she did refer to "the human species" and she did discuss woman as a "human female" in *The Second Sex*, while also rejecting racism and biological reductionism. For Beauvoir, a woman's body is an important part, but not the only part, of her situation.

In his war diary, Sartre's focus on freedom and project seems to guard and separate consciousness from the world. Sartre wrote, in an entry from 7 December 1939: "[A]ll that happens to [consciousness] must happen to it by its own doing: that is the law of its freedom. . . . [B]ut we should be clear that facticity has no relevance here. Granted it is thanks to facticity that I'm thrown into war. But what war will be for me, what face it will reveal to me, what I shall myself be in war and for war—all this I shall be freely and responsible for" (Sartre 1984, 113). He noted, "Man discovers his project everywhere, he discovers *nothing but his project*" (108). And, he continued, "What we call [human reality's] freedom is that . . . Nothing can ever happen to it *from outside*. This comes from the fact that human reality is first of all consciousness. . . . It is thus free in the sense that its reactions, and the way the world appears to it, are integrally attributable to it" (109).

In another passage from his diary, Sartre criticized the ambiguous response of a fellow soldier to his situation, a criticism that could apply also to Beauvoir: "It was Paul saying to me the other day: 'Me, a soldier? I consider myself as a civilian in military disguise'" (112). Sartre concluded, "He thus stubbornly continues to *flee* what he's *making of himself*" (112). As a soldier, Sartre confronted "this obligation to shoulder what happens to me. This, no doubt, is what gave birth to the religious notion of *trial* sent me by Heaven. But, by refusing excuses and assuming my freedom, I appropriate it" (113). He noted, "Nothing is ever too much. For—at the very moment when I lose my grip, when my body 'overcomes me', when under physical torture I confess what I wanted to keep secret—it is of my own accord, through the free consciousness of my torment, that I decide to confess" (113–14). Sartre's criticism of Paul for failing to assume his identity as a soldier contrasts with the ambiguity in Beauvoir's reference to being and not being a woman, and to her sense of an "equivocal solidarity" with her fellow countrymen under the Occupation. Sartre and Beauvoir thus seem to have had a different interpretation of Heidegger's concept of assuming one's situation.

The philosophical difference between Beauvoir and Sartre on the relation of consciousness and the social world is also apparent in their letters. In a letter dated 2 January 1940, Beauvoir wrote to Sartre about the Heine biography: "A funny individualist life but penetrated as much as possible by the social; rarely has a guy been more 'in situation' than this one—through him one follows the history of German Jewish immigration of one hundred years ago, and it is curious to see that in the light of today. . . . And it's a funny destiny, quite impressive. I was struck by it" (1990b, 2:11). Where Beauvoir admired the Heine biography for its emphasis on the social, Sartre, in a letter written to her the following day, criticized another text for the same reason.

On 3 January 1940, Sartre wrote to Beauvoir about the war, arguing against those who ignore freedom in their exclusive focus on the 'social': "In regards to the book by Rauschnig . . . , I *saw* a certain Germany; . . . and I felt my historicity. That allowed me to better understand these guys you and I have sometimes talked about who think only of the social all the time. That has its grandeur but the flip side of the coin is that one is always below the thoughts that one has. Because one *believes* in them. It's not that I don't believe in mine, ordinarily, but still I know well that they are the product of my freedom" (Sartre 1983, 2:13). Sartre's criticism of a too-narrow focus on the social contrasts with Beauvoir's appreciation of that focus in the Heine biography. Sartre's affirmation that his thoughts "are the product of my freedom" also contrasts with Beauvoir's November 1939 critique of those women "who make a pretense of choosing that to which they submit" (1990a, 124). One sees here a philosophical difference between Beauvoir and Sartre on the impact of situation on consciousness and on limiting choice.

Beauvoir sent the Heine biography to Sartre, who responded, in a letter dated 5 January 1940, that he found the social aspect interesting: "I've already read thirty-three pages with interest. It's well done and this effort is interesting—which was evidently necessary—to put each event back into the social setting. One feels indeed the solid bedrock of these funny Jewish families" (Sartre 1983, 2:17).

