

The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Introduction

Woman as Other

FOR a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in quarrelling over feminism, and perhaps we should say no more about it. It is still talked about, however, for the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? Are there women, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: 'Even in Russia women still are women'; and other erudite persons - sometimes the very same - say with a sigh: 'Woman is losing her way, woman is lost.' One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be. 'What has become of women?' was asked recently in an ephemeral magazine.

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 recognising 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. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a Platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination? Is a rustling petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women try zealously to incarnate this essence, it is hardly patentable. It is frequently described in vague and dazzling terms that seem to have been borrowed from the vocabulary of the seers, and indeed in the times of St Thomas it was considered an essence as certainly defined as the somniferous virtue of the poppy

But conceptualism has lost ground. The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a *situation*. If today femininity no longer exists, then it never existed. But does the word *woman*, then, have no specific content? This is stoutly affirmed by those who hold to the philosophy of the enlightenment, of rationalism, of nominalism; women, to them, are merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word *woman*. Many American women particularly are prepared to think that there is no longer any place for woman as such; if a backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to be psychoanalysed and thus get rid of this obsession. In regard to a work, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which in other respects has its irritating features, Dorothy Parker has written: 'I cannot be just to books which treat of woman as woman . . . My idea is that all of us, men as well as

women, should be regarded as human beings.' But nominalism is a rather inadequate doctrine, and the antifeminists have had no trouble in showing that women simply *are* not men. Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today - this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. Some years ago a well-known woman writer refused to permit her portrait to appear in a series of photographs especially devoted to women writers; she wished to be counted among the men. But in order to gain this privilege she made use of her husband's influence ! Women who assert that they are men lay claim none the less to masculine consideration and respect. I recall also a young Trotskyite standing on a platform at a boisterous meeting and getting ready to use her fists, in spite of her evident fragility. She was denying her feminine weakness; but it was for love of a militant male whose equal she wished to be. The attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity. In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that they do most obviously exist.

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through 'the eternal feminine', and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question "what is a woman"?

To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. 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. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: 'You think thus and so because you are a woman'; but I know that my only defence is to reply: 'I think thus and so because it is true,' thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: 'And you think the contrary because you are a man', for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. 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. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a

prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. 'The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam.

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 is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: '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.' 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.'

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality - that of the Self and the Other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumézil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.

Thus it is that 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. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged.

Levi-Strauss, at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion: 'Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality.' These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society were simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become dear, on the contrary, 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 neighbouring countries. As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity; willy-nilly, individuals and groups are forced to realize the reciprocity of their relations. How is it, then, that this reciprocity has not been recognised between the sexes, that one of the contrasting terms is set up as the sole essential, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative and defining the latter as pure otherness? Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?

There are, to be sure, other cases in which a certain category has been able to dominate another completely for a time. Very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers - the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth. Again, the two groups concerned have often been originally independent; they may have been formerly unaware of each other's existence, or perhaps they recognised each other's autonomy. But a historical event has resulted in the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger. The scattering of the Jews, the introduction of slavery into America, the conquests of imperialism are examples in point. In these cases the oppressed retained at least the memory of former days; they possessed in common a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion or a culture.

The parallel drawn by Bebel between women and the proletariat is valid in that neither ever formed a minority or a separate collective unit of mankind. And instead of a single historical event it is in both cases a historical development that explains their status as a class and accounts for the membership of *particular individuals* in that class. But proletarians have not always existed, whereas there have always been women. They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change - it was not something that *occurred*. The reason why otherness in this case seems to be an absolute is in part that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts. A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some other time, as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved: but it might seem that natural condition is beyond the possibility of change. In truth, however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change. Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into 'others'. But women do not say 'We', except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say 'women', and women use the same word in referring to themselves. They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude. The proletarians have accomplished the revolution in Russia, the Negroes in Haiti, the IndoChinese are battling for it in Indo-China; but the women's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.

The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organising 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. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressors 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 line of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.

One could suppose that this reciprocity might have facilitated the liberation of woman. When Hercules sat at the feet of Omphale and helped with her spinning, his desire for her held him captive; but why did she fail to gain a lasting power? To revenge herself on Jason, Medea killed their children; and this grim legend would seem to suggest that she might have obtained a formidable influence over him through his love for his offspring. In *Lysistrata* Aristophanes gaily depicts a band of women who joined forces to gain social ends through the sexual needs of their men; but this is only a play. In the legend of the Sabine women, the latter soon abandoned their plan of remaining sterile to punish their ravishers. In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need - sexual desire and the desire for offspring - which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female.

Master and slave, also, are united by a reciprocal need, in this case economic, which does not liberate the slave. In the relation of master to slave the master does not make a point of the need that he has for the other; he has in his grasp the power of satisfying this need through his own action; whereas the slave, in his dependent condition, his hope and fear, is quite conscious of the need he has for his master. Even if the need is at bottom equally urgent for both, it always works in favour of the oppressor and against the oppressed. That is why the liberation of the working class, for example, has been slow.

Now, woman has always been man's dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognised in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores. In the economic sphere men and women can almost be said to make up two castes; other things being equal, the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages, and have more opportunity for success than their new competitors. In

industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolise the most important posts. In addition to all this, they enjoy a traditional prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support, for the present enshrines the past - and in the past all history has been made by men. At the present time, when women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world, it is still a world that belongs to men - they have no doubt of it at all and women have scarcely any. 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.

But it will be asked at once: how did all this begin ? It is easy to see that the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. And doubtless the winner will assume the status of absolute. But why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; or that the outcome of the conflict might never have been decided. How is it that this world has always belonged to the men and that things have begun to change only recently ? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women?

These questions are not new, and they have often been answered. But the very fact that woman *is the Other* tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. These have all too evidently been dictated by men's interest. 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 favoured their own sex, and jurists have elevated these laws into principles', to quote Poulain de la Barre once more.

Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination. In the legends of Eve and

Pandora men have taken up arms against women. They have made use of philosophy and theology, as the quotations from Aristotle and St Thomas have shown. Since ancient times satirists and moralists have delighted in showing up the weaknesses of women. We are familiar with the savage indictments hurled against women throughout French literature. Montherlant, for example, follows the tradition of Jean de Meung, though with less gusto. This hostility may at times be well founded, often it is gratuitous; but in truth it more or less successfully conceals a desire for self-justification. As Montaigne says, 'It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other'. Sometimes what is going on is clear enough. For instance, the Roman law limiting the rights of woman cited 'the imbecility, the instability of the sex' just when the weakening of family ties seemed to threaten the interests of male heirs. And in the effort to keep the married woman under guardianship, appeal was made in the sixteenth century to the authority of St Augustine, who declared that 'woman is a creature neither decisive nor constant', at a time when the single woman was thought capable of managing her property. Montaigne understood clearly how arbitrary and unjust was woman's appointed lot: 'Women are not in the wrong when they decline to accept the rules laid down for them, since the men make these rules without consulting them. No wonder intrigue and strife abound.' But he did not go so far as to champion their cause.

It was only later, in the eighteenth century, that genuinely democratic men began to view the matter objectively. Diderot, among others, strove to show that woman is, like man, a human being. Later John Stuart Mill came fervently to her defence. But these philosophers displayed unusual impartiality. In the nineteenth century the feminist quarrel became again a quarrel of partisans. One of the consequences of the industrial revolution was the entrance of women into productive labour, and it was just here that the claims of the feminists emerged from the realm of theory and acquired an economic basis, while their opponents became the more aggressive. Although landed property lost power to some extent, the bourgeoisie clung to the old morality that found the guarantee of private property in the solidity of the family. Woman was ordered back into the home the more harshly as her emancipation became a real menace. Even within the working class the men endeavoured to restrain woman's liberation, because they began to see the women as dangerous competitors - the more so because they were accustomed to work for lower wages.

In proving woman's inferiority, the anti-feminists then began to draw not only upon religion, philosophy, and theology, as before, but also upon science - biology, experimental psychology, etc. At most they were willing to grant 'equality in difference' to the other sex. That profitable formula is most significant; it is precisely like the 'equal but separate' formula of the Jim Crow laws aimed at the North American Negroes. As is well known, this so-called equalitarian segregation has resulted only in the most extreme discrimination. The similarity just noted is in no way due to chance, for whether it is a race, a caste, a class, or a sex that is reduced to a position of inferiority, the methods of justification are the same. 'The eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul' and to 'the Jewish character'. True, the Jewish problem is on the whole very different from the other two - to the anti-Semite the Jew is not so much an inferior as he is an enemy for whom there is to be granted no place on earth, for whom annihilation is the fate desired. 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 when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'. Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?

Many men hope that it will continue; not all have given up the battle. The conservative bourgeoisie still see in the emancipation of women a menace to their morality and their interests. Some men dread feminine competition. Recently a male student wrote in the *Hebdo-Latin*: 'Every woman student who goes into medicine or law robs us of a job.' He never questioned his rights in this world. And economic interests are not the only ones concerned. One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to feel superior; thus, a 'poor white' in the South can console himself with the thought that he is not a 'dirty nigger' - and the more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride.

Similarly, the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women. It was much easier for M. de Montherlant to think himself a hero when he faced women (and women chosen for his purpose) than when he was obliged to act the man among men - something many women have done better than he, for that matter. And in September 1948, in one of his articles in the *Figaro litteraire*, 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. In truth, I know of more than one woman who would refuse to suffer with patience Mauriac's 'tone of polite indifference'.

I have lingered on this example because the masculine attitude is here displayed with disarming ingenuousness. But men profit in many more subtle ways from the otherness, the alterity of woman. Here is a miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility. Those who are not fear-ridden in the presence of their fellow men are much more disposed to

recognise a fellow creature in woman; but even to these the myth of Woman, the Other, is precious for many reasons.' They cannot be blamed for not cheerfully relinquishing all the benefits they derive from the myth, for they realize what they would lose in relinquishing woman as they fancy her to be, while they fail to realize what they have to gain from the woman of tomorrow. Refusal to pose oneself as the Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial. Furthermore, the vast majority of men make no such claim explicitly. They do not *postulate* woman as inferior, for today they are too thoroughly imbued with the ideal of democracy not to recognise all human beings as equals.

In the bosom of the family, woman seems in the eyes of childhood and youth to be clothed in the same social dignity as the adult males. Later on, the young man, desiring and loving, experiences the resistance, the independence of the woman desired and loved; in marriage, he respects woman as wife and mother, and in the concrete events of conjugal life she stands there before him as a free being. He can therefore feel that social subordination as between the sexes no longer exists and that on the whole, in spite of differences, woman is an equal. As, however, he observes some points of inferiority - the most important being unfitness for the professions - he attributes these to natural causes. When he is in a co-operative and benevolent relation with woman, his theme is the principle of abstract equality, and he does not base his attitude upon such inequality as may exist. But when he is in conflict with her, the situation is reversed: his theme will be the existing inequality, and he will even take it as justification for denying abstract equality.

So it is that many men will affirm as if in good faith that women are the equals of man and that they have nothing to clamour for, while *at the same time* they will say that women can never be the equals of man and that their demands are in vain. It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature. The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman's concrete situation. And there is no reason to put much trust in the men when they rush to the defence of privileges whose full extent they can hardly measure. We shall not, then, permit ourselves to be intimidated by the number and violence of the attacks launched against women, nor to be entrapped by the self-seeking eulogies bestowed on the 'true woman', nor to profit by the enthusiasm for woman's destiny manifested by men who would not for the world have any part of it.

We should consider the arguments of the feminists with no less suspicion, however, for very often their controversial aim deprives them of all real value. If the 'woman question' seems trivial, it is because masculine arrogance has made of it a 'quarrel'; and when quarrelling one no longer reasons well. People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man. Some say that, having been created after Adam, she is evidently a secondary being: others say on the contrary that Adam was only a rough draft and that God succeeded in producing the human being in perfection when He created Eve. Woman's brain is smaller; yes, but it is relatively larger. Christ was made a man; yes, but perhaps for his greater humility. Each argument at once suggests its opposite, and both are often fallacious. If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of

superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.

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. With a hermaphrodite we should be no better off, for here the situation is most peculiar; the hermaphrodite is not really the combination of a whole man and a whole woman, but consists of parts of each and thus is neither. It looks to me as if there are, after all, certain women who are best qualified to elucidate the situation of woman. Let us not be misled by the sophism that because Epimenides was a Cretan he was necessarily a liar; it is not a mysterious essence that compels men and women to act in good or in bad faith, it is their situation that inclines them more or less towards the search for truth. Many of today's women, fortunate in the restoration of all the privileges pertaining to the estate of the human being, can afford the luxury of impartiality - we even recognise its necessity. We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large we have won the game. In recent debates on the status of women the United Nations has persistently maintained that the equality of the sexes is now becoming a reality, and already some of us have never had to sense in our femininity an inconvenience or an obstacle. Many problems appear to us to be more pressing than those which concern us in particular, and this detachment even allows us to hope that our attitude will be objective. Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge. I have said that there are more pressing problems, but this does not prevent us from seeing some importance in asking how the fact of being women will affect our lives. What opportunities precisely have been given us and what withheld? What fate awaits our younger sisters, and what directions should they take? It is significant that books by women on women are in general animated in our day less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort towards clarity and understanding. As we emerge from an era of excessive controversy, this book is offered as one attempt among others to confirm that statement.

But it is doubtless impossible to approach any human problem with a mind free from bias. The way in which questions are put, the points of view assumed, presuppose a relativity of interest; all characteristics imply values, and every objective description, so called, implies an ethical background. Rather than attempt to conceal principles more or less definitely implied, it is better to state them openly, at the beginning. This will make it unnecessary to specify on every page in just what sense one uses such words as *superior*, *inferior*, *better*, *worse*, *progress*, *reaction*, and the like. If we survey some of the works on woman, we note that one of the points of view most frequently adopted is that of the public good, the general interest; and one always means by this the benefit of society as one wishes it to be maintained or established. For our part, we hold that the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens; we shall pass judgement on institutions according to their effectiveness in giving concrete opportunities to individuals. But we do not confuse the idea of private interest with that of happiness, although that is another common point of view. Are not women of the harem more happy than women voters? Is not the housekeeper happier than the working-woman? It is not too clear just what the word *happy* really

means and still less what true values it may mask. There is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them.

In particular 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-sois*' - 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. Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects.

Now, what peculiarly signalises the situation of woman 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 status of the Other. They propose to stabilise her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and for ever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) 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 fulfilment? 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.

Quite evidently this problem would be without significance if we were to believe that woman's destiny is inevitably determined by physiological, psychological, or economic forces. Hence I shall discuss first of all the light in which woman is viewed by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. Next I shall try to show exactly how the concept of the 'truly feminine' has been fashioned - why woman has been defined as the Other - and what have been the consequences from man's point of view. Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live; and thus we shall be able to envisage the difficulties in their way as, endeavouring to make their escape from the sphere hitherto assigned them, they aspire to full membership in the human race.

Further Reading:

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The Second Sex

Simone de Beauvoir 1949

Source: *The Second Sex*, 1949, translated by H M Parshley.

[Introduction](#)

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[The Second Sex, 25 years on](#), 1976 interview

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The Second Sex

by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Book One: Facts and Myths, Part I: Destiny

Chapter 1, The Data of Biology

WOMAN? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female — this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him: 'He is a male!' The term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasises woman's animality, but because it imprisons

her in her sex; and if this sex seems to man to be contemptible and inimical even in harmless dumb animals, it is evidently, because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in him by woman. Nevertheless he wishes to find in biology a justification for this sentiment. The word female brings up in his mind a saraband of imagery — a vast, round ovum engulfs and castrates the agile spermatozoan; the monstrous and swollen termite queen rules over the enslaved males; the female praying mantis and the spider, satiated with love, crush and devour their partners; the bitch in heat runs through the alleys, trailing behind her a wake of depraved odours; the she-monkey presents posterior immodestly and then steals away with hypocritical coquetry; and the most superb wild beasts — the tigress, the lioness, the panther — bed down slavishly under the imperial embrace of the male. Females sluggish, eager, artful, stupid, callous, lustful, ferocious, abased — man projects them all at once upon woman. And the fact is that she is a female. But if we are willing to stop thinking in platitudes, two questions are immediately posed: what does the female denote in the kingdom? And what particular kind of female is manifest in woman?

Males and females are two types of individuals which are differentiated within a species for the function of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively. But first it must be noted that even the division of a species into two sexes is not always clear-cut.

In nature it is not universally manifested. To speak only of animals, it is well known that among the microscopic one-celled forms — infusoria, amoebae, sporozoans, and the like — multiplication is fundamentally distinct from sexuality. Each cell divides and subdivides by itself. In many-celled animals or metazoans reproduction may take place asexually, either by schizogenesis — that is, by fission or cutting into two or more parts which become new individuals — or by blastogenesis — that is, by buds that separate and form new individuals. The phenomena of budding observed in the fresh-water hydra and other coelenterates, in sponges, worms, and tunicates, are well-known examples. In cases of parthenogenesis the egg of the virgin female develops into an embryo without fertilisation by the male, which thus may play no role at all. In the honey-bee copulation takes place, but the eggs may or may not be fertilised at the time of laying. The unfertilised eggs undergo development and produce the drones (males); in the aphids males are absent during a series of generations in which the eggs are unfertilised and produce females. Parthenogenesis has been induced artificially in the sea urchin, the starfish, the frog, and other species. Among the one-celled animals (Protozoa), however, two cells may fuse, forming what is called a zygote; and in the honey-bee fertilisation is necessary if the eggs are to produce females. In the aphids both males and females appear in the autumn, and the fertilised eggs then produced are adapted for over-wintering.

Certain biologists in the past concluded from these facts that even in species capable of asexual propagation occasional fertilisation is necessary to renew the vigour of the race — to accomplish 'rejuvenation' through the mixing of hereditary material from two individuals. On this hypothesis sexuality might well appear to be an indispensable function in the most complex forms of life; only the lower organisms could multiply without sexuality, and even here vitality would after a time become exhausted. But today this hypothesis is largely abandoned; research has proved that under suitable conditions asexual multiplication can go on indefinitely without noticeable degeneration, a fact that is especially striking in the bacteria and Protozoa. More and

more numerous and daring experiments in parthenogenesis are being performed, and in many species the male appears to be fundamentally unnecessary. Besides, if the value of intercellular exchange were demonstrated, that value would seem to stand as a sheer, unexplained fact. Biology certainly demonstrates the existence of sexual differentiation, but from the point of view of any end to be attained the science could not infer such differentiation from the structure of the cell, nor from the laws of cellular multiplication, nor from any basic phenomenon.'

The production of two types of gametes, the sperm and the egg, does not necessarily imply the existence of two distinct sexes; as a matter of fact, egg and sperm — two highly differentiated types of reproductive cells — may both be produced by the same individual. This occurs in normally hermaphroditic species, which are common among plants and are also to be found among the lower animals, such as annelid worms and molluscs. In them reproduction may be accomplished through self-fertilisation or, more commonly, cross-fertilisation. Here again certain biologists have attempted to account for the existing state of affairs. Some hold that the separation of the gonads (ovaries and testes) in two distinct individuals represents an evolutionary advance over hermaphroditism; others on the contrary regard the separate condition as primitive, and believe that hermaphroditism represents a degenerate state. These notions regarding the superiority of one system or the other imply the most debatable evolutionary theorising. All that we can say for sure is that these two modes of reproduction coexist in nature, that they both succeed in accomplishing the survival of the species concerned, and that the differentiation of the gametes, like that of the organisms producing them, appears to be accidental. It would seem, then, that the division of a species into male and female individuals is simply an irreducible fact of observation.

In most philosophies this fact has been taken for granted without pretence of explanation. According to the Platonic myth, there were at the beginning men, women, and hermaphrodites. Each individual had two faces, four arms, four legs, and two conjoined bodies. At a certain time they were split in two, and ever since each half seeks to rejoin its corresponding half. Later the gods decreed that new human beings should be created through the coupling of dissimilar halves. But it is only love that this story is intended to explain; division into sexes is assumed at the outset. Nor does Aristotle explain this division, for if matter and form must cooperate in all action, there is no necessity for the active and passive principles to be separated in two different categories of individuals. Thus St Thomas proclaims woman an 'incidental' being, which is a way of suggesting — from the male point of view — the accidental or contingent nature of sexuality. Hegel, however, would have been untrue to his passion for rationalism had he failed to attempt a logical explanation. Sexuality in his view represents the medium through which the subject attains a concrete sense of belonging to a particular kind (genre). 'The sense of kind is produced in the subject as an effect which offsets this disproportionate sense of his individual reality, as a desire to find the sense of himself in another individual of his species through union with this other, to complete himself and thus to incorporate the kind (genre) within his own nature and bring it into existence. This is copulation' (*Philosophy of Nature*, Part 3, Section 369). And a little farther on. 'The process consists in this, namely: that which they are in themselves, that is to say a single kind, one and the same subjective life, they also establish it as such.' And Hegel states later that for the uniting process to be accomplished, there must first be sexual differentiation. But his exposition is not

convincing: one feels in it all too distinctly the predetermination to find in every operation the three terms of the syllogism.

