Beauvoir: The Individual & Society

Bernard Shen

Power, Identity, Resistance (Mo/We 3:00pm–4:20pm)

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Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is sometimes reduced to a depiction of society's imbalanced gender roles and oppression against women. This interpretation is limited; while it is true that society imposes standards upon woman, a more nuanced reading of De Beauvoir might emphasize how woman's being establishes itself within this society, and what this act reveals about woman or human nature. For instance, De Beauvoir's argument that woman holds the same internal desires as man reveals a common humanity between the sexes; she describes woman as "divided in herself", revealing that societal norms and values only constitute part of the motivations behind woman's sentiments and behaviors. From one perspective, these expectations, which posit woman as a passive object, internalized by her as she is socialized — she defines herself through her society; yet conversely, she possesses an innate aspiration to assert herself as an active subject despite this repressive socialization. Moreover, her desire to claim her humanity and be a complete individual involves both the sexual aspects of her being and her aspiration to transcend; therefore, she assumes the awkward position of delicately balancing her femininity with her self-assertion. By reading De Beauvoir's book through a lens of mediation between an individual's quest for being and the restrictive standards of society, *The Second Sex* outlines the potential for societal evolution and individual transformation, paving the path for woman's transcendence and autonomy.

De Beauvoir's exploration of "feminine reality" reaches deep into the complex dynamic between the woman's internal world and the external, and she surpasses the psychoanalytic point of view by interrogating broader society. Indeed, De Beauvoir finds a societal explanation for what psychoanalysis fails to justify, or falsely justifies as an irreducible given. For instance, she explains the Freudian notion of "penis envy" through the lens of the privileges granted to boys.[1] Further, she argues that libido is constructed through man's external reality — his lived experience, not his innate internal world.[2] This analysis extends to woman finding her feminine consciousness within her society as, according to De Beauvoir, "A life is a relation with the world; the individual defines himself by choosing himself through the world."[3] Such a framing of consciousness emphasizes the role of society in shaping how woman perceives herself and chooses to act. On the other hand, De Beauvoir maintains that humanity has an inherent "quest for being", which seems to mirror the Nietzsche-esque notion of a will to power (meanwhile, psychoanalysts would describe this trait as masculine as opposed to human).[4] Combining her rejection of the psychoanalytic perspective with this idea of a "quest for being", I argue that humanity is malleable to the extent that society evolves, but unchanging in its core desire to experience freedom and transcendence.

De Beauvoir's discussion of the process by which one "becomes woman" concretely demonstrates the interactions between the individual's internal human desires and the norms they come to understand through their socialization. Despite perceiving the world in the same way, specific norms are ascribed to boys as opposed to girls.[5] De Beauvoir highlights the role that adults play in validating the child, hence little boys can be made by their parents to behave like

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[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Classics, 2011), 53, 58.
[2] ibid., 56.
[3] ibid., 58.
[4] ibid., 55, 60.
[5] ibid., 283.

little men, whilst also experiencing a sense of superiority in their sex organ.[6] The mother is said to impose her own destiny on her daughter in order to claim her own femininity whilst also taking revenge on it.[7] The precipice of the little girl's experience is when she discovers the hierarchy of the sexes and recognizes her father as sovereign and the embodiment of adventure and transcendence. When she realizes her destiny to become a woman like her mother, never the sovereign father, she experiences a sense of disappointment, and a fear of her body and the future to come.[8] This disappointment is internalized, and these fears realized, when she menstruates for the first time — a symbol of inescapable womanhood.[9] By delineating the differential treatment of boys and girls and the role of parental influence and power dynamics, De Beauvoir unveils the ways in which individuals come to understand themselves within a gendered framework.

The portrayal of the socialized woman as hesitating between the role of object that is proposed to her by society and her claim for freedom presents a dichotomy with no resolution at the individual level.[10] In embracing traditional femininity, woman lacks fulfillment and wonders what she could have become. She may try to fulfill her inner desire for transcendence through immanence: a hopeless endeavor.[11] If she attempts to assert her subjectivity by opposing cultural norms, she becomes undesirable from an erotic standpoint, and is denied the aspect of her humanity tied to intimate relationships with the opposite sex.[12] Hence, De Beauvoir highlights a discomfort woman faces when she attempts to claim her humanity by assuming both her status of autonomous individual and fulfilling her feminine destiny; this discomfort is expressed in her character.[13] De Beauvoir supports this claim by providing examples of women's thoughts and

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[6] ibid., 285–286.
[7] ibid., 295.
[8] ibid., 301–302.
[9] ibid., 329.
[10] ibid., 61.
[11] ibid., 664.
[12] ibid., 723.
[13] ibid., 661.

actions, and explaining them through the conflict that often arises between internal desire and societal expectation. The quintessential example is woman being late; according to De Beauvoir, this behavior is an exercise of petty revenge against man, who embodies the masculine universe and is held responsible for her condition in society.[14] As she is prescribed the passive waiting role while her species being wishes to claim independence and essentiality, she attempts to gain agency and subjectivity by making others wait. For a mere moment, man becomes the Other who passively submits to her will.[15] Thus, De Beauvoir's depiction of woman's internal world illustrates both behaviors of conformity and resistance; woman is forced to weave between her autonomous individuality and her feminine destiny in order to be human, yet she also exercises resentment and revenge through mundane behaviors such as tardiness. While conformity and resistance may seem different, they both represent an attempt at woman's claiming of her humanity; moreover, these behaviors prove that the internal desire that underpins woman's species being — her desire to assert agency — is not erased in her socialization.