In a very interesting letter dated 6 January 1940, Sartre praised Heine for having "assumed his condition as a Jew" and reflected on the implications for himself:

I've read the beginning of the Heine biography which inspired some curious reflections. Since I praised him to myself for having assumed his condition as a Jew, and since I understood lucidly that Jewish rationalists like Pieter or Brunschvick [his fellow soldiers] were inauthentic in thinking of themselves as men first and not Jews, the idea came to me, as a rigorous consequence, that I had to assume myself as French. It was without enthusiasm and above all it was empty of meaning for me. Little more than an inevitable and evident conclusion. I ask myself where it will take me and I'm going to occupy myself with all of that tomorrow . . . accepting in advance that I might end up a fascist [*me retrouver fasciste*] if that's the result of sound reasonings (but don't worry, I don't believe this need be envisioned). (Sartre 1983, 2:21)

In this very interesting passage, which may mark a beginning of Sartre's political engagement as described by Beauvoir in *Prime of Life*, Sartre praised Heine for assuming his condition as a Jew and critiqued "the Jewish rationalists" as inauthentic. Thus, Sartre recognized the insufficiencies of the universalist position of liberal modernism. But the reference to fascism suggests that Sartre may not have found essentialism similarly problematic, although he found it "empty of meaning" to "assume himself as French." For Sartre, one must

assume his national or ethnic identity, “as a Jew” or “as French,” while Beauvoir focused on the immigration experience, with its refusal of national boundaries, and Heine’s more ambiguous situation as a “Jew, German refugee.” Beauvoir’s focus in this passage may echo her 3 November 1939 diary entry, where she wrote of “the manner in which I am and am not of my sex,” referring, perhaps, to her own “emigration” from the confines of woman’s traditional role.

In a letter from the following day, 7 January 1940, Sartre wrote to Beauvoir that he had filled thirty-nine pages of his diary on his “relations with France. Just a historical review, the kind that you love . . . but tomorrow I will do the theory” (Sartre 1983, 2:22). Unfortunately, Sartre’s diaries from that period are missing, so we are unable to examine these pages. But Sartre returned to the topic in a letter dated 8 January 1940: “You must have laughed indeed at the solemn praises that I awarded Heine the other day for his Israelite fidelity, knowing that one year later he had himself baptised in order to win a cabinet post. . . . The book is truly gripping, you’re right, although perhaps one sacrifices a bit too much of the person of Heine to his *situation*” (25). Thus, Sartre criticized the biography for precisely that which Beauvoir admired in it, the analysis of Heine’s situation. It is another indication of a philosophical difference between Beauvoir and Sartre on the salience of the social.

The phrase, “Israelite fidelity” is interesting for its implications that Sartre’s concept of assuming one’s condition entails allegiance to an identity. This contrasts with Beauvoir’s focus on refusal and defiance of identity and anticipates her selection of an article on the phenomenon of “passing” among American blacks, for the special *U.S.A.* issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (vol. 1: 11–12, 1946). Sartre summarized his theory for Beauvoir in the same letter of 8 January 1940: “So I’ve written on France. The theory is done and well done, but be assured that I in no way become a fascist, far from it. I saw clearly and I believe that you will think as I do. Besides it’s always the same: historicity, being-in-the-world, *my war*, etc.” (Sartre 1983, 2:26).

Meanwhile, Beauvoir had responded, in an 8 January 1940 letter, to Sartre’s question on assuming one’s condition as French:

I don’t know that it’s necessary to assume oneself as French, I will reflect on that tomorrow. In part, yes, certainly, it seems to me that writing *Nausea* is in some ways assuming oneself as French. . . . I will reflect on this (but it seems to me that this assumption does not lead to patriotism any more than assuming the war leads to warmongering). It’s a question (or not?) in this case of attaining universal objects, ideas, works, etc., through a singular, historical position. Now it would be necessary to define the position and limit it and see what commitments it entails—speak to me of this again; it interests me strongly: in my little novel [*She Came to Stay*] I put in a conversation where Pierre assumes himself as French precisely in refusing the idea of moving his theatre to America. (1990b, 2:25–26)

Thus, for Beauvoir, refusal—either Heine's refusal to remain in an anti-Semitic Germany or Pierre's refusal to move his theater to America—seems to be an element in assuming one's situation.