The projection or transcendence of the individual towards the species, in which both individual and species are fulfilled, could be accomplished without the intervention of a third element in the simple relation of progenitor to offspring; that is to say, reproduction could be asexual. Or, if there were to be two progenitors, they could be similar (as happens in hermaphroditic species) and differentiated only as particular individuals of a single type. Hegel's discussion reveals a most important significance of sexuality, but his mistake is always to argue from significance to necessity, to equate significance with necessity. Man gives significance to the sexes and their relations through sexual activity, just as he gives sense and value to all the functions that he exercises; but sexual activity is not necessarily implied in the nature of the human being. Merleau-Ponty notes in the *Phénoménologie de la perception* that human existence requires us to revise our ideas of necessity and contingency. 'Existence,' he says, 'has no casual, fortuitous qualities, no content that does not contribute to the formation of its aspect; it does not admit the notion of sheer fact, for it is only through existence that the facts are manifested.' True enough. But it is also true that there are conditions without which the very fact of existence itself would seem to be impossible. To be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards this world; but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure. Sartre discusses in *L'Être et le néant* Heidegger's dictum to the effect that the real nature of man is bound up with death because of man's finite state. He shows that an existence which is finite and yet unlimited in time is conceivable; but none the less if death were not resident in human life, the relation of man to the world and to himself would be profoundly disarranged — so much so that the statement 'Man is mortal' would be seen to have significance quite other than that of a mere fact of observation. Were he immortal, an existent would no longer be what we call a man. One of the essential features of his career is that the progress of his life through time creates behind him and before him the infinite past and future, and it would seem, then, that the perpetuation of the species is the correlative of his individual limitation. Thus we can regard the phenomenon of reproduction as founded in the very nature of being. But we must stop there. The perpetuation of the species does not necessitate sexual differentiation. True enough, this differentiation is characteristic of existents to such an extent that it belongs in any realistic definition of existence. But it nevertheless remains true that both a mind without a body and an immortal man are strictly inconceivable, whereas we can imagine a parthenogenetic or hermaphroditic society.

On the respective functions of the two sexes man has entertained a great variety of beliefs. At first they had no scientific basis, simply reflecting social myths. It was long thought — and it still is believed in certain primitive matriarchal societies — that the father plays no part in conception. Ancestral spirits in the form of living germs are supposed to find their way into the maternal body. With the advent patriarchal institutions, the male laid eager claim to his posterity.' was still necessary to grant the mother a part in procreation, but it was conceded only that she carried and nourished the living seed, created by the father alone. Aristotle fancied that the foetus arose from the union of sperm and menstrual blood, woman furnishing only passive matter while the male principle contributed force, activity, movement, life. Hippocrates held to a similar doctrine, recognising two kinds of seed, the weak or female and the strong or

male. The theory of Aristotle survived through the Middle Ages and into modern times.

At the end of the seventeenth century Harvey killed female dogs shortly after copulation and found in the horns of the uterus small sacs that he thought were eggs but that were really embryos. The Danish anatomist Steno gave the name of ovaries to the female genital glands, previously called 'feminine testicles', and noted on their surface the small swellings that von Graaf in 1677 erroneously identified with the eggs and that are now called Graafian follicles. The ovary was still regarded as homologous to the male gland. In the same year, however, the 'spermatic animalcules' were discovered and it was proved that they penetrated into the uterus of the female; but it was supposed that they were simply nourished therein and that the coming individual was preformed in them. In 1694 a Dutchman, Hartsaker, drew a picture of the 'homunculus' hidden in the spermatozoan, and in 1699, another scientist said that he had seen the spermatozoan cast off a kind of moult under which appeared a little man, which he also drew. Under these imaginative hypotheses, woman was restricted to the nourishment of an active, living principle already preformed in perfection. These notions were not universally accepted, and they were argued into the nineteenth century. The use of the microscope enabled von Baer in 1827 to discover the mammalian egg, contained inside the Graafian follicle. Before long it was possible to study the cleavage of the egg — that is, the early stage of development through cell division — and in 1835 sarcode, later called protoplasm, was discovered and the true nature of the cell began to be realised. In 1879 the penetration of the spermatozoan into the starfish egg was observed, and thereupon the equivalence of the nuclei of the two gametes, egg and sperm, was established. The details of their union within the fertilised egg were first worked out in 1883 by a Belgian zoologist, van Beneden.

Aristotle's ideas were not wholly discredited, however. Hegel held that the two sexes were of necessity different, the one active and the other passive, and of course the female would be the passive one. 'Thus man, in consequence of that differentiation, is the active principle while woman is the passive principle because she remains undeveloped in her unity.' [Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*] And even after the egg had been recognised as an active principle, men still tried to make a point of its quiescence as contrasted with the lively movements of the sperm. Today one notes an opposite tendency on the part of some scientists. The discoveries made in the course of experiments on parthenogenesis have led them to reduce the function of the sperm to that of a simple physico-chemical reagent. It has been shown that in certain species the stimulus of an acid or even of a needle-prick is enough to initiate the cleavage of the egg and the development of the embryo. On this basis it has been boldly suggested that the male gamete (sperm) is not necessary for reproduction, that it acts at most as a ferment; further, that perhaps in time the co-operation of the male will become unnecessary in procreation — the answer, it would seem, to many a woman's prayer. But there is no warrant for so bold an expectation, for nothing warrants us in universalising specific life processes. The phenomena of asexual propagation and of parthenogenesis appear to be neither more nor less fundamental than those of sexual reproduction. I have said that the latter has no claim a priori to be considered basic; but neither does any fact indicate that it is reducible to any more fundamental mechanism.

Thus, admitting no a priori doctrine, no dubious theory, we are confronted by a fact for which we can offer no basis in the nature of things nor any explanation through observed data, and the significance of which we cannot comprehend a priori. We can hope to grasp the significance of sexuality only by studying it in its concrete manifestations; and then perhaps the meaning of the word female will stand revealed.

I do not intend to offer here a philosophy of life; and I do not care to take sides prematurely in the dispute between the mechanistic and the purposive or teleological philosophies. It is to be noted, however, that all physiologists and biologists use more or less finalistic language, „if only because they ascribe meaning to vital phenomena. I shall adopt Without taking any stand on the relation between life and consciousness, we can assert that every biological fact implies transcendence, that every function involves a project, something to be done. Let my words be taken to imply no more than that.

In the vast majority of species male and female individuals co-operate in reproduction. They are defined primarily as male and female by the gametes which they produce — sperms and eggs respectively. In some lower plants and animals the cells that fuse to form the zygote are identical; and these cases of isogamy are significant because they illustrate the basic equivalence of the gametes. In general the gametes are differentiated, and yet their equivalence remains a striking fact. Sperms and eggs develop from similar primordial germ cells in the two sexes. The development of oocytes from the primordial cells in the female differs from that of spermatocytes in the male chiefly in regard to the protoplasm, but the nuclear phenomena are clearly the same. The biologist Ancel suggested in 1903 that the primordial germ cell is indifferent and undergoes development into sperm or egg depending upon which type of gonad, testis or ovary, contains it. However this may be, the primordial germ cells of each sex contain the same number of chromosomes (that characteristic of the species concerned), which number is reduced to one half by closely analogous processes in male and female. At the end of these developmental processes (called spermatogenesis in the male and oogenesis in the female) the gametes appear fully matured as sperms and eggs, differing enormously in some respects, as noted below, but being alike in that each contains a single set of equivalent chromosomes.

Today it is well known that the sex of offspring is determined by the chromosome constitution established at the time of fertilisation. According to the species concerned, it is either the male gamete or the female gamete that accomplishes this result. In the mammals it is the sperm, of which two kinds are produced in equal numbers, one kind containing an X-chromosome (as do all the eggs), the other kind

containing a Y-chromosome (not found in the eggs). Aside from the X- and Y-chromosomes, egg and sperm contain an equivalent set of these bodies. It is obvious that when sperm and egg unite in fertilisation, 'the fertilised egg will contain two full sets of chromosomes, making up the number characteristic of the species — 48 in man, for example. .If fertilisation is accomplished by an X-bearing sperm, the fertilised egg will contain two X-chromosomes and will develop into a female XXX). If the Y-bearing sperm fertilises the egg, only one X-chromosome „,will be present and the sex will be male (XY). In birds and butterflies the situation is reversed, though the principle remains the same; it is the eggs that contain either X or Y and

hence determine the sex of the offspring. In the matter of heredity, the laws of Mendel show that the father and the mother play equal parts. The chromosomes contain the factors of heredity (genes), and they are conveyed equally in egg and sperm.

What we should note in particular at this point is that neither gamete can be regarded as superior to the other; when they unite, both lose their individuality in the fertilised egg. There are two common suppositions which — at least on this basic biological level — are clearly false. The first — that of the passivity of the female — is disproved by the fact that new life springs from the union of the two gametes; the living spark is not the exclusive property of either. The nucleus of the egg is a centre of vital activity exactly symmetrical with the nucleus of the sperm. The second false supposition contradicts the first — which does not seem to prevent their coexistence. It is to the fact that the permanence of the species is assured by the female, the principle being of an explosive and transitory nature. As a matter of fact, the embryo carries on the germ plasma of the father as well as that of the mother and transmits them together to its descendants under now male, now female form. It is, so to speak, an androgynous germ plasma, which outlives the male or female individuals that are its incarnations, whenever they produce offspring.

This said, we can turn our attention to secondary differences between egg and sperm, which are of the greatest interest. The essential peculiarity of the egg is that it is provided with means for nourishing and protecting the embryo; it stores up reserve material from which the foetus will build its tissues, material that is not living substance but egg yolk. In consequence the egg is of massive, commonly spherical form and relatively large. The size of birds' eggs is well known; in woman the egg is almost microscopic, about equal in size to a printed period (diameter 0.132- 0.135 mm.), but the human sperm is far smaller (0.04 — 0.06 mm. in length), so small that a cubic millimetre would hold 60,000. The sperm has a threadlike tail and a small, flattened oval head, which contains the chromosomes. No inert substance weighs it down; it is wholly alive. In its whole structure it is adapted for mobility. Whereas the egg, big with the future of the embryo, is stationary; enclosed within the female body or floating externally in water, it passively awaits fertilisation. It is the male gamete that seeks it out. The sperm is always a naked cell; the egg may or may not be protected with shell and membranes according to the species; but in any case, when the sperm makes contact with the egg, it presses against it, sometimes shakes it, and bores into it. The tail is dropped and the head enlarges, forming the male nucleus, which now moves towards the egg nucleus. Meanwhile the egg quickly forms a membrane, which prevents the entrance of other sperms. In the starfish and other echinoderms, where fertilisation takes place externally, it is easy to observe the onslaught of the sperms, which surround the egg like an aureole. The competition involved is an important phenomenon, and it occurs in most species. Being much smaller than the egg, the sperm is generally produced in far greater numbers (more than 200,000,000 to 1 in the human species), and so each egg has numerous suitors.

Thus the egg — active in its essential feature, the nucleus — is superficially passive; its compact mass, sealed up within itself, evokes nocturnal darkness and inward repose. It was the form of the sphere that to the ancients represented the circumscribed world, the impenetrable atom. Motionless, the egg waits; in contrast the sperm — free, slender, agile — typifies the impatience and the restlessness of existence. But allegory should not be pushed too far. The ovule has sometimes been

likened to immanence, the sperm to transcendence, and it has been said that the sperm penetrates the female element only in losing its transcendence, its motility; it is seized and castrated by the inert mass that engulfs it after depriving it of its tail. This is magical action disquieting, as is all passive action — whereas the activity of the male gamete is rational; it is movement measurable in terms of time and space. The truth is that these notions are hardly more than vagaries of the mind. Male and female gametes fuse in the fertilised egg; they are both suppressed in becoming a new whole. It is false to say that the egg greedily swallows the sperm, and equally so to say that the sperm victoriously commandeers the female cell's reserves, since in the act of fusion the individuality of both is lost. No doubt movement seems to the mechanistic mind to be an eminently rational phenomenon, but it is an idea no clearer for modern physics than action at a distance. Besides, we do not know in detail the physico-chemical reactions that lead up to gametic union. We can derive a valid suggestion, however, from this comparison of the gametes. There are two interrelated dynamic aspects of life: it can be maintained only through transcending itself, and it can transcend itself only on condition that it is maintained. These two factors always operate together, and it is unrealistic to try to separate them, yet now it is one and now the other that dominates. The two gametes at once transcend and perpetuate themselves when they unite; but in its structure the egg anticipates future needs, it is so constituted as to nourish the life that will wake within it. The sperm, on the contrary, is in no way equipped to provide for the development of the embryo it awakens. On the other hand, the egg cannot provide the change of environment that will stimulate a new outburst of life, whereas the sperm can and does travel. Without the foresight of the egg, the sperm's arrival would be in vain; but without the initiative of the latter, the egg would not fulfil its living potentialities.

We may conclude, then, that the two gametes play a fundamentally identical role; together they create a living being in which both of them are at once lost and transcended. But in the secondary and superficial phenomena upon which fertilisation depends, it is the male element which provides the stimuli needed for evoking new life and it is the female element that enables this new life to be lodged in a stable organism.

It would be foolhardy indeed to deduce from such evidence that woman's place is in the home — but there are foolhardy men. In his book *Le Tempérament et le caractère*, Alfred Fouillée undertakes to found his definition of woman in toto upon the egg and that of man upon the spermatozoan; and a number of supposedly profound theories rest upon this play of doubtful analogies. It is a question to what philosophy of nature these dubious ideas pertain; not to the laws of heredity, certainly, for, according to these laws, men and women alike develop from an egg and a sperm. I can only suppose that in such misty minds there still float shreds of the old philosophy of the Middle Ages which taught that the cosmos is an exact reflection of a microcosm — the egg is imagined to be a little female, the woman a giant egg. These musings, generally abandoned since the days of alchemy, make a bizarre contrast with the scientific precision of the data upon which they are now based, for modern biology conforms with difficulty to medieval symbolism. But our theorists do not look too closely into the matter. In all honesty it must be admitted that in any case it is a long way from the egg to woman. In the unfertilised egg not even the concept of femaleness is as yet established. As Hegel justly remarks the sexual

relation cannot be referred back to the relation of the gametes. It is our duty, then, to study the female organism as a whole.

It has already been pointed out that in many plants and in some animals (such as snails) the presence of two kinds of gametes does not require two kinds of individuals, since every individual produces both eggs and sperms. Even when the sexes are separate, they are not distinguished in any such fashion as are different species. Males and females appear rather to be variations on 'a common groundwork, much as the two gametes are differentiated from similar original tissue. In certain animals (for example, the marine worm *Bonellia*) the larva is asexual, the adult becoming male or female according to the circumstances under which it has developed. But as noted above (pages 42-3), sex is determined in most species by the genotypic constitution of the fertilised egg. In bees the unfertilised eggs laid by the queen produce males exclusively; in aphids parthenogenetic eggs usually produce females. But in most animals all eggs that develop have been fertilised, and it is notable that the sexes are produced in approximately equal numbers through the mechanism of chromosomal sex-determination, already explained.

In the embryonic development of both sexes the tissue from which the gonads will be formed is at first indifferent; at a certain stage either testes or ovaries become established; and similarly in the development of the other sex organs there is an early indifferent period when the sex of the embryo cannot be told from an examination of these parts, from which, later on, the definitive male or female structures arise. All this helps to explain the existence of conditions intermediate between hermaphroditism and gonochorism (sexes separate). Very often one sex possesses certain organs characteristic of the other; a case in point is the toad, in which there is in the male a rudimentary ovary called Bidder's organ, capable of producing eggs under experimental conditions. Among the mammals there are indications of this sexual bipotentiality, such as the uterus masculinus and the rudimentary mammary glands in the Male, and in the female Gärtner's canal and the clitoris. Even in those species exhibiting a high degree of sexual differentiation individuals combining both male and female characteristics may occur. Many cases of intersexuality are known in both animals and man; and among insects and crustaceans one occasionally finds examples of gynandromorphism, in which male and female areas of the body are mingled in a kind of mosaic.

The fact is that the individual, though its genotypic sex is fixed at fertilisation, can be profoundly affected by the environment in which it develops. In the ants, bees, and termites the larval nutrition determines whether the genotypic female individual will become a fully developed female ('queen') or a sexually retarded worker. In these cases the whole organism is affected; but the gonads do not play a part in establishing the sexual differences of the body, or soma. In the vertebrates, however, the hormones secreted by the gonads are the essential regulators. Numerous experiments show that by varying the hormonal (endocrine) situation, sex can be profoundly affected. Grafting and castration experiments on adult animals and man have contributed to the modern theory of sexuality, according to which the soma is in a way identical in male and female vertebrates. It may be regarded as a kind of neutral element upon which the influence of the gonad imposes the sexual characteristics. Some of the hormones secreted by the gonad act as stimulators, others as inhibitors. Even the genital tract itself is somatic, and embryological investigations show that it develops in the male or

female direction from an indifferent and in some respects hermaphroditic condition under the hormonal influence. Intersexuality may result when the hormones are abnormal and hence neither one of the two sexual potentialities is exclusively realised.

Numerically equal in the species and developed similarly from like beginnings, the fully formed male and female are basically equivalent. Both have reproductive glands — ovaries or testes — in which the gametes are produced by strictly corresponding processes, as we have seen. These glands discharge their products through ducts that are more or less complex according to sex; in the female the egg may pass directly to the outside through the oviduct, or it may be retained for a time in the cloaca or the uterus before expulsion; in the male the semen may be deposited outside, or there may be a copulatory organ through which it is introduced into the body of the female. In these respects, then, male and female appear to stand in a symmetrical relation to each other. To reveal their peculiar, specific qualities it will be necessary to study them from the functional point of view.

It is extremely difficult to give a generally valid definition of the female. To define her as the bearer of the eggs and the male as bearer of the sperms is far from sufficient, since the relation of the organism to the gonads is, as we have seen, quite variable. On the other hand, the differences between the gametes have no direct effect upon the organism as a whole; it has sometimes been argued that the eggs, being large, consume more vital energy than do the sperms, but the latter are produced in such infinitely greater numbers that the expenditure of energy must be about equal in the two sexes. Some have wished to see in spermatogenesis an example of prodigality and in oogenesis a model of economy, but there is an absurd liberality in the latter, too, for the vast majority of eggs are never fertilised.' In no way do gametes and gonads represent in microcosm the organism as a whole. It is to this the whole organism — that we must now direct our attention.

One of the most remarkable features to be noted as we survey the scale of animal life is that as we go up, individuality is seen to be more and more fully developed. At the bottom, life is concerned only in the survival of the species as a whole; at the top, life seeks expression through particular individuals, while accomplishing also the survival of the group. In some lower species the organism may be almost entirely reduced to the reproductive apparatus; in this case the egg, and hence the female, is supreme, since the egg is especially dedicated to the mere propagation of life; but here the female is hardly more than an abdomen, and her existence is entirely used up in a monstrous travail of ovulation. In comparison with the male, she reaches giant proportions; but her appendages are often tiny, her body a shapeless sac, her organs degenerated in favour of the eggs. Indeed, such males females, although they are distinct organisms, can hardly be regarded as individuals, for they form a kind of unity made up of inseparable elements. In a way they are intermediate between hermaphroditism and gonochorism.

Thus in certain Crustacea, parasitic on the crab, the female is a mere sac enclosing millions of eggs, among which are found the minute males, both larval and adult. In *Edriolydnus* the dwarf male is still more degenerate; it lives under the shell of the female and has no digestive tract of its own, being purely reproductive in function. But ;in all such cases the female is no less restricted than the male; it is enslaved to

the species. If the male is bound to the female, the latter is no less bound down, either to a living organism on which it exists as a parasite or to some substratum; and its substance is consumed in producing the eggs which the tiny male fertilises. Among somewhat higher animals an individual autonomy begins to be manifested and the bond that joins the sexes weakens; but in the ts they both remain strictly subordinated to the eggs. Frequently, in the mayflies, male and female die immediately after copulation and egg-laying. In some rotifers the male lacks a digestive tract and fecundation; the female is able to eat and survives long least to develop and lay the eggs. The mother dies after the appearance of the next generation is assured. The privileged position held by the females in many insects comes from the fact that the production and sometimes the care of the eggs demand a long effort, whereas fecundation is for the most part quickly accomplished.

In the termites the enormous queen, crammed with nourishment and laying as many as 4,000 eggs per day until she becomes sterile and is pitilessly killed, is no less a slave than the comparatively tiny male who attends her and provides frequent fecundations. In the matriarchal ants' nests and beehives the males are economically useless and are killed off at times. At the season of the nuptial flight in ants, all the males emerge with females from the nest; those that succeed in mating with females die at once, exhausted; the rest are not permitted by the workers to re-enter the nest, and die of hunger or are killed. The fertilised female has a gloomy fate; she buries herself alone in the ground and often dies while laying her first eggs, or if she succeeds in founding a colony she remains shut in and may live for ten or twelve years constantly producing more eggs. The workers, females with atrophied sexuality, may live for several years, but their life is largely devoted to raising the larvae. It is much the same with bees; the drone that succeeds in mating with the queen during the nuptial flight falls to earth disembowelled; the other drones return to the hive, where they live a lazy life and are in the way until at the approach of winter they are killed off by the workers. But the workers purchase their right to live by incessant toil; as in the ants they are undeveloped females. The queen is in truth enslaved to the hive, laying eggs continually. If she dies, the workers give several larvae special food so as to provide for the succession; the first to emerge kills the rest in their cells.

