

### Beauvoir and Butler

‘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.’ (Beauvoir 1949/1989, 267)<sup>1</sup>

1. *Are there women, really?* ‘Every female human being is not necessarily a woman’, otherwise they would not be exhorted to be women. One need not exhort someone to be what they necessarily are.

But first we must ask: what is a woman? ‘Tota mulier in utero’, says one, ‘woman is a womb’. But in speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist 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 so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. (xxv)

The contradiction in popular views about women—half of human beings are women, yet they are urged to be women—is resolved by (in effect) a distinction between *sex* and *gender*. Women (understood as a gender) are what they are only due to their (changeable) situation.

2. *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.

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.... It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. (xxvii)

3. *Relationality of ‘woman’.* 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, blue-stocking.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: ‘Woman, the relative being ...’ And Benda...: ‘The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ (xviii)

4. *Sexual dimension.* Sexuality is especially prominent in the apparent function, or relational aspect, of women, and the concept of ‘woman’. A woman appears essentially as a sexual being (cf. ‘la sexe’; ‘femme/homme’).

And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (xviii)

5. *Existentialist background.*

- Existentialism distinguishes free, conscious beings: *subjects* (Being for-itself, *pour soi*), from things, obeying deterministic causal laws: *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’ (‘the Look’).

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself... no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travellers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile ‘others’ out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. (xviii)

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<sup>1</sup> Pagination is to *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, trans. H. M. Parshley. Vintage Books, 1989.

- You don't come into the world with a ready-made function that determines what you are, or ought to be. 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.

6. *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.

Things become clear... if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object [...] But the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim. The native travelling abroad is shocked to find himself in turn regarded as a 'stranger' by the natives of neighboring countries. [...] How is it, then, that this reciprocity has not been recognized between the sexes...? Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? (xxix-xxx)

(ii) Solutions: *reciprocity*, when members of subject groups become aware that they too are objects in Others' eyes; and *solidarity* of group consciousness and activism.

(iii) *Oppression compared with 'bad faith'.* The authentic subject aims for 'transcendence' through freely chosen projects, avoiding immanence, 'the degradation of existence into the *en soi*'. 'The downfall into immanence is bad faith, a moral fault, if the subject consents to it; if inflicted, it is oppression'.

7. *Women's oppression.* A woman finds herself in the world as a free, autonomous human being, but compelled to 'assume the status of the Other', by those who want to 'stabilize her as an object and doom her to immanence'.

[Othering] The bond that unites her to her oppression is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the lines of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in an totality of which the two components are necessary to one another. (xxxii-xxxiii)

[Material circumstances] The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women. [...] The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other. (xxxii)

8. *Why have women not rebelled more strongly?*

- (a) Women are divided from each other, preventing solidarity;
- (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.

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the 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, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. When man makes of woman the Other, he may, then, expect to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the Other. (xxxiii)

Those who are condemned to stagnation are often pronounced happy on the pretext that happiness consists in being at rest. This notion we reject, for our perspective is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a

continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi*—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. (xl-xli)

9. *How oppression is in men's interests.* (a) Material advantages; (b) a man can feel 'like a demi-god', as compared with women.

One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to feel superior...the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women. [...] Claude Mauriac—whose great originality is admired by all – could write regarding woman: 'We listen on a tone [*sic!*] of polite indifference ... to the most brilliant among them, well knowing that her wit reflects more or less luminously ideas that come from *us*.' Evidently the speaker referred to is not reflecting the ideas of Mauriac himself, for no one knows of his having any. It may be that she reflects ideas originating with men, but then, even among men there are those who have been known to appropriate ideas not their own; and one can well ask whether Claude Mauriac might not find more interesting a conversation reflecting Descartes, Marx, or Gide rather than himself. What is really remarkable is that by using the questionable *we* he identifies himself with St Paul, Hegel, Lenin, and Nietzsche, and from the lofty eminence of their grandeur looks down disdainfully upon the bevy of women who make bold to converse with him on a footing of equality. (xxxvi-vii)

10. *Epistemology of oppression.* There are no neutral witnesses. The inferiority that is an artifact of oppression can look like evidence that would justify it.

