

When the Thinker Betrays the Thought: Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Tillich

Review : Rowley, H. (2005). *Tête-à-Tête : Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York : HarperCollins. Hardcover. 416 pages.

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It is all too easy for psychoanalysts to write reductionistic and pathologizing applied psychoanalytic studies of artists and philosophers overlooking or downplaying their genius (out of envy perhaps?) and focusing upon their psychological conflicts, character distortions, regressions, infantilisms, pathologies and perversities. It was the proclivity of members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society to engage on Saturday evenings in this enterprise—Freud’s *Leonardo* being a case in point—that caused the critic and satirist Karl Kraus to set aside his initially favourable attitude toward psychoanalysis and conclude that “Nerve-doctors who pathologize genius ought to have their heads bashed in with the collected works of the genius” (Kraus in Szasz, 1976, p. 113).

In regard to George Atwood’s (1994) essay on “The pursuit of being in the life and thought of Jean-Paul Sartre,” I wrote: “As a typical ‘pathography’ reducing the life and work of a great philosopher to his character pathology--this time conceived in self-psychological rather than Freudian terms as in Hanly’s (1979) earlier study--Atwood’s account is guilty of the fallacy best refuted by Sartre (1943) himself: while it is no doubt true that Jean-Paul Sartre suffered from a self disorder, not everyone with a disorder of the self is a Jean-Paul Sartre” (Carveth 1996, p. 383).

I have long been an admirer of both Sartre and de Beauvoir. Sartre’s attempt to work out both an existential psychoanalysis and an existential Marxism that would inject into each of these unacceptably deterministic discourses that element of individual existential freedom and responsibility, overlooked at great cost by both, remains important in my view. And the significance of de Beauvoir’s classic study, *The Second Sex*, especially for feminism, can hardly be denied. It is because of my admiration of their work that I find the revelations about their lives and relationships provided in Rowley’s (2005) biography so disturbing.

Early on they made a pact. “They rejected marriage. They never lived together. They openly had other lovers. They were often friends with each other’s lovers: on occasion they shared them. Their original agreement (not conveyed to the third parties involved) was that whereas their other loves would be ‘secondary,’ theirs would be ‘absolute’” (Rowley, p. x). As the full reality of his secondary status gradually sank in, de Beauvoir’s American lover, Nelson Algren, felt increasingly “used” and reacted with bitterness and rage. Sartre and de Beauvoir had promised to tell each other *everything*: “It was impossible to say which was the more satisfying ...: the voyeuristic thrill of hearing about each other’s life or the cozy enjoyment of narrating their own” (p. xi).

They proclaimed their passionate belief in truth-telling: “To them, the notion of privacy was a relic of bourgeois hypocrisy” (p. xi). But on reading their journals and

correspondence (published after de Beauvoir's death), "Readers were left reeling with shock. It turned out that these two advocates of truth-telling constantly told lies to an array of emotionally unstable young girls." While throughout her life de Beauvoir had publicly denied ever having an affair with a woman, we witness her "telling Sartre about her pleasurable nights making love with young women!" Rowley wonders "how could Sartre write so coldly and clinically about taking his latest girlfriend's virginity? And why were they both so disparaging about the young women they went to bed with?" (p. xiv).

When in 1942 the mother of one of de Beauvoir's former students brought charges against her claiming that she had seduced her daughter and then acted as a procurer, passing the girl to her two lovers, Sartre and Pierre Bost, "Sartre and Beauvoir discussed their best strategy. The members of their clique were carefully primed. Each in turn duly denied everything, telling the police well-honed lies" (p. 131). The case was dismissed.

Another former student whom de Beauvoir seduced and brought into a "trio" with Sartre, Bianca Bienenfeld, eventually had a nervous breakdown. De Beauvoir confessed to Sartre: "She's suffering from an intense and dreadful attack of neurasthenia, and it's our fault, I think. It's the very indirect, but profound, after-shock of the business between her and us" (de Beauvoir quoted in Rowley, p.157). Rowley writes that "In the late 1940s, Bienenfeld's psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, would come to the same conclusion. It was his view that Sartre and Beauvoir had had a quasi-parental relationship with Bienenfeld, and Bienenfeld's traumatized reaction was partly because they had broken the incest taboos by sleeping with her" (p. 157).

