

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

VOLUME III ISSUE I 2008

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 46-51

Short Essay Competition Postgraduate Section – 1st Place

Sue Kentlyn

The Problem of Desire: Simone De Beauvoir and 'The Lesbian'

ABSTRACT

Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* is to reach an understanding of how woman as the *Other* can attain a sense of agency. She sees the principal obstacle as women's essentially and inescapably passive sexual nature. I contend, however, that by ignoring the issue of desire and its role in the choice of sexual partners and sexual practices, Beauvoir has not appreciated both the active dimension of female sexuality and one of the fundamental constraints on female sexual choice.

BIOGRAPHY

Sue Kentlyn has a BA (Hons) in Sociology from The University of Queensland and is currently completing a Graduate Diploma in Philosophy, with a particular interest in gender, sexuality, and the performativity of identity.

THE PROBLEM OF DESIRE: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND ‘THE LESBIAN’

INTRODUCTION

In her 1990 critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s chapter on ‘The Lesbian’ in *The Second Sex*, Ann Ferguson alleges that ‘... the weakness of [Beauvoir’s] approach is to ignore the social and historical meaning of a lesbian identity in order to focus on the individual choice of sexual preference.’ⁱ There appear to be two quite separate issues involved here. The first rests on the distinction made between lesbian *practices* (women making love to women) and lesbian *identity* as a social identity organised around homosexual object choice. The second is the issue of choice itself—Ferguson sees women’s choices as constrained by social and material conditions, and accuses Beauvoir of ignoring this fact in her emphasis on the individual.ⁱⁱ While correct in this accusation in the sense that Beauvoir does not, indeed, provide a social and historical analysis of lesbian identity, I think Ferguson has misapprehended the actual nature of Beauvoir’s central project in *The Second Sex*. Ferguson identifies this as ‘a feminist appropriation of an Existentialist metaphysic to analyse motherhood as a biological, economic and social institution which perpetuates male dominance cross-culturally.’ⁱⁱⁱ Instead, I see Beauvoir’s central preoccupation as being with the question of woman as the Other attaining a sense of agency, escaping the state of being object to become subject, moving from immanent to transcendent, contingent to autonomous, inessential to essential. ‘How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfilment?’ she asks.^{iv} Beauvoir is less concerned about the materiality of a *lesbian* existence, and more concerned with the central drama of *authentic* existence.^v That being said, Ferguson is right to point out how social and historical conditions do affect this drama by structuring subject–object ways of thinking. However, I will argue that the chief weakness of Beauvoir’s approach to the lesbian is not so much her neglect of historical and social conditions, but rather her failure to engage with the subject of desire, which is crucial to any sense of sexual choice, and thus of agency.

LESBIAN PRACTICES / LESBIAN IDENTITY

The Australian Study of Health and Relationships (ASHR), conducted in 2001-2002, involved computer-assisted telephone interviews with a representative sample of 9,134 women aged 16-59 years throughout Australia. 97.7% identified as heterosexual, 0.8% as lesbian or homosexual, and 1.4% as bisexual. However, 15.1% of women reported some same-sex attraction or experience.^{vi} Figures like these underpin the important distinction Ferguson makes between lesbian practice and lesbian identity. Clearly there are many thousands of Australian women who have engaged in lesbian practices who still consider themselves heterosexual. Lesbian sexual practices do not guarantee a permanent movement from object to subject, nor do they necessarily constitute a radical and enduring form of political resistance to patriarchal oppression.^{vii}

Ferguson argues that it is only the modern notion of lesbian identity, and the collective and social bonding of women into an oppositional subculture, made possible by recent social and economic changes, that offer women the genuine possibility of individual choice. While this is undoubtedly true for all but a few independently wealthy women, I do not see this as a major problem for Beauvoir’s analysis. Her understanding of the freedom of choice is anchored in an acknowledgement of social context.

