

The Philosophy of Woman of Simone de Beauvoir

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“Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. For I do not allow a woman to teach, or to exercise authority over men; but she is to keep quiet” (I Tim. 2; 11-13). The preceding words of St. Paul exemplify an attitude towards women which today is being seriously challenged by those who see in woman’s subjection to man a detriment to her full development as a person.

One of the more articulate champions of a new attitude towards women is Simone de Beauvoir, the French existentialist philosopher-author. In this article, after a brief introduction to her life and to her philosophy in general, the views of Mlle. de Beauvoir will be presented and analysed. It is hoped that study of her provocative views will stimulate a critical re-examination of the role of women in contemporary society.

Biographical Note

Because Simone de Beauvoir’s attitude towards women is intimately connected with her own life, it is significant to present some bio-

graphical information concerning her. Born in Paris of a typical bourgeois family on January 9, 1908 young Simone soon experienced inner conflicts which forced her to flee within herself as she maintained the outward conformity of a dutiful daughter. She writes in the first volume of her autobiography, "I was not a child, I was myself." Despite her inner rejection of the mores imposed upon her she assumed the role of "*une petite fille modèle*." At fourteen years old she rejected God with "*un choix furieux*" and appears never to have repudiated this decision of her adolescence.

Having received her early education in private schools she then attended the Sorbonne from where she received the degree of Agrégée de Philosophie in 1929. While at the Sorbonne she met Jean-Paul Sartre and inaugurated with him a lifelong association of both a personal and an intellectual nature. After teaching philosophy in lycées from 1931 until 1943, she gave up her teaching career to devote herself exclusively to writing. The author of novels, essays, and plays and allied with Sartre in editing the existentialist magazine *Les Temps Modernes*, Mlle. de Beauvoir has also travelled and lectured widely.

During World War II she was a member of the French Resistance and after the war she rigorously opposed the role of France in Algeria. Mlle. de Beauvoir has been associated with leftist causes, but although she is sympathetic with Marxism she is not a Communist. In the third volume of her autobiography she states explicitly, "Close to the Communists certainly, because of my horror of all that they were fighting against; but I loved truth too much not to demand the freedom to seek it as I wished." At present she lives alone in a Paris hotel and rarely visits the cafés on the Left Bank which she had frequented in her youth.

General Philosophical Convictions

Although admittedly dependent upon Sartre philosophically and politically, Simone de Beauvoir is not a "dulcet-voiced carbon copy" of him. While she follows Sartre in his fundamental philosophical insights concerning *pour-soi* and *en-soi* and the absolute and awesome nature of human freedom, she is distinctive in the more optimistic orientation of her thought. For her, existentialism is an optimistic philosophy of transcendence which repudiates abstractions and hypocrisy. The existentialist, living as an authentic subject, poses to himself

his own ends. He makes himself, creates his own values, and is his own source of law. Freedom alone constitutes man, and the only evil is to seek to escape from freedom. Man is sole and sovereign master of his destiny if only he wills *to be*.

Hence a man like the Marquis de Sade is to be lauded, not condemned. Passionately attached to the concrete, Sade took a stand against the abstractions and alienations which are merely flights from the truth about man. Never respecting the "everyone says" with which mediocre minds lazily content themselves, he "adhered only to the truths which were derived from the evidence of his own actual experience. Thus, he went beyond the sensualism of his age and transformed it into an ethic of authenticity."²²

Like Sartre, Mlle. de Beauvoir attaches great importance to human relationships. She sees in them the source both of constant tension and of man's highest achievement. The existence of other men "tears each man out of his immanence and enables him to fulfill the truth of his being, to complete himself through transcendence, through escape toward some objective, through enterprise."²³

Relations with others necessarily involve constant tension because every conscious being seeks to set himself up alone as sovereign subject. Each tries to fulfill himself by reducing the other to slavery. However, individuals can rise above interpersonal conflicts if through friendship and generosity each one freely recognizes the other, if each regards himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner. Herein lies man's highest achievement, and through this achievement he is to be found in his true nature. Nevertheless, in his relations with others man is never free from tension and is required to outdo himself at every moment. "Quite unable to fulfill himself in solitude, man is incessantly in danger in his relations with his fellows: his life is a difficult enterprise with success never assured."²⁴

