

Finding Freedom within Existential Anxiety with Beauvoir

Sara Hardman

Teachers College, Columbia University

In her article, Dr. Burdick-Shepherd addresses what I take to be an important set of questions surrounding the relation between anxiety, philosophy, and childhood. She draws upon a powerful source of reflection on this relation, the work of Simone de Beauvoir. I appreciate and respect this project and, in that spirit, raise three lines of questioning.

First, I provide a slightly different and more nuanced definition of the specific type of anxiety that Beauvoir refers to. Second, I examine the specific responses to dealing with this anxiety that make freedom possible for Beauvoir but oppression unavoidable for Zaza. Third, I propose an amendment to the philosophical solution to childhood anxiety that Dr. Burdick-Shepherd provides in her closing section.

DEFINING ANXIETY

First, I find it important to differentiate between types of anxiety. Many children have diagnosable anxiety disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, PTSD, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. I do not think these diagnosable anxieties are the kind that Beauvoir refers to, and they do not seem like the kind of anxiety Dr. Burdick-Shepherd discusses either, although never explicitly delineating the difference. Rather, I would call the anxiety of which they both speak an existential anxiety that, if it does not affect us all, at least has the potential to. Whereas diagnosable anxiety disorders are generally harmful to children and adults from both a psychological and philosophical perspective, following what Dr. Burdick-Shepherd has said, an existential anxiety can unlock new experiences of freedom, creation, and authorship, and can be confronted by philosophical questioning.

That said, I think it worthwhile to further clarify Beauvoir's conception of existential anxiety. I see Beauvoir saying existential anxiety arises not when you unconsciously practice a false freedom, but when you realize the world you live in is not one you helped create—when you realize you live within constraints of expectations, norms, and rules that, when examined, become arbitrary.¹ It is an anxiety that arises upon discovering at once your own individuality and the fact that in order to live within a community you must allow yourself to be constrained.

Therefore, it is not the feeling of existential anxiety itself that is harmful, nor does it alone cause a life of seriousness. Rather, the harm can arise depending on how we respond to the existential anxiety that will inevitably surface in childhood and adolescence. Here, I agree with Dr. Burdick-Shepherd's assessment that Beauvoir depicts two disparate reactions to anxiety that can either lead to freedom or oppression—an oppression so severe it might lead to death.

FREEDOM OR OPPRESSION

As Dr. Burdick-Shepherd depicts in her article, in *Memoirs*, Beauvoir demonstrates how she transcended her own existential anxieties to achieve freedom, yet her childhood friend Zaza never could. In this analysis, Dr. Burdick-Shepherd discusses the importance of several factors in approaching childhood anxiety. She mentions why we should strive to promote philosophical inquiry and strong relationships, as well as the importance of adults fostering spaces for children that support their existential pursuits. Dr. Burdick-Shepherd briefly mentions engaging in creative acts together, which I also consider vital in discovering a sense of ownership in the world. But in light of Beauvoir and Zaza, I add another component I believe crucial for responding to existential anxiety during childhood, adolescence, and really any period of life: leisure time.

Beauvoir's Freedom

In *Memoirs*, there are four aspects I consider vital to Beauvoir's freedom

from anxiety: 1) support from her parents; 2) her friendship with Zaza; 3) philosophy; and finally, perhaps most importantly, 4) ample leisure time.

First, support from her parents provided Beauvoir a stable foundation among her existential pursuits. As Dr. Burdick-Shepherd points out, even as a young child Beauvoir rebelled against the arbitrariness of what one ought to do. “Yesterday, I peeled a peach,” she says. “Then why shouldn’t I peel a plum?”²² The expectations and oughts only grew as Beauvoir did. No longer was it a question of peeling fruit, but rather of marriage, schooling, and childbearing. Yet Beauvoir had the support of her parents to make a living of her own, attend university, and remain independent, without pressure to wed. As such, Beauvoir only had to reconcile her desires with the expectations of the general population and not with those of her most intimate relations.

Second, Beauvoir credits her friendship with Zaza for revealing how it feels to be free. At one point in childhood, Beauvoir realizes with a sudden rush her immense affection for her friend. “All at once,” she says, “conventions, routines, and the careful categorizing of emotions were swept away, and I was overwhelmed by a flood of feeling that had no place in any code.”²³ Later, Beauvoir says, “I loved Zaza with an intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions.”²⁴ In these passages, Beauvoir demonstrates how her affection for Zaza helped her transcend beyond the expectations of what one ought to do, and thus beyond the tension which could produce anxiety in her.