Having lost his father at fifteen months, Sartre had been raised by his mother. He was convinced that having had no father he had suffered no Oedipus complex! "Throughout his life, he would never forgive his mother for betraying him, as he saw it, by marrying again, when he was eleven" (p. 3). Many years later he was to move in with his widowed mother with whom he lived happily until her death. He wrote: "I had an older sister, my mother, and I wanted a younger one ... I made the serious mistake of often looking among women for this sister who had never turned up ... What attracted me in this family link was not so much the temptation to love as the prohibition against making love; I liked incest with its mixture of fire and ice, enjoyment and frustration, so long as it remained platonic" (Sartre quoted in Rowley, p.227). But it didn't remain platonic—at least not if we include the symbolic incest involved in sexual relations between, say, analysts and patients, or between young people and adults occupying a relationship with them that is *in loco parentis*.

A consequence of Sartre's grandiose refusal of the paternal law was his self-authorization, without training, as a psychoanalyst. He took on several women as "patients," sleeping with one but not succeeding in convincing the other to go to bed with him, while interpreting their resistances and transferences. I believe a consequence of Sartre's serious superego pathology was a chronic tendency toward paranoia that, early on, appeared in a psychotic episode in which he felt pursued through the streets by a giant lobster (p. 57), and that he defended against by increasingly large doses of Corydrane (an amphetamine mixed with asperin) and alcohol, and by his obsessive quest for female attention—all attempts to ward off the threatening and projected superego. The inability to develop a mature conscience simply means the repressed superego will exact its pound

of flesh in neurotic, psychotic and psychosomatic symptoms—all of which Sartre displayed in abundance.

A striking example of Sartre's moral confusion and corruption is his theory of the "temporary moral code":

It was impossible for Jean Cau, Sartre's secretary, not to be aware of the lies Sartre told his women. Sartre would phone two girlfriends in a row, telling the second a quite different story from the first. Cau recalls an occasion when Sartre put down the phone and sighed:

"It's difficult, sometimes."

"Sure is," I say. "I wonder how you manage. Tough situations."

"That's the word exactly, Cau. There are situations which I call *rotten*. Try as one might to resolve them, it's impossible to get out of them externally intact."

"Yes, yes, I see. But what about internally? How do you manage that?"

"In some cases, you're obliged to resort to a temporary moral code."

Cau was impressed by this notion of a temporary morality. It was like opening an umbrella in a storm, he thought to himself. ... What do you do if you are Sartre and you find yourself persecuted by the Other? You resort to a temporary moral code! That way, you wriggle out of the situation, and the huge moral edifice you have constructed remains intact" (p. 246).

No wonder at the sea Sartre could only swim out a certain distance and then suddenly, becoming terrified "of the slimy creatures he imagined lurking in the depths" (p. 93), have to swim back in a panic. A psychoanalyst must wonder: was the slimy creature in the depths ... Jean-Paul Sartre?

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But does it make sense to feel disturbed by these revelations? Do we not all learn in philosophy 101 about the *ad hominem* fallacy? The fact that Freud was the first-born son of a young mother, the third wife of his aging father, may have left him with an unusually intense Oedipus complex which may even account for its discovery in his own and others' lives. But knowledge of the personal or social origins of theory tells us nothing about the validity or invalidity of the theory itself which must be established on other grounds. Logically, there is a disjunction between the theory someone produces and his or her motives for producing it. Knowledge of the personal or social origins of theory leaves entirely open the question of its validity. Truth can be posited for bad motives as

well as good ones, and so can error. Even a paranoid schizophrenic can be alert to truths to which the mentally healthy may be blind. The paranoid Jews got out of Germany.

Why then am I troubled by the fact that Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy of being I much admire, was a Nazi who never expressed any regret or took any responsibility for his “mistake” and never mentioned the Holocaust (Farias, 1989; Steiner 2000)? And why am I so disillusioned and angry that Sartre was not just a chronic womanizer—we always knew that—but that he and de Beauvoir were constantly lying both to each other and to the others they so carelessly manipulated, betrayed and exploited as objects of their incessant need for narcissistic gratification. Given the disjunction between philosophy and the philosopher, I can, of course, admire the former while disapproving of the latter. None of the revelations about Heidegger’s politics, or Sartre’s and de Beauvoir’s dishonesty, narcissism and exploitiveness, will cause me to value any less those aspects of their intellectual achievements that I admire—although they do certainly raise the question of how their thinking may have contributed, or at least failed to prevent, the behaviour I find unacceptable.