Philosophy of Woman

Applying the principles of her philosophy specifically to women, Mlle. de Beauvoir articulates a distinctive theory of femininity. For her, one is not born but rather becomes a woman. Being first a human being, woman then becomes what she is. Unfortunately throughout the centuries man has so dominated her that she has lost her dignity as a human being and has been enslaved by man. He, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has exploited her physical weak-

ness and her slavery to reproduction and has presumed to create a feminine domain, a kingdom of immanence which encloses her. While man becomes the essential Other, transcendent, a subject, woman is destined to become the inessential Other, immanent, an object. However, as an existent irregardless of sex woman like man seeks self-fulfillment through transcendence. Herein lies the frustration of a woman—there is a contradiction between her status as a true human being and her vocation as a female as man has created it. Today more than ever woman demands to be recognized as an existent, as a human being. She demands her freedom so that she can freely create her own destiny.

As an existent seeking transcendence woman cannot be identified with the Freudian female whose life story is explained by the interplay of determinate elements. Woman's life is a relation to the world. Not a plaything of contradictory drives, woman lives in a world of values and her behavior has a dimension of liberty. Her sexuality is not an irreducible datum but merely one aspect of her more original "quest of being." Since woman is not determined by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but rather is made by forces extrinsic to herself, her destiny is not predetermined for all eternity.

The inner liberty of woman can be achieved by a social evolution which provides her with material independence. All forms of socialism, wresting woman away from the family, favor her liberation. Nothing but gainful employment can guarantee her liberty in practice. Through work she traverses the distance that separates her from the male. Thus it can be said that "the curse that is upon woman as vassal consists in the fact that she is not permitted to do anything; so she persists in the vain pursuit of her true being through narcissism, love, or religion."⁵ Woman regains her transcendence and concretely affirms her status as subject through active productivity. She makes use of and senses her responsibility in connection with the aims she pursues, with the money and the rights of which she takes possession.

Unfortunately today neither a job nor the right to vote constitute true liberty for woman because the contemporary social structure has not been modified much by her changing condition. "This world, always belonging to men, still retains the form that they have given it."⁶

Love, Marriage, Maternity, and Mysticism

Deeper insights into Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of woman are given through consideration of her concept of certain vital aspects

of femininity. Considering love only in its erotic sense, she views it as genuine only when it is founded on the mutual recognition of the liberty of the lovers. Through such recognition the lovers experience themselves both as self and as other; neither gives up transcendence or is mutilated. For both of them love is a revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world.

In idolatrous love, on the other hand, woman, with a passionate desire to transcend the limitations of self and become infinite, abandons herself to love primarily to save herself, but paradoxically in so doing she denies herself utterly in the end. She gives up her transcendence, subordinating it to man, the essential Other to whom she makes herself vassal and slave. Lacking economic independence she exists, not essentially as *pour-soi*, but relatively as *pour-autrui*. Thus for her, love involves not union but bitter solitude, not cooperation but struggle and often hate. Love is a supreme effort to survive by accepting the dependence to which she is condemned.

Ideally this condition will some day be obliterated. Mlle. de Beauvoir maintains that on the day when woman can love "not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself, but to assert herself—on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger."⁷ Meanwhile, love represents in its most touching form the curse that lies heavily upon mutilated woman confined in the feminine universe.

In view of the preceding view of love it is not surprising that Mlle. de Beauvoir takes a dim view of marriage. Originally intended to protect man against woman, marriage today is on the whole "a surviving relic of dead ways of life." The failure of marriage is due not to the ill will of individuals but to the institution itself, perverted as it has been from the start. Marriage as it is traditionally conceived necessarily gives rise to hypocrisy, lying, hostility, and unhappiness. Shut up in her home, confined to domestic tasks, the married woman has no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality. Hence it is true that while marriage often diminishes man it almost always annihilates woman.

