



The Erotico-Theoretical Transference Relationship between Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir Revisited with Michèle Le Dœuff

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Abstract: Michèle Le Dœuff considers the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as a paradigmatic case of what she calls an "erotico-theoretical transference" relationship: De Beauvoir devoted herself to Sartre theoretically by adopting his existentialist perspective for the analysis of reality in general and the analysis of women's oppression in particular. The latter is especially strange since Sartre used strongly sexist metaphors and adopted a macho attitude towards women. In her book *Hipparchia's Choice*, Le Dœuff speaks in this context of "theoretical masculinism." She convincingly shows in this book that Sartre without using images could not have closed his existentialist philosophy: without the feminine drawback he would not have been able to explain why man cannot become god. Sartre not only understands gaining knowledge as a rape of a woman he also fears that the possessed feminine (body) could reverse its position from being dominated to the dominating force by appropriating the masculine through slime. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre states that "slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge." Despite of the fact that De Beauvoir used Sartre's heterosexist ontology and metaphysics she managed to provide a highly influential depiction of women's condition and offered an original approach to the understanding of selfhood which places woman inside the subject.

Keywords: Le Dœuff, Michèle; de Beauvoir, Simone; Sartre, Jean-Paul; second sex; women's condition; selfhood; transference relationship; sexist metaphor; existentialist philosophy; philosophical imaginary.

As is well known, de Beauvoir got insulted with such labels as "Notre-Dame de Sartre" or "La Grande Sartreuse."¹ Like le Dœuff, Toril Moi notices in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* that whilst de Beauvoir referred to Sartre as a philosopher, she classified herself as a writer and novelist. Margaret Simons states in the "Introduction" to the collection of critical essays entitled *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*

(1995) that de Beauvoir rejected "efforts by feminist philosophers to define her position as philosophically distinct from Sartre's."² This is perhaps a result of both, the years of contemptuous dismissal by philosophers and her affection for Sartre. De Beauvoir and Sartre read and criticized the writings of each other. They had a symbiotic relationship. In *Simone De Beauvoir: A Life, A Love Story*, Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier

¹ Toril Moi, "Politics and the Intellectual Woman: Clichés in the Reception of Simone de Beauvoir's Work," in *Feminist Theory & Simone de Beauvoir*, Oxford, GB: Blackwell 1990. pp. 21-60, here p. 21.

² Margaret A. Simons, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2006, pp. 1-10, here p. 1.

cite Sartre's acknowledgement of his emotional and intellectual dependency on de Beauvoir: "in a certain way, if you like, I owe her everything...I put complete trust in her...You could say that I write for her."³ Francis and Gontier suggest, "their [writing] efforts united them more surely than an embrace" (LL 168). Yet de Beauvoir is not Sartre's equal in a harmonious mutual relationship, but it rather holds true what Moi says, "the two may well be one, but *he* is the one they are."⁴

This essay revisits Simone de Beauvoir's masterpiece *Le Deuxième Sexe / The Second Sex* (1953) with the aid of Michèle Le Dœuff's analysis of pictorial or imaginary elements in philosophical texts. Although my focus is on the early texts by Le Dœuff, her intellectual encounters with de Beauvoir are still ongoing.⁵ In her research Le Dœuff takes a central interest in the *imaginaire*.⁶ In *The Philosophical Imaginary* (1980) she identifies throughout the history of philosophy images that were presented by their authors as merely ornamental, marginal additions and an aid for understanding, when in fact, they are essential in a strain of argumentation or in an entire philosophical system. She says about her method, "it involves reflecting on strands of the imaginary operating in places where, in principle, they are supposed not to belong and yet where, without them, nothing would have been accomplished."⁷ Le Dœuff understands doing history

of philosophy in terms of "a permanent effort towards reactualization" (PI 204-5). Yet this "reorientation never means absolute discontinuity" (PI 204). For both de Beauvoir and Le Dœuff, being a philosopher and being a feminist coincide.