In certain spiders the female carries the eggs about with her in a silken case until they hatch. She is much larger and stronger than the male and may kill and devour him after copulation, as does an insect, the praying mantis, around which has crystallised the myth of devouring femininity — the egg castrates the sperm, the mantis murders her spouse, these acts foreshadowing a feminine dream of castration. The mantis, however, shows her cruelty especially in captivity; and under natural conditions, when she is free in the midst of abundant food, she rarely dines on the male. If she does eat him, it is to enable her to produce her eggs and thus perpetuate the race, just as the solitary fertilised ant often eats some of her own eggs under the same necessity. It is going far afield to see in these facts a proclamation of the 'battle of the sexes' which sets individuals, as such, one against another. It cannot simply be said that in ants, bees, termites, spiders, or mantises the female enslaves and sometimes devours the male, for it is the species that in different ways consumes them both. The female lives longer and seems to be more important than the male; but she has no independence — egg-laying and the care of eggs and larvae are her destiny, other functions being atrophied wholly or in part.

In the male, on the contrary, an individual existence begins to be manifested. In impregnation he very often shows more initiative than the female, seeking her out, making the approach, palpating, seizing, and forcing connection upon her. Sometimes he has to battle for her with other males. Accordingly the organs of locomotion, touch, and prehension frequently more highly evolved in the male. Many female moths are wingless, while the males have wings; and often the males of insects have more highly developed colours, wing-covers, legs, and pincers. And sometimes to this endowment is added a seeming luxury of brilliant coloration. Beyond the brief moment of copulation the life of the male is useless and irresponsible; compared with the industriousness of the workers, the idleness of the drones seems a remarkable privilege. But this privilege is a social disgrace, and often the male pays with his life for his futility and partial independence. The species, which holds the female in slavery, punishes the male for his gesture towards escape; it liquidates him with brutal force.

In higher forms of life, reproduction becomes the creation of discrete organisms; it takes on a double role: maintenance of the species and creation of new individuals. This innovating aspect becomes the more unmistakable as the singularity of the individual becomes pronounced. It is striking that these, two essential elements — perpetuation and creation — are separately apportioned to the two sexes. This separation, already indicated at the moment when the egg is fertilised, is to be discerned in the whole generative process. It is not the essential nature of the egg that requires this separation, for in higher forms of life the female has, like the male, attained a certain autonomy and her bondage to the egg has been relaxed. The female fish, batrachian, or bird is far from being a mere abdomen. The less strictly the mother is bound to the egg, the less does the labour of reproduction represent an absorbing task and the more uncertainty there is in the relations of the two parents with their offspring. It can even happen that the father will take charge of the newly hatched young, as in various fishes.

Water is an element in which the eggs and sperms can float about and unite, and fecundation in the aquatic environment is almost always external. Most fish do not copulate, at most stimulating one another by contact. The mother discharges the eggs, the father the sperm — their role is identical. There is no reason why the mother, any more than the father, should feel responsibility for the eggs. In some species the eggs are abandoned by the parents and develop without assistance; sometimes a nest is prepared by the mother and sometimes she watches over the eggs after they have been fertilised. But very often it is the father who takes charge of them. As soon as he has fertilised them, he drives away the female to prevent her from eating them, and he protects them savagely against any intruder. Certain males have been described as making a kind of protective nest by blowing bubbles of air enclosed in an insulating substance; and in many cases they protect the developing eggs in their mouths or, as in the seahorse, in abdominal folds.

In the batrachians (frogs and toads) similar phenomena are to be seen. True copulation is unknown to them; they practise amplexus, the male embracing the female and thus stimulating her to lay her eggs. As the eggs are discharged, the sperms are deposited upon them. In the obstetrical toad the male wraps the strings of eggs about his hind legs and protects them, taking them into the water when the young are about to hatch as tadpoles.

In birds the egg is formed rather slowly inside the female; it is relatively large and is laid with some difficulty. It is much more closely associated with the mother than with the father, who has simply fertilised it in a brief copulation. Usually the mother sits on the eggs and takes care of the newly hatched young; but often the father helps in nest-building and in the protection and feeding of the young birds. In rare cases — for example among the sparrows — the male does the incubating and rearing. Male and female pigeons secrete in the crop a milky fluid with, which they both feed the fledglings. It is remarkable that in these cases where the male takes part in nourishing the young, there is no production of sperms during the time devoted to them while occupied in maintaining life the male has no urge to beget new living beings.

In the mammals life assumes the most complex forms, and individualisation is most advanced and specific. There the division of the two vital components — maintenance and creation — is realised definitively in the separation of the sexes. It is in this group that the mother sustains the closest relations — among vertebrates — with her offspring, and the father shows less interest in them. The female organism is wholly adapted for and subservient to maternity, while sexual initiative is the prerogative of the male.

The female is the victim of the species. During certain periods in the year, fixed in each species, her whole life is under the regulation of a sexual cycle (the oestrus cycle), of which the duration, as well as the rhythmic sequence of events, varies from one species to another. This cycle consists of two phases: during the first phase the eggs (variable in number according to the species) become mature and the lining of the uterus becomes thickened and vascular; during the second phase (if fertilisation has not occurred) the egg disappears, the uterine edifice breaks down, and the material is eliminated in a more or less noticeable temporary flow, known as menstruation in woman and related higher mammals. If fertilisation does occur, the second phase is replaced by pregnancy. The time of ovulation (at the end of the first phase) is known as oestrus and it corresponds to the period of rut, heat, or sexual activity.

In the female mammal, rut is largely passive; she is ready and waiting to receive the male. It may happen in mammals — as in certain birds — that she solicits the male, but she does no more than appeal to him by means of cries, displays, and suggestive attitudinising. She is quite unable to force copulation upon him. In the end it is he who makes the decision. We have seen that even in the insects, where the female is highly privileged in return for her total sacrifice to the species, it is usually the male who takes the initiative in fecundation; among the fishes he often stimulates the female to lay her eggs through his presence and contact; and in the frogs and toads he acts as a stimulator in amplexus. But it is in birds and mammals especially that he forces himself upon her, while very often she submits indifferently or even resists him.

Even when she is willing, or provocative, it is unquestionably the male who takes the female — she is taken. Often the word applies literally, for whether by means of special organs or through superior strength, the male seizes her and holds her in place; he performs the copulatory movements; and, among insects, birds, and mammals, he penetrates her. In this penetration her inwardness is violated, she is like an enclosure that is broken into. The male is not doing violence to the species, for the species survives only in being constantly renewed and would come to an end if eggs and sperms did not come together; but the female, entrusted with the protection of the egg,

locks it away inside herself, and her body, in sheltering the egg, shields it also from the fecundating action of the male. Her body becomes, therefore, a resistance to be broken through, whereas in penetrating it the male finds self-fulfilment in activity.

His domination is expressed in the very posture of copulation — in almost all animals the male is on the female. And certainly the organ he uses is a material object, but it appears here in its animated state it is a tool — whereas in this performance the female organ is more in the nature of an inert receptacle. The male deposits his semen, the female receives it. Thus, though the female plays a fundamentally active role in procreation, she submits to the coition, which invades her individuality and introduces an alien element through penetration and internal fertilisation. Although she may feel the sexual urge as a personal need, since she seeks out the male when in heat, yet the sexual adventure is immediately experienced by her as an interior event and not as an outward relation to the world and to others.

But the fundamental difference between male and female mammals lies in this: the sperm, through which the life of the male is transcended in another, at the same instant becomes a stranger to him and separates from his body; so that the male recovers his individuality intact at the moment when he transcends it. The egg, on the contrary, begins to separate from the female body when, fully matured, it emerges from the follicle and falls into the oviduct; but if fertilised by a gamete from outside, it becomes attached again through implantation in the uterus. First violated, the female is then alienated — she becomes, in part, another than herself. She carries the foetus inside her abdomen until it reaches a stage of development that varies according to the species — the guinea-pig is born almost adult, the kangaroo still almost an embryo. Tenanted by another, who battens upon her substance throughout the period of pregnancy, the female is at once herself and other than herself; and after the birth she feeds the newborn upon the milk of her breasts. Thus it is not too clear when the new individual is to be regarded as autonomous: at the moment of fertilisation, of birth, or of weaning? It is noteworthy that the more clearly the female appears as a separate individual, the more imperiously the continuity of life asserts itself against her separateness. The fish and the bird, which expel the egg from the body before the embryo develops, are less enslaved to their offspring than is the female mammal. She regains some autonomy after the birth of her offspring — a certain distance is established between her and them; and it is following upon a separation that she devotes herself to them. She displays initiative and inventiveness in their behalf; she battles to defend them against other animals and may even become aggressive. But normally she does not seek to affirm her individuality; she is not hostile to males or to other females and shows little combative instinct. [Certain fowls wrangle over the best places in the poultry-yard and establish a hierarchy of dominance (the 'peck-order'); and sometimes among cattle there are cows that will fight for the leadership of the herd in the absence of males.] In spite of Darwin's theory of sexual selection, now much disputed, she accepts without discrimination whatever male happens to be at hand. It is not that the female lacks individual abilities — quite the contrary. At times when she is free from maternal servitude she can now and then equal the male; the mare is as fleet as the stallion, the hunting bitch has as keen a nose as the dog, she-monkeys in tests show as much intelligence as males. It is only that this individuality is not laid claim to; the female renounces it for the benefit of the species, which demands this abdication.

The lot of the male is quite different. As we have just seen, even in his transcendence towards the next generation he keeps himself apart and maintains his individuality within himself. This characteristic is constant, from the insect to the highest animals. Even in the fishes and whales, which live peaceably in mixed schools, the males separate from the rest at the time of rut, isolate themselves, and become aggressive towards other males. Immediate, direct in the female, sexuality is indirect, it is experienced through intermediate circumstances, in the male. There is a distance between desire and satisfaction which he actively surmounts; he pushes, seeks out, touches the female, caresses and quiets her before he penetrates her. The organs used in such activities are, as I have remarked, often better developed in the male than in the female. It is notable that the living impulse that brings about the vast production of sperms is expressed also in the male by the appearance of bright plumage, brilliant scales, horns, antlers, a mane, by his voice, his exuberance. We no longer believe that the 'wedding finery' put on by the male during rut, nor his seductive posturings, have selective significance; but they do manifest the power of life, bursting forth in him with useless and magnificent splendour. This vital superabundance, the activities directed towards mating, and the dominating affirmation of his power over the female in coitus itself — all this contributes to the assertion of the male individual as such at the moment of his living transcendence. In this respect Hegel is right in seeing the subjective element in the male, while the female remains wrapped up in the species. Subjectivity and separateness immediately signify conflict. Aggressiveness is one of the traits of the rutting male; and it is not explained by competition for mates, since the number of females is about equal to the number of males; it is rather the competition that is explained by this will to combat. It might be said that before procreating, the male claims as his own the act that perpetuates the species, and in doing battle with his peers confirms the truth of his individuality. The species takes residence in the female and absorbs most of her individual life; the male on the contrary integrates the specific vital forces into his individual life. No doubt he also submits to powers beyond his control: the sperms are formed within him and periodically he feels the rutting urge; but these processes involve the sum total of the organism in much less degree than does the oestrus cycle. The production of sperms is not exhausting, nor is the actual production of eggs; it is the development of the fertilised egg inside an adult animal that constitutes for the female an engrossing task. Coition is a rapid operation and one that robs the male of little vitality. He displays almost no paternal instinct. Very often he abandons the female after copulation. When he remains near her as head of a family group — monogamic family, harem, or herd — he nurtures and protects the community as a whole; only rarely does he take a direct interest in the young. In the species capable of high individual development, the urge of the male towards autonomy — which in lower animals is his ruin is crowned with success. He is in general larger than the female, stronger, swifter, more adventurous; he leads a more independent life, his activities are more spontaneous; he is more masterful, more imperious. In mammalian societies it is always he who commands.

In nature nothing is ever perfectly dear. The two types, male and female, are not always sharply distinguished; while they sometimes exhibit a dimorphism — in coat colour or in arrangement of spotting or mottling — that seems absolutely distinctive, yet it may happen, on the contrary, that they are indistinguishable and that even their functions are hardly differentiated, as in many fishes. All in all, however, and especially at the top of the animal scale, the two sexes represent two diverse aspects

of the life of the species. The difference between them is not, as has been claimed, that between activity and passivity; for the nucleus of the egg is active and moreover the development of the embryo is an active, living process, not a mechanical unfolding.

It would be too simple to define the difference as that between change -and permanence: for the sperm can create only because its vitality is maintained in the fertilised egg, and the egg can persist only through developmental change, without which it deteriorates and disappears.

It is true, however, that in these two processes, *maintaining* and *creating* (both of which are active), the synthesis of becoming is not accomplished in the same manner. To *maintain* is to deny the scattering of instants, it is to establish continuity in their flow; to *create* is to strike out from temporal unity in general an irreducible, separate present. And it is true also that in the female it is the continuity of life that seeks accomplishment in spite of separation; while separation into new and individualised forces is incited by male initiative. The male is thus permitted to express himself freely; the energy of the species is well integrated into his own living activity. On the contrary, the individuality of the female is opposed by the interest of the species; it is as if she were possessed by foreign forces — alienated. And this explains why the contrast between the sexes is not reduced when — as in higher forms — the individuality of the organisms concerned is more pronounced. On the contrary, the contrast is increased. The male finds more and more varied ways in which to employ the forces he is master of; the female feels her enslavement more and more keenly, the conflict between her own interests and the reproductive forces is heightened. Parturition in cows and mares is much more painful and dangerous than it is in mice and rabbits. Woman — the most individualised of females — seems to be the most fragile, most subject to this pain and danger: she who most dramatically fulfils the call of destiny and most profoundly differs from her male.

In man as in most animals the sexes are born in approximately equal numbers, the sex ratio for Western man being about 105-5 males to 100 females. Embryological development is analogous in the two sexes; however, in the female embryo the primitive germinal epithelium (from which ovary or testis develops) remains neutral longer and is therefore under the hormonal influence for a longer time, with the result that its development may be more often reversed. Thus it may be that the majority of pseudo-hermaphrodites⁷ are genotypically female subjects that have later become masculinised. One might suppose that the male organisation is defined as such at the beginning, whereas the female embryo is slower in taking on its femininity; but these early phenomena of foetal life are still too little known to permit of any certainty in interpretation.

Once established, the genital systems correspond in the two sexes, and the sex hormones of both belong to the same chemical group, that of the sterols; all are derived in the last analysis from cholesterol. They regulate the secondary sexual differences of the soma. Neither the chemical formulae of the hormones nor the anatomical peculiarities are sufficient to define the human female as such. It is her functional development that distinguishes her especially from the male.

The development of the male is comparatively simple. From birth to puberty his growth is almost regular; at the age of fifteen or sixteen spermatogenesis begins, and it continues into old age; with its appearance hormones are produced that establish the masculine bodily traits. From this point on, the male sex life is normally integrated with his individual existence: in desire and in coition his transcendence towards the species is at one with his subjectivity — he is his body.

Woman's story is much more complex. In embryonic life the supply of oocytes is already built up, the ovary containing about 40,000 immature eggs, each in a follicle, of which perhaps 400 will ultimately reach maturation. From birth, the species has taken possession of woman and tends to tighten its grasp. In coming into the world woman experiences a kind of first puberty, as the oocytes enlarge suddenly; then the ovary is reduced to about a fifth of its former size — one might say that the child is granted a respite. While her body develops, her genital system remains almost stationary; some of the follicles enlarge, but they fail to mature. The growth of the little girl is similar to that of the boy; at the same age she is sometimes even taller and heavier than he is. But at puberty the species reasserts its claim. Under the influence of the ovarian secretions the number of developing follicles increases, the ovary receives more blood and grows larger, one of the follicles matures, ovulation occurs, and the menstrual cycle is initiated; the genital system assumes its definitive size and form, the body takes on feminine contours, and the endocrine balance is established.

It is to be noted that this whole occurrence has the aspect of a *crisis*. Not without resistance does the body of woman permit the species to take over; and this struggle is weakening and dangerous. Before puberty almost as many boys die as girls; from age fourteen to eighteen, 128 girls die to 100 boys, and from eighteen to twenty-two, 105 girls to 100 boys. At this period frequently appear such diseases as chlorosis tuberculosis, scoliosis (curvature of the spine), and osteomyelitis (inflammation of the bone marrow). In some cases puberty is abnormally precocious, appearing as early as age four or five. In others, on the contrary puberty fails to become established, the subject remaining infantile and suffering from disorders of menstruation (amenorrhea or dysmenorrhea). Certain women show signs of virilism, taking on masculine traits as a result of excessive adrenal secretion.

Such abnormalities in no way represent victories of the individual over the species; there is no way of escape, for as it enslaves the individual life, the species simultaneously supports and nourishes it. This duality is expressed at the level of the ovarian functions, since the vitality of woman has its roots in the ovaries as that of man in the testicles. In both sexes a castrated individual is not merely sterile; he or she suffers regression, degenerates. Not properly constituted, the whole organism is impoverished, and thrown out of balance; it can expand and flourish only as its genital system expands and flourishes. And furthermore many reproductive phenomena are unconcerned with the individual life of the subject and may even be sources of danger. The mammary glands, developing at puberty, play no role in woman's individual economy: they can be excised at any time of life. Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation — the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements.

From puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned. Anglo-Saxons call menstruation 'the curse'; in truth the menstrual cycle is a burden, and a useless one from the point of view of the individual. In Aristotle's time it was believed that each month blood flowed away that was intended, if fertilisation had occurred, to build up the blood and flesh of the infant, and the truth of that old notion lies in the fact that over and over again woman does sketch in outline the groundwork of gestation. In lower mammals this oestrus cycle is confined to a particular season, and it is not accompanied by a flow of blood; only in the primates (monkeys, apes, and the human species) is it marked each month by blood and more or less pain. ['Analysis of these phenomena in recent years has shown that they are similar in woman and the higher monkeys and apes, especially in the genus Rhesus. It *is evidently easier* to experiment with *these animals*,' writes Louis Callien (*La Sexualité*).] During about fourteen days one of the Graafian follicles that enclose the eggs enlarges and matures, secreting the hormone folliculin (estrin). Ovulation occurs on about the fourteenth day: the follicle protrudes through the surface of the ovary and breaks open (sometimes with slight bleeding), the egg passes into the oviduct, and the wound develops into the corpus luteum. The latter secretes the hormone progesterone, which acts on the uterus during the second phase of the cycle. The lining of the uterus becomes thickened and glandular and full of blood vessels, forming in the womb a cradle to receive the fertilised egg. These cellular proliferations being irreversible, the edifice is not resorbed if fertilisation has not occurred. In the lower mammals the debris may escape gradually or may be carried away by the lymphatic vessels; but in woman and the other primates, the thickened lining membrane (endometrium) breaks down suddenly, the blood vessels and blood spaces are opened, and the bloody mass trickles out as the menstrual flow. Then, while the corpus luteum regresses, the membrane that lines the uterus is reconstituted and a new follicular phase of the cycle begins.

This complex process, still mysterious in many of its details, involves the whole female organism, since there are hormonal reactions between the ovaries and other endocrine organs, such as the pituitary, the thyroid the adrenals, which affect the central nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system, and in consequence all the viscera. Almost all women — more than 85 per cent — show more or less distressing symptoms during the menstrual period. Blood pressure rises before the beginning of the flow and falls afterwards; the pulse rate and often the temperature are increased, so that fever is frequent; pains in the abdomen are felt; often a tendency to constipation followed by diarrhoea is observed; frequently there are also swelling of the liver, retention of urea, and albuminuria; many subjects have sore throat and difficulties with hearing and sight; perspiration is increased and accompanied at the beginning of the menses by an odour *sui generis*, which may be very strong and may persist throughout the period. The rate of basal metabolism is raised. The red blood count drops. The blood carries substances usually put on reserve in the tissues, especially calcium salts; the presence of these substances reacts on the ovaries, on the thyroid — which enlarges — and on the pituitary (regulator of the changes in the uterine lining described above) more active. This glandular instability brings on a pronounced nervous instability. The central nervous system is affected, with frequent headache, and the sympathetic system is overactive; unconscious control through the central system is reduced, freeing convulsive reflexes and complexes and leading to a marked capriciousness of disposition. The woman is more emotional, more nervous, more irritable than usual, and may manifest serious psychic disturbance. It is during

her periods that she feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing; it is, indeed, the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it; each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow. Woman, like man, is her body; ['So I am body, in so far, at least, as my experience goes, and conversely a life-model, or like a preliminary sketch, for my total being.' Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*.] but her body is something other than herself.