But whence the sense of betrayal? Is it due to a naïve, idealistic and outmoded belief in a unitary subject, either all-good or all-bad, that precludes ambivalence toward those whose contradictions are evident? Do we insist, for example, that the great artist be a fine human being as well? Do we require, as Cohn (2002) suggests, a self that is of one piece such that “every aspect of it is necessarily reflected by any other aspect, so that a person questionable in one way will also be questionable in any other way” (p. 3). But while rightly suggesting we should outgrow this attitude and learn to accept that greatness in one field of life may coexist with serious deficiency in another, Cohn himself finds a connection between Heidegger’s politics and his philosophy and argues that it “is not one in which the philosophy validates the behaviour but rather it is one in which the behaviour is a betrayal of the philosophy” (p. 4). Having suggested we surrender the demand for unity in favour of what Freudians view as the capacity to sustain ambivalence and Kleinians regard as the whole-object (as distinct from part-object) relating characterizing mature mental functioning, Cohn nevertheless argues that, in Heidegger’s case, the disunity embodies a betrayal. While the philosophy celebrates an attitude of awe, respect and care toward being, and an almost feminine attitude of receptiveness, the politics were those of the goose-stepping, hyper-masculine, phallic and aggressive Nazis.

Do I feel betrayed by Sartre and de Beauvoir because their behaviour is a betrayal of their philosophy? On one level the answer is no, for I suspect their behaviour may well have been an outcome, together with other factors, of their Nietzschean vision in which God is dead and there exists no basis, either in the supernatural or the natural, for ethics and in which, therefore, we must all pick up the burden of being gods ourselves and legislate values as we see fit. If the values we construct occasionally put us in a rotten situation, we can always resort to a “temporary moral code.” Perhaps in their way of living and relating to others and each other, Sartre and de Beauvoir have demonstrated what happens when human beings deny the existence of any law other than that created, this way or that way, by human beings—that is, what happens when human beings believe they are a law unto themselves. But, on another level, the answer is yes: their behaviour contradicts what their writing leads us to expect of them. They celebrated truth-telling but gave us lies; they advocated abjuring bad faith and acknowledging responsibility, but their behaviour was saturated with bad faith and irresponsibility.

Why then do I not feel betrayed by Paul Tillich in light of his wife Hannah's (1974) revelations regarding her husband's chronic infidelity and pornographic interests, or in light of May's (1973) discussion of what he sees as a sadistic element in Tillich that accompanied his obsessive need to seduce? Is it simply that I'm able to be more forgiving of an admired fellow Christian than of the atheistic Sartre or the obscurely polytheist Heidegger who awaits, during this night of the world, the return not of God but of the gods? I think there is more involved than such a simple subjective bias and I think it has to do with what appears in the philosophies of Heidegger, Sartre and de Beauvoir to be a kind of promise or a type of self-advertisement. The philosophers who speak so movingly of authenticity and responsibility lead us to expect them to embody these virtues. When we learn otherwise, we feel betrayed. The feminist who celebrates truth-telling and speaks so persuasively of the need for women to become autonomous and independent agents causes us to expect her to exemplify these traits. We are disappointed to learn of her duplicity and her craven submission to domination by her man and willingness to bend herself entirely out of shape to hold him.

What then, if anything, is different in Tillich's case? I think it may be that the very philosophy he elucidates and advocates, Christianity, itself teaches us that we are broken and fallen sinners. So the discovery that in his life Tillich fell far short of his Christian ideals, is not surprising. While it certainly doesn't excuse him, it is at least consistent with his teaching. Tillich (1955) explains the reason for the forgiven sinner's love of God: unlike the righteous man who has little to be forgiven and therefore feels little love for the Lord who forgives (herein lies the righteous man's unrighteousness), the sinner has much to be forgiven and is full of love toward the unconditionally loving and forgiving God. Paul Tillich knew he was a sinner with much to be forgiven and he loved much and was much loved. His writings do not convey any impression or induce any expectation that he himself would turn out to be anything other than a whole man, a sinful saint, a saintly sinner. We are saddened by and disapproving of his character flaws and his hurtful behaviour, especially towards his wife Hannah (who leaves us in the dark regarding his qualities as a father which may also have been seriously deficient), but I at least do not feel duped nor left with an impression of hypocrisy, as I certainly am in learning from Rowley's book about the reality behind the rhetoric of Sartre and de Beauvoir.

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