In her essay "Women and Creativity," de Beauvoir writes that "truly great works are those which contest the world in its entirety."⁸ Her passionate, forceful and ironic voice in *The Second Sex* certainly meets this criterion for genius and exemplifies the fact that women are not creative inferiors to men. In *The Second Sex*, a classic of both philosophy and of women's liberation movement, De Beauvoir wants to know "what is a woman?"⁹ She investigated women's situation because she made the experience in life that while men are primarily perceived and conceived as human beings and, thus, are supposed to have direct access to the world in its objectivity, women are primarily perceived and conceived as sexed creatures with a distorted and partial understanding of the world. She writes that whilst male men thought of themselves as being "inevitable, like a pure idea, the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit," women's bodies were philosophically and socio-culturally constructed in such a way that they are "weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (SS 16). De Beauvoir maintains that the dictates for femininity, which women internalized, can be undone because as she says in the first sentence of the second book of *The Second Sex* "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (SS 295) (*on ne naît pas femme: on le devient*). Humans are capable of constantly transcending and surpassing their biological givens such as sex difference since, for her, "in the human species individual 'possibilities' depend upon the economic and social situation" (SS 67). The philosopher and historian of science Donna Haraway states that "despite important differences, all the modern feminist meanings of gender have roots in Simone de Beauvoir's claim that 'one is not born a woman!'"¹⁰

Like De Beauvoir, Le Dœuff is a highly original

[Henceforth cited as *PI*]

⁸ Simone DeBeauvoir, "Women and Creativity," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Oxford, GB: Blackwell 1966, pp. 17-32, here p. 28.

⁹ Simone DeBeauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. Howard M. Parshley, London, GB: Vintage, 1949/1953, p. 15. [Henceforth cited as *SS*]

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London, GB: Free Association Books 1991, p. 131.

³ Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Simone De Beauvoir: A Life, a Love Story*, transl. Lisa Nesselson, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press 1985, p. 111. [Henceforth cited as *LL*]

⁴ Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell 1994, p. 222.

⁵ For instance, in 2006 she published the essay "Engaging with Simone de Beauvoir". And at the 7th annual conference of the Society for European Philosophy (SEP), which took place in September 2011 at York St. John University in England, Le Dœuff was a keynote speaker. At this conference I chaired the panel session on "Philosophy and 'Women in the Profession'" with Pamela Sue Anderson and Roxana Baiasu on it and Le Dœuff herself was as an active discussant in the audience.

⁶ Raoul Mortley, "Chapter 5. Michèle Le Dœuff," in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Dœuff, Derrida*, ed. Raoul Mortley, London, GB: Routledge 1991, pp. 80-91, here p. 85. [Henceforth cited as *MD*]

⁷ Michèle Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, transl. Colin Gordon, London, GB: Athlone Press, 1989, p. 2.

and obstinately self-willed French philosopher who encourages women to develop their own voice and agency. She does not want to be counted as belonging to a certain school of thinking because she perspicaciously sees therein a version of the trap for women philosophers to have in philosophy a permissive status only. She claims, "permissiveness is a sly form of prohibition" (*PI* 103). In several of her works, she evidences that women are welcome in philosophy exclusively in subordinated roles for example as disciples, commentators, or lovers of male master-philosophers. She argues that women are used in philosophy in two ways: (1) they have to console and reassure the male philosophers to be superior and in possession of plenitude despite their experience of lack, disappointment, and incompleteness and (2) on the level of language they are the atrophied, devalued, excluded other.¹¹ Le Dœuff regards "femininity" as "a fantasy product of conflicts within a field of reason that has been assimilated to masculinity" (*WP* 196, see *MD* 85-6). She maintains that "it is probably always the same when anti-feminist men talk about women: they project their desires and anxieties, and attempt to pass off this discourse of desire and defense as a rational theoretical discourse" (*WP* 197). On feminist philosophers' speaking position, Le Dœuff writes,

not from that other position produced by philosophy as a preserve of purely negative otherness. Nor from within metaphysics since this founds the duality of masculine-rationality and feminine disorder. But there are other possibilities. For logocentrism is not the ineluctable presupposition (or hypothesis) of any rational position. [*WP* 198]

With other words, for Le Dœuff, it is possible to reason whilst avoiding or escaping both logocentrism and its others against which it has constituted itself and which are defined by it.