Woman's situation, as suggested by De Beauvoir, is one of alienation from her species being and broader society. As an autonomous being placed in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other, woman experiences a drama between her individual claim to essentiality and the societal criterion that posits her as inessential. This experience of being Other within one's own society is unique to women, whose lives were intertwined with men to the extent that they never established an ingroup that allowed them to assert themselves as subjects.[16] Moreover, De Beauvoir writes that women's historical role in broader society was always defined by repetition; they were biologically destined to repeat life and societally bound to immanence through domestic work. Meanwhile, man's project of heroism and transcendence

[14] ibid., 647.
[15] ibid., 650.
[16] ibid., 8.

above his animal condition (reflecting a Rousseauian notion of perfectibility) gave him a sense of purpose; his creation of values — reasons for living — set himself as master over woman, whose paths in life yielded no greater purposes for being. Hence, woman became alienated from the human quest for transcendence; and not only was she denied her individual quest for being, but in not sharing the same sense of purpose as man, she lost her claim to the brotherhood, and by extension, her humanity. Therefore, De Beauvoir indicates that this history began woman's status as Other in society.[17] Furthermore, after this establishment of woman as Other and object, relations between man and woman lose their reciprocity; De Beauvoir's portrayal of sexual relations in particular illustrate how the denial of another's subjectivity — their inner self and their humanity — results in hostile sentiments.[18] These adverse feelings manifest in woman's feelings of resentment towards man, posing another obstacle in a mutual affirmation of their common brotherhood. Thus, the "feminine reality" which emerges from these conditions of history and society explain why woman is prevented from fully accomplishing herself and why she is alienated from her being and society: her path to transcendence is obscured by her societal and biological destiny.[19]

These destinies, however, ought not be perceived as static — society is defined by its constant state of becoming; De Beauvoir acknowledges that political and technological developments have drastically changed woman's condition. For instance, industrial capitalism brought about her sexual liberation through her participation in the workforce, and the introduction of abortion offered a degree of freedom from reproductive slavery — her biological destiny.[20] Nonetheless, De Beauvoir notes that ancient traditions still restrict woman, as society

[17] ibid., 73–75.
[18] ibid., 415.
[19] ibid., 17.
[20] ibid., 132, 139.

continues to condition her to pursue marriage first and foremost. Instead, Beauvoir argues that woman's personal development should be prioritized and that she should be given the freedom to choose her destiny without feeling that she would encounter societal judgment or erotic restriction in choosing a career over marriage.[21] Thus, De Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of societal evolution in promoting woman's autonomy. In particular, she argues that society's conception of femininity should evolve alongside societal developments and not remain trapped in tradition. While acknowledging that man and woman will always maintain their differences, Beauvoir advocates for equality between the sexes, and cautions against allowing humanity's limited imagination to constrain its possibilities for achieving a better future.[22]

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explores the intricate interplay between an individual's inner world and society. By examining woman's sentiments and behaviors through this lens of mediation between these two spheres — the internal and external — Beauvoir surpasses the psychoanalytic lens; her depictions of little girls being socialized into a world and searching for ways to exercise autonomy and self-assertion in adulthood, illustrate her broader argument regarding woman's having innate internal desires. Yet woman is described as "divided in herself;" the clash of these desires with those internalized notions of femininity and life as repetition manifest in her thoughts and actions. Moreover, Beauvoir claims that a woman's expression of her species being is fundamentally incompatible with her claims to womanhood, and in choosing one over the other, woman loses part of her being; hence woman assumes the awkward position of delicately balancing her claims to femininity and autonomy. She anchors this claim in a discussion of alienation and subject-object relations, emphasizing the ways in which society construes woman into a passive *other*. Ultimately, Beauvoir argues that while man

[21] ibid., 155.
[22] ibid., 765.

and woman are inherently different, they share a common humanity that ought to be recognized as universal; more specifically, the innate internal desire for autonomous freedom and transcendence is enduring, and common to both sexes, while the unfreedom posed by traditional societal notions of femininity represents only a transitory moment in historical becoming — something that can and will change. Only through a societal evolution that facilitates individual transformation, and emphasizes reciprocity in man's relations with woman, can a common brotherhood between the sexes be affirmed.

Bibliography

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2011.