

Topic 3, Simone de Beauvoir

Gender as Choice

Every time I see two boxes—one male, one female—and I am expected to choose one, I hesitate before choosing the second, because that is what I am expected to do, even when I do not identify with the label. I am a woman, and that is a term that comes with so much baggage that sometimes the weight of it suffocates me. I am a woman, even when I have cut my hair short, pitched my voice low, and adopted the mannerisms and attitude of the male gender. I am a woman, regardless of what I want to be, because society expects me to be one. And it is not an easy thing to shed seventeen years of social conditioning when the process began before I even knew my name.

Gender is a social construct, as Simone de Beauvoir rightfully points out. I argue in this paper that one indeed becomes a woman because of societal expectations and pressures, and that these should be eliminated to create a society in which one becomes a woman out of choice, not society.

GENDER

There is much confusion surrounding sex and gender that I would first like to clarify. Sex is biological: it is defined by the sexual organs you are born with. If you can produce sperm, your sex is male. If you are born with ovaries and a womb, your sex is female.

When it comes to gender, however, things are far less black and white, the distinction blurred. Gender is the role you identify as. There are a hundred shades of grey between white and black, and so it is in gender. Cisgender people identify completely with their biological sex, whereas transgender people do not. The latter experience dysphoria because their definition of themselves do not match with society's definition of what they should be like. Gender is a fluid concept: you can be born with the male sexual organ, but you can choose to identify with the female gender. The neat binary distinction of male and female does not encompass the whole spectrum of gender: people who fall into the nonbinary category, somewhere in the middle, a no man's land, where you identify with neither or both genders. From now on when I say man and woman in this paper, I refer to this concept of gender, not sex.

THE SECOND SEX

De Beauvoir argues that women are marginalized as the ‘other’ and that a girl has to follow societal standards of femininity. She has to decorate herself for men and present herself like a doll, because that is what is expected of her. She acts in what Sartre calls bad faith, because she does not define herself. She lets society define her role, passively follows it, and therefore is not free. But de Beauvoir, who comes from the existentialist tradition, also argues that women are free to break from this role and define who they are. In this aspect, she is like Sartre, who argues that existence precedes essence and that one can become whoever he wants to be.

The context is that no one is forced to become something they do not want to become. Outside factors may have an influence on you, but you ultimately make the choices regarding what to accept and how to react to society. You are a boat, afloat on a vast sea of expectations and pressures, but as long as you do not have a hole and let these in, you are free to head wherever you want, do whatever you’d like. No one is born as something. No one has a purpose written into their system: they are the designers of their own lives, the writers of their own destinies.

This is the rosy picture that existentialism presents, and I must say the picture is appealing but does not really represent society as it is in its ugly reality. De Beauvoir argues that it is possible for girls to be whoever they want, to resist society. But there are significant barriers to this kind of self-realization. Women can never be completely free. They will come face to face with discrimination and misogyny at some point, and it will be an upward battle just to be who they are. It takes integrity and courage to do that, and not everyone has the means or the resources to break free. More importantly, societal expectations are so ingrained into our thinking that it is difficult to detect them. They are so nuanced that it takes you awhile to figure out that the thought you have is there because you’ve been told that for years – and most people do not notice it.

I must recount a surreal experience I had a few months ago. An economics teacher from our school was taking pregnancy leave, and I thought it was unfair for the students that the teacher was taking leave for an year when she should be teaching, when I realized with a flash of illumination that this was exactly the kind of thinking that perpetuated gender discrimination in the workplace: that women would get pregnant and take leave and that would be the company or institution’s loss. It was only then that I realized how pervasive gender stereotypes could be. It’s a whole culture, an entire system, and that doesn’t change overnight.

FREEDOM AND CHOICE

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” nicely sums up *The Second Sex*. I borrow from Derrida in reading this quotation differently. One can read it as de Beauvoir meant: society’s expectations make one into the expected role of a woman. Or one can read it

differently: one becomes a woman, not because of societal standards, but according to her own choice. The difference is in the interpretation of “becomes.” The former indicates a lack of choice, whereas the latter indicates the existence of choice. The latter should be the state of society that we should all aim for.

So despite the aforementioned social conditioning and the pressure to be what society expects us to be, we should still make choices. I am of the opinion that everything in life should be a choice, and gender is no exception. You follow society blindly, just drifting through life, then you have no control over your life. You do not define your life as you want to. Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living. I take it to mean that you should question all your thoughts and the everyday actions that you go through on autopilot, without thinking. Are you acting that way without reason or are you acting that way purposefully, willfully, consciously? Have you thought of the alternatives? If you act in a way that is conventionally called feminine, are you doing that because that’s what’s expected of you or are you doing that because you really want to? If you discover that if you had the choice, you would act differently, that is when you should act differently instead of thinking you’d like to.

Margaret Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister of Britain, once declared that she got the position on her own merits, that she was not a quota. Thatcher behaved just like a man: authoritarian, with an iron fist and a commandeering attitude. Some would argue that Thatcher successfully escaped societal expectations of women. This is not the case. She may have reached a point where women could not, but she did so by becoming male. She had to adopt the male mannerisms for people to take her seriously. That’s not changing societal expectations of women. That’s changing *yourself* so that you conform to male expectations. I imagine Thatcher did not really want to become male; she only did so for political reasons, because politics was a male-dominated field and she had survive there.

When I wear my clothes just right, and I cut my hair just so, and I pitch my voice low and take up more space than I can, people take me for a boy. And it is better to be a boy than a girl, because people take a little boy more seriously than a little girl. The point here is not that I have successfully become male. The point is that I should not have to become male in order to be taken seriously, that I should not have to change myself so as to receive the rightful treatment that every female should get. The point is that I am acting in bad faith, stuck in this box of labels, when I take advantage of society’s differing attitudes toward men and women, because I let society define me. The point is not that I wouldn’t be female even if given the chance. The point is, I shouldn’t have to be forced into this situation in the first place.

I do not argue against girls acting in a conventionally feminine way. I argue for the choice to be feminine or not. When you are asked what *woman* is, the image that comes to mind should not involve a certain image, just as when you are asked what *black* is, you would think of a skin color but not any defining characteristics. Black should not mean a certain thing. Black is black and nothing else. And so is woman. Woman is just that: woman. A category, a description and nothing else.

Some criticize existentialism as a philosophy that is too individualistic, without consideration for the people around you, cutting you off from society. I beg to differ. That represents just one facet of existentialism. Existentialism is also a philosophy that tells you that you are responsible for mankind, because as you make choices regarding your life, you are also choosing for humanity as a whole, that you represent humanity. It is not enough that you choose to embrace your freedom. You must make an environment where other people can make the same choices.

THE FUTURE

Simone de Beauvoir is right that one becomes a woman. She is right to diagnose societal expectations and pressures as the cause, and although she makes it seem like women can be whatever they want to be regardless – to be fair, she cannot be faulted too much, because that is a problem with existentialism in general, that it tends to ignore factors working against your writing your own destiny – she is ultimately correct that we can make that choice. So we should exercise that freedom of choice to its most, and we should also create a society in which other people can make that choice.

The thing with being a woman is, you cannot live without the other gender. You coexist with the gender that marginalizes and stereotypes you, because women come to love men. You can both love a man and hate that he partakes in a system that suppresses you. That is the conundrum of gender. When you're poor, you can live all your life criticizing the wealthy and have nothing to do with them. It's different when you're a woman. You can't go a single day without seeing the other gender, and you realize that for all their faults, they are human too and experience the same world. This is a complicated relationship we have with each other.

Being a woman is difficult to understand unless you've been born with it, like learning a foreign language is difficult unless you've been born a native speaker. You ask a man what male privilege is, and he won't be able to answer you because it's like asking a fish what water is like. It is all around him, yet he doesn't know it because he's been born with it. He can't imagine what it would be like *not* to have it. The first step to creating a society where people can make choices regarding gender is to acknowledge the existing flaws in the system and taking measures to correct this mistaken assumption. The first assumption that has to go is the thought that there is no male privilege.

We are in a perpetual state of war, men and women. Perhaps 'war' is too grand a label for the tension. Perhaps it is an incorrect label because the men do not realize they are fighting it. But this is a battle that must be waged and won, for the purpose of giving women the choice to become woman, and more importantly, to *not* become woman. And unless the war is won, I fear we will not have peace.