Although balanced couples sometimes exist within the frame of marriage, most often they are to be found outside it. The ideal is for entirely self-sufficient human beings to form unions with one another only in accordance with the untrammelled dictates of their mutual love. Because love is an outgoing movement, an impulse toward a future, accepting a burden, a tyranny, involves not love but repulsion.

If affection and physical love are to be authentic they must first of all be free. This freedom, however, does not mean fickleness, for a tender sentiment is an involvement of feeling which goes beyond the moment. Freedom in love involves the free decision of the individual alone as to whether he is to maintain or to break off the relation he has entered upon. His sentiment is free when it depends upon no extrinsic constraint, when it is experienced in fearless sincerity. "Conjugal love," which actually means absence of love, represents a constraint leading to all kinds of repression and lies. It prevents the couple from really knowing each other, for daily intimacy creates neither understanding nor sympathy.

The pernicious effects of conjugal intimacy extend beyond marriage to include stabilized liaisons as well. If a liaison takes on a familiar conjugal character there will again be found in it all the vices of marriage: ennui, jealousy, calculation, deception, and the like. The woman will dream of still another man to rescue her from this routine.

Viewed from the standpoint of economics both marriage and prostitution constitute slavery. "For both [wife and prostitute] the sexual act is a service; the one is hired for life by one man; the other has several clients who pay her by the piece."⁸ The conjugal slavery consequent upon financial dependence makes women "preying mantises," "leeches," and "poisonous creatures." Hence the common welfare demands that marriage be prohibited as a career for women. It is necessary to transform marriage and the condition of women in general so that they, freed from masculine domination, will be enabled to make positive contributions to society—contributions beneficial both to men and to themselves.

Although she rejects marriage as a career for women, Mlle. de Beauvoir does not thereby exclude maternity from their lives. She maintains that in a properly organized society, where children and mothers would be cared for and helped by the community, maternity would be wholly compatible with careers for women. Indeed, the woman who works, the one who enjoys the richest individual life, has the most to give her children and demands the least from them. Under the present social structure, however, because feminine employment is still too often a kind of slavery and because no effort has been made to provide for the care, protection, and education of children outside the home, woman can hardly reconcile with the best interests of her children an occupation which consumes so much of her time and strength.

Simone de Beauvoir seeks to expose the falsity of two currently accepted preconceptions, namely, that maternity is enough in all cases to crown a woman's life and that a child is assured of happiness in his mother's arms. With regard to the first preconception she warns against the harmful and absurd error of regarding the child as a universal panacea. Maintaining that the mother's relation with her children takes form within the totality of her existence, she concludes that only the woman who is well balanced, healthy, and aware of her responsibilities is capable of being a "good" mother. It is deceptive for a woman to dream of gaining through the child a plentitude, a warmth, a value, which she is unable to create for herself. The child brings joy only to the woman who is capable of disinterestedly desiring the happiness of another, to one who without being wrapped up in self seeks to transcend her own existence.

Even for such a well-balanced woman, however, a child cannot represent the limits of her horizon. To restrict woman to maternity is to perpetuate her inferiority, which originated historically in her enslavement to the generative function. Woman today seeks to escape her slavery. She demands today to participate actively in humanity's continual quest for justification through transcendence. Unable to consent to bring forth life unless life has meaning, she is unable to be a mother without endeavouring to play a role in the economic, political, and social life of the times. For the modern woman, "it is not the same thing to produce cannon fodder, slaves, victims, or, on the other hand, free men."⁹

The second preconception to which Mlle. de Beauvoir objects is directly implied by the first. It sees the child as necessarily happy in his mother's arms. This is not always the case because a child is radically affected by unfavorable relations with his parents. The great danger threatening the infant in contemporary culture is the fact that the mother to whom it is confided in all its helplessness is almost always a discontented woman who seeks to compensate for all her frustrations through her child. Moreover, parents who are themselves in conflict, with their quarrels and their tragic scenes, are bad company for the child. A chain of misery is lengthened indefinitely as the child, deeply scarred by his early home life, approaches his own children through complexes and frustrations.