Woman experiences a more profound alienation when fertilisation has occurred and the dividing egg passes down into the uterus and proceeds to develop there. True enough, pregnancy is a normal process, which, if it takes place under normal conditions of health and nutrition, is not harmful to the mother; certain interactions between her and the foetus become established which are even beneficial to her. In spite of an optimistic view having all too obvious social utility, however, gestation is a fatiguing task of no individual benefit to the woman [I am taking here an exclusively physiological point of view. It is evident that maternity can be very advantageous psychologically for a woman, just as it can also be a disaster.] but on the contrary demanding heavy sacrifices. It is often associated in the first months with loss of appetite and vomiting, which are not observed in any female domesticated animal and which signalise the revolt of the organism against the invading species." There is a loss of phosphorus, calcium, and iron — the last difficult to make good later; metabolic overactivity excites the endocrine system; the sympathetic nervous system is in a state of increased excitement; and the blood shows a lowered specific gravity, it is lacking in iron, and in general it is similar 'to that of persons fasting, of victims of famine, of those who have been bled frequently, of convalescents'." All that a healthy and well-nourished woman can hope for is to recoup these losses without too much difficulty after childbirth; but frequently serious accidents or at least dangerous disorders mark the course of pregnancy; and if the woman is not strong, if hygienic precautions are not taken, repeated child-bearing will make her prematurely old and misshapen, as often among the rural poor. Childbirth itself is painful and dangerous. In this crisis it is most clearly evident that the body does not always work to the advantage of both species and individual at once; the infant may die, and, again, in being born it may kill its mother or leave her with a chronic ailment. Nursing is also a tiring service. A number of factors — especially the hormone prolactin bring about the secretion of milk in the mammary glands; some soreness and often fever may accompany the process and in any case the nursing mother feeds the newborn from the resources of her own vitality. The conflict between species and individual, which sometimes assumes dramatic force at childbirth, endows the feminine body with a disturbing frailty. It has been well said that women 'have infirmity in the abdomen'; and it is true that they have within them a hostile element — it is the species gnawing at their vitals. Their maladies are often caused not by some infection from without but by some internal maladjustment; for example, a false inflammation of the endometrium is set up through the reaction of the uterine lining to an abnormal excitation of the ovaries; if the corpus luteum persists instead of declining menstruation, it causes inflammation of the oviducts and uterine lining, and so on.

In the end woman escapes the iron grasp of the species by way of still another serious crisis; the phenomena of the menopause, the inverse of puberty, appear between the ages of forty-five and fifty. Ovarian activity diminishes and disappears, with resulting impoverishment of the individual's vital forces. It may be supposed that the metabolic

glands, the thyroid and pituitary, are compelled to make up in some fashion for the functioning of the ovaries; and thus, along with the depression natural to the change of life, are to be noted signs of excitation, such as high blood pressure, hot flushes, nervousness, and sometimes increased sexuality. Some women develop fat deposits at this time; others become masculinised. In many, a new endocrine balance becomes established. Woman is now delivered from the servitude imposed by her female nature, but she is not to be likened to a eunuch, for her vitality is unimpaired. And what is more, she is no longer the prey of overwhelming forces; she is herself, she and her body are one. It is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute 'a third sex'; and, in truth, while they are not males, they are no longer females. Often, indeed, this release from female physiology is expressed in a health, a balance, a vigour that they lacked before.

In addition to the primary sexual characteristics, woman has various secondary sexual peculiarities that are more or less directly produced in consequence of the first, through hormonal action. On the average she is shorter than the male and lighter, her skeleton is more delicate, and the pelvis is larger in adaptation to the functions of pregnancy and childbirth; her connective tissues accumulate fat and her contours are thus more rounded than those of the male. Appearance in general — structure, skin, hair — is distinctly different in the two sexes. Muscular strength is much less in woman, about two thirds that of man; she has less respiratory capacity, the lungs and trachea being smaller. The larynx is relatively smaller, and in consequence the female voice is higher. The specific gravity of the blood is lower in woman and there is less haemoglobin; women are therefore less robust and more disposed to anaemia than are males. Their pulse is more rapid, the vascular system less stable, with ready blushing. Instability is strikingly characteristic of woman's organisation in general; among other things, man shows greater stability in the metabolism of calcium, woman fixing much less of this material and losing a good deal during menstruation and pregnancy. It would seem that in regard to calcium the ovaries exert a catabolic action, with resulting instability that brings on difficulties in the ovaries and in the thyroid, which is more developed in woman than in man. Irregularities in the endocrine secretions react on the sympathetic nervous system, and nervous and muscular control is uncertain. This lack in stability and control underlies woman's emotionalism, which is bound up with circulatory fluctuations, palpitation of the heart, blushing, and so forth — and on this account women are subject to such displays of agitation as tears, hysterical laughter, and nervous crises.

It is obvious once more that many of these traits originate in woman's subordination to the species, and here we find the most striking conclusion of this survey: namely, that woman is of all mammalian females at once the one who is most profoundly alienated (her individuality the prey of outside forces), and the one who most violently resists this alienation; in no other is enslavement of the organism to reproduction more imperious or more unwillingly accepted. Crises of puberty and the menopause, monthly 'curse', long and often difficult pregnancy, painful and sometimes dangerous childbirth, illnesses, unexpected symptoms and complications — these are characteristic of the human female. It would seem that her lot is heavier than that of other females in just about the same degree that she goes beyond other females in the assertion of her individuality. In comparison with her the male seems infinitely favoured: his sexual life is not in opposition to his existence as a person, and biologically it runs an even course, without crises and generally without mishap. On

the average, women live as long as men, or longer; but they are much more often ailing, and there are many times when they are not in command of themselves.

These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation. Throughout our further discussion we shall always bear them in mind. For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever.

It has been frequently maintained that in physiology alone must be sought the answers to these questions: Are the chances for individual success the same in the two sexes? Which plays the more important role in the species? But it must be noted that the first of these problems is quite different in the case of woman, as compared with other females; for animal species are fixed and it is possible to define them in static terms — by merely collecting observations it can be decided whether the mare is as fast as the stallion, or whether male chimpanzees excel their mates in intelligence tests — whereas the human species is for ever in a state of change, for ever becoming.

Certain materialist savants have approached the problem in a purely static fashion; influenced by the theory of psychophysiological parallelism, they sought to work out mathematical comparisons between the male and female organism — and they imagined that these measurements registered directly the functional capacities of the two sexes. For example, these students have engaged in elaborately trifling discussions regarding the absolute and relative weight of the brain in man and woman — with inconclusive results, after all corrections have been made. But what destroys much of the interest of these careful researches is the fact that it has not been possible to establish any relation whatever between the weight of the brain and the level of intelligence. And one would similarly be at a loss to present a psychic interpretation of the chemical formulae designating the male and female hormones.

As for the present study, I categorically reject the notion of psychophysiological parallelism, for it is a doctrine whose foundations have long since been thoroughly undermined. If I mention it at all, it is because it still haunts many minds in spite of its philosophical and scientific bankruptcy. I reject also any comparative system that assumes the existence of a natural hierarchy or scale of values — for example, an evolutionary hierarchy. It is vain to ask if the female body is or is not more infantile than that of the male, if it is more or less similar to that of the apes, and so on. All these dissertations which mingle a vague naturalism with a still more vague ethics or aesthetics are pure verbiage. It is only in a human perspective that we can compare the female and the male of the human species. But man is defined as a being who is not fixed, who makes himself what he is. As Merleau-Ponty very justly puts it, man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea. Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her possibilities should be defined. What gives rise to much of the debate is the tendency to reduce her to what she has been, to what she is today, in raising the question of her capabilities; for the fact is that capabilities are clearly manifested only

when they have been realised — but the fact is also that when we have to do with a being whose nature is transcendent action, we can never close the books.

Nevertheless it will be said that if the body is not a thing, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting — that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty: it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects. Woman is weaker than man, she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles, less lung capacity, she runs more slowly, can lift less heavy weights, can compete with man in hardly any sport; she cannot stand up to him in a fight. To all this weakness must be added the instability, the lack of control, and the fragility already discussed: these are facts. Her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out. In other words, her individual life is less rich than man's.

Certainly these facts cannot be denied — but in themselves they have no significance. Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the body on a basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science; whenever the physiological fact (for instance, muscular inferiority) takes on meaning, this meaning is at once seen as dependent on a whole context; the 'weakness' is revealed as such only in the light of the ends man proposes, the instruments he has available, and the laws he establishes. If he does not wish to seize the world, then the idea of a *grasp* on things has no sense; when in this seizure the full employment of bodily power is not required, above the available minimum, then differences in strength are annulled; wherever violence is contrary to custom, muscular force cannot be a basis for domination. In brief, the concept of *weakness* can be defined only with reference to existentialist, economic, and moral considerations. It has been said that the human species is anti-natural, a statement that is hardly exact, since man cannot deny facts; but he establishes their truth by the way in which he deals with them; nature has reality for him only to the extent that it is involved in his activity — his own nature not excepted. As with her grasp on the world, it is again impossible to measure in the abstract the burden imposed on woman by her reproductive function. The bearing of maternity upon the individual life, regulated naturally in animals by the oestrus cycle and the seasons, is not definitely prescribed in woman — society alone is the arbiter. The bondage of woman to the species is more or less rigorous according to the number of births demanded by society and the degree of hygienic care provided for pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, while it is true that in the higher animals the individual existence is asserted more imperiously by the male than by the female, in the human species individual 'possibilities' depend upon the economic and social situation.

But in any case it does not always happen that the male's individual privileges give him a position of superiority within the species, for in maternity the female acquires a kind of autonomy of her own. Sometimes, as in the baboons studied by Zuckermann, [*The Social Life of Monkeys and Apes* (1932).] the male does dominate; but in many species the two members of the pair lead a separate life, and in the lion the two sexes share equally in the duties the den. Here again the human situation cannot be reduced to any other; it is not as single individuals that human beings are to be defined in the first place; men and women have never stood opposed to each other in single combat; the couple is an original *Mitsein*, a basic combination; and as such it always appears as a permanent or temporary element in a large collectivity.

Within such a society, which is more necessary to the species, male or female? At the level of the gametes, at the level of the biological functions of coition and pregnancy, the male principle creates to maintain, the female principle maintains to create, as we have seen; but what are the various aspects of this division of labour in different forms of social life? In sessile species, attached to other organisms or to substrata, in those furnished by nature with abundant sustenance obtainable without effort, the role of the male is limited to fecundation; where it is necessary to seek, to hunt, to fight in order to provide the food needed by the young, the male in many cases co-operates in their support. This co-operation becomes absolutely indispensable in a species where the offspring remain unable to take care of themselves for a long time after weaning; here the male's assistance becomes extremely important, for the lives he has begotten cannot be maintained without him. A single male can fecundate a number of females each year; but it requires a male for every female to assure the survival of the offspring after they are born, to defend them against enemies, to wrest from nature the wherewithal to satisfy their needs. In human history the equilibrium between the forces of production and of reproduction is brought about by different means under different economic conditions, and these conditions govern the relations of male and female to offspring and in consequence to each other. But here we are leaving the realm of biology; by its light alone we could never decide the primacy of one sex or the other in regard to the perpetuation of the species.

But in truth a society is not a species, for it is in a society that the species attains the status of existence — transcending itself towards the world and towards the future. Its ways and customs cannot be deduced from biology, for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subject rather to that second nature which is custom and in which are reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature. It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfilment — it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself. And, once again, it is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them. If the respect or the fear inspired by woman prevents the use of violence towards her, then the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power. If custom decrees — as in certain Indian tribes — that the young girls are to choose their husbands, or if the father dictates the marriage choice, then the sexual aggressiveness of the male gives him no power of initiative, no advantage. The close bond between mother and child will be for her a source of dignity or indignity according to the value placed upon the child — which is highly variable this very bond, as we have seen, will be recognised or not according to the presumptions of the society concerned.

Thus we must view the facts of biology in the light of an ontological, economic, social, and psychological context. The enslavement of the female to the species and the limitations of her various powers are extremely important facts; the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society. Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question that is before us: why is woman the Other? Our task is to discover how the nature of woman has been affected throughout the course of history; we are concerned to find out what humanity has made of the human female.

Further Reading:

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[Kate Millett on Biology](#) | [Evelyn Reed](#) | [Merleau-Ponty](#) | [Heidegger](#)
[Hegel's Philosophy of Nature](#) | [Hegel on the Family](#)

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/index.htm>

The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Book One: Facts and Myths, Part I: Destiny

Chapter 2: The Psychoanalytic Point of View

The tremendous advance accomplished by psychoanalysis over psychophysiology lies in the view that no factor becomes involved in the psychic life without having taken on human significance; it is not the body-object described by biologists that actually exists, but the body as lived by the subject. Woman is a female to the extent that she feels herself as such. There are biologically essential features that are not a part of her real, experienced situation: thus the structure of the egg is not reflected in it, but on the contrary an organ of no great biological importance, like the clitoris, plays in it a part of the first rank. It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.

An entire system has been built up in this perspective, which I do not intend to criticise as a whole, merely examining its contribution to the study of woman. It is not an easy matter to discuss psychoanalysis *per se*. Like all religions — Christianity and Marxism, for example — it displays an embarrassing flexibility on a basis of rigid concepts. Words are sometimes used in their most literal sense, the term phallus, for example, designating quite exactly that fleshy projection which marks the male; again, they are indefinitely expanded and take on symbolic meaning, the phallus now expressing the virile character and situation in toto. If you attack the letter of his doctrine, the psychoanalyst protests that you misunderstand its spirit; if you applaud its spirit, he at once wishes to confine you to the letter. The doctrine is of no importance, says one, psychoanalysis is a method; but the success of the method strengthens the doctrinaire in his faith. After all, where is one to find the true lineaments of psychoanalysis if not among the psychoanalysts? But there are heretics among these, just as there are among Christians and Marxists; and more than one psychoanalyst has declared that 'the worst enemies of psychoanalysis are the psychoanalysts'. In spite of a scholastic precision that often becomes pedantic, many

obscurities remain to be dissipated. As Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have observed, the proposition 'Sexuality is coextensive with existence' can be understood in two very different ways; it can mean that every experience of the existent has a sexual significance, or that every sexual phenomenon has an existential import. It is possible to reconcile these statements, but too often one merely slips from one to the other. Furthermore, as soon as the 'sexual' is distinguished from the 'genital', the idea of sexuality becomes none too clear. According to Dalbiez, 'the sexual with Freud is the intrinsic aptitude for releasing the genital'. But nothing is more obscure than the idea of 'aptitude' — that is, of possibility — for only realisation gives indubitable proof of what is possible. Not being a philosopher, Freud has refused to justify his system philosophically; and his disciples maintain that on this account he is exempt from all metaphysical attack. There are metaphysical assumptions behind all his dicta, however, and to use his language is to adopt a philosophy. It is just such confusions that call for criticism, while making criticism difficult.

Freud never showed much concern with the destiny of woman; it is clear that he simply adapted his account from that of the destiny of man, with slight modifications. Earlier the sexologist Marañón had stated that 'As specific energy, we may say that the libido is a force of virile character. We will say as much of the orgasm'. According to him, women who attain orgasm are 'viriloid' women; the sexual impulse is 'in one direction' and woman is only half way along the road. Freud never goes to such an extreme; he admits that woman's sexuality is evolved as fully as man's; but he hardly studies it in particular. He writes: 'The libido is constantly and regularly male in essence, whether it appears in man or in woman.' He declines to regard the feminine libido as having its own original nature, and therefore it will to him like a complex deviation from the human libido in general. This develops at first, he thinks, identically in the two sexes — each infant passes first through an oral phase that fixates it upon the maternal breast, and then through an anal phase; finally it reaches the genital phase, at which point the sexes become differentiated.

Freud further brought to light a fact the importance of which had not been fully appreciated: namely, that masculine erotism is definitely located in the penis, whereas in woman there are two distinct erotic systems: one the clitoral, which develops in childhood, the other vaginal, which develops only after puberty. When the boy reaches the genital phase, his evolution is completed, though he must pass from the auto-erotic inclination, in which pleasure is subjective, to the hetero-erotic inclination, in which pleasure is bound up with an object, normally a woman. This transition is made at the time of puberty through a narcissistic phase. But the penis will remain, as in childhood, the specific organ of erotism. Woman's libido, also passing through a narcissistic phase, will become objective, normally towards man; but the process be much more complex, because woman must pass from clitoral pleasure to vaginal. There is only one genital stage for man, but there are two for woman; she runs a much greater risk of not reaching the end of her sexual evolution, of remaining at the infantile stage and thus of developing neuroses.

While still in the auto-erotic stage, the child becomes more or less strongly attached to an object. The boy becomes fixed on his mother and desires to identify himself with his father; this presumption terrifies him and he dreads mutilation at the hands of his father in punishment for it. Thus the castration complex springs from the Oedipus complex. Then aggressiveness towards the father develops, but at the same time the

child interiorises the father's authority; thus the superego is built up in the child and censures his incestuous tendencies. These are repressed, the complex is liquidated, and the son is freed from his fear of his father, whom he has now installed in his own psyche under the guise of moral precepts.' The super-ego is more powerful in proportion as the Oedipus complex has been more marked and more rigorously resisted.

Freud at first described the little girl's history in a completely corresponding fashion, later calling the feminine form of the process the Electra complex; but it is clear that he defined it less in itself than upon the basis of his masculine pattern. He recognised a very important difference between the two, however: the little girl at first has a mother fixation, but the boy is at no time sexually attracted to the father. This fixation of the girl represents a survival of the oral phase. Then the child identifies herself with the father; but towards the age of five she discovers the anatomical difference between the sexes, and she reacts to the absence of the penis by acquiring a castration complex — she imagines that she has been mutilated and is pained at the thought. Having then to renounce her virile pretensions, she identifies herself with her mother and seeks to seduce the father. The castration complex and the Electra complex thus reinforce each other. Her feeling of frustration is the keener since, loving her father, she wishes in vain to be like him; and, inversely, her regret strengthens her love, for she is able to compensate for her inferiority through the affection she inspires in her father. The little girl entertains a feeling of rivalry and hostility towards her mother. Then the super-ego is built up also in her, and the incestuous tendencies are repressed; but her super-ego is not so strong, for the Electra complex is less sharply defined than the Oedipus because the first fixation was upon the mother, and since the father is himself the object of the love that he condemns, his prohibitions are weaker than in the case of his son-rival. It can be seen that like her genital development the whole sexual drama is more complex for the girl than for her brothers. In consequence she, may be led to react to the castration complex by denying her femininity, by continuing obstinately to covet a penis and to identify herself with her father. This attitude will cause her to remain in the clitoral phase, to become frigid or to turn towards homosexuality.

The two essential objections that may be raised against this view derive from the fact that Freud based it upon a masculine model. He assumes that woman feels that she is a mutilated man. But the idea of mutilation implies comparison and evaluation. Many psychoanalysts today admit that the young girl may regret not having a penis without believing, however, that it has been removed from her body., and even this regret is not general. It could not arise from a simple anatomical comparison; many little girls, in fact, are late in discovering the masculine construction, and if they do, it is only by sight. The little boy obtains from his penis a living experience that makes it an object of pride to him, but this pride does not necessarily imply a corresponding humiliation for his sisters, since they know the masculine organ in its outward aspect only — this outgrowth, this weak little rod of flesh re them only with indifference, or even disgust. The little girl's covetousness, when it exists, results from a previous evaluation of virility. Freud takes this for granted, when it should be On the other hand, the concept of the Electra complex is very vague, because it is not supported by a basic description libido. Even in boys the occurrence of a definitely genital Oedipus complex is by no means general; but, apart from very few exceptions, it cannot be admitted that the father is a source of genital excitation for his young daughter. One of

the great problems of feminine eroticism is that clitoral pleasure is localised; and it is only towards puberty that a number of erogenous zones develop in various parts of the body, along with the growth of vaginal sensation. To say, then, that in a child of ten the kisses and caresses of her father have an 'intrinsic aptitude' for arousing clitoral pleasure is to assert something that in most cases is nonsense. If it is admitted that the Electra complex has only a very diffuse emotional character, then the whole question of emotion is raised, and Freudianism does not help us in defining emotion as distinguished from sexuality. What deifies the father is by no means the feminine libido (nor is the mother deified by the desire she arouses in the son); on the contrary, the fact that the feminine desire (in the daughter) is directed towards a sovereign being gives it a special character. It does not determine the nature of its object; rather it is affected by the latter. The sovereignty of the father is a fact of social origin, which Freud fails to account for; in fact, he states that it is impossible to say what authority decided, at a certain moment in history, that the father should take precedence over the mother — a decision that, according to Freud, was progressive, but due to causes unknown. 'It could not have been patriarchal authority, since it is just this authority which progress conferred upon the father', as he puts it in his last work.