The truth is that homosexuality is no more a perversion deliberately indulged in than it is a curse of fate. It is an attitude *chosen in a certain situation*—that is, at once motivated and freely adopted. No one of the factors that mark the subject in connection with this choice—physiological conditions, psychological history, social circumstances—is the determining element, though they all contribute to its explanation.^{viii}

Beauvoir’s examination of ‘The Lesbian’ is not a sociological study of a social phenomenon, but rather a philosophical meditation on self and agency. Her emphasis on choice is part of the broader existentialist concern with liberty and transcendence.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL FACTORS

The Second Sex provides a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the social and historical conditions that have resulted in the compulsion for women to assume the status of the Other.^{ix} Beauvoir explores fields as diverse as biology, psychoanalysis, literature and economics, from pre-agricultural societies up until her own time. By situating her chapter on ‘The Lesbian’ in book two, ‘Woman’s Life Today,’ and especially in part IV, ‘The Formative Years’, she indicates that her focus will be on the psychodynamic process of female identity formation, rather than the social and historical specificities of lesbian identity.^x Her interest in this chapter is to

understand why some women outgrow this 'stage' while others make 'a definite choice of homosexuality.'^{xi} In a passage I take to be central to her argument, she says:

The truth is that there is never a single determining factor; it is always a matter of a choice, arrived at in a complex total situation and based upon a free decision; no sexual fate governs the life of the individual woman: her type of eroticism, on the contrary, expresses her general outlook on life.^{xii}

Beauvoir does admit that environmental circumstances influence this choice, such as gender-segregated schooling, occupations, living arrangements, having other creative outlets, social class, and education.^{xiii} Nevertheless, her main interest is in how homosexuality offers one way, among others, for women to solve the problems inherent in their 'condition in general' which Beauvoir believes stems specifically from women's 'erotic situation.'^{xiv} Ferguson alleges that Beauvoir offers an essentialist reading of the biological facts of heterosexual coitus, but Beauvoir's account strikes me as informed by a classic Freudian reading of those facts, particularly with relation to the male principle as 'active' and the female as 'passive.'^{xv} Indeed it is this Freudian version of female sexuality that occludes Beauvoir's vision of woman as a desiring subject and thus a fully autonomous human being. More recent developments in psychoanalytic theory make room for cultural influences; Person argues that cultural material, along with the lived experiences of individuals, infuse our intrapsychic lives, shaping our desires, reframing our fantasies, and becoming part of the unconscious.^{xvi} This accords with Ferguson's criticisms in the sense that for women to choose a sexual preference they must first be aware of new pathways through which to express their deepest wishes and needs and to create new life trajectories. In adopting an essentialist psychoanalytic reading of female and male sexuality, Beauvoir sees no need to address these issues.

THE PROBLEM OF DESIRE

In fact, Beauvoir's Freudian reading of female sexuality leads her to the conclusion that there must be a *fundamental* conflict for women between an 'active personality' and their sexual role; the active 'virile' woman must choose between assuming or repudiating her *normal sexuality*.^{xvii} The word 'normal' seems to be used in the sense of 'free from mental or emotional disorder' rather than simply 'regular, usual, typical.'^{xviii} Beauvoir adds '... the lesbian may often wish she were a normal and complete woman while preferring not to be,' and she describes a lesbian who penetrates her partner by 'artificial means' as a 'castrate'—'She is unfulfilled as a woman, impotent as a man, and her disorder may lead to psychosis.'^{xix} For Beauvoir, female sexual agency must always be a violation of woman's true nature and thus come at the cost of healthy psychological integration.

Thus the 'choice' to be lesbian, for Beauvoir, is largely a negative one - a *rejection* of femininity and of intimacy with men. Every adolescent female, she contends, fears penetration and masculine domination.^{xx} The lesbian simply refuses to make the sacrifices of liberty and autonomy required by femininity; she declines 'to abdicate in favour of another human being.'^{xxi} Women with projects of their own 'do not propose to waste time in playing a feminine role or in struggling with men.'^{xxii} 'The lesbian, in fact, is distinguished by her refusal of the male and her liking for feminine flesh ... the female body is for her, as for the male, an object of desire.'^{xxiii} However, for Beauvoir this liking for feminine flesh is not an active desiring; all young women are naturally homosexual in the sense that they are repulsed by the male body and, like men, they prefer the softness and gentleness of the female, recalling their initial attachment to the mother.^{xxiv} Beauvoir's descriptions of lesbian sexuality stress its passive and gentle qualities. Women with an active personality, she contends, are looking for relaxation, appeasement and diversion in sexual pleasure. Eroticism plays only a small part in lesbian sexuality: female sex pleasure is less 'violent and vertiginous' than that between men and women; women's carnal affection is more even, has more continuity, is characterised by 'tranquil pleasure', rather than 'frenetic ecstasies.'^{xxv} Two key passages explore her understanding of lesbian sexuality and are worth quoting in full:

Between women there is complicity that disarms modesty; the excitement that one arouses in the other is generally without violence; homosexual caresses imply neither defloration nor penetration: they satisfy the clitoral eroticism of childhood without demanding new and disquieting changes. The young girl can realise her vocation as passive object without feeling herself deeply alienated.^{xxvi}

Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality. Says Colette in *Ces plaisirs*: 'The close resemblance gives certitude of pleasure. The lover takes delight in being sure of caressing a body the secrets of which she knows, and whose preferences her own body indicates to her.'^{xxvii}

The consequences of this view of lesbian sexuality is to make its choice a relatively easy and straightforward matter. Although she is at pains to declare that lesbianism is not a case of arrested development as many psychoanalysts would allege, Beauvoir clearly views it as an ‘easy option’, a refusal to engage in the real challenge of establishing an authentic self in relation to the sovereign subject ‘man.’^{xxxviii} She portrays lesbian sexuality as essentially narcissistic, and this assumption that all women’s bodies work in the same way, that knowing one’s own body means one automatically knows how to please another woman, makes woman-on-woman sexual practice simply a variant of auto-eroticism, a kind of mutual objectification, rather than an engagement with the Other. However, I would argue that same-sex eroticism removes the illusion that the chasm between us and the Other is simply due to gender and forces us to face the alterity of *all* others. Levinas asserts the ‘absolute difference’ between myself and the Other, deriving from the fact that no universal concept or general category serves to unite us.^{xxix} All the Other and I have in common is that we have nothing in common.^{xxx} However, by accepting the Freudian view that *all* female sexuality is essentially passive, Beauvoir seems to me to ignore the role of desire in a woman’s ability to choose another woman as a sexual partner, and to choose an erotic life, and thus a mode of existence, free of male domination.

Sartre defines the essential existentialist project in the following terms: human beings are forced to be free and to creatively make themselves, their individual essence, and they do so by adopting freely chosen projects.^{xxxi} This seems to me to accurately portray my transition to a lesbian identity. After studying feminism for a while, I came to the conclusion that heterosexuality was no place for a self-respecting feminist, and so I “decided” to become a lesbian. I must stress that I understood this at the time as a political decision, and I did not expect it to ever be manifested in the flesh, so to speak: after 22 years of marriage I had no expectation that anyone would ever again find me sexually attractive, and so I reconciled myself to the idea of celibacy—except in fantasies, where I “chose” to send my imagination down new erotic pathways. When the marriage finally ended and I was able to put these fantasies to the test, I was fortunate to find that the realities were congenial to me. However, I have talked to many heterosexual women who express a kind of rueful regret that, much as they would like to be lesbians, they cannot cope with the idea of physical intimacy with a woman. Is this merely “false consciousness”—what Rich calls ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality’?^{xxxii} Certainly the women themselves see it more as an expression of their essential identity, which they are powerless to change.

Conversely, for many gay and lesbian people, especially those who have been in heterosexual marriages, they see their choice to ‘come out’ and live their gay identity, as coming from their need for authenticity—they feel an overwhelming need for their actions to reflect what they feel to be their “inner” reality, and often they feel impelled to this decision by what they experience as the increasing psychic dissonance between an essential, “given” nature and a lived-experience at variance with it.^{xxxiii} To suggest that they could choose otherwise, and by their choices to creatively make an essence for themselves, as Sartre seems to be saying, they find oppressive and insulting—this is exactly what some Christians say, and many of these people have tried for 20 years and more to do exactly that, without success. Their same-sex desire has consistently overwhelmed them and finally they feel they must acknowledge and accept it, or kill themselves. Beauvoir hints at this problem, but again only in passive form, when she discusses women who believe that they ‘will not derive pleasure from heterosexual relations.’^{xxxiv}

Sartre himself speaks of desire as though it conquers our power to choose: ‘it seems that one is *invaded* by facticity;’ ‘we say that it *takes hold* of you, that it *overwhelms* you, that it *paralyzes* you;’ ‘Desire is not only the desire of the Other’s body; it is ... the ... lived project of being *swallowed up* in the body ...’^{xxxv} What I find has bedevilled my attempts at lesbian relationships is the unruliness of desire—I find myself sexually desiring people who are completely inappropriate long-term partners, and unable to feel desire for those with whom I am most compatible in every other way. Is this simply evidence of a disordered subconscious, or something to do with pheromones, as the biological essentialists would have it?^{xxxvi} In any case, it seems to me that desire resists the Sartrean project of making an essence for ourselves by our freely chosen actions, and thus for Beauvoir’s notion of the individual choice of sexual preference.