Despite her rather strong statements on the matter Mlle. de Beauvoir denies that she refuses to grant any value to the maternal instinct and to love. She claims that she simply asks that "women experience

them [maternity and love] truthfully and freely, whereas they often use them as excuses and take refuge in them, only to find themselves imprisoned in that refuge when their emotions have dried up in their hearts.²¹⁰ Against the charge that she preaches sexual promiscuity she says, "At no point did I ever advise anyone to sleep with just anyone at just any time; my opinion on this subject is that all choices, agreements and refusals should be made independently of institutions, conventions and motives of self-aggrandizement."²¹¹

In her consideration of mysticism Mlle. de Beauvoir reaches the same conclusion as she does with regard to idolatrous love. Enmeshed in her immanence the mystic reaches out toward transcendence, an absolute; but instead of a man she chooses to adore divinity in the person of God himself. Although mystical fervor, like love and even narcissism, can be integrated with a life of activity and independence, in itself this attempt at individual salvation is doomed to failure. The mystic puts herself into relation with an unreality (God) and thus lacks any grasp on the world. She does not escape her subjectivity; her liberty remains frustrated.

Critical Analysis

An adequate and fair analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's position on women is difficult to make because of the ambiguities surrounding her views. Intent upon liberating woman from the shackles of male domination, she involves herself in an unbalanced counterpoint of bold assertions and subsequent modifications. Thus she opens herself up to misunderstanding.

A significant ambiguity is found in her conception of the relationship between physiological and cultural factors in the development of woman. On the one hand, she continually denies the existence of a feminine nature and insists that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. Within this perspective she has been accused of wanting women to be men. On the other hand, she appeals to men and women to affirm their brotherhood by and through their natural differentiation. Within this perspective she maintains that a woman's "eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature."²¹²

With regard to the first perspective Gerald Vann complains that Mlle. de Beauvoir tries to lead woman away from her own destiny and urges her instead "to assume a travesty of the qualities, and therefore

no doubt the follies, of man."¹³ This criticism is grounded in the fact that Mlle. de Beauvoir equates transcendence with masculinity and in her appeal for feminine transcendence seeks masculine values for women. This equation is unfortunate because it associates Mlle. de Beauvoir with the traditionally embittered feminists of the last century. Moreover, it may legitimately be questioned whether modern man is a transcendent as Mlle. de Beauvoir idealistically makes him. Because he, as well as woman, is often enmeshed in immanence, he does not entirely escape existence as an inessential Other. To equate unequivocally the transcendent with the male is to confuse the issue of personal fulfillment regardless of sex.

Mlle. de Beauvoir is led to strong feminist statements by her conviction that extrinsic conditions have fashioned woman as she exists today. Insisting that nothing is natural in human society and that woman is "a product elaborated by civilization," she passionately rejects any notion of a determined female nature—an "Eternal Feminine." Such a notion, which reduces woman to a sex object and perpetuates her subservience to man, is detrimental to the full development of woman as a human being.

Despite her polemic against feminine nature, she does not ignore physiological factors entirely nor does she demand the identification of women and men. She admits that a woman's body is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world and maintains that "her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identified with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child."¹⁴ Nevertheless, woman's body is not enough to define her as a woman. She is conscious of herself and attains fulfillment not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws. Custom is a second nature in which are reflected the desires and fears that express an individual's essential nature, or *facticité*. When economic, moral, social and cultural conditions permit the equality of the sexes to be realized concretely, this equality will find new expression in each individual. Then both men and women will ideally find transcendence within the framework of differences in equality, not equality in difference.

Mlle. de Beauvoir's efforts to redefine femininity lead her on a circuitous route often difficult to follow. Rejecting all traditional conceptions of woman, she leaves the way wide open for the emergence of a new, culturally emancipated female. This woman will not be

identical with man, but as a transcendent subject she will reflect the values currently possessed only by him. Her appearance will mark not only her own liberation but also that of man, for then he no longer will have to sustain his effort to appear male, important, superior.

Simone de Beauvoir has not settled the question concerning the degree to which woman is biologically and/or culturally determined. But in stressing the latter aspect she has presented a challenging view of femininity.