Sabina Lovibond who defends rationality along the lines of Le Dœuff, is in agreement with Le Dœuff that reason itself is not contaminated by patriarchy.¹² Le Dœuff is working toward transforming the relationship of the subject to philosophical research. She suggests to move away from desiring individual intellectual

mastery in philosophy and, instead, to start turning doing philosophy into a collective undertaking (*PI* 207). She sees in the seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal a paradigm or model for her idea of agreeing to be "a tributary to a collective discourse and knowledge" (*PI* 208) which is of an incomplete and open nature. She considers his *Pensées* or "thoughts", published in 1670, which are a collection of philosophical fragments assembled with the objective of an impassionate defense of the Christian faith against Montague's skepticism and Epictetus' stoicism, as an example which should be followed because it is "a form of writing which does not claim to reconstruct and explain everything, which slides along the verge of the unthought, develops only by grafting itself onto another discourse and is consenting to be its tributary" (*WP* 208). By means of this "plural work" and the ensuing plural meanings, Le Dœuff claims that women can be included into philosophizing. This reintegration of women into meandering thought with its blanks and gaps includes also a change in the "psycho-theoretical attitude" (*WP* 208).

Le Dœuff is both a Universalist and an anti-foundationalist.¹³ She uses psychoanalytic and postmodern ideas in order to interrogate the desire for and the will to truth. She maintains that what is needed is "a form of philosophy that no longer considers its incompleteness a tragedy" but that, rather, is distinguished by "a recognition of the necessarily incomplete character of all theorization" and that countenances the shifting, wandering nature of thought (*WP* 207-8). Totalizing efforts cannot but violate the excluded groups such as women or children. In her view, traditional philosophy simultaneously creates and represses femininity:

[T]oday it is possible to think of rationality otherwise than in a hegemonic mode....This struggle was begun by historical materialism, in so far as this is a rationalism which renounces the idea of the omnipotence of knowledge. From here on one can trace a new form of philosophy, as a fellow-traveler of conflicts which arise outside its realm and which, similarly, will be resolved (if at all) outside it, by means which do not rely on its inherent power. [*WP* 198]

Although Le Dœuff regards critically analyzing the philosophical imaginary as indispensable for doing philosophy differently, she always insists that it is even

¹¹ Michèle Le Dœuff, "Women and Philosophy," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Oxford, GB: Blackwell 1987, pp. 181-209, here pp. 188, 192. [Henceforth cited as *WP*]

¹² Sabina Lovibond, "Feminism and the 'Crisis of Rationality'," *New Left Review* I/207 (September/October 1994), 72-86.

¹³ Colin Gordon in "Translator's Note" to *PI* viii, *PI* 171 n4, see *MD* 87.

more important that thought systems have to be applied to concrete problems of the social world. Her materialist feminism is concerned with phallographic prejudices. Le Dœuff understands by the "phallographic point of view" "the ideological justification of the exclusion of women from valorized social fields, and the project of maintaining in existence all forms of social domination and inferiorization of women" (*PI* 187 n39).

In the 2006 "Epilogue" of her reprinted book *Hipparchia's Choice* (1989) Le Dœuff argues that

the field currently known as "philosophy" must take into account its own potentialities, all of them, and at the most refined level, if it is to get rid of what shackles it both to social forms of exclusion and to a certain imaginary which ensures, within philosophical texts themselves, that no opening, no real freedom of thought, will ever be envisaged by the reader.¹⁴

In order to re-conceive philosophy in the Le Dœuffian mode, comparative knowledge of the whole history of philosophy is indispensable since both doing philosophy and doing philosophy of history are philosophical activities that cross-fertilize each other. For Le Dœuff, philosophy neither begins nor ends, but rather it is in a Deleuzian manner "impulse and movement"; it is an ever shifting thinking in and between the different intellectual disciplines (*HC* 168). This understanding of philosophy precludes putting women under tutelage of a totalized philosophical knowledge.

Her philosophical activities share an affinity with the "feminism of equality" which developed out of de Beauvoir's work and which opposes the "feminism of difference" that draws on Luce Irigaray's approach of "writing the feminine." She also found inspiration in the works of the Enlightenment philosophers, Bachelard (*PI* 2, 6), Koyré, Foucault (*PI* 7) and, as I have already mentioned, in Deleuze and Blaise Pascal. Her fragmented writing style and the ironic tone of her notebooks, which she collected in *Hipparchia's Choice*, draws on Nietzsche's "gay science" (*HC* 317). Similar to Le Dœuff, Nietzsche claimed that we think in images. He goes so far as to identify thought with images and claims that humans generated intelligibility via imagery: "we ourselves made the world thinkable by means of little images" (*die Welt in Bildchen uns denkbar*

gemacht).¹⁵ Le Dœuff agrees to a certain extent with Nietzsche insofar as, for her, images in a sense are

the foundation of this or that system or way of reasoning; they organize the fundamental values of every system...and they express the differences the philosopher has to assume before getting started on his work. [*MD* 87]

She states that in order to identify misogynistic subtexts in philosophical texts a distanced way of reading is needed "which enables one to see what is implicit in the text or to pick out the 'gaps' in a theorization" (*WP* 205).