Adler took issue with Freud because he saw the deficiency of a system that undertook to explain human life upon the basis of sexuality alone; he holds that sexuality should be integrated with the total personality. With Freud all human behaviour seems to be the outcome of desire — that is, of the search for pleasure — but for Adler man appears to be aiming at certain goals; for the sexual urge he substitutes motives, purposes, projects. He gives so large a place to the intelligence that often the sexual has in his eyes only a symbolic value. According to his system, the human drama can be reduced to three elemental factors: in every individual there is a will to power, which, however, is accompanied by an inferiority complex; the resulting conflict leads the individual to employ a thousand ruses in a flight from reality — a reality with which he fears he may not be able to cope; the subject thus withdraws to some degree from the society of which he is apprehensive and hence becomes afflicted with the neuroses that involve disturbance of the social attitude. In woman the inferiority complex takes the form of a shamed rejection of her femininity. It is not the lack of the penis that causes this 'complex, but rather woman's total situation; if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys. The place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her own education — everything confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority. Later on, when she takes part in sexual relations, she finds a new humiliation in the coital posture that places woman underneath the man. She reacts through the 'masculine protest': either she endeavours to masculinise herself, or she makes use of her feminine weapons to wage war upon the male. Through maternity she may be able to find an equivalent of the penis in her child. But this supposes that she begins by wholly accepting her role as woman and that she assumes her inferiority. She is divided against herself much more profoundly than is the male.

I shall not enlarge here upon the theoretical differences that separate Adler and Freud nor upon the possibilities of a reconciliation; but this may be said: neither the explanation based upon the sexual urge nor that based upon motive is sufficient, for every urge poses a motive, but the motive is apprehended only through the urge — a synthesis of Adlerianism and Freudianism would therefore seem possible of

realisation. In fact, Adler retains the idea of psychic causation as an integral part of his system when he introduces the concepts of goal and of finality, and he is somewhat in accord with Freud in regard to the relation between drives and mechanism: the physicist always recognises determinism when he is concerned with conflict or a force of attraction. The axiomatic proposition held in common by all psychoanalysts is this: the human story is to be explained by the interplay of determinate elements. And all the psychoanalysts allot the same destiny to woman. Her drama is epitomised in the conflict between her 'viriloid' and her 'feminine' tendencies, the first expressed through the clitoral system, the second in vaginal erotism. As a child she identifies herself with her father; then she becomes possessed with a feeling of inferiority with reference to the male and is faced with a dilemma: either to assert her independence and become virilised — which, with the underlying complex of inferiority, induces a state of tension that threatens neurosis — or to find happy fulfilment in amorous submission, a solution that is facilitated by her love for the sovereign father. He it is whom she really seeks in lover or husband, and thus her sexual love is mingled with the desire to be dominated. She will find her recompense in maternity, since that will afford her a new kind of independence. This drama would seem to be endowed with an energy, dynamism, of its own; it steadily pursues its course through any and all distorting incidents, and every woman is passively swept along in it.

The psychoanalysts have had no trouble in finding empirical confirmation for their theories. As we know, it was possible for a long time to explain the position of the planets on the Ptolemaic system by adding to it sufficiently subtle complications; and by superposing an inverse Oedipus complex upon the Oedipus complex, by disclosing desire in all anxiety, success has been achieved in integrating with the Freudian system the very facts that appear to contradict its validity. It is possible to make out a form only against a background, and the way in which the form is apprehended brings out the background behind it in positive detail; thus, if one is determined to describe a special case in a Freudian perspective, one will encounter the Freudian schema behind it. But when a doctrine demands the indefinite and arbitrary multiplication of secondary explanations, when observation brings to light as many exceptions as instances conformable to rule, it is better to give up the old rigid framework. Indeed, every psychoanalyst today is busily engaged after his fashion in making the Freudian concepts less rigid and in attempting compromises. For example, a contemporary psychoanalyst [Baudouin] writes as follows: 'Wherever there is a complex, there are by definition a number of components ... The complex consists in the association of these disparate elements and not in the representation of one among them by the others.' But the concept of a simple association of elements is unacceptable, for the psychic life is not a mosaic, it is a single whole in every one of its aspects and we must respect that unity. This is possible only by our recovering through the disparate facts the original purposiveness of existence. If we do not go back to this source, man appears to be the battleground of compulsions and prohibitions that alike are devoid of meaning and incidental.

All psychoanalysts systematically reject the idea of choice and the correlated concept of value, and therein lies the intrinsic weakness of the system. Having dissociated compulsions and prohibitions from the free choice of the existent, Freud fails to give us an explanation of their origin — he takes them for granted. He endeavoured to replace the idea of value with that of authority; but he admits in *Moses* and *Monotheism* that he has no way of accounting for this authority. Incest, for example,

is forbidden because the father has forbidden it — but why did he forbid it? It is a mystery. The super-ego interiorises, introjects commands and prohibitions emanating from an arbitrary tyranny, and the instinctive drives are there, we know not why: these two realities are unrelated because morality is envisaged as foreign to sexuality. The human unity appears to be disrupted, there is no thoroughfare from the individual to society; to reunite them Freud was forced to invent strange fictions, as in Totem and Taboo. Adler saw clearly that the castration complex could be explained only in social context; he grappled with the problem of valuation, but he did not reach the source in the individual of the values recognised by society, and he did not grasp that values are involved in sexuality itself, which led him to misjudge its importance.

Sexuality most certainly plays a considerable role in human life; it can be said to pervade life throughout. We have already learned from physiology that the living activity of the testes and the ovaries is integrated with that of the body in general. The existent is a sexual, a sexuate body, and in his relations with other existents who are also sexuate bodies, sexuality is in consequence always involved. But if body and sexuality are concrete expressions of existence, it is with referene to this that their significance can be discovered. Lacking this perspective, psychoanalysis takes for granted unexplained facts. For instance, we are told that the little girl is ashamed of urinating in a squatting position with her bottom uncovered — but whence comes this shame? And likewise, before asking whether the male is proud of having a penis or whether his pride is expressed in his penis, it is necessary to know what pride is and how the aspirations of the subject can be incarnated in an object. There is no need of taking sexuality as an irreducible datum, for there is in the existent a more original 'quest for being', of which sexuality is only one of the aspects. Sartre demonstrates this truth in *L'Être et le néant*, as does Bachelard in his works on Earth, Air, and Water. The psychoanalysts hold that the primary truth regarding man is his relation with his own body and with the bodies of his fellows in the group; but man has a primordial interest in the substance of the natural world which surrounds him and which he tries to discover in work, in play, and in all the experiences of the 'dynamic imagination'. Man aspires to be at one concretely with the whole world, apprehended in all possible ways. To work the earth, to dig a hole, are activities as original as the embrace, as coition, and they deceive themselves who see here no more than sexual symbols. The hole, the ooze, the gash, hardness, integrity are primary realities; and the interest they have for man is not dictated by the libido, but rather the libido will be coloured by the manner in which he becomes aware of them. It is not because it symbolises feminine virginity that integrity fascinates man; but it is his admiration for integrity that renders virginity precious. Work, war, play, art signify ways of being concerned with the world which cannot be reduced to any others; they disclose qualities that interfere with those which sexuality reveals. It is at once in their light and in the light of these erotic experiences that the individual exercises his power of choice. But only an ontological point of view, a comprehension of being in general, permits us to restore the unity of this choice.

It is this concept of choice, indeed, that psychoanalysis most vehemently rejects in the name of determinism and the 'collective unconscious'; and it is this unconscious that is supposed to supply man with prefabricated imagery and a universal symbolism. Thus it would explain the observed analogies of dreams, of purposeless actions, of visions of delirium, of allegories, and of human destinies. To speak of liberty would be to deny oneself the possibility of explaining these disturbing conformities. But the idea

of liberty is not incompatible with the existence of certain constants. If the psychoanalytic method is frequently rewarding in spite of the errors in its theory, that is because there are in every individual case certain factors of undeniable generality: situations and behaviour patterns constantly recur, and the moment of decision flashes from a cloud of generality and repetition. 'Anatomy is destiny', said Freud; and this phrase is echoed by that of Merleau-Ponty: 'The body is generality.' Existence is all one, bridging the gaps between individual existents; it makes itself manifest in analogous organisms, and therefore constant factors will be found in the bonds between the ontological and the sexual. At a given epoch of history the techniques, the economic and social structure of a society, will reveal to all its members an identical world, and there a constant relation of sexuality to social patterns will exist; analogous individuals, placed in analogous conditions, will see analogous points of significance in the given circumstances. This analogy does not establish a rigorous universality, but it accounts for the fact that general types may be recognised in individual case histories.

The symbol does not seem to me to be an allegory elaborated by a mysterious unconscious; it is rather the perception of a certain significance through the analogue of the significant object. Symbolic significance is manifested in the same way to numerous individuals, because of the identical existential situation connecting all the individual existents, and the identical set of artificial conditions that all must confront. Symbolism did not come down from heaven nor rise up from subterranean depths — it has been elaborated, like language, by that human reality which is at once *Mitsein* and separation; and this explains why individual invention also has its place, as in practice psychoanalysis has to admit, regardless of doctrine. Our perspective allows us, for example, to understand the value widely accorded to the penis.' It is impossible to account for it without taking our departure from an existential fact: the tendency of the subject towards *alienation*. The anxiety that his liberty induces in the subject leads him to search for himself in things, which is a kind of flight from himself. This tendency is so fundamental that immediately after weaning, when he is separated from the Whole, the infant is compelled to lay hold upon his alienated existence in mirrors and in the gaze of his parents. Primitive people are alienated in mana, in the totem; civilised people in their individual souls, in their egos, their names, their property, their work. Here is to be found the primary temptation to inauthenticity, to failure to be genuinely oneself. The penis is singularly adapted for playing this role of 'double' for the little boy — it is for him at once a foreign object and himself; it is a plaything, a doll, and yet his own flesh; relatives and nurse-girls behave towards it as if it were a little person. It is easy to see, then, how it becomes for the child 'an *alter ego* ordinarily more artful, more intelligent, and more .ever than the individual'. [Alice Balint] The penis is regarded by the subject as at once himself and other than himself, because the functions of urination and later of erection are processes midway between the voluntary and involuntary, and because it is a capricious and as it were a foreign source of pleasure that is felt subjectively. The individual's specific transcendence takes concrete form in the penis and it is a source of pride. Because the phallus is thus set apart, man can bring into integration with his subjective individuality the life that overflows from it. It is easy to see, then, that the length of the penis, the force of the urinary jet, the strength of erection and ejaculation become for him the measure of his own worth . [I have been told of peasant children amusing themselves in excremental competition; the one who produced the most copious and solid faeces enjoyed a prestige unmatched by any other form of success, whether in

games or even in fighting. The faecal mass here plays the same part as the penis — there is alienation in both cases.]

Thus the incarnation of transcendence in the phallus is a constant; and since it is also a constant for the child to feel himself transcended that is to say, frustrated in his own transcendence by the father — we therefore continually come upon the Freudian idea of the 'castration complex'. Not having that *alter ego*, the little girl is not alienated in a material thing and cannot retrieve her integrity. On this account she is led to make an object of her whole self, to set up herself as the Other. Whether she knows that she is or is not comparable with boys is secondary; the important point is that, even if she is unaware of it, the absence of the penis prevents her from being conscious of herself as a sexual being. From this flow many consequences. But the constants I have referred to do not for all that establish a fixed destiny the phallus assumes such worth as it does because it symbolises a dominance that is exercised in other domains. If woman should succeed in establishing herself as subject, she would invent equivalents of the phallus; in fact, the doll, incarnating the promise of the baby that is to come in the future can become a possession more precious than the penis." There are matrilineal societies in which the women keep in their possession the masks in which the group finds alienation; in such societies the penis loses much of its glory. The fact is that a true human privilege is based upon the anatomical privilege only in virtue of the total situation. Psychoanalysis can establish its truths only in the historical context.

Woman can be defined by her consciousness of her own femininity no more satisfactorily than by saying that she is a female, for she acquires this consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is a member. Interiorising the unconscious and the whole psychic life, the very language of psychoanalysis suggests that the drama of the individual unfolds within him — such words as *complex*, *tendency*, and so on make that implication. But a life is a relation to the world, and the individual defines himself by making his own choices through the world about him. We must therefore turn towards the world to find answers for the questions we are concerned with. In particular psychoanalysis fails to explain why woman is the *Other*. For Freud himself admits that the prestige of the penis is explained by the sovereignty of the father, and, as we have seen, he confesses that he is ignorant regarding the origin of male supremacy.

We therefore decline to accept the method of psychoanalysis, without rejecting en bloc the contributions of the science or denying the fertility of some of its insights. In the first place, we do not limit ourselves to regarding sexuality as something given. The insufficiency of this view is shown by the poverty of the resulting descriptions of the feminine libido; as I have already said, the psychoanalysts have never studied it directly, but only in taking the male libido as their point of departure. They seem to ignore the fundamental ambivalence of the attraction exerted on the female by the male. Freudians and Adlerians explain the anxiety felt by the female confronted by the masculine sex as being the inversion of a frustrated desire. Stekel saw more clearly that an original reaction was concerned, but he accounts for it in a superficial manner. Woman, he says, would fear decoration, penetration, pregnancy, and pain, and such fear would restrain her desire — but this explanation is too rational. Instead of holding that her desire is disguised in anxiety or is contested by fear, we should regard as an original fact this blending of urgency and apprehension which is female desire: it is the indissoluble synthesis of attraction and repulsion that characterises it.

We may note that many female animals avoid copulation even as they are soliciting it, and we are tempted to accuse them of coquetry or hypocrisy; but it is absurd to pretend to explain primitive behaviour patterns by asserting their similarity to complex modes of conduct. On the contrary, the former are in truth at the source of the attitudes that in woman are called coquetry and hypocrisy. The notion of a 'passive libido' is baffling, since the libido has been defined, on the basis of the male, as a drive, an energy; but one would do no better to hold the opinion that a light could be at once yellow and blue — what is needed is the intuition of green. We would more fully encompass reality if instead of defining the libido in vague terms of 'energy' we brought the significance of sexuality into relation with that of other human attitudes — taking, capturing, eating, making, submitting, and so forth; for it is one of the various modes of a bending an object. We should study also the qualities of the erotic object as it presents itself not only in the sexual act but also to observation in general. Such an investigation extends beyond the frame of psychoanalysis, which assumes eroticism as irreducible.

Furthermore, I shall pose the problem of feminine destiny quite otherwise: I shall place woman in a world of values and give her behaviour a dimension of liberty. I believe that she has the power to choose between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as object; she is not the plaything of contradictory drives; she devises solutions of diverse values in the ethical scale. Replacing value with authority, choice with drive, psychoanalysis offers an Ersatz, a substitute for morality — the concept of normality. This concept is certainly most useful in therapeutics, but it has spread through psychoanalysis in general to a disquieting extent. The descriptive schema is proposed as a law; and most assuredly a mechanistic psychology cannot accept the notion of moral invention; it can in strictness render an account of the *less* and never of the more; in strictness it can admit of checks, never of creations. If a subject does not show in his totality the development considered as normal, it will be said that his development has been arrested, and this arrest will be interpreted as a lack, a negation, but never as a positive decision. This it is, among other things, that makes the psychoanalysis of great men so shocking: we are told that such and such a transference, this or that sublimation, has not taken place in them; it is not suggested that perhaps they have refused to undergo the process, perhaps for good reasons of their own; it is not thought desirable to regard their behaviour as possibly motivated by purposes freely envisaged; the individual is always explained through ties with his past and not in respect to a future towards which he projects his aims. Thus the psychoanalysts never give us more than an inauthentic picture, and for the inauthentic there can hardly be found any other criterion than normality. Their statement of the feminine destiny is absolutely to the point in this connection. In the sense in which the psychoanalysts understand the term, 'to identify oneself' with the mother or with the father *is to alienate oneself* in a model, it is to prefer a foreign image to the spontaneous manifestation of one's own existence, it is to play at being. Woman is shown to us as enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the *Other* — and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation.

The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek fulfilment in transcendence. The thing to do, then, is to see what possibilities are opened up for her through what are called the virile and the feminine attitudes. When a child takes

the road indicated by one or the other of its parents, it may be because the child freely takes up their projects; its behaviour may be the result of a choice motivated by ends and aims. Even with Adler the will to power is only an absurd kind of energy; he denominates as 'masculine protest' every project involving transcendence. When a little girl climbs trees it is, according to Adler, just to show her equality with boys; it does not occur to him that she likes to climb trees. For the mother her child is something other than an 'equivalent of the penis'. To paint, to write, to engage in politics — these are not merely 'sublimations'; here we have aims that are willed for their own sakes. To deny it is to falsify all human history.

Further Reading:

[Biography Index](#) | [Introduction](#) | [1. Biology](#) | [3. Marxism](#) | [Conclusion](#)
[Betty Friedan](#) | [Kate Millett](#) on Psychology | [Heidegger](#) | [Freud](#) | [Adler](#)

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/index.htm>

The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Book One: Facts and Myths, Part I: Destiny

Chapter 3: The Point of View of Historical Materialism

THE theory of historical materialism has brought to light some most important truths. Humanity is not an animal species, it is a historical reality. Human society is an antiphysis — in a sense it is against nature; it does not passively submit to the presence of nature but rather takes over the control of nature on its own behalf. This arrogation is not an inward, subjective operation; it is accomplished objectively in practical action.

Thus woman could not be considered simply as a sexual organism, for among the biological traits, only those have importance that take on concrete value in action. Woman's awareness of herself is not defined exclusively by her sexuality: it reflects a situation that depends upon the economic organisation of society, which in turn indicates what stage of technical evolution mankind has attained. As we have seen, the two essential traits that characterise woman, biologically speaking, are the following: her grasp upon the world is less extended than man's, and she is more closely enslaved to the species.

But these facts take on quite different values according to the economic and social context. In human history grasp upon the world has never been defined by the naked body: the hand, with its opposable thumb, already anticipates the instrument that multiplies its power; from the most ancient records of prehistory, we see man always as armed. In times when heavy dubs were brandished and wild beasts held at bay, woman's physical weakness did constitute a glaring inferiority: if the instrument required strength slightly beyond that at woman's disposal, it was enough to make her appear utterly powerless. But, on the contrary, technique may annul the muscular inequality of man and woman: abundance makes for superiority only in the perspective of a need, and to have too much is no better than to have enough. Thus the control of many modern machines requires only a part of the masculine resources, and if the minimum demanded is not above the female's capacity, she becomes, as far as this work is concerned, man's equal. Today, of course, vast displays of energy can be controlled by pressing a button. As for the burdens of maternity, they assume widely varying importance according to the customs of the country: they are crushing if the woman is obliged to undergo frequent pregnancies and if she is compelled to nurse and raise the children without assistance; but if she procreates voluntarily and if society comes to her aid during pregnancy and is concerned with child welfare, the burdens of maternity are light and can be easily offset by suitable adjustments in working conditions.

Engels retraces the history of woman according to this perspective in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, showing that this history depended essentially on that of techniques. In the Stone Age, when the land belonged in common to all members of the clan, the rudimentary character of the primitive spade and hoe limited the possibilities of agriculture, so that woman's strength was adequate for gardening. In this primitive division of labour, the two sexes constituted in a way two classes, and there was equality between these classes. While man hunts and fishes, woman remains in the home; but the tasks of domesticity include productive labour — making pottery, weaving, gardening — and in consequence woman plays a large part in economic life. Through the discovery of copper, tin, bronze, and iron, and with the appearance of the plough, agriculture enlarges its scope, and intensive labour is called for in clearing woodland and cultivating the fields. Then man has recourse to the labour of other men, whom he reduces to slavery. Private property appears: master of slaves and of the earth, man becomes the proprietor also of woman. This was 'the great historical defeat of the feminine sex'. It is to be explained by the upsetting of the old division of labour which occurred in consequence of the invention of new tools. 'The same cause which had assured to woman the prime authority in the house — namely, her restriction to domestic duties — this same cause now assured the domination there of the man; for woman's housework henceforth sank into insignificance in comparison with man's productive labour — the latter as everything, the former a trifling auxiliary.' Then maternal authority gave place to paternal authority, property being inherited from father to son and no longer from woman to her clan. Here we see the emergence of the patriarchal family founded upon private property. In this type of family woman is subjugated. Man in his sovereignty indulges himself in sexual caprices, among others — he fornicates with slaves or courtesans or he practises polygamy. Wherever the local customs make reciprocity at all possible, the wife takes revenge through infidelity — marriage finds its natural fulfilment in adultery. This is woman's sole defence against the domestic slavery in which she is bound; and it is this economic oppression that gives rise to the social oppression to

which she is subjected. Equality cannot be re-established until the two sexes enjoy equal rights in law; but this enfranchisement requires participation in general industry by the whole female sex. 'Woman can be emancipated only when she can take part on a large social scale in production and is engaged in domestic work only to an insignificant degree. And this has become possible only in the big industry of modern times, which not only admits of female labour on a grand scale but even formally demands it. . .'

Thus the fate of woman and that of socialism are intimately bound up together, as is shown also in Bebel's great work on woman. 'Woman and the proletariat,' he says, 'are both downtrodden.' Both are to be set free through the economic development consequent upon the social upheaval brought about by machinery. The problem of woman is reduced to the problem of her capacity for labour. Puissant at the time when techniques were suited to her capabilities, dethroned when she was no longer in a position to exploit them, woman regains in the modern world her equality with man. It is the resistance of the ancient capitalistic paternalism that in most countries prevents the concrete realisation of this equality; it will be realised on the day when this resistance is broken, as is the fact already in the Soviet Union, according to Soviet propaganda. And when the socialist society is established throughout the world, there will no longer be men and women, but only workers on a footing of equality.