Beauvoir's argument that Sartre assumed himself as French in writing *Nausea* is also interesting for its element of individuality. Beauvoir's reference to attaining universals through "a singular, historical position" suggests that she had not yet formulated the idea of the generality of situations found in *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*. Nor does her concept of assuming one's situation from this era seem to entail a political engagement, as it did for Sartre and as it would for Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, where she argued that women could only assume their situation authentically through a collective struggle for their liberation.

When Sartre, in a 9 January letter, acknowledged the significance of the concept of "situation," he was in a crisis of self-doubt, characterizing his work on historicity as little more than a "rehash of Heidegger":

It seems to me that . . . basically what I've done since September, with all the stuff on "my" war, etc., is only to laboriously develop what [Heidegger] says in ten pages on historicity. On that point I am reading this biography of Heine which captures me, as it captured you. But now that I am "grown," reading biographies no longer gives me the joyful, facile excitement that it did ten years ago. It rather leaves me a bit demoralized. I considered myself rather futile when confronted with this guy, who did some filthy things and who had a great weakness of character, but who lived, as you said, so formidably in situation. For myself I know well that I waited for the war to decipher my situation a bit and I see also that I don't have much talent for it. I'm not lacking in good will but I would also need this historical sense that he had. (Sartre 1983, 2:28)

Beauvoir did not refer again to Heine in her letters to Sartre, although references to the concept of situation continued in both of their diaries. After returning from his February leave in Paris, Sartre drew on a new influence in his discussion of "situation": Beauvoir's metaphysical novel *She Came to Stay*, which he read while in Paris. Beauvoir's novel was apparently ready for publication in the summer of 1941, although she worked on it only intermittently during the months of the Nazi Occupation when Sartre was a prisoner. Although its completion and publication were delayed by the war, Beauvoir's novel seems to have been substantially complete by February 1940. In a letter dated 15 February 1940, after reading Beauvoir's manuscript during his leave, Sartre wrote to her: "[Y]ou have written a handsome little novel" (1983, 2:70). In fact, her novel seems to have influenced Sartre's concept of situation. In a 17 February letter, after his leave, he wrote to Beauvoir that he was working with her concept of "unrealizable situations": "[T]oday I worked on my diary, I spoke there of your 'unrealizable situations'—you know what Elizabeth felt all around her. And I included my leave among those situations" (75).

The scene apparently referred to by Sartre appears in the published version of *L'Invitée*. Elizabeth, entering her apartment filled with the material signs of her success, thinks to herself: "If one were to look at all this décor in a mirror, one would be able to believe oneself in the presence of the realization of an old dream. . . . And yet, [Beauvoir writes, Elizabeth] continued to feel herself on the margins of life . . . a living parody of the woman that she claimed to be" (1943, 271). Thinking about his military leave, Sartre wrote in his diary on 17 February:

For [Beauvoir] has taught me something new: in her novel, one sees Elisabeth complaining about being surrounded by objects she'd like to enjoy, but that she can't 'realize.' . . . [Beauvoir] meant that we are surrounded by 'unrealizables.' . . . The example chosen by Elisabeth is excellent: one can never truly live the relation between what one has been and what one is. . . . Our great hopes are dead, and far from our being able to see our success through them, it's them we look at through our success. (1984, 198)

In a diary entry for the following day, Sartre made clear that Beauvoir's concept of unrealizables concerns a situation, not an object: "My comment yesterday about unrealizables could give rise to confusion. What is unrealizable is never an *object*. It is a *situation*. It's not Paris, but being-in-Paris, with respect to which the question of the unrealizable is posed" (1984, 208). Sartre later incorporated an expanded version of this discussion of Beauvoir's concept of unrealizables into the section on "situation" in *Being and Nothingness* (1953, 610–15).