In the "Preface" to *Hipparchia's Choice* Le Dœuff poses her research question, how in an environment of sexism which

underpins the very method by which a system of thought is established...can we conceive of a method for a feminist philosophy, or for a philosophy which will allow men and women to come together in a common task? [*HC* xii]

Her work aims at creating "a non-hegemonic rationalism" which accepts its "intrinsic incompleteness" (*HC* 206). In this way she attempts to redraw the borders of philosophy in a way that leaves no space for sexist and other exclusions by means of irrational and uncritical imagery. In her philosophy women and children are theoretically as capable as male men are. In it reason and imagination exist only in the plural (*PI* 5). This means that she is interested in, as she puts it, "the variety of forms of rationality" (*MD* 85). She explains that traditional "philosophical discourse is inscribed and declares its status as philosophy through a break with myth, fable, the poetic, the domain of the image" (*PI* 1). In contrast to it, her point of departure is that the imaginary not only "occupies the place of theory's impossible" (*PI* 5), but that reverie is also to be found within objective knowledge itself. She regards the philosophical imaginary as a cultural product. From Bachelard's poetics she learned that images have close ties with affectivity (*PI* 6). This is one source of their powerful effects.

Unlike de Beauvoir who at best marginally relies on psychoanalytic insights, Le Dœuff uses psychoanalytic language quite generously. For instance, she employs

¹⁴ Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* (1989), transl. Trista Selous, Oxford, GB: Blackwell 2006, p. 317 [Henceforth cited as *HC*]

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter 1967 onward, Notes Vol. 10, Winter 1883-4, pp. 658, 654.

the notion of transference, which is usually understood as referring to the "process of actualization of unconscious wishes."¹⁶ For instance, in a philosophical love transference relationship a male philosopher projects his own unconscious wish for phallic plenitude and completion on his female student who responds to his authoritarian display of philosophical mastery with an exclusive love of the philosopher's system and stops thinking for herself.¹⁷ The challenge for feminists consists in resisting and subverting such transferential demands for male narcissistic satisfaction and instead insisting on "conceptual self-determination" (HC 199). Only if women establish and keep a direct access to philosophy are intellectual independence and original philosophical contributions possible. Le Dœuff claims that both men and women need to experience lack, frustration, and disappointment in order to be able to be philosophically creative and productive.

At the end of the first volume of de Beauvoir's autobiography we read that Sartre said when he told de Beauvoir she had passed the *agrégation*: "from now on, I'm going to take you under my wing."¹⁸ Le Dœuff considers the Sartre-de Beauvoir relationship as a paradigmatic case of what she calls an "erotico-theoretical transference" (WP 185) relationship: de Beauvoir devoted herself to Sartre theoretically by adopting his existentialist perspective for the analysis of reality in general and the analysis of women's oppression in particular. The latter is especially strange since Sartre used strongly sexist metaphors and adopted a macho attitude towards women. Le Dœuff speaks in this context of "theoretical masculinism" (HC 78). She convincingly shows that Sartre without using images could not have closed his existentialist philosophy: without the feminine drawback he would not have been able to explain why man cannot become god.

Next, I give an account of Sartre's use of metaphors to make important philosophical points and, as Le Dœuff traces it, to efface contradictions and tensions in his thinking system. Like Nietzsche, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Sartre understands knowing in terms of appropriation and rape. He explains,

the scientist is the hunter who surprises a white nudity and who violates by looking at it....Knowledge is at one and the same time a penetration and a superficial caress...the desire to know is...appropriation.¹⁹

He not only understands gaining knowledge as a rape of a woman he also fears that the possessed feminine (body) could reverse its position from being dominated to the dominating force by appropriating the masculine through "slime."²⁰ Sartre states,

there exists a poisonous possession; there is a possibility that the In-itself might absorb the For-itself...and that in this new being the In-itself would draw the For-itself into its contingency, into its indifferent exteriority, into its foundationless existence....Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge. [BN 609]

Through this move Sartre links the In-itself and the immanent with the feminine and the For-itself and the transcendent with the masculine.²¹ He describes the works of the slimy as "a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking" (BN 609). Simons correctly states disgust in Sartre's descriptions of the female body (PB 9).

Sartre does not only want to lead a slime-free existence, he also hunts for plenitude, namely "the spherical plenitude of Parmenidean being" (BN 613). Sartre writes, "a good part of our life is passed in plugging up holes, in filling empty places, in realizing

¹⁶ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York, NY: Norton, 1967/1973, p. 455.

¹⁷ A similar analysis of the love transference relationship between a man and a woman with regard to authority and knowledge is made by Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

¹⁸ Simone DeBeauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, transl. James Kirkup, Harmondsworth, GB: Penguin, 1958/1959, p. 339; see Michèle Le Dœuff "Long Hair, Short Ideas," in *PI*, pp. 100-28, here p. 119.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. Hazel Barnes, London, GB: Routledge, 1943/1958, pp. 578-80. [Henceforth cited as BN]

²⁰ Collins and Peirce judge Sartre's sexism to be blatant due to its open and unashamed nature. See Marjorie Collins and Christine Peirce, "Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre's Psychoanalysis," in *Women and Philosophy: Toward a Theory of Liberation*, ed. Carol Gould and Marx Wartofsky, New York, NY: Capricorn Books 1976, pp. 112-27.

²¹ The connection between Sartre's For-itself and the masculine is discussed in William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1958.

and symbolically establishing a plenitude" (BN 613). In his view, one sort of hole is the feminine sex. He regards it as being indecent, offensive, and disgusting and maintains,

the obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which "gapes open." It is an appeal to being as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution. [BN 613-4]

But as already mentioned, the inviting female holes are also dangerous. Sartre writes: "beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis" (BN 614). A woman must hate herself and her sex strongly in order to be able to stand Sartre's depictions in what Le Dœuff adequately calls his "ontological-carnal hierarchy of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine'."²² Le Dœuff perspicuously criticizes Sartre's phenomenology of sexuality for founding

an ontological hierarchy, on the basis of which, for all eternity, woman can be posited as the in-itself and man as the for-itself. The masculine/feminine roles deduced from this phenomenology place woman outside the subject. [BE 282]

Despite the fact that de Beauvoir used Sartre's heterosexist ontology and metaphysics she managed to provide a highly influential depiction of women's condition and offered an original approach to the understanding of selfhood that places woman inside the subject. In *BE*, Le Dœuff analyses how de Beauvoir manages to bring about this transformation of the Sartrean existentialist framework with its women-

excluding phantasmagoria. In Sartre's voluntaristic ethics external oppression does not exist; if there is oppression then it is always internal self-oppression of the subject which is not pursuing a project that has the aim of continuously transcending itself. It is not willing its freedom and, thus, lives in a state of bad faith. The constructive side of de Beauvoir's adoption of the Sartrean ethics of authenticity was that it allowed her to distance herself sufficiently from women's condition in order to expose its radical contingency. The essence of the human is the sum of human acts. The deeds, the doing is decisive for de Beauvoir's self rather than its essence.

In Sartre, the self and the other stand in an antagonistic relationship: each consciousness desires to bring about the death of the consciousness of the other. In contrast to Sartre, who sees the individual as solitary, abandoned in a senseless world, and exposed to the threat that the hostility of the other's consciousness will make him or her through its look a mere object, de Beauvoir emphasizes that human beings depend on each other. We are with others; we take part in the human *Mitsein*. The last words of the introduction to the French original of the *Second Sex* read: women aspire to partake at the human being with others (*elles [les femmes] prétendent participer au mitsein humain*). In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger developed the concept of "being with" (*Mitsein*) which denotes our being together with one another in the world.²³ Since the existence of others is vital to oneself, it stands to reason to recognize one another and build social realities that liberate from oppression.

²² Michèle Le Dœuff, "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," *Feminist Studies* 6/2 (Summer 1980), 277-289, here p. 280. [Henceforth cited as *BE*]

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarri and Edward Robinson, Oxford, GB: Blackwell, 1927/1962, p. 7.