Less difficult to analyse than the preceding are Mlle. de Beauvoir's concepts of freedom and love. By absolutizing the former and restricting the latter to eroticism, she distorts both. Freedom for her is not a condition for intelligent and loving response to self, neighbor, and God, but a substantive, an end in itself. As such it leads ultimately to solipsistic slavery, not inner liberty. Love too becomes constrictive of self when its erotic aspects are stressed to the detriment of its other vital dimensions.

Furthermore, the appeal for complete freedom and self-sufficiency in love is unrealistic. Is any human being self-sufficient? Is it not through love that contingent beings seek fulfillment? Mlle. de Beauvoir contradicts her principal thesis concerning authentic love when quite correctly she says, "An authentic love should assume the contingency of the other, that is to say, his lacks, his limitations, and his basic gratuitousness. It would not pretend to be a mode of salvation, but a human interrelation."¹⁵

Because she is so impassionately prejudiced against marriage it is difficult to refute her marital views on purely rational grounds. She bases her opinions chiefly on marriages of convenience and ignores unions freely entered into by mature individuals who in their love for one another have committed themselves to life-long relationships, which despite inevitable trials and difficulties are personally enriching. Although it must be admitted that she has accurately described many existent marital evils, it cannot be maintained that marriage is as degenerate as she depicts it.

Another distortion in Mlle. de Beauvoir's philosophy of woman involves her view of maternity. She rightly recognizes that a woman who centers all her attention upon her children restricts both their development and her own. But she goes too far in insisting that women be taken out of the home. Here again she involves herself in paradox for she recognizes the importance of the mother/child relationship. Why then deny marriage as a career for women? By failing

to recognize the creative in maternity and indeed by declaring the two incompatible Mlle. de Beauvoir does a disservice to the many mature women who find in motherhood both challenge and enrichment.

Nevertheless, she is correct in challenging mothers to expand their interests beyond the limits of the hearth. The woman with young children should seek outside interest lest she succumb to what Betty Friedan calls "the feminine mystique." Exclusive confinement to the role of housewife threatens full human development and leads many women to frustration and despair. Furthermore, with earlier marriages and fewer children the average woman in the United States has her youngest child in school by the time she is thirty-two years old and out of the home by the time she is in her middle forties.¹⁶ This leaves her a long time in which she is not charged with the care of her offspring, time in which she can engage in fruitful activities and make significant contributions to society outside of the home. Thus even while she is rearing her children a mother should remain open to other possibilities for development.

Fulfilling potentialities outside of maternity does not necessarily mean becoming a career woman. Mlle. de Beauvoir errs in equating fruitful labor with a job and in demanding economic independence as an essential requirement for woman's liberation. Women today, especially those who are well educated, should be aware of their powers and responsibilities and not hide behind their sex to escape the challenges of contemporary society. Yet there are many ways besides careers in which they can exercise their rights and duties as responsible members of the human race.

Conclusion

Although Simone de Beauvoir is guilty of exaggerations, fallacies, and misconceptions in her articulation of a philosophy of woman she should not be arbitrarily dismissed as a disgruntled female with an "ax to grind." It is to her credit that she has exposed many of the deceptions under which woman has for too long taken refuge and has challenged her to assume her responsibilities as a human person in the modern world. Daring to expose aspects of femininity usually left untouched and challenging the sexual solipsism of Sigmund Freud, she has opened the way for a re-evaluation of the role of modern woman. While one may reject the solutions she offers, one should not neglect the problems she raises.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1964), p. 45.

² Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" *Marquis de Sade*, ed. Paul Dinnage (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1953), p. 80.

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 678-680.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 680.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 524-525.

¹⁰ *Force of Circumstance*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *The Second Sex*, *op. cit.*, p. 731.

¹³ Gerald Vann, "Review of *The Second Sex*," *Blackfriars*, XXXIV, (December, 1953), 551.

¹⁴ *The Second Sex*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 654.

¹⁶ Chase C. Woodhouse, "Volunteer Community Work," *American Women: The Changing Image*, ed. Beverly B. Cassara (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 52.

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