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Topic #3; Author: Simone de Beauvoir

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Gender Constructions

I: What does it mean to be a woman?

Gender equality and feminism have been and continue to be controversial topics in society. These controversies have manifested themselves in various forms throughout the past centuries, such as the suffragette movements, female sexual health, and the wage gap between men and women. For the greater part of human history, the differences between men and women were discussed simply in the context of biological sex. This meant that this difference was considered to be relatively straightforward—if someone was anatomically and biologically male, he was a man, and if someone was anatomically and biologically female, she was a woman. However, in recent years, the issue of gender identity itself has begun to surface as a topic of controversy, especially given that the topic of transgender people—people who identify as a different gender than their biological sex—has come to the forefront of societal attention due to more exposure in the media. This was made especially evident in context of events such as the extensive coverage of Caitlyn Jenner’s gender transition in worldwide news and social media.

Though issues of gender identity are only now beginning to become prominent in the public eye, discussions surrounding this topic had already previously existed in philosophical circles. Perhaps the most prominent philosophical work regarding this was Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in which she states: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. Now what does she mean by this? Obviously, this is not a reference to the notion of biological female sex; depending on an individual’s anatomy, that person is physically born a male or a female. Instead, de Beauvoir is commenting on what it means to identify as a member of the female gender. The word ‘become’ is particularly notable here, as it implies that a human being either grows into, or changes, an identity to become a woman, rather

than having been born as one. Her statement establishes a distinction between biological sex and the more loosely defined notion of 'gender', which has to do with personal identity, the acquired and individual understanding that one has of oneself. In doing so, there is an implication within the statement that lends itself to further philosophical inquiry. If de Beauvoir is correct in differentiating between physical sex and gender identity, then there must be some sort of difference between the mind, which establishes personal, individual identity, and the physical body, which determines biological sex. That relationship between the mind and the body becomes the first central concern that must be examined when critiquing de Beauvoir's statement.

II. Do humans possess minds that are distinct from their physical bodies?

Some may argue that the mind and the body must necessarily be one and the same, because conscious thought, emotion, and other cognitive functions can be traced back to specific physical body structures such as different areas of the brain. Though this argument is understandable, there are several assumptions made in the conception of the argument that ultimately undermine it. First, though scientists have been able to determine different areas of the brain and body that are stimulated when humans think or feel certain things, there is still no clear attribution as to the direct cause of these thoughts or emotions. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the human brain is what is causing these thoughts and feelings to come to fruition.

Second, the processes that occur in the physical body are biochemical interactions between different substances and chemicals that are governed by the laws of physical science, just like any machine will function and behave in accordance with the laws of physics. There has never been a situation in which such physical and mechanical processes have been shown to generate conscious thought independently; chemicals being experimented with in a lab do not ever develop minds of their own—the very thought of that happening is ludicrous. Even with the most advanced robotics and so-called 'artificial intelligence' (AI) technology, no machine has ever developed an actual mind or human-like intelligence of any sort. The most recent example of AI technology in the news was the computer AlphaGoGo, which managed to defeat human beings at playing certain games of strategy. However, this machine never independently developed conscious thoughts; rather, there were human computer programmers who developed the machine with their own minds, and programmed into the machine algorithms regarding strategy that allowed the computer to imitate intelligent thought. But it was nothing more than this. There simply is no alternative to human intelligence and thought that can be seen in a purely mechanical setting. Thus, it cannot be shown, using evidence, that the mind and the body are one and the same.

However, there is clear evidence to indicate that human minds are entities distinct from physical bodies. Transgender people believe that there is a disconnect between the gender with which they identify, and the biological sex that was determined by their anatomy at birth. For example, Female-to-Male (FTM) transgender people are born biologically female but identify as a male, while Male-to-Female (MTF) transgender people are born biologically male, but identify as a female. If the mind and the body were to be the same entity, it would logically be impossible for this situation to arise. How could one entity define its own essence to have two, completely contradictory natures? The existence of such individuals who cannot identify, in their minds, as being a member of their biological sex, demonstrates that there indeed is a distinct mind that is a completely different and separate entity from the physical human body. Though the mind and the body may or may not interact with each other, they would still be distinct entities. Perhaps this was what philosophers such as Rene Descartes were thinking of when they discussed the differences between the mind, soul, and body?

In the context of de Beauvoir's original statement, this commentary would affirm her beliefs, given that it can be shown that there is a distinction between the physical body and the identity-determining mind of an individual. Because the mind and the body are distinct from each other, even if a child is born with biologically female body, the child's mind would have to 'become' a female by developing in a way that she can identify as a woman. Seeing as this is the case, the next question that comes to mind is: if this is the case, why do the large majority of people still identify with the gender that is the same as their biological sex? Is there some link between the mind and the body that causes this to occur, even if the two of them are still distinct?

III. Does an individual's physical body affect identity?

Let us assume for a moment that the physical body itself can affect identity, which may serve to explain why so many people identify with the sex with which they were born. This would mean that the physical body or stimuli to that body needs to be able to affect the mind as well. Though the body and the mind have been shown to be separate entities, this doesn't mean that they cannot influence each other. In fact, it seems likely that the physical body can indeed affect the mind. Hormone cycles and levels, which are physical chemicals within the body, can affect the moods and emotions of individuals. Physical pain will also send the mind into a state of agony, as the person feels the pain, and will experience negative emotions about the pain. It is clear that the physical sensations on the body does indeed impact the mind.