Although this chain of thought as outlined by Engels marks an advance upon those we have been examining, we find it disappointing — the most important problems are slurred over. The turning-point of all history is the passage from the regime of community ownership to that of private property, and it is in no wise indicated how this could have come about. Engels himself declares in *The Origin of the Family* that 'at present we know nothing about it'; not only is he ignorant of the historical details: he does not even suggest any interpretation. Similarly, it is not clear that the institution of private property must necessarily have involved the enslavement of women. Historical materialism takes for granted facts that call for explanation: Engels assumes without discussion the bond of interest which ties man to property; but where does this interest, the source of social institutions, have its own source? Thus Engels's account remains superficial, and the truths that he does reveal are seemingly contingent, incidental. The fact is that we cannot plumb their meaning without going beyond the limits of historical materialism. It cannot provide solutions for the problems we have raised, because these concern the whole man and not that abstraction : *Homo oeconomicus*.

It would seem clear, for example, that the very concept of personal possession can be comprehensible only with reference to the original condition of the existent. For it to appear, there must have been at first an inclination in the subject to think of himself as basically individual, to assert the autonomy and separateness of his existence. We can see that this affirmation would have remained subjective, inward, without validity as long as the individual lacked the practical means for carrying it out objectively. Without adequate tools, he did not sense at first any power over the world, he felt lost in nature and in the group, passive, threatened, the plaything of obscure forces; he dared to think of himself only as identified with the clan: the totem, mana, the earth e group realities. The discovery of bronze enabled man, in the experience of hard and productive labour, to discover himself as creator; dominating nature, he was no longer afraid of it, and in the face of obstacles overcome he found courage to see himself as

an autonomous active force, to achieve self-fulfilment as an individual.' [Gaston Bachelard in *La Terre et les rêveries de fa volonté* makes among others a suggestive study of the blacksmith. He shows how man, through the hammer and the anvil, asserts himself and his individuality. 'The blacksmith's instant is an instant at once well marked off and magnified. It promotes the worker to the mastery of time, through the forcefulness of an instant' (P. 142); and farther on: 'The man at the forge accepts the challenge of the universe arrayed against him.']

But this accomplishment would never have been attained had not man originally willed it so; the lesson of work is not inscribed upon a passive subject: the subject shapes and masters himself in shaping and mastering the land.

On the other hand, the affirmation of the subject's individuality is not enough to explain property: each conscious individual through challenge, struggle, and single combat can endeavour to raise himself to sovereignty. For the challenge to have taken the form of *potlatch* or ceremonial exchange of gifts — that is, of an economic rivalry — and from this point on for first the chief and then the members of the clan to have laid claim to private property, required that there should be in man another original tendency. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the existent succeeds in finding himself only in estrangement, in alienation; he seeks through the world to find himself in some shape, other than himself, which he makes his own. The clan encounters its own alienated existence in the totem, the mana, the terrain it occupies; and when the individual becomes distinguished from the community, he requires a personal incarnation. The mana becomes individualised in the chief, then in each individual; and at the same time each person tries to appropriate a piece of land, implements, crops. Man finds himself in these goods which are his because he has previously lost himself in them; and it is therefore understandable that he places upon them a value no less fundamental than upon his very life. Thus it is that man's interest in his property becomes an intelligible relation. But we see that this cannot be explained through the tool alone: we must grasp in its entirety the attitude of man wielding the tool, an attitude that implies an ontological substructure, a foundation in the nature of his being.

On the same grounds it is impossible to deduce the oppression of woman from the institution of private property. Here again the inadequacy of Engels's point of view is obvious. He saw clearly that woman's muscular weakness became a real point of inferiority only in its relation to the bronze and iron tool; but he did not see that the limitations of her capacity for labour constituted in themselves a concrete disadvantage only in a certain perspective. It is because man is a being of transcendence and ambition that he projects new urgencies through every new tool: when he had invented bronze implements, he was no longer content with gardens — he wanted to clear and cultivate vast fields. And it was not from the bronze itself that this desire welled up. Woman's incapacity brought about her ruin because man regarded her in the perspective of his project for enrichment and expansion. And this project is still not enough to explain why she was oppressed; for the division of labour between the sexes could have meant a friendly association. If the original relation between a man and his fellows was exclusively a relation of friendship, we could not account for any type of enslavement; but no, this phenomenon is a result of the imperialism of the human consciousness, seeking always to exercise its sovereignty in objective fashion. If the human consciousness had not included the original category

of the Other and an original aspiration to dominate the Other, the invention of the bronze tool could not have caused the oppression of woman.

No more does Engels account for the peculiar nature of this oppression. He tried to reduce the antagonism of the sexes to class conflict, but he was half-hearted in the attempt; the thesis is simply untenable. It is true that division of labour according to sex and the consequent oppression bring to mind in some ways the division of society by classes, but it is impossible to confuse the two. For one thing, there is no biological basis for the separation of classes. Again, the slave in his toil is conscious of himself as opposed to his master; and the proletariat has always put its condition to the test in revolt, thereby going back to essentials and constituting a threat to its exploiters. And what it has aimed at is its own disappearance as a class. I have pointed out in the Introduction how different woman's situation is, particularly on account of the community of life and interests which entails her solidarity with man, and also because he finds in her an accomplice; no desire for revolution dwells within her, nor any thought of her own disappearance as a sex — all she asks is that certain sequels of sexual differentiation be abolished.

What is still more serious, woman cannot in good faith be regarded simply as a worker; for her reproductive function is as important as her productive capacity, no less in the social economy than in the individual life. In some periods, indeed, it is more useful to produce offspring than to plough the soil. Engels slighted the problem, simply remarking that the socialist community would abolish the family — certainly an abstract solution. We know how often and how radically Soviet Russia has had to change its policy on the family according to the varying relation between the immediate needs of production and those of re-population. But for that matter, to do away with the family is not necessarily to emancipate woman. Such examples as Sparta and the Nazi regime prove that she can be none the less oppressed by the males, for all her direct attachment to the State.

A truly socialist ethics, concerned to uphold justice without suppressing liberty and to impose duties upon individuals without abolishing individuality, will find most embarrassing the problems posed by the condition of woman. It is impossible simply to equate gestation with a *task*, a piece of work, or with a service, such as military service. Woman's life is more seriously broken in upon by a demand for children than by regulation of the citizen's employment no state has ever ventured to establish obligatory copulation. In the sexual act and in maternity not only time and strength but also essential values are involved for woman. Rationalist materialism tries in vain to disregard this dramatic aspect of sexuality; for it is impossible to bring the sexual instinct under a code of regulations. Indeed, as Freud said, it is not sure that it does not bear within itself a denial of its own satisfaction. What is certain is that it does not permit of integration with the social, because there is in eroticism a revolt of the instant against time, of the individual against the universal. In proposing to direct and exploit it, there is risk of killing it, for it is impossible to deal at will with living spontaneity as one deals at will with inert matter; and no more can it be obtained by force, as a privilege may be.

There is no way of directly compelling woman to bring forth: all that can be done is to put her in a situation where maternity is for her the sole outcome — the law or the mores enjoin marriage, birth control and abortion are prohibited, divorce is forbidden.

These ancient patriarchal restraints are just what Soviet Russia has brought back today; Russia has revived the paternalistic concepts of marriage. And in doing so, she has been induced to ask woman once more to make of herself an erotic object: in a recent pronouncement female Soviet citizens were requested to pay careful attention to their garb, to use make-up, to employ the arts of coquetry in holding their husbands and fanning the flame of desire. As this case shows clearly, it is impossible to regard woman simply as a productive force: she is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object — an Other through whom he seeks himself. In vain have the totalitarian or authoritative regimes with one accord prohibited psychoanalysis and declared that individual, personal drama is out of order for citizens loyally integrated with the community; the erotic experience remains one in which generality is always regained by an individuality. And for a democratic socialism in which classes are abolished but not individuals, the question of individual destiny would keep all its importance — and hence sexual differentiation would keep all its importance. The sexual relation that joins woman to man is not the same as that which he bears to her; and the bond that unites her to the child is *sui generis*, unique. She was not created by the bronze tool alone; and the machine tool alone will not abolish her. To claim for her every right, every chance to be an all-round human being does not mean that we should be blind to her peculiar situation. And in order to comprehend we must look beyond the historical materialism that man and woman no more than economic units.

So it is that we reject for the same reasons both the sexual monism of Freud and the economic monism of Engels. A psychoanalyst will interpret the claims of woman as phenomena of the 'masculine protest'; for the Marxist, on the contrary, her sexuality only expresses her economic situation in more or less complex, roundabout fashion. But the categories of 'clitorid' and 'vaginal', like the categories of 'bourgeois or proletarian', are equally inadequate to encompass a concrete woman. Underlying all individual drama, as it underlies the economic history of mankind, there is an existentialist foundation that alone enables us to understand in its unity that particular form of being which we call a human life. The virtue of Freudianism derives from the fact that the existent is a body: what he experiences as a body confronted by other bodies expresses his existential situation concretely. Similarly, what is true in the Marxian thesis is that the ontological aspirations — the projects for becoming — of the existent take concrete form according to the material possibilities offered, especially those opened up by technological advances. But unless they are integrated into the totality of human reality, sexuality and technology alone can explain nothing. That is why in Freud the prohibitions of the super-ego and the drives of the ego appear to be contingent, and why in Engels's account of the history of the family the most important developments seem to arise according to the caprices of mysterious fortune. In our attempt to discover woman we shall not reject certain contributions of biology, of psychoanalysis, and of historical materialism; but we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence. The value of muscular strength, of the phallus, of the tool can be defined only in a world of values; it is determined by the basic project through which the existent seeks transcendence.

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The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Conclusion

'NO, WOMAN is not our brother; through indolence and deceit we have made of her a being apart, unknown, having no weapon other than her sex, which not only means constant warfare but unfair warfare — adoring or hating, but never a straight friend, a being in a legion with esprit *de corps* and freemasonry — the defiant gestures of the eternal little slave.'

Many men would still subscribe to these words of Laforgue; many think that there will always be 'strife and dispute', as Montaigne put it, and that fraternity will never be possible. The fact is that today neither men nor women are satisfied with each other. But the question is to know whether there is an original curse that condemns them to rend each other or whether the conflicts in which they are opposed merely mark a transitional moment in human history.

Legends notwithstanding, no physiological destiny imposes an eternal hostility upon Male and Female as such; even the famous praying mantis devours her male only for want of other food and for the good of the species: it is to this, the species, that all individuals are subordinated, from the top to the bottom of the scale of animal life. Moreover, humanity is something more than a mere species: it is a historical development; it is to be defined by the manner in which it deals with its natural, fixed characteristics, its facticité. Indeed, even with the most extreme bad faith, it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a rivalry between the human male and female of a truly physiological nature. Further, their hostility may be allocated rather to that intermediate terrain between biology and psychology: psychoanalysis. Woman, we are told, envies man his penis and wishes to castrate him; but the childish desire for the penis is important in the life of the adult woman only if she feels her femininity as a mutilation; and then it is as a symbol of all the privileges of manhood that she wishes to appropriate the male organ. We may readily agree that her dream of castration has this symbolic significance: she wishes, it is thought, to deprive the male of his transcendence.

But her desire, as we have seen, is much more ambiguous: she wishes, in a contradictory fashion, to have- this transcendence, which is to suppose that she at once respects it and denies it, that she intends at once to throw herself into it and keep it within herself. This is to say that the drama does not unfold on a sexual level; further, sexuality has never seemed to us to define a destiny, to furnish in itself the

key to human behaviour, but to express the totality of a situation that it only helps to define. The battle of the sexes is not implicit in the anatomy of man and woman. The truth is that when one evokes it, one takes for granted that in the timeless realm of Ideas a battle is being waged between those vague essences the Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine; and one neglects the fact that this titanic combat assumes on earth two totally different forms, corresponding with two different moments of history.

The woman who is shut up in immanence endeavours to hold man in that prison also; thus the prison will become interchangeable with the world, and woman will no longer suffer from being confined there: mother, wife, sweetheart are the jailers. Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values. But in doing this she is only defending herself; it was neither a changeless essence nor a mistaken choice that doomed her to immanence, to inferiority. They were imposed upon her. All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception. The existent who is regarded as inessential cannot fail to demand the re-establishment of her sovereignty.

Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavours to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go. He is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to accept his companion as an equal in any concrete way. She replies to his lack of confidence in her by assuming an aggressive attitude. It is no longer a question of a war between individuals each shut up in his or her sphere: a caste claiming its rights attacks and is resisted by the privileged caste. Here two transcendences are face to face; instead of displaying mutual recognition, each free being wishes to dominate the other.

This difference of attitude is manifest on the sexual plane as on the spiritual plane. The 'feminine' woman in making herself prey tries to reduce man, also, to her carnal passivity; she occupies herself in catching him in her trap, in enchaining him by means of the desire she arouses in him in submissively making herself a thing. The emancipated woman, on the contrary, wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal.

In so far as she expresses herself in definite action, this claim is legitimate, and male insolence must then bear the blame. But in men's defence it must be said that women are wont to confuse the issue. Many women, in order to show by their successes their equivalence to men, try to secure male support by sexual means; they play on both sides, demanding old-fashioned respect and modern esteem, banking on their old magic and their new rights. It is understandable that a man becomes irritated and puts himself on the defensive; but he is also double-dealing when he requires woman to play the game fairly while he denies her the indispensable trump cards through distrust and hostility. Indeed, the struggle cannot be clearly drawn between them, since woman is opaque in her very being; she stands before man not as a subject but

as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as self and as other, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences. When she makes weapons at once of her weakness and of her strength, it is not a matter of designing calculation: she seeks salvation spontaneously in the way that has been imposed on her, that of passivity, at the same time when she is actively demanding her sovereignty; and no doubt this procedure is unfair tactics, but it is dictated by the ambiguous situation assigned her. Man, however, becomes indignant when he treats her as a free and independent being and then realises that she is still a trap for him; if he gratifies and satisfies her in her posture as prey, he finds her claims to autonomy irritating; whatever he does, he feels tricked and she feels wronged.

The quarrel will go on as long as men and women fail to recognise each other as equals; that is to say, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such. Which sex is the more eager to maintain it? Woman, who is being emancipated from it, wishes none the less to retain its privileges; and man, in that case, wants her to assume its limitations. 'It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other,' says Montaigne. It is vain to apportion praise and blame. The truth is that if the vicious circle is so hard to break, it is because the two sexes are each the victim at once of the other and of itself. Between two adversaries confronting each other in their pure liberty, an agreement could be easily reached: the more so as the war profits neither. But the complexity of the -, Whole affair derives from the fact that each camp is giving aid and comfort to the enemy; woman is pursuing a dream of submission, man a dream of identification. Want of authenticity does not pay: each blames the other for the unhappiness he or she has incurred in yielding to the temptations of the easy way; what man and woman loathe in each other is the shattering frustration of each one's own bad faith and baseness.

We have seen why men enslaved women in the first place;' the devaluation of femininity has been a necessary step in human evolution, but it might have led to collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is to be explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by means of identification with the other, whom he oppresses to that end. In each individual man that tendency exists today; and the vast majority yield to it. The husband wants to find himself in his wife, the lover in his mistress, in the form of a stone image; he is seeking in her the myth of his virility, of his sovereignty, of his immediate reality. But he is himself the slave of his double. what an effort to build up an image in which he is always in danger! In spite of everything his success in this depends upon the capricious freedom of women: he must constantly try to keep this propitious to him. Man is concerned with the effort to appear male, important, superior; he pretends so as to get pretence in return; he, too, is aggressive, uneasy; he feels hostility for women because he is afraid of them, he is afraid of them because he is afraid of the personage, the image, with which he identifies himself. What time and strength he squanders in liquidating, sublimating, transferring complexes, in talking about women, in seducing them, in fearing them! He would he liberated himself in their liberation. But this is precisely what he dreads. And so he obstinately persists in the mystifications intended to keep woman in her chains.

That she is being tricked, many men have realised. 'What a misfortune to be a woman! And yet the misfortune, when one is a woman, is at bottom not to comprehend that it is one,' says Kierkegaard. [In *Vino Veritas*. He says further: 'Politeness is pleasing —

essentially — to woman, and the fact that she accepts it without hesitation is explained by nature's care for the weaker, for the unfavoured being. and for one to whom an illusion means more than a material compensation. But this illusion, precisely, is fatal to her ... To feel oneself freed from distress thanks to something imaginary, to be the dupe of something imaginary, is that not a still deeper mockery? ... Woman is very far from being *verwahrlost* (neglected), but in another sense she is, since she can never free herself from the illusion that nature has used to console her.'] For a long time there have been efforts to disguise this misfortune. For example, guardianship has been done away with: women have been given 'protectors', and if they are invested with the rights of the old-time guardians, it is in woman's own interest. To forbid her working, to keep her at home, is to defend her against herself and to assure her happiness. We have seen what poetic veils are thrown over her monotonous burdens of housekeeping and maternity: in exchange for her liberty she has received the false treasures of her 'femininity'. Balzac illustrates this manoeuvre very well in counselling man to treat her as a slave while persuading her that she is a queen. Less cynical, many men try to convince themselves that she is really privileged. There are American sociologists who seriously teach today the theory of 'low-class gain', that is to say, the benefits enjoyed by the lower orders. In France, also, it has often been proclaimed — although in a less scientific manner — that the workers are very fortunate in not being obliged to 'keep up appearances'. Like the carefree wretches gaily scratching at their vermin, like the merry Negroes laughing under the lash, and those joyous Tunisian Arabs burying their starved children with a smile, woman enjoys that incomparable privilege: irresponsibility. Free from troublesome burdens and cares, she obviously has 'the better part. But it is disturbing that with an obstinate perversity — connected no doubt with original sin — down through the centuries and in all countries, the people who have the better part are always crying to their benefactors: 'It is too much! I will be satisfied with yours!' But the munificent capitalists, the generous colonists, the superb males, stick to their guns: 'Keep the better part, hold on to it!'

It must be admitted that the males find in woman more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed. And in bad faith they take authorisation from this to declare that she has desired the destiny they have imposed on her. We have seen that all the main features of her training combine to bar her from the roads of revolt and adventure. Society in general — beginning with her respected parents — lies to her by praising the lofty values of love, devotion, the gift of herself, and then concealing from her the fact that neither lover nor husband nor yet her children will be inclined to accept the burdensome charge of all that. She cheerfully believes, these lies because they invite her to follow the easy slope: in this others commit their worst crime against her; throughout her life from childhood on, they damage and corrupt her by designating as her true vocation this submission, which is the temptation of every existent in the anxiety of liberty. If a child is taught idleness by being amused all day long and never being led to study, or shown its usefulness, it will hardly be said, when he grows up, that he chose to be incapable and ignorant., yet this is how woman is brought up, without ever being impressed with the necessity of taking charge of her own existence. So she readily lets herself come to count on the protection, love, assistance, and supervision of others, she lets herself be fascinated with the hope of self-realisation without doing anything. She does wrong in yielding to the temptation; but man is in no position to blame her, since he has led her into the temptation. When conflict arises between them, each will hold the other responsible for the situation; she

will reproach him with having made her what she is: 'No one taught me to reason or to earn my own living'; he will reproach her with having accepted the consequences: 'You don't know anything you are an incompetent,' and so on. Each sex thinks it can justify itself by taking the offensive; but the wrongs done by one do not make the other innocent.

The innumerable conflicts that set men and women against one another come from the fact that neither is prepared to assume all the consequences of this situation which the one has offered and the other accepted. The doubtful concept of 'equality 'm inequality', which the one uses to mask his despotism and the other to mask her cowardice, does not stand the test of experience: in their exchanges, woman appeals to the theoretical equality she has been guaranteed, and man the concrete inequality that exists. The result is that in every association an endless debate goes on concerning the ambiguous meaning of the words give and take: she complains of giving her all, he protests that she takes his all. Woman has to learn that exchanges it is a fundamental law of political economy — are based on the value the merchandise offered has for the buyer, and not for the seller: she has been deceived in being persuaded that her worth is priceless. The truth is that for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, company, an inessential boon; he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence. The exchange, therefore, is not of two items of equal value.

This inequality will be especially brought out in the fact that the time they spend together — which fallaciously seems to be the same time — does not have the same value for both partners. During the evening the lover spends with his mistress he could be doing something of advantage to his career, seeing friends, cultivating business relationships, seeking recreation; for a man normally integrated in society, time is a positive value: money, reputation, pleasure. For the idle, bored woman, on the contrary, it is a burden she wishes to get rid of; when she succeeds 'm killing time, it is a benefit to her: the man's presence is pure profit. In a liaison what most clearly interests the man, in many cases, is the sexual benefit he gets from it: if need be, he can be content to spend no more time with his mistress than is required for the sexual act; but — with exceptions — what she, on her part, wants is to kill all the excess time she has on her hands; and — like the greengrocer who will not sell potatoes unless the customer will take turnips also — she will not yield her body unless her lover will take hours of conversation and 'going out' into the bargain. A balance is reached if, on the whole, the cost does not seem too high to the man, and this depends, of course, on the strength of his desire and the importance he gives to what is to be sacrificed. But if the woman demands — offers — too much time, she becomes wholly intrusive, like the river overflowing its banks, and the man will prefer to have nothing rather than too much. Then she reduces her demands; but very often the balance is reached at the cost of a double tension: she feels that the man has 'had' her at a bargain, and he thinks her price is too high. This analysis, of course, is put in somewhat humorous terms; but — except for those affairs of jealous and exclusive passion in which the man wants total possession of the woman — this conflict constantly appears in cases of affection, desire, and even love. He always has 'other things to do' with his time; whereas she has time to kill; and he considers much of the time she gives him not as a gift but as a burden.