In her 8 January 1940 letter to Sartre, quoted above, Beauvoir referred to a different scene from her novel, "where Pierre assumes himself as French precisely in refusing the idea of moving his theatre to America" (1990b, 2:25–26). This is a particularly interesting section of the novel for contrasting Beauvoir's and Sartre's concepts of assuming one's situation. In the scene, a conversation between a middle-aged couple, Pierre and Françoise, and their young friend, Gerbert, about the coming war and mobilization begins with Gerbert's suggestion that, if things get too rough, Pierre could take off for America. The reasons that Pierre offers for staying in France suggest Beauvoir's concept of assuming one's situation and anticipate her later arguments in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Pierre's first response is "What meaning could it have for me to work in exile? If one desires to make one's mark on the world, one must be in solidarity with it" (323). Beauvoir's point here would seem to be that solidarity with others is necessary in order to create an enduring legacy that will transcend the limits of one's finite lifetime. To Françoise's objection that "America is also a world," Pierre gives a Heideggerian reply: "But it is not mine." "It will be the day that you adopt it," Françoise answers, to which Pierre replies with the concept of engagement. It is his identification with his past and the tradition that

has shaped him that keeps him in this world: "I am too engaged in this one" (1943, 323). "I have been formed by an entire past. . . . I would be nothing without all that. And of course, my wish is that art receive from me an original future, but which would be the future of this tradition. One can not work in a void, that would lead to nothing" (324).

Françoise then turns Pierre's argument against him, arguing that he need not respond to the mobilization, since the military is not "his" either: "Obviously, to go set yourself up with weapons and luggage in service of something that's none of your business, that would scarcely be satisfying" (1943, 324). Pierre's reply is a subjective appeal to personal taste: "Personally, I rather put up barbed wire somewhere in Lorraine than eat corn-on-the-cob in New York" (324). Then he appeals to their spirit of adventure and curiosity: "I must confess I feel a sort of curiosity." Françoise then picks up the argument, arguing that the war is too "important" to miss: "I wouldn't like something important to happen without me" (324).

In reply to Gerbert's universalist challenge that one should therefore go fight in Spain or China, Françoise introduces the concept of situation: "'It seems to me that there is a question of situation,' Françoise said. I remember when I was at the Point du Raz, and Pierre tried to force me to leave before the storm, I was in despair; I felt that it was wrong to give in. Whereas at this moment, I wouldn't care if all the storms in the world were raging there without me" (1943, 325). Pierre agrees: "There you are, that's it exactly. This war belongs to my own history and that's why I would not consent to miss it" (325).

Beauvoir's example of a hiker refusing to be deterred by a storm illustrates an individual's moral obligation to proceed with a project threatened by conditions in the world. The weather at the Pointe du Raz is important only in the context of her individual project. It's irrelevant once she's back in Paris. Analogously, an individual whose projects are in France would feel a moral obligation to not be deterred by the coming war, thus refusing to cede to the threat of the Nazis.

As the scene continues, Françoise's despair at the thought of giving way to the storm is contrasted with Pierre's acquiescence to the force of circumstances, which, he argues, have no effect on his freedom. Confronted by Gerbert with a horrifying war story of a doctor driven mad by the suffering of the wounded soldiers, Pierre replied, "[Y]ou know, I don't even find that too bad; it's just something you've got to live with like any other." "If you take that line, anything can be justified," said Gerbert. All you have to do is sit back and cross your arms" (1943, 325). "Oh, no!" said Pierre. "To live something doesn't mean to submit to it stupidly; I would accept to live through almost anything, precisely because I would always have the resources to live it freely." "A funny kind of freedom [*drôle de liberté*], said Gerbert. "You wouldn't be able to do any of the things that interested you" (325).