Third, Beauvoir discovers philosophy in her youth and credits it with giving her a greater sense of authorship and agency in her life and in the world. She describes her first encounter with philosophy, which took place at school, as such: “After twelve years of dreary dogmatism, to find a discipline which asked questions and asked them of *me*. For suddenly it was I myself who was involved in these matters, and until then I had only been treated to commonplaces, as if I were a person of no account.”²⁵ Philosophy demanded of Beauvoir opinions and arguments, and through this she practiced the skill of reshaping the world and becoming an author of her own situation. As such, instead of living according to foreign expectations, norms, and beliefs, Beauvoir can help change them.

Finally, Beauvoir gives immense importance to the significant leisure time she had in adolescence. She reminisces on entire afternoons spent in the park reading whatever books pleased her, resting in nature, taking long walks, and reflecting in her diary. Beauvoir spends pages upon pages in *Memoirs* describing such solitary ventures, and echoes the same sentiment in *The Second Sex*: “When the struggle to claim a place in the world gets too rough, there can be no question of tearing oneself away from it; one must first emerge within it in sovereign solitude if one wants to try to grasp it anew.”⁶ Beauvoir notes that when a person feels existential anxiety, they should allow themselves time and space to be alone. With proper leisure time, they are better able to understand the tension between their own desires and that of the rest of the world, and consequently, confidently recommit to their own even in the face of conflict. In a sense, with proper leisure time they are able to transcend their existential anxieties.

Zaza's Oppression

Clearly Zaza had a different outcome, so how does her situation differ? She had a strong friendship in her youth and also partook in the same philosophy classes that Beauvoir did. But, significantly, Zaza did not have the support of her parents, nor did she have adequate leisure time, to truly transcend her existential anxieties.

Whereas Beauvoir's existential anxieties resided in friction with the world at large, Zaza's resided with her religion and her mother—much more intimate and unavoidable tensions. She fell in love, twice, and on both occasions her mother demanded she end the relationship in favor of a handpicked husband because marrying for love “simply wasn't done” in their circles. And Zaza, trapped in the expectation of pleasing her mother, could not disobey her. Similarly, she refused to disobey Christian doctrine despite her recurring and serious doubts concerning faith. In the tension between her own individual desires and the expectations of her family and religion, Zaza let the latter win repeatedly despite its increasing pressure on her own anxieties.

Finally, and I argue most importantly, Zaza lacked the proper leisure time to transcend her existential anxieties—the leisure time Beauvoir reveled in. Zaza lived as her mother wanted, which comprised a life full of social obligations and domestic activities. The only time in her young adulthood that Zaza seemed to transcend her anxieties occurred when she moved to Berlin for a short stint, and consequently had independence and leisure time away from her family. Shortly after Zaza returns to Paris, however, she again succumbed to her mother's strict schedule. While Beauvoir visited her friend over a school holiday, "it broke [her] heart to see [Zaza] spending hours covering jam pots with greaseproof paper," and in one of Zaza's final letters to Beauvoir, she mentions that because she has no free time, she writes letters to her dear friend between two o'clock and five o'clock in the morning.⁷

Zaza, in the face of a seemingly unresolvable tension between her own desires and those of her mother and religion, was not allowed enough leisure time to alleviate her existential anxieties and completely transcend her situation. Despite the fact that she might have transcended her anxieties in certain ways, through her friendship with Beauvoir and study of philosophy, the lack of support from her parents and, most importantly, her dearth of leisure time, proved significant enough to oppress her rather than permit her freedom.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, my gratitude to Dr. Burdick-Shepherd for putting forward an article that has generated these thoughts—which has led me to delve into the work of Beauvoir, define existential anxiety, and put forward four responses necessary for freedom, most importantly adding leisure time to the solution.

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1958).

2 Beauvoir, *Memoirs*, 12.

3 *Ibid.*, 95.

4 *Ibid.*, 118.

5 Ibid., 158.

6 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1949), 748.

7 Beauvoir, *Memoirs*, 353.