

## Beauvoir on Gender, Oppression, and Freedom

### 1. Introduction: Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Beauvoir was born in Paris and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. She passed exams for Certificates in History of Philosophy, General Philosophy, Greek, and Logic in 1927, and in 1928, in Ethics, Sociology, and Psychology. She wrote a graduate *diplôme* (equivalent to an MA thesis) on Leibniz. Her peers included Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1929, she took second place in the highly competitive philosophy *agrégation* exam, barely losing to Jean-Paul Sartre who took first (it was his second attempt at the exam). At 21 years of age, Beauvoir was the youngest student ever to pass the exam. She taught in high school from 1929-1943, and then supported herself on her writings, and co-editorship of *Le Temps Modernes*. She is known for her literary writing, and her philosophical work in existentialism, ethics, and feminism. She published *The Second Sex* in 1949.

### 2. Gender

‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the future that the human female presents in society.’ (II.iv.1)

#### A. What is a woman?

“Tota mulier in utero: she is a womb,” some say. Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, “They are not women,” even though they have a uterus like the others. Everyone agrees there are females in the human species; today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that “femininity is in jeopardy”; we are urged, “Be women, stay women, become women.” So not every female human being is necessarily a woman... (23)

So there seems to be a sort of contradiction in our ordinary understanding of women: not every female is a woman, otherwise they would not be exhorted to be women. One need not exhort someone to be what they necessarily are. (Note that the same seems to be true of men.) This contradiction is resolved by a distinction between *sex* (physical sexual/reproductive characteristics) and *gender* (social role).

#### B. Asymmetry of gender terms: ‘man/woman’, ‘masculine/feminine’.

These concepts look like symmetrical counterparts, like ‘positive’ and ‘negative’; but the former is both the ‘positive’ and the ‘neutral’. The terms that are gendered female give the marked case, that deviates from the standard. (2)

A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. The categories masculine and feminine appear as symmetrical in a formal way on town hall records or identification papers. The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French ‘hommes’ designates human beings... Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity. (25)

The concept of ‘woman’, and women themselves, are understood in relational, and functional, terms. Evaluation is related to relational and functional role of e.g. cook, matron, prostitute. Recall Aristotle on virtue: the virtues of an X are what enable Xs to perform their function or task excellently. To be a good woman is to be feminine, which is to function excellently in the assigned social role for women. Beauvoir suggests that at least part of this social role is to be a sexual object for men, to satisfy their sexual desires.

And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (26)

### 3. Existentialist background.

#### A. Self/Other

The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies...No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travelers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travelers to become vaguely hostile "others." (26)

We can find the category of self/other in many contexts, e.g., with respect to ethnicity, race. But these are temporary and can be reversed. (27) This is not true of sex. In the division between men and women, women are "Absolute Other."

The couple is a fundamental unit with the two halves riveted to each other: cleavage of society by sex is not possible. This is the fundamental characteristic of woman: she is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each other. (29)

#### B. Freedom

Existentialism distinguishes free, conscious beings from things, obeying deterministic causal laws: *subjects* (Being for-itself, *pour soi*) from *objects* (Being in-itself, *en soi*). Social relations are affected by the self's consciousness of the 'other' as 'object', and reciprocal awareness of oneself as 'object' for the 'other' as 'subject.' In social relations we are constantly constructing others as objects and seeing ourselves through the other's eyes (consider Du Bois on double consciousness!), but the subject must resist this objectification and embrace their freedom.

Human beings don't have a function or a nature, according to existentialism. You have to invent yourself, by acting, choosing what you will be. In so doing you project yourself, transcend your circumstances, live authentically, in honest apprehension of the freedom of your choice and action. Freedom brings anguish. In flight from anguish, you can pretend to be an object, with a pre-ordained blueprint; a thing that cannot choose what it does. That's to act inauthentically, in bad faith.

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into "in-itself," of freedom into facticity; *this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression*; in both cases it is an absolute evil. (37, my emphasis)

#### C. What is oppression? An existentialist perspective.

(i) *Subject vs. Other, or Object.* Oppression occurs when one group sets itself up as the 'Subject', viewing and treating the dominated group as the 'Other' or 'Object'. The disposition to do this stems in part from the antagonistic structure of human consciousness, and in part from concrete material circumstances. Solutions: *reciprocity*, when members of subject groups become aware that they too are objects in Others' eyes; and *solidarity* of group consciousness and activism.

(ii) *Oppression compared with 'bad faith'.*

'The downfall into immanence is bad faith, a moral fault, if the subject consents to it; if inflicted, it is oppression'. (see quote above) Beauvoir and Sartre share a conception of bad faith, but Beauvoir was more sensitive to the fact that sometimes one's immanence is *imposed* and not simply chosen. Women are bound by their situation in a way that men are not.

But what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and *the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential*. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find

independence within dependence? *What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them?* These are the fundamental questions we would like to elucidate. (37, my emphasis)

#### **D. Resistance: Why haven't women rebelled more strongly?**

(a) Women are divided from each other, preventing solidarity:

It is that they lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests; they even lack their own space that makes communities of American blacks, the Jews in ghettos, or the workers in Saint-Denis or Renault factories. They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men— fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women. As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not with black women. The proletariat could plan to massacre the whole ruling class; a fanatic Jew or black could dream of seizing the secret of the atomic bomb and turning all of humanity entirely Jewish or entirely black: but a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. (28)

(b) Oppression is to women's material advantage;

(c) It is assisted by women's complicity and *bad faith*, providing an easy moral justification of one's existence; to become object-like avoids the 'anguish' of freedom. (30)

#### **E. Summing up: oppression, freedom, objectification.**

Normally one is unfree because one has willingly accepted 'immanence', of the status of an object. *Oppression* is similar to bad faith: but in oppression the status of an object is inflicted. You *objectify* someone when you (a) treat them as intentional 'object' of consciousness; (b) treat them as less than human, as determined, as unable to make choices, as valuable only instrumentally, in relation to some function. However, we must always be alert to the possibility of *self-objectification*, via bad faith and complicity.

Invoking *freedom*: (a) gender hierarchy is to be evaluated in terms of effects on freedom, not happiness; (b) it is not 'natural' but the result of actions and choices, hence changeable. So women should aim for liberty or transcendence, rather than happiness "in focusing on the individual's possibilities, we will define these possibilities not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom." (37)

#### **Questions:**

1. What are the similarities and differences between Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness and the existentialist conception of bad faith?
2. Why does Beauvoir resist the suggestion that in seeking justice we ought to aim for happiness? Why is freedom more important? What would Aristotle say?
3. Beauvoir defines women in terms of their objectification as "Other." How plausible is that today? Are men also objectified *as men*? What would that involve? Is gender necessarily a matter of objectification?

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