

BOOK REVIEW

## Diary of a Philosophy Student

**Volume 1, 1926–27 and Volume 2, 1929–29. Simone de Beauvoir (author); Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, and Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann (editors). Urbana: University of Illinois Press (ISBN: 978-0252042546)**

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These diaries mark Simone de Beauvoir's wounded young soul and her anchorless life in which philosophy at times acted as an anchor. They can also be seen as primitive bandages that Beauvoir applied to her open wounds. I doubt if these bandages helped her wounds to heal completely, but they lessened the hurt.

For me it was a dual challenge to write this review not only because the diaries are about the making of Simone de Beauvoir, but also because in an earlier paper based on these diaries, I contested the assumption that Beauvoir was a protégée of Sartre. I had used these same diaries to show the influence of Hegel and other philosophers on her works, so it was challenging to read them again with no theoretical baggage (Shukla 2017).

Both volumes are strong and important contributions to feminist philosophy, not only in their themes but in significantly addressing these themes with reference to gendered human existence. I recommend them to anyone who is interested in understanding the making of a feminist philosopher, especially to early researchers working on Beauvoir, to undergraduates trying to understand philosophy, as well as to scholars seeking to understand Beauvoir and her philosophical themes.

Sometimes as a monologue and at times as an imaginative dialogue, these diaries keep on talking back to our hidden desires, pain, losses, and shared happiness. They create an intimacy between readers and themselves, where both can listen to each other and talk to each other in a (cordial) harmless manner. The safe space that these volumes create make them stand first among equals. Surprisingly, they also talk about mind–body dualism in a feminist manner. Beauvoir, while trying to understand herself, questions abstraction/objectivity in philosophy and why it has been centered solely on males. Rationality has been attributed only to men, whereas women have been reduced to their mere appearance, their bodies. Beauvoir constantly questions this dichotomy in philosophy and its reduction of women and their existence to appearances, talking only about bodily aspect, a nonrational, emotive idea of gendered being.

In the first volume, 1926–27, one can sense the undertone of Beauvoir's churning when it comes to dealing with an “impersonal or abstract kind of philosophy.”

Whether it be happiness, her existential crisis, or ideas of self/other and nothingness, we navigate all of these in the first volume, which lives and breathes the themes of Beauvoir's later works. In "August," she tirelessly addresses the concept of ambiguity, which we see later in "The Ethics of Ambiguity." In her words:

Certainly, I am very individualistic, but is this incompatible with the devotion and disinterested love of others? It seems to me that there is one part of me that is made to be given away, another that is made to be kept and cultivated. The second part is valid in itself and guarantees the value of the other. (I, 63)

Many works on Beauvoir have critiqued her ideas of love, which absorbed her completely. Interestingly, one can observe the contradiction in her diaries. In "August," she writes, "love should not make all else disappear, but should simply tint it with new nuances; I would like a love that accompanies me through life, not that absorbs all my life" (I, 68). We can observe Beauvoir's idea of "self" and "love" evolving: In November 1926, she strongly evokes an "existentialist idea of self." She writes, "life is a death of every minute, and without hope of resurrection; with the firm will, on the contrary, not to resuscitate. And it is heartrending, but it is very beautiful" (I, 164).

In the entries from April 1927, the diary talks about ageism and how it affects our own idea of ourselves. Beauvoir comes back to this theme later in multiple works. Beauvoir intentionally chooses "literature" as a tool, as she thought this would be a better way to do philosophy. Later on, we can observe this pattern in Beauvoir's work. Not only does she navigate her ideas of ambiguity, self/other, love, and desire but she also discusses in detail her concept of situated choices and circumstances. Her first volume discusses all those "invisible/unnoticed hurdles" that always exist in our lives but that were never represented in abstract/impersonal philosophy. This "personalized philosophy" and its effects and influences are fully developed in her later published works.

I could not help but notice the different kinds of love that she observes and discusses: "non-reciprocal love," "self-love," "selfless love," "love with precariousness," "love for one's body," and so on; "the things that I love do not love each other" (I, 254). Her 1927 diaries discuss how love acted as the bridge that brings people together, in conflict and within vulnerability. The diaries discuss how love necessities the idea of the "Other." She develops this relationship with herself as well, with her conscience, her reflections. On July 22, 1927, she writes precisely on how love and affection can also enslave us. She notes the precarity that comes with loving others and how it makes us lonely.

On the same day, her diary makes a significant point about abandonment. When do we choose to abandon people (while loving them, not receiving their love in response)? When we abandon people, can we abandon their thoughts too? Abandonment becomes difficult because of "lived experience," "memory." The novelist Elena Ferrante also invokes this idea in her book, *Frantumaglia*. She writes:

In reality, Olga is a woman of today who knows that she cannot react to abandonment by breaking down. In life, as in writing, the effect of this new knowledge interests me: how she acts, what resistance she offers, how she fights against the wish to die and gains the time necessary to learn to bear her suffering, what stratagems or fictions she employs in order to accept life again. (Ferrante 2016, 83)

Volume 2, 1928–29, addresses more nuanced, developed existential concerns. The first volume plays with the ideas of reflection, necessary for a personal philosophy of gender. It discusses how one needs to honor one's freedom, which gives us the responsibility to become whomever we want. If the first volume was like a new leaf, the second volume turns into a new plant. The second volume can be very interesting to read if one thinks about a few Indian philosophical concepts in comparison. The beginning of the second volume hints toward an Upanishadic ideal (*Eka Chalo Re*), which translates into *Walk Alone*. The Upanishads, one of the greatest texts of Indian philosophy, dwell a lot on the idea of the individual, how one should be. Beauvoir's second volume weaves a narrative along these lines too. How should a life be? How can it be an authentic life?

Whether her descriptions of days, nights, moods, or themes, she expresses all of them with utmost clarity and rigor. "Night is falling dark and oppressive; a gentleman next to me is reading a book on happiness. Why?" (II, 75). Her April entries discuss in detail how human existence is mocked by words and acts. The second volume works on a gendered personal philosophy where feelings and expressions are not mocked or critiqued. On the contrary, they are developed into words so that we understand what lies behind them. We understand that there can be a thorough philosophy that can come from our own lived experience, our bodies, our lived reality.

These diaries talk and let the reader create a dialogue with conflicts, dilemmas, and one's own inhibitions (things we all carry in ourselves). Whether it be solitude, desire, happiness, friendship, empathy, love, care, affection, reciprocity as well as indifference, Beauvoir tells us that these qualities make us human. Discarding mind–body dualism (which since the beginning has assigned rationality to the mind, which belongs to men, and emotions and sentiments to the body, which has been assigned to women), she critiques this abstract way of doing philosophy. The key to happiness is not only peace, a way out of conflict, but also absorption: absorption such that your feelings, your instincts, and your ideas help you in achieving a sense of fulfillment. These diaries tell us to go for absorptions, as they could lead to understanding oneself.

## References

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