Pierre has been caught in a contradiction. In defense of his concept of freedom, he is forced to abandon his earlier claim of an integral link with his situa-



tion, as an artist in France. “You see, I’ve changed,” Pierre said. “I no longer have a mystical belief in art. I could very easily envision other activities.” “Then nothing is stopping you from leaving for America,” Gerbert said. Pierre can only respond by reasserting his decision as a matter of principle: “For the moment,” he said, “it seems to me that the best use of my freedom is to defend a civilization which is linked to all of the values that I hold.” Françoise declares herself unconvinced: “Still, Gerbert is right,” Françoise said. “You’d regard any world justified in which there was a place for you.” She smiled: “I’ve always suspected you of thinking you’re God the Father” (1943, 326).

This scene is an attack on the notion of absolute unlimited freedom in Sartre’s diary, as inconsistent with a concept of situation as the mutual permeability of subject and world. Beauvoir defended a notion of assuming one’s situation, as a kind of loyalty to a tradition that has shaped one’s consciousness and within which one conceives of making a lasting impression on the world. But her concept is not one of political engagement. It will not be until in the war and after greater personal experience of the horrors of anti-Semitism and the American system of racist segregation that Beauvoir’s concept of situation in *The Second Sex* would be fully developed.

In reviewing Beauvoir’s philosophical independence in a dialogue with Sartre about Heidegger’s concept of situation, one can only wonder why Beauvoir misrepresented this aspect of her work in her autobiographical texts and interviews. Perhaps she lost faith in her philosophical achievements after they failed to win public recognition. Perhaps she acted out of shame or from a misguided effort to protect Sartre’s reputation. But in leaving her diaries to be found and published after her death, Beauvoir, like Sartre, trusted us to follow their clues and solve a mystery at the philosophical heart of one of the twentieth century’s most important books, *The Second Sex*.

There are signs that we are in the midst of something of a Beauvoir renaissance. Many young readers are attracted by the passion of Beauvoir’s philosophy—the very quality that tends to confound more traditional philosophers. With her first novel, *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir brought onto philosophy’s center stage a woman’s moral struggle to reconcile freedom and love. She wrote with an admirable clarity and a potent immediacy. She believed that intellectuals have a moral responsibility to engage in the world around them, a belief on which she acted over the course of seven decades: as a white person in the 1940s speaking out against American racism, as a French person in the 1960s opposing the use of torture by French soldiers during the Algerian war, and as a feminist in the 1970s opening her apartment to women seeking illegal abortions or fleeing domestic violence. Her posthumous manuscripts provide a humanizing glimpse into the private Beauvoir, showing that she was anything but immune from the problems that plague many intimate relationships. Beauvoir’s life of intellectual passion, moral commitment, and political engagement provides an enduring model, not just for women, but for us all.

## Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Beauvoir's and Sartre's French texts are my own.

## Works Cited

- Barnes, Hazel. 1997. *The Story I Tell Myself: A Venture in Existential Autobiography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. [1927]. *Cahier*. Holograph manuscript. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
- . 1943. *L'Invitée* [*She Came to Stay*]. Paris: Gallimard/Folio.
- . 1944. *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1947. *Pour une Morale de l'Ambiguïté* [*The Ethics of Ambiguity*]. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1949. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1960. *La Force de l'âge* [*Prime of Life*]. Paris: Gallimard/Folio.
- . 1990a. *Journal de guerre*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1990b. *Lettres à Sartre*. 2 vols. Ed. Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bergoffen, Debra B. 1997. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P.
- Fullbrook, Kate, and Edward Fullbrook. 1994. *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kruks, Sonia. 1990. *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Lundgren-Gothlin, Eva. 1996. *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex."* Trans. Linda Schenck. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP.
- Raymond, Diane Barsoum. 1991. *Existentialism and the Philosophical Tradition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. [1943] 1953. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.
- . 1983. *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard.
- . [1983] 1984. *The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre: November 1939 to March 1940*. Trans. Quentin Hoare. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Simons, Margaret A. 1981. "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Question of Influence." *Eros* 8.1: 25–42.
- . 1999. *Beauvoir and "The Second Sex": Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Vintges, Karen. 1996. *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP.