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## SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

# “Introduction” to *The Second Sex*

### Who Was Simone de Beauvoir?

Born in Paris in 1908, Simone de Beauvoir had become such an important figure in France by the time of her death in 1986 that her funeral was attended by 5000 people, including four former ministers of the Mitterrand government. A headline announcing her death read “Women, you owe her everything!”

De Beauvoir was the eldest of two daughters in a respectable, conservative bourgeois family, and she spent her formative years heatedly reacting against her parents and their values. She became an atheist while still a teenager, and decided early on to devote her life to writing and studying ‘rather than’ becoming a wife and mother. She studied philosophy at the ancient Parisian university of the Sorbonne and was the youngest person ever to obtain the *agrégation* (a high-level competitive examination for recruiting teachers in France) in philosophy, in 1929. She was 21. In that same year she met the famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and began an intense relationship with him—the most important of her life—that lasted until his death in 1980.<sup>1</sup>

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1 When the university *agrégation* results came out, Sartre was ranked first in the year and de Beauvoir second. Also, incidentally, 1929 was the year de Beauvoir acquired her lifelong nickname, *le Castor* (the French for beaver, because of the resemblance of her surname to “beaver”).

De Beauvoir and Sartre became notorious throughout France as a couple who were lovers and soul-mates but who maintained an open relationship; both considered themselves highly sexually ‘liberated,’ and de Beauvoir was openly bisexual. Sartre made what he called a “pact” with de Beauvoir—they could have affairs with other people, but they were required to tell each other everything—and he proceeded to match his actions to this rule. As he put it to de Beauvoir: “What we have is an *essential* love; but it is a good idea for us also to experience *contingent* love affairs.”

Despite the rotating cast of lovers, de Beauvoir remained devoted to Sartre all her life and always maintained that he was the most brilliant man she had ever known. Indeed, she once declared that, her many books, literary prizes, and social influence notwithstanding, her greatest achievement in life was her relationship with Sartre.

Between 1932 and 1943 de Beauvoir was a high school teacher of philosophy in Rouen, in north-western France. There, she was subject to official reprimands for her protests about male chauvinism and for her pacifism; finally, a parental complaint made against her for ‘corrupting’ one of her female students caused her dismissal. For the rest of her life, de Beauvoir lived in Paris and made her living from her writing. At the end of World War II, de Beauvoir became an editor at *Les Temps Modernes*, a new political journal founded by Sartre and other French intellec-

tuals. She used this journal to promote her own work, and several excerpts from *The Second Sex* were first published in it.

Interestingly, part of the impetus to write *The Second Sex* came to her as she gradually realized that, unlike some of her female friends, she did *not* at first feel any sense that she was disadvantaged as a woman, but that this feeling of personal satisfaction and of independence resulted primarily from her relationship with a well-known, influential man—Sartre. When she reflected on this relationship, she realized with astonishment that she was fundamentally different from Sartre “because he was a man and I was only a woman.” As she put it, “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.”

She was also influenced by what she saw in America, during a visit in 1947, of the experience of blacks in a segregated society. For example, she was friends with the black American short story writer and novelist Richard Wright, who, with his white wife Ellen, was a tireless advocate for black equality. For de Beauvoir, feminism was part of a larger project of social justice and human rights. From the late 1940s until the 1960s she was a very public left-wing political activist and a vocal supporter of communism (and critic of American-style capitalism).

*The Second Sex* is an extended examination of the problems women have encountered throughout history and of the possibilities left open to them. After the Introduction (reprinted here), the book is broken into two halves: Book One is a historical overview of “Facts and Myths” about women, and Book Two deals with “Women’s Life Today.” Book One is divided



into sections describing the “Destiny” of women according to theories of biology, psychoanalysis and Marxist historical materialism; the “History” of women from pre-historic times to the granting of the vote to women in France in 1947; and “Myths” about women in literature. Book Two is more personal, and talks about women in childhood, adolescence, sexual initiation, various forms of mature loving and sexual relationships, and old age. The conclusion of the book is positive and optimistic, as de Beauvoir tries to set out a model of life and action for future generations of women.

### Some Useful Background Information

1. The first words of Book Two of *The Second Sex* are “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that determines this creature.” This is how de Beauvoir most famously expresses an influential central thesis of the book: that ‘woman,’ as a biological category, is separable from ‘feminine,’ as a social construction—or more generally, that sex is not the same thing as gender. Thus, woman’s status under the patriarchy as the Other is a contingent, socially constructed fact rather than an essential truth about the female gender.

It is important to appreciate that de Beauvoir is not denying that there are biological differences between men and women, nor does she insist that these biological differences must be simply ignored in a properly constituted society. Rather, she is arguing that our *biologi-*

cal constitutions do not determine our *gender* characteristics: such things as 'femininity' or 'masculinity,' being 'nurturing' or 'modest' or 'emotional' or 'delicate'—these things are constructed and constrained purely by *social* influences. Under different social conditions women and men might naturally and freely behave in ways radically different from contemporary social norms.

Thus, according to de Beauvoir, gender is more something we *do*—a way we live—than something we *are*. Gender is constrained by social pressures in large part because social pressures constrain how we can legitimately behave. A woman in, say, Canada in the 1950s could not just decide as an individual to behave like a man—or like someone who is neither masculine nor feminine—and in this way change her gender unilaterally. Even if she were brave enough to attempt the experiment, according to de Beauvoir—and the other existentialists—one cannot possess a certain trait, such as being masculine, unless others recognize one as doing so.

2. This emphasis on the social construction of gender, race, and other aspects of the reality we experience in our day-to-day lives is related to de Beauvoir's commitment to *existentialism*. Central to existentialism is the doctrine that *existence precedes essence*: humans have no pre-given purpose or essence determined for them by God or by biology. According to existentialism, each consciousness faces the world as an isolated individual, and inevitably creates itself—gives itself determinate form—by making choices. These choices are forced by the need to respond to the things around us, including both passive natural objects and other consciousnesses.

De Beauvoir and Sartre see the meeting of one consciousness with another as profoundly disturbing: faced with the gaze of an Other, we recognize a point of view which is necessarily different from our own and so we are required to concede our own incompleteness; furthermore, the opposing consciousness must treat

us as an Other, which we feel as a threat to destroy us by turning us into an object.

De Beauvoir's feminism can be seen as a development of this idea: in response to the threat posed by other consciousnesses, according to existentialism, one might retaliate by objectifying and dominating the Other, to be able to control it without destroying it and thus be able to withstand its gaze. Thus, according to de Beauvoir, men have objectified and dominated women as the Other, and succumbing to all-pervasive social pressures women have allowed themselves to be dominated.

3. Towards the end of this essay, de Beauvoir mentions the contrast between being *en-soi* (in-itself) and being *pour-soi* (for-itself). Being for-itself is a mode of existence that is purposive and, as it were, constituted by its own activity; being in-itself, by contrast, is a less fully human kind of existence that is more like being a 'thing'—self-sufficient, non-purposive, driven by merely contingent current conditions.

### How Important and Influential Is This Passage?

*The Second Sex* is often considered the founding work of twentieth-century feminism. It has been called "one of the most important and far-reaching books on women ever published" (Terry Keefe) and "the best book about women ever written" (*The Guardian*, 1999). From the day it was published it was both popular and controversial: twenty-two thousand copies of the first volume were sold in France in the first week, and de Beauvoir received large quantities of hate mail including some from "very active members of the First Sex." "How courageous you are.... You're going to lose a lot of friends!" one of her friends wrote to her. She was accused of writing a pornographic book (because of *The Second Sex's* discussion of female sexuality), and the Vatican put it on the Index of prohibited books. "Once," de Beauvoir reported in her autobiography, "during an entire dinner at Nos Provinces on the Boulevard Montparnasse, a table of people nearby stared at me and giggled; I didn't like dragging [her lover, Nelson] Algren into a scene,

but as I left I gave them a piece of my mind." On the other hand, some of the contemporary reviews were glowing: *The New Yorker* called it "more than a work of scholarship; it is a work of art, with the salt of recklessness that makes art sting."

After the initial furor died down, the book was criticized by scholars and critics as having too much of a middle-class, distorted viewpoint—as having been written by someone who had no cause to actually feel the pressures that give life to feminism. The poet Stevie Smith wrote, in 1953: "She has written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them, nor does she like being a woman." This debate continues today, and arguably it is only recently that *The Second Sex* has come to be appreciated seriously as a work of philosophy that stands on its own merits, rather than read solely in terms of de Beauvoir's "biography, relationship with ... Sartre, psyche, or feminist credentials" (TLS, 2005).

De Beauvoir is a pivotal figure in the history of feminist thought from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century. In the Renaissance and early modern period, writers that we would today think of as feminist [such as Christine de Pizan (1365–c. 1430) and Mary Astell (1666–1731)] tended to focus on the social asymmetries between women and men. They argued that women have similar innate abilities to men and should be granted opportunities equivalent to those their male counterparts enjoyed in certain key areas, especially education, the family, and sometimes work and politics. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [in work by writers such as Olympe de Gouges (1745–93), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), John Stuart Mill (1806–73), and Harriet Taylor (1807–58)] saw a greater accumulation of forceful writings against the oppression of women, combined with more explicit (but only gradually successful) political campaigns to have women's equal status with men enshrined in law. It was at the end of the nineteenth century—in France, during the 1890s—that the term 'feminism' first appeared.