As a rule he consents to assume the burden because he knows very well that he is on the privileged side, he has a bad conscience; and if he is of reasonable good will he

tries to compensate for the inequality by being generous. He prides himself on his compassion, however, and at the first clash he treats the woman as ungrateful and thinks, with some irritation: 'I'm too good for her.' She feels she is behaving like a beggar when she is convinced of the high value of her gifts, and that humiliates her.

Here we find the explanation of the cruelty that woman often shows she is capable of practising; she has a good conscience because she is on the unprivileged side; she feels she is under no obligation to deal gently with the favoured caste, and her only thought is to defend herself. She will even be very happy if she has occasion to show her resentment to a lover who has not been able to satisfy all her demands: since he does not give her enough, she takes savage delight in taking back everything from him. At this point the wounded lover suddenly discovers the value in toto of a liaison each moment of which he held more or less in contempt: he is ready to promise her everything, even though he will feel exploited again when he has to make good. He accuses his mistress of blackmailing him: she calls him stingy; both feel wronged.

Once again it is useless to apportion blame and excuses: justice can never be done in the midst of injustice. A colonial administrator has no possibility of acting rightly towards the natives, nor a general towards his soldiers; the only solution is to be neither colonist nor military chief; but a man could not prevent himself from being a man. So there he is, culpable in spite of himself and labouring under the effects of a fault he did not himself commit; and here she is, victim and shrew in spite of herself. Sometimes he rebels and becomes cruel, but then he makes himself an accomplice of the injustice, and the fault becomes really his. Sometimes he lets himself be annihilated, devoured, by his demanding victim; but in that case he feels duped. Often he stops at a compromise that at once belittles him and leaves him ill at ease. A well-disposed man will be more tortured by the situation than the woman herself: in a sense it is always better to be on the side of the vanquished; but if she is well-disposed also, incapable of self-sufficiency, reluctant to crush the man with the weight of her destiny, she struggles in hopeless confusion.

In daily life we meet with an abundance of these cases which are incapable of satisfactory solution because they are determined by unsatisfactory conditions. A man who is compelled to go on materially and morally supporting a woman whom he no longer loves feels he is victimised; but if he abandons without resources the woman who has pledged her whole life to him, she will be quite as unjustly victimised. The evil originates not in the perversity of individuals and bad faith first appears when each blames the other — it originates rather in a situation against which all individual action is powerless. Women are 'clinging', they are a dead weight, and they suffer for it; the point is that their situation is like that of a parasite sucking out the living strength of another organism. Let them be provided with living strength of their own, let them have the means to attack the world and wrest from it their own subsistence, and their dependence will be abolished — that of man also. There is no doubt that both men and women will profit greatly from the new situation.

A world where men and women would be equal is easy to visualise, for that precisely is what the Soviet Revolution *promised*: women reared and trained exactly like men were to work under the same conditions [That certain too laborious occupations were to be closed to women is not in contradiction to this project. Even among men there is an increasing effort to obtain adaptation to profession; their varying physical and

mental capacities limit their possibilities of choice; what is asked is that, in any case, no line of sex or caste be drawn.] and for the same wages. Erotic liberty was to be recognised by custom, but the sexual act was not to be considered a 'service' to be paid for; woman was to be obliged to provide herself with other ways of earning a living; marriage was to be based on a free agreement that the contracting parties could break at will; maternity was to be voluntary, which meant that contraception and abortion were to be authorised and that, on the other hand, all mothers and their children were to have exactly the same rights, in or out of marriage; pregnancy leaves were to be paid for by the State, which would assume charge of the children, signifying not that they would be taken away from their parents, but that they would not be abandoned to them.

But is it enough to change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context, for men and women to become truly equal? 'Women will always be women,' say the sceptics. Other seers prophesy that in casting off their femininity they will not succeed in changing themselves into men and they will become monsters. This would be to admit that the woman of today is a creation of nature; it must be repeated once more that in human society nothing is natural and that woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilisation. The intervention of others in her destiny is fundamental: if this action took a different direction, it would produce a quite different result. Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself. The abyss that separates the adolescent boy and girl has been deliberately widened between them since earliest childhood; later on, woman could not be other than what she *was made*, and that past was bound to shadow her for life. If we appreciate its influence, we see clearly that her destiny is not predetermined for all eternity.

We must not believe; certainly, that a change in woman's economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear. At this moment they have been realised nowhere, in Russia no more than in France or the United States; and this explains why the woman of today is torn between the past and the future. She appears most often as a 'true woman' disguised as a man, and she feels herself as ill at ease in her flesh as in her masculine garb. She must shed her old skin and cut her own new clothes. This she could do only through a social evolution. No single educator could fashion a *female human being* today who would be the exact homologue of the *male human being*; if she is brought up like a boy, the young girl feels she *is* an oddity and thereby she is given a new kind of sex specification. Stendhal understood this when he said: 'The forest must be planted all at once.' But if we imagine, on the contrary, a society in which the equality of the sexes would be concretely realised, this equality would find new expression in each individual.

If the little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with women and men who seemed to her undoubted equals, the meanings of the castration complex and of the Oedipus complex would be profoundly modified. Assuming on the same basis as the father the material and moral responsibility of the couple, the mother would enjoy

the same lasting prestige; the child would perceive around her an androgynous world and not a masculine world. Were she emotionally more attracted to her father — which is not even sure — her love for him would be tinged with a will to emulation and not a feeling of powerlessness; she would not be oriented towards passivity. Authorised to test her powers in work and sports, competing actively with the boys, she would not find the absence of the penis — compensated by the promise of a child enough to give rise to an inferiority complex; correlatively the boy would not have a superiority complex if it were not instilled into him and if he looked up to women with as much respect as to men. [I knew a little boy of eight who lived with his mother, aunt and grandmother, all independent and active women, and his weak old half-crippled grandfather. He had a crushing inferiority complex in regard to the feminine sex, although he made efforts to combat it. At school he scorned comrades and teachers because they were miserable males.] The little girl would not seek sterile compensation in narcissism and dreaming, she would not take her fate for granted; she would be interested in what she was doing, she would throw herself without reserve into undertakings.

I have already pointed out how much easier the transformation of puberty would be if she looked beyond it, like the boys, towards a free adult future: menstruation horrifies her only because it is an abrupt descent into femininity. She would also take her young eroticism in much more tranquil fashion if she did not feel a frightened disgust for her destiny as a whole, coherent sexual information would do much to help her over this crisis. And thanks to coeducational schooling, the august mystery of Man would have no occasion to enter her mind: it would be eliminated by everyday familiarity and open rivalry.

Objections raised against this system always imply respect for sexual taboos; but the effort to inhibit all sex curiosity and pleasure in the child is quite useless; one succeeds only in creating repressions, obsessions, neuroses. The excessive sentimentality, homosexual fervours, and platonic crushes of adolescent girls, with all their train of silliness and frivolity, are much more injurious than a little childish sex play and a few definite sex experiences. It would be beneficial above all for the young girl not to be influenced against taking charge herself of her own existence, for then she would not seek a demigod in the male — merely a comrade, a friend, a partner. Eroticism and love would take on the nature of free transcendence and not that of resignation; she could experience them as a relation between equals. There is no intention, of course, to remove by a stroke of the pen all the difficulties that the child has to overcome in changing into an adult; the most intelligent, the most tolerant education could not relieve the child of experiencing things for herself; what could be asked is that obstacles should not be piled gratuitously in her path. Progress is already shown by the fact that 'vicious' little girls are no longer cauterised with a red-hot iron. Psychoanalysis has given parents some instruction, but the conditions under which, at the present time, the sexual training and initiation of woman are accomplished are so deplorable that none of the objections advanced against the idea of a radical change could be considered valid. It is not a question of abolishing in woman the contingencies and miseries of the human condition, but of giving her the means for transcending them.

Woman is the victim of no mysterious fatality; the peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them.

They can be surmounted, in the future, when they are regarded in new perspectives. Thus, as we have seen, through her erotic experience woman feels — and often detests — the domination of the male; but this is no reason to conclude that her ovaries condemn her to live for ever on her knees. Virile aggressiveness seems like a lordly privilege only within a system that in its entirety conspires to affirm masculine sovereignty; and woman tects herself profoundly passive in the sexual act only because she already thinks of herself as such. Many modern women who lay claim to their dignity as human beings still envisage their erotic life from the standpoint of a tradition of slavery: since it seems to them humiliating to lie beneath the man, to be penetrated by him, they grow tense in frigidity. But if the reality were different, the meaning expressed symbolically in amorous gestures and postures would be different, too: a woman who pays and dominates her lover can, for example, take pride in her superb idleness and consider that she is enslaving the male who is actively exerting himself. And here and now there are many sexually well-balanced couples whose notions of victory and defeat are giving place to the idea of an exchange.

As a matter of fact, man, like woman, is flesh, therefore passive, the plaything of his hormones and of the species, the restless prey of his desires. And she, like him, in the midst of the carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live out in their several fashions the strange ambiguity of existence made body. In those combats where they think they confront one another, it is really against the self that each one struggles, projecting into the partner that part of the self which is repudiated; instead of living out the ambiguities of their situation, each tries to make the other bear the objection and tries to reserve the honour for the self. If, however, both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity. The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another; it is never the given that confers superiorities: 'virtue', as the ancients called it, is defined at the level of 'that which depends on us'. In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it, they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence.

I shall be told that all this is utopian fancy, because woman cannot be transformed unless society has first made her really the equal of man. Conservatives have never failed in such circumstances to refer to that vicious circle; history, however, does not revolve. If a caste is kept in a state of inferiority, no doubt it remains inferior; but liberty can break the circle. Let the Negroes vote and they become worthy of having the vote; let woman be given responsibilities and she is able to assume them. The fact is that oppressors cannot be expected to make a move of gratuitous generosity; but at one time the revolt of the oppressed, at another time even the very evolution of the privileged caste itself, creates new situations; thus men have been led, in their own interest, to give partial emancipation to women: it remains only for women to continue their ascent, and the successes they are obtaining are an encouragement for them to do so. It seems almost certain that sooner or later they will arrive at complete economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis.

However this may be, there will be some to object that if such a world is possible it is not desirable. When woman is 'the same' as her male, life will lose its salt and spice. This argument, also, has lost its novelty: those interested in perpetuating present conditions are always in tears about the marvellous past that is about to disappear, without having so much as a smile for the young future. It is quite true that doing away with the slave trade meant death to the great plantations, magnificent with azaleas and camellias, it meant ruin to the whole refined Southern civilisation. In the attics of time rare old laces have joined the clear pure voices of the Sistine *castrati*,¹ and there is a certain 'feminine charm' that is also on the way to the same dusty repository. I agree that he would be a barbarian indeed who failed to appreciate exquisite flowers, rare lace, the crystal-clear voice of the eunuch, and feminine charm.

When the 'charming woman' shows herself in all her splendour, she is a much more exalting object than the 'idiotic paintings, over-doors, scenery, showman's garish signs, popular reproductions', that excited Rimbaud; adorned with the most modern artifices, beautified according to the newest techniques, she comes down from the remoteness of the ages, from Thebes, from Crete, from Chichén-Itzá; and she is also the totem set up deep in the African jungle; she is a helicopter and she is a bird; and there is this, the greatest wonder of all: under her tinted hair the forest murmur becomes a thought, and words issue from her breasts. Men stretch forth avid hands towards the marvel, but when they grasp it it is gone; the wife, the mistress, speak like everybody else through their mouths: their words are worth just what they are worth; their breasts also. Does such a fugitive miracle — and one so rare — justify us in perpetuating a situation that is baneful for both sexes? One can appreciate the beauty of flowers, the charm of women,- and appreciate them at their true value; if these treasures cost blood or misery, they must be sacrificed.

But in truth this sacrifice seems to men a peculiarly heavy one; few of them really wish in their hearts for woman to succeed in making it; those among them who hold woman in contempt see in the sacrifice nothing for them to gain, those who cherish her see too much that they would lose. And it is true that the evolution now in progress threatens more than feminine charm alone: in beginning to exist for herself, woman will relinquish the function as double and mediator to which she owes her privileged place in the masculine universe; to man, caught between the silence of nature and the demanding presence of other free beings, a creature who is at once his like and a passive thing seems a great treasure. The guise in which he conceives his companion may be mythical, but the experiences for which she is the source or the pretext are none the less real: there are hardly any more precious, more intimate, more ardent. There is no denying that feminine dependence, inferiority, woe, give women their special character; assuredly woman's autonomy, if it spares men many troubles, will also deny them many conveniences; assuredly there are certain forms of the sexual adventure which will be lost in the world of tomorrow. But this does not mean that love, happiness, poetry, dream, will be banished from it.

Let us not forget that our lack of imagination always depopulates the future; for us it is only an abstraction; each one of us secretly deplores the absence there of the one who was himself. But the humanity of tomorrow will be living in its flesh and in its conscious liberty; that time will be its present and it will in turn prefer it. New relations of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes; already, indeed, there have appeared between men and women friendships,

rivalries, complicities, comradeships — chaste or sensual — which past centuries could not have conceived. To mention one point, nothing could seem more debatable than the opinion that dooms the new world to uniformity and hence to boredom. I fail to see that this present world is free from boredom or that liberty ever creates uniformity.

To begin with, there will always be certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature. This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child; those who make much of 'equality in difference' could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality. Then again, it is institutions that create uniformity. Young and pretty, the slaves of the harem are always the same in the sultan's embrace; Christianity gave eroticism its savour of sin and legend when it endowed the human female with a soul; if society restores her sovereign individuality to woman, it will not thereby destroy the power of love's embrace to move the heart.

It is nonsense to assert that revelry, vice, ecstasy, passion, would become impossible if man and woman were equal in concrete matters; the contradictions that put the flesh in opposition to the spirit, the instant to time, the swoon of immanence to the challenge of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of forgetting, will never be resolved; in sexuality will always be materialised the tension, the anguish, the joy, the frustration, and the triumph of existence. To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognising each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other. The reciprocity of their relations will not do away with the miracles — desire, possession, love, dream, adventure — worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories; and the words that move us — giving, conquering, uniting — will not lose their meaning. On the contrary, when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the 'division' of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form. 'The direct, natural, necessary relation of human creatures is *the relation of man to woman,*' Marx has said. 'The nature of this relation determines to what point man himself is to be considered as a *generic being*, as mankind; the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. By it is shown, therefore, to what point the natural behaviour of man has become human or to what point the human being has become his *natural* being, to what point his human nature has become his *nature*.'

The case could not be better stated. It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given. To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.

Further Reading:

[Biography Index](#) | [Introduction](#) | [1. Biology](#) | [2. Psychology](#) | [3. History](#)
[Evelyn Reed](#) | [Origin of the Family](#), Engels | [1844 Manuscripts](#) Marx

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/index.htm>

Interview with Simone de Beauvoir 1976

The second sex 25 years later

Interview: John Gerassi, 1976;

Published: *Society*, Jan-Feb. 1976;

Source:

<http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/students/french/FrenchThought/beauvoir/gerassi.htm>;

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Gerassi. It's now about twenty-five years since *The Second Sex* was published. Many people, especially in America, consider it the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement. Would you ...

Beauvoir. I don't think so. The current feminist movement, which really started about five or six years ago, did not really know the book. Then, as the movement grew, some of the leaders took from it some of their theoretical basis. But *The Second Sex* in no way launched the feminist movement. Most of the women who became very active in the movement were much too young in 1949-50, when the book came out, to be influenced by it. What pleases me, of course, is that they did discover it later. Sure, some of the older women — Betty Friedan, for example, who dedicated *The Feminine Mystique* to me — had read it and were perhaps influenced by it somewhat. But others, not at all. Kate Millet, for example, does not cite me a single time in her work. They may have become feminists for the reasons I explain in *The Second Sex*; but they discovered those reasons in their life experiences, not in my book.

Gerassi. You have said that your own feminist consciousness grew out of the experience of writing *The Second Sex*. In what way, and how do you see the development of the movement after it was published in terms of your own trajectory?

Beauvoir. In writing *The Second Sex* I became aware, for the first time, that I myself was leading a false life, or rather, that I was profiting from this male-oriented society without even knowing it. What had happened is that quite early in my life I had accepted the male values, and was living accordingly. Of course, I was quite successful, and that reinforced in me the belief that man and woman could be equal if the woman wanted such equality. In other words, I was an intellectual. I had the luck to come from a sector of society, the bourgeoisie, which could afford not only to send me to the best schools but also to allow me to play leisurely with ideas. Because of that I managed to enter the man's world without too much difficulty. I showed that I

could discuss philosophy, art, literature, etc., on “man’s level.” I kept whatever was particular to womanhood to myself. I was then reinforced by my success to continue. As I did, I saw I could earn as good a living as any male intellectual and that I was taken as seriously as any of my male peers. Being who I was, I then found that I could travel by myself if I wanted to. that I could sit in cafés and write and be as respected as any male writer, and so on. Each stage fortified my sense of independence and equality. It became, therefore, very easy for me to forget that a secretary could in no way enjoy the same privileges. She could not sit in a café and read a book without being molested. She was rarely invited to parties for “her mind.” She could not establish credit or own property. I could. More importantly still, I tended to scorn the kind of woman who felt incapable, financially or spiritually, to show her independence from men. In effect, I was thinking, without even saying it to myself, “if I can, so can they.” In researching and writing *The Second Sex* I did come to realize that my privileges were the result of my having abdicated, in some crucial respects at least, my womanhood. If we put it in class economic terms, you would understand it easily: I had become a class collaborationist. Well, I was sort of the equivalent in terms of the sex struggle. Through *The Second Sex* I became aware of the struggle needed. I understood that the vast majority of women simply did not have the choices that I had had, that women are, in fact, defined and treated as a second sex by a male-oriented society whose structure would totally collapse if that orientation was genuinely destroyed. But like economically and politically dominated peoples anywhere, it is very hard and very slow for rebellion to develop. First, such peoples have to become aware of that domination. Then they have to believe in their own strength to change it. Those who profit from their “collaboration” have to understand the nature of their betrayal. And finally, those who have the most to lose from taking a stand, that is, women like me who have carved out a successful sinecure or career, have to be willing to risk insecurity — be it merely ridicule — in order to gain self-respect. And they have to understand that those of their sisters who are most exploited will be the last to join them. A worker’s wife, for example, is least free to join the movement. She knows that her husband is more exploited than most feminist leaders and that he depends on her role as the housewife-mother to survive himself. Anyway. for all these reasons, women did not move. Oh yes, there were some very nice, very wise little movements which struggled for political promotions, for women’s participation in politics, in government. I could not relate to such groups. Then came 1968, and everything changed. I know that some important events happened before that. Betty Friedan’s book, for one, was published before ’68. In fact, the American women were well on the move by then. They, more than any other women, and for obvious reasons, were most aware of the contradictions between the new technology and the conservative role of keeping women in the kitchen. As technology expands — technology being the power of the brain and not of the brawn — the male rationale that women are the weaker sex and hence must play a secondary role can no longer be logically maintained. Since technological innovations were so widespread in America, American women could not escape the contradictions. It was thus normal that the feminist movement got its biggest impetus in the very heartland of imperial capitalism, even if that impetus was strictly one of economics, that is, the demand for equal pay for equal work. But it was within the antiimperialist movement itself that real feminist consciousness developed. Whether in the anti-Vietnam War movement in America or in the aftermath of the 1968 rebellion in France and other European countries, women began to feel their power. Having understood that capitalism leads necessarily to domination of poor peoples all over the world, masses of women began

to join the class struggle — even if they did not accept the term “class struggle.” They became activists. They joined the marches, the demonstrations, the campaigns, the underground groups, the militant left. They fought, as much as any man, for a nonexploiting, nonalienating future. But what happened? In the groups or organizations they joined, they discovered that they were just as much a second sex as in the society they wanted to overturn. Here in France, and I dare say in America just as much, they found that the leaders were always the men. Women became the typists, the coffee-makers of these pseudorevolutionary groups. Well, I shouldn't say pseudo. Many of the movement's male “heavies” were genuine revolutionaries. But trained, raised, molded in a male-oriented society, these revolutionaries brought that orientation to the movement as well. Understandably, such men were not voluntarily going to relinquish that orientation, just as the bourgeois class isn't going to voluntarily relinquish its power. So, just as it is up to the poor to take away the power of the rich, so it is up to women to take away power from the men. And that doesn't mean dominate men in turn. It means establish equality. As socialism, true socialism, establishes economic equality among all peoples, the feminist movement learned it had to establish equality between the sexes by taking power away from the ruling class within the movement, that is, from men. Put another way: once inside the class struggle, women understood that the class struggle did not eliminate the sex struggle. It's at that point that I myself became aware of what I have just said. Before that I was convinced that equality of the sexes can only be possible once capitalism is destroyed and therefore — and it's this “therefore” which is the fallacy — we must first fight the class struggle. It is true that equality of the sexes is impossible under capitalism. If all women work as much as men, what will happen to those institutions on which capitalism depends, such institutions as churches, marriage, armies, and the millions of factories, shops, stores, etc.. which are dependent on piece work, part-time work, and cheap labor? But it is not true that a socialist revolution necessarily establishes sexual equality. Just look at Soviet Russia or Czechoslovakia, where (even if we are willing to call those countries “socialist”, which I am not) there is a profound confusion between emancipation of the proletariat and emancipation of women. Somehow, the proletariat always end up being made up of men. The patriarchal values have remained intact there as well as here. And that — this consciousness among women that the class struggle does not embody the sex struggle — is what is new. Yet most women in the struggle know that now. That's the greatest achievement of the feminist movement. It's one which will alter history in the years to come.