Very well, but just how shall we pose the question? And, to begin with, who are we to propound it at all? Man is at once judge and party to the case; but so is woman. What we need is an angel – neither man nor woman – but where shall we find one? Still, the angel would be poorly qualified to speak, for an angel is ignorant of all the basic facts involved in the problem.

A little-known feminist of the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: 'All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.' Everywhere, at all times, the males have displayed their satisfaction in feeling that they are the lords of creation. 'Blessed be God ... that He did not make me a woman,' say the Jews in their morning prayers, while their wives pray on a note of resignation: 'Blessed be the Lord, who created me according to His will.' The first among the blessings for which Plato thanked the gods was that he had been created free, not enslaved; the second, a man, not a woman. But the males could not enjoy this privilege fully unless they believed it to be founded on the absolute and the eternal; they sought to make the fact of their supremacy into a right. 'Being men, those who have made and compiled the laws have favored their own sex, and jurists have elevated these laws into principles', to quote Poulain de la Barre once more. (xxxiii-iv)

But there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro. Both are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to 'keep them in their place'—that is, the place chosen for them. In both cases the former masters lavish more or less sincere eulogies, either on the virtues of 'the good Negro' with his dormant, childish, merry soul – the submissive Negro – or on the merits of the woman who is 'truly feminine' – that is, frivolous, infantile, irresponsible the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, 'The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy; and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes.' This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior. But the significance of the verb *to be* must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value... (xxxv-vi)

11. *Summing up: oppression, freedom, objectification.*

- a) Women should aim for liberty, rather than happiness.
- b) Women suffer from bad faith: willing assumption of 'immanence', of the status of an object.
- c) *Oppression* is similar to bad faith: but the inflicted assumption of the status of an object.
- d) Gender hierarchy is to be evaluated in terms of effects on freedom, not happiness;
- e) Gender hierarchy is not 'natural' but the result of actions and choices, hence changeable.
- f) You *objectify* someone when you (i) treat them as intentional 'object' of consciousness (problematic, on Hegelian theory of consciousness); (ii) treat them as less than human, as determined, as unable to make choices, as valuable only instrumentally, in relation to some function.
- g) *Self-objectification* also occurs via bad faith and complicity.

They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome? These are the fundamental questions on which I would fain throw some light. This means that I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty. (xli)

## Questions Re Butler, "Gendering the Body."

1. In her article "Gendering the Body," Judith Butler aims to elucidate two claims (p. 254):

- i) The body is not a natural fact but an historical idea, and
- ii) one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.
  - a) On Butler's interpretation, should we take claim (i) to deny that there are biological differences between male bodies and female bodies? Briefly, and in your own words, what does she mean by (i)?
  - b) State two points Butler makes about the use of "becomes" in claim (ii). (see pp. 255-6)

2. Butler claims that "One does not become a gender through a free and unconstrained act of choice..." (p. 256) and yet also claims that our genders are "in no sense either naturally or historically necessary" (p. 257). So it looks like she wants to establish some middle ground between freedom and necessity in the way we become our gender. Explain how, on Butler's view, this becoming is chosen (so is not necessary) but nevertheless is not an "unconstrained act of choice".

3. Butler suggests that we might understand 's de Beauvoir's approach to gender in line with Sartre's approach to the self: "what if, in existentialist fashion, gender is nothing other than the acts that realize it, so that gendered behavior and desire are the modes through which gender is regularly constituted." (p. 259) Butler then considers an example of a man acting in a feminine way to explore what she takes to be the "radical cultural consequences" of De Beauvoir's view (p. 259-60).

- a) Explain how the example can be seen as an illustration of Sartre's approach to the self, here extended to gender; and
- b) Indicate what sort of "radical cultural consequences" Butler thinks follows from this approach.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1989. © Vintage Books. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Butler, Judith. "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution." In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*. Edited by Marilyn Pearsall and Ann Garry. Unwin Hyman, 1989. © Unwin Hyman. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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