

# Simone De Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*



# What is a Woman?

“But first we must ask: what is a woman?...All agree in recognizing the fact that **females** exists in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a **woman**; to be considered so she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as **femininity**. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a Platonic essence?” (1).

# Sex vs. Gender

To grasp the meaning of this quote we must lay out some distinctions:

- Sex and sexual difference: refers to biological differences, chromosomes, hormones, sexual organs, etc.
- Gender and gender difference: refers to the social roles and characteristics used by society to differentiate the masculine and the feminine.

# Three Concepts

1. Female: A member of the human species with a certain anatomy (Sex).
2. Woman: Something more than a female member of the human species, a member who has a certain essence, femininity. (Gender)
3. Femininity: the inbuilt essence ascribed to woman by traditional society, which is *not* the same as their biological nature (the fact that they are female).
  - De Beauvoir argues that the feminine is not an eternal essence, as traditional society thinks, but a 'social construct'.

# An Eternal Essence?

The concept of an eternal feminine *essence* in has come under attack:

- “The Biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangable fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to women, Jew or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part on a *situation*. If today femininity no longer exists, then it never existed. But does the word *women*, then, have no specific content?” (1).

# The No-essence View

Some feminists (often American) argue that the concept of 'women' has no meaning, that there are only *individuals* who happen to be female.

- The vigorous denial of womanhood shows that these feminists are “haunted by a sense of their femininity” (2).
- But if 1) being female does not define being a woman, and 2) women are not just individuals, and 3) women are not defined by an eternal essence, then the question: ‘What is a woman?’ comes back.

# What is a Woman: The Other

- All individuals and groups define themselves in relation to 'an other' which they are not. In defining oneself, one also defines what one isn't. "Otherness is" therefore "a fundamental category of human thought." (3)
- But not everyone gets to be self-defining in relation to an other. Only dominant individuals or groups have that privilege.
- "Humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (3). He is the Subject, he is the absolute—she is the Other" (3)
- What women are is the 'other' of men. Masculinity is the norm, the unquestioned universal of things, while femininity is other than this, "the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (2).

# Male (Self) and Female (Other)

## Male

- Universal
- Objective
- Rational
- Unbiased
- Autonomous (free)
- Outside of nature
- Not determined by one's body

## Woman

- Particular
- Subjective
- Non-rational
- Biased (because emotional)
- Heteronomous (not-free)
- In nature
- Determined by their body



# Spirit vs. Nature

In the history of Western thought the nature/sprit (culture) distinction is central. Women are nature, men are spiritual.

- Whereas a woman's body is a "a hindrance, a prison" (3), a man's body connects them directly to reality.
- While women are sunk in natural becoming, in natural things that come into being and pass away, men are able to grasp Being, the a-temporal Platonic forms which govern reality.

# The Situation of Women

“The situation of women is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the stance of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object...The drama of women lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)...and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential” (11)

# Freedom, Subjugation, and Authenticity

Workers and black people regard themselves as subjects by transforming capitalists and whites “into ‘others’” (4). Women have not done so, have not said ‘We’. Why? (This was written before the feminist movements of the 1960’s).

- The man-woman relation, unlike the oppressive relation between groups, is ‘natural’. Women have no memory of a common past or tradition. Women are scattered throughout the society and segmented (4-5).
- “Along with the urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also a temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will...It is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence” (6).

# Objectivity

How can one be objective in making judgments about the relations between men and women?

- Most judgments in history have been made by men. But as Poulain de la Barre puts it: “All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit” (6).
- But of course so are women. There is no objective place from which to judge this issue. but “certain women are best qualified to elucidate the situation of women” (10).
- “We know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately that do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge” (10).

# The Common Good and Happiness

Very often men view the question of women through the concepts of the common good and happiness (11).

- Men say: for the sake of the common good women should be care-givers, or women are more happy in the home, etc.
- De Beauvoir rejects both standards. She endorses an “existentialist ethics.” She argues that we should
  - “pass judgment on institutions according to their giving concrete opportunities to individuals”
  - and she is “interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty” (11).