Up to this point, feminism can be usefully—albeit simplistically—understood as characterized by a demand for equal rights with men. Once women are educated as extensively as men, are given the oppor-

tunity to vote, are not forbidden from joining certain professions, and so on, then it was assumed that their innate capacities—in many (though perhaps not all) respects equal to, or even superior to, those of the male sex—would flourish free from oppression. That is, pre-twentieth-century feminism tended to focus on the suppression and distortion of woman's nature by contingent social structures such as laws and institutions. De Beauvoir's writings marked a significant shift and deepening in the nature of feminist thought. She denied that there is an inborn 'female nature' that just awaits the opportunity to break free from male oppression, and insisted that women are dominated by men in *all* aspects of their lives—that their very consciousness, the very shape of their minds, is formed by the patriarchal society of which they are a part. Feminism cannot aspire simply to change the laws and institutions of a country; this will leave the subordinate position of women essentially untouched. Feminists must fight for much more thoroughgoing change to the basic practices and assumptions of the whole society.

Later twentieth-century feminism, often known as *second-wave feminism* [representatives of which include Susan Moller Okin (1946–2004), Catharine MacKinnon (1946–), Martha Nussbaum (1947–), and Iris Young (1949–)], took up this emphasis on the deep and subtle nature of patriarchal dominance (though often without a very self-conscious sense of the debt to de Beauvoir). The distinction between sex and gender—the notion of gender as a social construct—proved especially significant in making this case. For many feminists, this has evolved into a critique of standards that are taken to have an objective and universal status—such as 'rational,' 'true,' and 'right'—but which, feminists argue, in fact reflect particular gender interests. Thus, for example, to argue—as Wollstonecraft did—that women are 'equally rational' as men is to succumb to, rather than combat, one of the hidden patriarchal structures that oppress women.

The so-called *third-wave* (or sometimes, *postmodern*) feminism that began in the 1980s can also be seen as having roots in the work of de Beauvoir. Third-wave feminism emphasizes the claim that gender is a social, contingent, rather than a natural category,

and adopts an 'anti-essentialist' stance about women: that is, there is nothing that can be usefully said about woman 'as such,' and instead we must focus in an explicitly un-unified way on different conceptions of femininity in particular ethnic, religious, and social groups.

### Suggestions for Critical Reflection

1. De Beauvoir begins her book by asking "What is a woman?" How do you think she answers this question?
2. De Beauvoir claims that the terms *masculine* and *feminine* are not symmetrical opposites. What do you make of this claim? How does de Beauvoir develop it? What is its importance?
3. "Throughout history [women] 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." Does this claim seem plausible? How important is it to de Beauvoir's argument?
4. De Beauvoir suggests that for women to renounce their status as an Other would be to abandon "all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste." What does she mean by this? Is she right? How serious a difficulty is this for feminism?
5. "[T]he dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created." Does this ring true? How important is it for the social activist, including the feminist, to notice this? How much does this explain the behavior towards women by even well-intentioned men?
6. "We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large we have won the game." Is de Beauvoir right about this? Is this claim consistent with her general theory of the oppression of women in society?
7. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Some commentators have argued that, in making this central claim, de Beauvoir herself falls victim to the patriarchal mindset she is criticizing—that she is tacitly assuming that "femaleness is indeed optional and subhuman, and maleness the slipped-from standard." Does

this criticism strike you as plausible? Does it suggest a fundamental problem with de Beauvoir's project, or with the way she carries it out?

### Suggestions for Further Reading

De Beauvoir's two most important works of philosophy are *The Second Sex* (1949) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947; it was translated into English by Bernard Frechtman and published by Citadel Press in 1949). The latter is an excellent introduction to existentialism. De Beauvoir also published four philosophical novels between 1943 and 1954, and in her later years she published several volumes of autobiography and biography, especially exploring her relationship with Sartre and the phenomenon of old age.

There are several biographies of de Beauvoir, including Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (Summit Books, 1990), and Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Blackwell, 1994). Useful secondary sources include: Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism* (Columbia University Press, 2001); Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (SUNY Press, 1996); Claudia Card, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ruth Evans, ed., *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (St. Martin's, 1998); Elizabeth Fallaize, ed., *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader* (Routledge, 1998); Lori Jo Marso and Patricia Moynagh, eds., *Simone de Beauvoir's Political Thinking* (University of Illinois Press, 2006); Toril Moi, *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir* (Blackwell, 1990); Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Margaret Simons, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); and Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (translated by Anne Lavelle, Indiana University Press, 1996). Volume 72 of *Yale French Studies* (1986) is devoted to articles on Simone de Beauvoir, several of which are valuable.



## **"Introduction" to *The Second Sex*<sup>2</sup>**

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 the quarreling over feminism, now practically over, 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<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

But first we must ask: what is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*,"<sup>5</sup> says one, "woman is a womb." But in speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must

For copyright reasons, this sample ends here. The complete "Introduction" to *The Second Sex* is available in *First Philosophy: Second Edition*.

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- 2 This is the Introduction to *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, translated by H.M. Parshley, copyright 1952 and renewed 1980 by Alfred A. Knopf Inc. (It was first published in French in 1949.) Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.
  - 3 That is, even after the reorganization of society in Russia after the Communist revolution of 1917 (and the upheaval of World War II).
  - 4 [Author's note] *Franchise*, dead today.
  - 5 "The whole woman is in her uterus," or, more snappily, "Woman is a womb." This aphorism dates back to medieval scholastic theology.