Gerassi. But such a consciousness is limited to the women who are in the left, that is, women who are committed to the restructuring of the whole society.

Beauvoir. Well, of course, since the rest are conservative, meaning they want to conserve what has been or what is. Women on the right do not want revolution. They are mothers, wives, devoted to their men. Or, if they are agitators at all, they want a bigger piece of the pie. They want to earn more, elect more women to parliaments, see a woman become president. They fundamentally believe in inequality, except they want to be on top rather than on the bottom. But they will fit fine into the system as it is or as it will change a bit to accommodate such demands. Capitalism can certainly afford to allow women to join an army, allow women to join a police force. Capitalism is certainly intelligent enough to let more women join the government. Pseudosocialism can certainly allow a woman to become secretary-general of its party. Those are just reforms, like social security or paid vacations. Did the

institutionalization of paid vacations change the inequality of capitalism? Did the right of women to work in factories at equal pay to the men change the male orientation of the Czech society? But to change the whole value system of either society, to destroy the concept of motherhood: that is revolutionary.

A feminist, whether she calls herself leftist or not, is a leftist by definition. She is struggling for total equality, for the right to be as important, as relevant, as any man. Therefore, embodied in her revolt for sexual equality is the demand for class equality. In a society where the male can be the mother, where, say, to push the argument on values so it becomes clear, the so-called "female intuition" is as important as the "male's knowledge" — to use today's absurd language — where to be gentle or soft is better than to be hard and tough, in other words, in a society where each person's experiences are equivalent to any other, you have automatically set up equality, which means economic and political equality and much more. Thus, the sex struggle embodies the class struggle, but the class struggle does not embody the sex struggle. Feminists are, therefore, genuine leftists. In fact, they are to the left of what we now traditionally call the political left.

Gerassi. But in the meantime, by waging the sex struggle only within the left — since, as you've said, the sex struggle is, temporarily at least, irrelevant within other political sectors — aren't feminists weakening the left, hence fortifying those who exploit both their women and the poor everywhere?

Beauvoir. No, and in the long run it can only fortify the left.

For one thing, by being confronted as leftists, that is, as opponents of exploitation, leftist men are forced to start watering their wine. More and more groups feel compelled to keep their macho male leaders in check. That's progress. Here in our newspaper, *Libération*, the male-oriented majority felt obliged to let a woman become its director.

That's progress. Leftist men are beginning to watch their language, are...

Gerassi. But is it real? I mean. I've learned, for example, never to use the word "chick." to pay attention to women in any group discussion, to wash dishes, clean the house, do the shopping. But am I any less sexist in my thoughts? Have I rejected the male values?

Beauvoir. You mean inside you? To be blunt, who cares? Think for a minute. You know a racist Southerner. You know he's racist because you've known him all his life. But now he never says "nigger." He listens to all black men's complaints and tries to do his best to deal with them. He goes out of his way to put down other racists. He insists that black children be given a better-than-average education to offset the years of no education. He gives references for black men's loan applications. He backs the black candidates in his district both with money and his vote. Do you think the blacks give a damn that he's just as much a racist now as before "in his soul"? A lot of the objective exploitation is habit. If you can check your habits, make it so that it's "natural" to have counterhabits, that's a big step. If you wash dishes, clean house, and take the attitude that you don't feel any less "a man" for doing it, you're helping to set up new habits. A couple of generations feeling that they have to appear

nonracist at all times, and the third generation will grow up nonracist in fact. So play at being nonsexist, and keep playing. Think of it as a game. In your private thoughts, go ahead and think of yourself as superior to women. But as long as you play convincingly — that you keep washing dishes, shopping, cleaning the house, taking care of children — you're setting precedents, especially men like you who have a certain macho "pose." The trouble is, I don't believe it. I don't think you really keep doing what you say. It's one thing to wash dishes. it's another to change diapers day in, day out.

Gerassi. Well. I don't have any children...

Beauvoir. Why not? You chose not to. Do you think the mothers you know chose to have children? Or were they intimidated into having them? Or, more subtly, were they raised into thinking that it's natural and normal and womanly to have children and therefore chose to have them? But who made that choice inevitable? Those are the values that have to be changed.

Gerassi. Fine. And that's why, and I understand it that many feminists have insisted on being separatists. But in terms of the revolution, theirs as well as mine, can we win if we break up into totally separate groups? Can the feminist movement achieve its ends by excluding men from its struggle? Yet the dominant part of the women's movement today, here in France at least, and it's also quite true for America, is separatist.

Beauvoir. Just a minute. We have to investigate why they're separatist. I can't speak for America, but here in France there are many groups, consciousness groups, which do exclude men because they find it very important to rediscover their identity as women to understand themselves as women. They can only do this by speaking among themselves, telling each other things they would never dare in front of husbands, lovers, brothers, fathers, or any other masculine power. Their need to speak with the intensity and honesty required can only be fulfilled this way. And they have managed to communicate with a profundity that I never thought possible or imaginable when I was 25. When I was among even the most intimate of my women friends then, truly feminine problems were never discussed. So now, for the first time, because of these consciousness groups and because of the toughness of the desire to genuinely confront women's problems within these groups, real friendships among women have developed. I mean, in the past, in my youth, until very recently, women tended never to become genuine friends with other women. They saw each other as rivals, enemies even, or at least competitors. Now, mostly as a result of these consciousness groups, not only are women capable of being true friends, they have learned to be warm, open, deeply tender with each other: they are turning sisterhood and fraternity into realities — and without making that relationship dependent on lesbian sexuality. Of course, there are many battles, even strictly feminist battles with social impact, in which the women do expect men to join, and many have. I'm thinking, for example, of the struggle here to legalize abortion. When we staged the first massive demonstration on that issue, three or four years ago, I remember well the great quantity of men present. This doesn't mean that they were not sexist: to uproot what has been anchored in one's behavior pattern and value system from the earliest days of childhood takes years, decades ..But these were men who were, at least,

conscious of that sexism in society and took a political stand against it. On such occasions men are welcome. indeed encouraged. to join the struggle.

Gerassi. But there are also a great many groups, at least here in France, which proudly proclaim their separatism and define their struggle as strictly lesbian.

Beauvoir. Let's be precise. Within the MLF [Women's Liberation Movement] there are many groups, yes, which call themselves lesbians. Many of these women, thanks to the MLF and the consciousness groups, are now capable of saying openly that they are lesbian, and that's great. It didn't used to be that way at all. There are other women who have become lesbian out of a sort of political commitment: that is, they feel that it is a political act to be lesbian, the equivalent somewhat within the sex struggle of the black power advocates within the racial struggle. And, true, these women tend to be more dogmatic about the exclusion of men from their struggle. But that does not mean that they ignore the numerous struggles being waged everywhere against oppression. For example. when Pierre Overney, the young Maoist organizer. was killed in cold blood by a Renault factory policeman for failing to disperse during a demonstration, and the whole left staged a protest march across Paris, all of these so-called radical lesbian separatists joined the demonstration and carried flowers to his grave. This, on the other hand, did not mean that they expressed their solidarity with Overney the male, but that they identified with the protest against the state which exploits and abuses the people — women and men.

Gerassi. One of the consequences of women's liberation, according to recent surveys carried out on American campuses, is that male impotence has vastly increased, especially among those young men trying to confront their sexism ...

Beauvoir. It's their own fault. They try to play roles...

Gerassi. But precisely, it is that they have become aware that they used to play roles, that it was easy to be macho and make believe that they were selfish, virile types when in fact. they now realize they often felt they had to make love or had to make an attempt to seduce the woman because that was what was expected, while now ...

Beauvoir. Having become aware of the role they played, which, nevertheless satisfied them — in both respects, that is, it was easy and it satisfied them sexually — while now they must worry. about satisfying the woman, they can't satisfy themselves. Too bad. I mean that. If they felt genuine affection for the women they were with, if they are honest with themselves and with their partners, they would automatically think of satisfying both. Now they're worried about being judged sexist if they don't satisfy the woman, so they can't perform at all. But it's still a performance, isn't it? Such men are impotent because of the contradiction they live. It is too bad that it is this group of men, who are at least conscious of sexism, which suffers most from the women's movement. while the vast majority of men profit from it, making life more intolerable for women...

Gerassi. Profit?

Beauvoir. A while ago we were talking about how the MLF has helped women gain sisterhood. affection for each other, and so on. That might have created the impression

that I think women are now better off. They're not. The struggle is just beginning, and in the early phases it makes life much harder. Because of the publicity the word "liberation" is on the tip of the tongue of every male, whether aware of sexual oppression of women or not. The general attitude of males now is that "well, since you're liberated. Let's go to bed." In other words, men are now much more aggressive, vulgar, violent. In my youth we could stroll down Montparnasse or sit in cafés without being molested. Oh, we got smiles, winks, stares, and so on. But now it's impossible for a woman to sit alone in a café reading a book. And if she's firm about being left alone when the males accost her, their parting remark is most often *salope* [bitch] or *putain* [whore]. There's much much more rape now. In general, male aggressiveness and hostility has become so common that no woman feels at ease in this town, and from what I hear in any town in America. Unless, of course, women stay at home. And that's what lies behind this male aggressiveness: the threat which, in male eyes, women's liberation represents has brought out their insecurity, hence their anger resulting that they now tend to behave as if only women who stay at home are "clean" while the others are easy marks. When women turn out not to be such easy marks, the men become personally challenged, so to speak. Their one idea is to "get" the woman.

Gerassi. So what's happened to the myth, which every Frenchman upheld but which, of course, was never true, that lovemaking is an art, and that he was the greatest artist of them all?

Beauvoir. Except in some very rich parasitical layers of society, the myth is dead. Frenchmen now behave like American or Italian males: they just want "to score," as the saying goes. And except for a very few number of men who try to cope with their sexism, they take the attitude that the freer a woman claims to be, that is, the more a woman tries to fight it out materially and in terms of her career, in their world, the man's world, the easier she should be to get to bed.

Gerassi. The talk about women being freer puzzles me, In our society, freedom is achieved with money and power. Do women have any more power today, after almost a decade of the women's movement?

Beauvoir. In the sense in which you ask, no. Intellectual women, young women who are willing to risk marginalization, the daughters of the rich when they are willing and capable to discard their parents' value system: these women, yes, are freer. That is, because of their education, life-style, or financial resources, such women can withdraw from the harsh competitive society, live in communes or on the fringes, and develop relations with other similar women or men sensitive to their problems and feel freer. In other words, as individuals, women who can afford it for whatever reason can feel freer. But as a class women certainly are not freer, precisely because, as you say, they do not have economic power. There are all sorts of statistics these days to prove that the number of women lawyers, politicians, doctors, advertising executives, etc., is increasing. But such statistics are misleading. The number of powerful women lawyers and executives is not. How many women lawyers can pick up a phone and call a judge or government official to fix anything or demand special favors? Such women must always operate through established male equivalents. Women doctors? How many are surgeons, hospital directors? Women in government? Yes, a few, tokens. In France we have two. One, serious, hardworking, Simone Weil,

is Minister of Health. The other, Françoise Giroud, who is the Minister in charge of women is strictly a showpiece, meant to placate bourgeois women's needs for integration into the system. But how many women control Senate appropriations? How many women control the editorial policy of newspapers? How many are judges? How many are bank presidents, capable of financing enterprises? Just because there are many more women in middle-level positions, as journalists say, in no way means they have power. And even those women must play the male game to succeed. Now, that doesn't mean that I do not believe that women have not made progress in the struggle. But the progress is the result of mass action. Take the new abortion law proposed by Simone Veil. Despite the fact that abortions will not be covered by the national health program and hence will be more available to the wealthy than to the poor, the law is certainly a great step forward. But for all the seriousness with which Simone Veil fought for such a law, the reason she could present it is because thousands of women have been agitating all over France for such a law, because thousands of women have publicly claimed that they have had abortions (thus forcing the government to either prosecute them or change the law), because hundreds of doctors and midwives have risked prosecution by admitting they have performed them, because some were tried and fought the issue in the courts, etc. What I'm saying is that, in mass actions, women can have power. The more women become conscious of the need for such mass action, the more progress will be achieved. And, to return to the woman who can afford to seek individual liberation, the more she can influence her friends and sisters, the more that consciousness will spread, which in turn, when frustrated by the system, will stimulate mass action. Of course, the more that consciousness spreads, the more men will be aggressive and violent. But then, the more men are aggressive, the more women will need other women to fight back, that is, the more the need for mass action will be clear. Most workers of the capitalist world today are aware of the class struggle, whether they call themselves Marxists or not, in fact, whether they even heard of Marx or not. And so it must become in the sex struggle. And it will.

Gerassi. You told me last year that you were thinking of writing another book on women, a sort of follow-up on *The Second Sex*. Are you?

Beauvoir. No. In the first place, such a work would have to be a collective effort. And then it should be rooted in practice rather than in theory. *The Second Sex* went the other way. Now that's no longer valid. It's in the practice that one can now see how the class struggle and the sex struggle intertwine, or at least how they can be articulated. But that's true about all struggles now: we must derive our theory from practice, not the other way around. What really is needed is that a whole group of women, from all sorts of countries, assemble their lived experiences, and that we derive from such experiences the patterns facing women everywhere. What's more, such information should be amassed from all classes, and that's doubly hard. After all, the women waging the fight for liberation today are mostly bourgeois intellectuals; by and large, workers' wives and even female workers remain firmly attached to the society's middle-class value system. Try, for example, to talk to women workers about the rights of prostitutes and the respect due them. The idea is shocking to most women workers. To raise the consciousness of women workers is a very slow process needing a great deal of tact. I know that there are MLF extremists who are trying to get workers' wives to rebel against their husbands as male oppressors. I think that's a mistake. A worker's wife, here in France at least, will be quick to answer, "but my

enemy is not my husband but my boss.” And this even if she has to wash her husband’s socks and make his soup after she too spends a whole day at some factory. It’s the same in America, where black women refused to listen to the women’s liberation movement proselytizers because they were white. Such black women remained supportive of their black husbands despite the exploitation, simply because the persons trying to make them aware of the exploitation were white. Gradually, however, a bourgeois feminist can reach a worker’s wife, just as in America today there are some black women — very few, I grant you — who say, “no, we do not want to submit to the oppression of our men on the pretext that they are black and that we have to struggle together against the whites; no, that is not a reason for our men to squash us, just because they are our black men.”

In some very concrete ways, however, the class struggle can and does encourage and develop the sex struggle. Over the past few years, for example, there have been many strikes here in France in plants where the workers were almost totally women. I’m thinking of the textile strike in Troyes, in the North, or at the Nouvelles Galeries at Thionville, or the famous strike at Lip. In each case the women workers gained not only a new consciousness but also new or stronger faith in their power, and this faith upset the male system they faced in their homes. At Lip, for example, the women seized the plant and refused to evacuate it despite threats by the police to use force to get them out. At first, the workers’ husbands were very proud of their militant wives. The men brought food, helped make picket signs, etc. But when the women decided to be totally equal to the few men who also worked at Lip and who were on strike too, then the problems arose. The Lip strikers decided to organize shifts to guard the factory from police invasion. That meant night duty. Oh oh. Now, suddenly, the striking women’s husbands were upset. “You can strike and picket all you want.” they said. “but only in the daytime. not at night. What, night guard duty? Oh no! Sleeping together in large common rooms in shifts? Oh no.” Naturally, the women workers resisted. They had fought for equality, they weren’t going to give it up now. So they became committed to a double struggle: the class struggle against the Lip bosses, the police, the government, etc., on the one hand, and the sex struggle against their own husbands. Union organizers at Lip reported that the women were completely transformed after the strike, saying “one thing I got out of all this is that never again am I going to let my husband play the boss at home. I’m now against all bosses.”

Gerassi. Did your consciousness about old age change as you wrote on that, in the way your consciousness about being a woman changed during the writing of *The Second Sex*?

Beauvoir. Not really. I discovered many things; I learned a great deal about old folks. But I didn’t really gain a new consciousness because it was the realization that I was old which made me undertake the book in the first place. But now I can much better relate to the old than before. I used to be much more severe. Now I understand that when an old person is too susceptible, too selfish, that he is only protecting himself, throwing up defenses. But, you see, a woman can go through life refusing to face the fact that she is fundamentally, in values, experience, and life-approach, different from men. But it is very hard to avoid becoming aware that one is growing old. There comes a time when you just know that you have to draw the line or that you’ve passed the line. I know today that I shall never be able to go wandering through the hills on foot, that I shall never again ride a bicycle, that I shall never again have relations with

a man. I was very scared or at least very apprehensive about old age before I reached it. Then, when it came, when I knew I had passed the line, well, it was much easier than I expected. Of course, you must stop looking backwards. But I find living from day to day much easier than I thought. But I learned I had passed that line independently of my research for my book on old age. Work on the book simply taught me to understand the old, and to be more tolerant.

Gerassi. What are you working on now?

Beauvoir. Basically, nothing. I'm helping on a scenario on, precisely, old age, for a Swedish director. I'm going to help Sartre with his television project. You know that he has signed a contract with national television to do ten one-hour shows, starting in October, on the seventy-five years of this century, and his relation to its major events. But I have no plans to undertake some particular project. This too is new for me. I used to have in the back of my head all sorts of projects, even while I was working on a specific book.

Gerassi. You have written that you have had a good life and regret nothing. Do you know that there are many couples who look upon your life with Sartre as a model, especially in the sense that you were not jealous of each other, that you had what is called an open relationship, and that it worked for forty-five years?

Beauvoir. But that's ridiculous to use us as a model. People have to find their own elans, their own structures. Sartre and I were very lucky but also our backgrounds were very particular, very exceptional. We met each other when we were very young. He was 23; I, 20. We weren't quite formed yet, though we were already molded into intellectuals with similar motivations. To both of us, literature had replaced religion.

Gerassi. Yet you could have been competitive, rivals ...

Beauvoir. True, similar personalities with similar ambitions often feel competitive. But we had something else in common: we had been similarly structured in our youth. Both our childhoods were very solid, very secure. This meant that neither of us had to prove something to ourselves or the other. We were sure of ourselves. It was as if everything had been preordained from the very beginning. My parents acted as if nothing in the universe could change the normal course of my life, which was to be a nice little bourgeois intellectual. Sartre's grandfather, who raised him — you know his father died when he was still a baby — behaved the same way, absolutely convinced that Sartre would grow up to be a professor. And that's the way it was. So that even when crises occurred, such as when Sartre's mother remarried when he was 12-13, or such as when I was 14-15 and learned that my father no longer loved me the way I expected it, the solidity of our childhoods made us externalize these crises. It was they who changed, not us. We were too structured to feel insecure. Besides, whatever the little variants, we were fundamentally in accord with our parents' design for us. They wanted us to be intellectual, to read, to study, to teach, and we agreed and did so. Thus, when Sartre and I met not only did our backgrounds fuse, but also our solidity, our individual conviction that we were what we were made to be. In that framework we could not become rivals. Then, as the relationship between Sartre and me grew, I became convinced that I was irreplaceable in his life, and he in mine. In other words, we were totally secure in the knowledge that our relationship was also

totally solid, again preordained, though, of course, we would have laughed at that word then. When you have such security it's easy not to be jealous. But had I thought that another woman played the same role as I did in Sartre's life, of course, I would have been jealous.

Gerassi. How do you see the rest of your life?

Beauvoir. I don't see it at all. I guess I'll soon start to write something again, that I'll go back to work, but I have no idea yet what I'll do. I know that I'll continue to work with women, within feminist groups, the League of Women, and that I'll continue to militate in some way, in whatever way I can, within the — let's call it — the revolutionary struggle. And I know that I'll remain with Sartre until one of us dies. But, you know, he's 70 now and I'm 67.

Gerassi. Are you optimistic? Do you think the changes you have been struggling for will take place?

Beauvoir. I don't know. Not in my lifetime anyway. Maybe in four generations. I don't know about the revolution. But the changes that women are struggling for, yes, that I am certain of, in the long run women will win.

[The Second Sex](#)

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