However, what is not so clear is that, though the body can affect the mind temporarily, it cannot affect the long-term identity that the mind develops (so the initial

assumption would be incorrect). Physical sensations are temporary; they do not continue to exist in the long term. Pain only exists while there is some external stimuli causing the pain. Hormones only affect mood while the levels of those particular hormones remain high. Identity is, by definition, a individual sense of personal essence that is developed in the long-term by formative experiences and thoughts. Brief sensations exist only in the short term, not in the long term, so identity itself is not affected by them, even if the mind briefly is.

A possible counterargument is that though physical sensations may be momentary, our minds can take attitudes about the physical form of the body that are impressive enough that they contribute to the mind's development of identity. For example, people who suffer from anorexia or other eating disorders are reacting to the state of their physical bodies. Also, some people suffer trauma from certain experiences that they underwent—for example, a soldier who were injured in a war and had to have one of their limbs amputated may suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These mental conditions that affect the mind are all related to the physical body in some way. However, this is not evidence that indicates that the physical world can directly affect identity. All of these issues with eating disorders, trauma, etc. are about mental *perceptions* of the physical world that the *mind* creates. Eating disorders are caused because individuals believe that their body shape does not meet the societal standards of beauty that are constructed. Amputees suffering from PTSD who have lost limbs are considered different only because other members of society have not undergone such physical changes and alterations. Though physical stimuli may cause short-term effects on the mind itself, the individual identity that the mind develops in the long term is set by the mind and its perception of reality, rather than by any direct effect due to real physical sensations.

When going back to examine de Beauvoir's comments on gender and sex, there still has not been a definite conclusion reached as to what factors influence the construction of gender identity. The proposal that the physical body or external physical stimuli can directly affect identity can be shown to be incorrect; however, in the process of examining the relationship between the physical world, the mind, and identity, it was shown that mental *perceptions* of the physical body or stimuli can indeed affect identity. Often, societal standards are what affect the mind's perceptions of different situations. Perhaps society is what influences the development of gender identity?

IV. How does society influence the construction of gender identity and roles?

In a society, it is the community, not the individual, that determines what is normal and abnormal, what is right and what is wrong. If there were an individual human being who were to somehow truly live completely alone in an environment without contact with any other living creatures, that individual would perhaps be able to determine his own authentic

identity. This person would do what felt right or wrong for himself. Maybe this person would not even have a gender identity, seeing as there would be no basis of comparison with other individuals of same and different sexes. However, most human beings, if not all, currently live in some kind of society that provides them with formative experiences and encounters with others in that community. These encounters indicate what society believes to be a normal, correct path to follow in life—the individual, for the most part, unconsciously conforms to these norms and experiences perceptions that are similar to that of society's, including the gender roles that are defined as a result.

Philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre once described a hypothetical waiter who mindlessly and efficiently does every task that is assigned to him marvellously. This waiter waits on tables and picks up dishes. He does this effortlessly, moving around doing his work with an almost robotic sense of efficiency, because it does not require much thought on his part. According to Sartre, this waiter fulfils his societal duties as a waiter excellently. He performs the tasks that society requires of him well—but is he aware of what he is doing? Does this waiter truly understand why he does what he does? Because the waiter is so preoccupied with obeying and following society's norms and standards, he has lost an understanding of his own self and who he truly is as a person. He has become a conformist to societal constructs, with no individuality, nor any understanding of his own identity. This is, essentially, how society affects an individual's perception of the world. Because people live in communities, it is the group, not the individual that decides what is normal and proper. It is the public community that constructs roles and standards for the individuals in the society to follow.

The same is the case for societal female roles and gender identity. Society has defined gender roles for the individuals that are a part of the community. By largely equating sex and gender, and implicitly imposing stereotypes about the physical differences between men and women on individuals, society has set up gender roles to which people are pushed to subscribe. Men are, on average, stronger than women, so there are double standards about men's and women's sports due to the differences in strength. Though women are not usually actively discouraged from pursuing fields in business or in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, there is often enough implicit stereotyping that exists that indicates that these fields are male-dominated, so that women sometimes seek some form of personal or external empowerment if they wish to pursue them successfully. In this way, society affects individual perceptions of the world, leading the societal gender role of a woman to be set in a specific way, and implicating affecting women to conform to these standards and roles. Gender has become a societal construct by which women 'become women' when they fit themselves to it, as de Beauvoir points out in her statement.

V. Gender: the societal construct

Simone de Beauvoir's statement that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', can be seen to be largely true in a very general sense. However, the statement itself can be refined and elaborated upon after some philosophical consideration about society and the norms that it sets. Society establishes the concept of the female gender as a construct that pushes biological females to 'become women' with all the societal implications that that carries, regardless of what their own individual identities would be like without those norms.

Society places a pair of glasses with tinted lenses in front of individuals' views of the world to set up these constructs. Because individuals are so integrated into societies, it may perhaps be impossible to remove these glasses completely, as long as they exist as members of society. However, perhaps given enough self-reflection and thought about who they truly are without the public constructs surrounding them, they will be able to look past the glasses and see glimpses of their private, authentic identity. One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. But in today's society, this is not an accomplishment, it is a restrictive societal construct that limits authenticity in the determination of individual identities.