CONCLUSION

Ferguson critiques Beauvoir’s examination of lesbian sexuality chiefly on the grounds that Beauvoir presents this as a mode of resistance to male domination which is freely chosen by individual women. By failing to acknowledge the role of historical and social conditions in shaping and defining women’s choices, sexuality and sense of self, Ferguson believes that Beauvoir neglects the essential grounds that make the choice of lesbian identity, and thus resistance to patriarchal ideologies, possible. In making these criticisms I believe Ferguson has not fully apprehended the nature of Beauvoir’s project in *The Second Sex*. This project is to reach an understanding of how woman as the Other can attain a sense of agency, escaping the state of being object to

become subject, moving from immanent to transcendent, contingent to autonomous, inessential to essential. Beauvoir sees the principal obstacle to this process as located in women's fundamental sexual nature, which she sees in Freudian terms as essentially and inescapably passive. Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, the choice to remain lesbian is a fairly easy one for women, but one that is narcissistic and does not qualify for the Sartrean project of making an essence for ourselves by adopting freely chosen projects. I contend, however, that by ignoring the issue of desire and its role in choosing sexual partners and sexual practices, Beauvoir has not appreciated both the active dimension of female sexuality and one of the fundamental constraints on female sexual choice. Neither Sartre nor Beauvoir adequately address the implications of the unruliness of desire for the making of "authentic" individual choices, and this is the primary weakness of Beauvoir's chapter on 'The Lesbian.'

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Ann Ferguson, "Lesbian Identity: Beauvoir and History" in Al-Hibri, Azizah and Margaret Simons, eds., *Hypatia Reborn: Essays in Feminist Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 285.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 284–286.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 280.
- ^{iv} Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) xxxv, emphasis added.
- ^v *Ibid*, xxvii.
- ^{vi} Anthony Smith, Chris Rissel, Juliet Richters, Andrew Grulich and Richard de Visser, "Sexual Identity, Sexual Attraction and Sexual Experience Among a Representative Sample of Adults," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 27(2) (2003): 138–145.
- ^{vii} Ferguson, "Lesbian Identity," 287.
- ^{viii} Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 424, emphasis in original.
- ^{ix} *Ibid*, xxxv.
- ^x See *ibid*, 342–344, 407.
- ^{xi} *Ibid*, 407, 415.
- ^{xii} *Ibid*, 417.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid*, 417–418, 411, 418, 422.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, 424.
- ^{xv} *Ibid*, 407; Ethel Person, "Something Borrowed: How Mutual Influences among Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Straights Changed Women's Lives and Psychoanalytic Theory," *The Annual of Psychoanalysis* 32 (2004): 95–96.
- ^{xvi} Person, "Something Borrowed," 81–82.
- ^{xvii} Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 411, emphasis added.
- ^{xviii} *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Normal."
- ^{xix} Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 412.
- ^{xx} *Ibid*, 407.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid*, 409–410.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid*, 411.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid*, 407.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid*, 346–347.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid*, 420.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid*, 346.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid*, 416.
- ^{xxviii} See *ibid*, 401–403.
- ^{xxix} Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.
- ^{xxx} Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, *On Levinas* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 18.
- ^{xxxi} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (NY: Philosophical Library, 1956), 28.
- ^{xxxii} Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(4) (1980): 631–660.
- ^{xxxiii} Anthony Venn-Brown, *A Life of Unlearning: a Journey to Find the Truth* (Sydney, NSW: New Holland Publishers, 2007).
- ^{xxxiv} Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 416.
- ^{xxxv} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 387–389.

^{xxxvi} Nicholas Wade, 'Gay Men Are Found to Have Different Scent of Attraction,' *The New York Times*, May 9, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/09/science/09end-smell.html?_r=1&oref=slogin (30 March 2008).