

3. *“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1949).* Discuss critically, using your own arguments, the manner in which sex and gender are outlined and characterized here.

In this quote, Simone de Beauvoir claims that the being a woman is not a way in which one is born, but rather something one becomes. What does she mean by this statement? In this essay, I will discuss different ways in which the quote can be interpreted, and try to come closer to a plausible explanation. Simone de Beauvoir was a philosopher of the existentialist tradition, and thus I will discuss the quote in light of this as well. I will then examine the quote more closely to see if there are any contradictions. Finally, I will see the quote in light of some concrete and practical situations.

In the quote, as aforementioned, de Beauvoir states that one becomes a woman. But what exactly does she mean by the word woman? One interpretation could be that one literally becomes a woman, both physically and mentally. However, I hardly believe this is what de Beauvoir meant. This interpretation is quite extreme, and far from credible. Anyone who has seen a baby knows that the physical difference between the sexes is there to begin with. This leaves the interpretation where woman must be understood either as an abstract concept where one feels like a woman, or as a social category, though the two are closely related. As this is the only credible way to interpret the quote, we can see that Simone de Beauvoir has already made a distinct separation of the physical sex from the social or emotional gender. Does this also imply a clear distinction between the mind and the physical body? To me, this view is problematic, and I will get back to this later.

What were we before we became women? Is one born a man, or is a man something one becomes as well? Simone de Beauvoir calls women the second sex, and by this she means that the man is considered to be the standard, whereas the woman is defined in relation to the man. Does this then mean that before one became a woman, one was a man? To me, this seems pretty farfetched. It is more credible, I think, to say that one does not have a gender to begin with, it is created later on. This is credible in the context of the quote because, as I have already stated, there must be a clear distinction between physical sex and emotional gender for the quote to make sense.

If one does indeed “become a woman” from something resembling a blank slate, an interesting question is why? Why does one person become a woman while another do not? The idea of a blank slate, of having no fixed identity to begin with is very much a view typical to existentialism: the idea that we are free to create ourselves is a central thought in the philosophy of other existentialists as well, for instance Sartre. It is only without an essence that one can be truly free to decide who one wants to become. But the same question arises here as the one that arises from de Beauvoirs statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Why? If I can decide who I want to be, if I can create myself, who is this *I* who creates *me*? Doesn’t the *I* imply that I already had an identity, an essence, before the *me* was created? If that is the case, then the choices I make are dependent on who exactly this *I* is, and seeing as this *I* must either have a preconceived essence or be the object of another *I* who has such an essence, the choice of who the *me* is to be, is never truly free. It seems to me as if the essence, the *I*, has to be there for any *me* to exist. Applying this to de Beauvoirs quote, it would mean that one could only become a woman if there was something in you from the very beginning that made you inclined to become a woman. Thus, stating that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, is imprecise at best.

Perhaps the language in itself is the problem, that our concepts are too limited to relay the true meaning, but this contradiction is interesting to note nevertheless. Our language and manner of thinking are, after all, closely connected. And if a lack of fitting concepts prevents us from relaying information that does not fit into our this particular set of concepts, then I believe this would limit our thoughts as well.

A possible solution to the problem could be that we are formed by the environment we live in. If this is the case, the essence of an *I* who decides who to become isn’t necessary to explain why we become different from each other. The differences between individuals as well as the differences between the different genders, can be explained by the environment we have grown up to, and the different ways in which we have interacted with the environment. A woman became a woman not because she was born a woman, but because she was treated like a woman from the moment she was born. Again one could protest by asking *why* she was treated like woman, but the clear distinction between an emotional/social gender and a physical sex has made this a non-issue. She was treated like a woman because her physical sex was female, and this formed her gender-identity.

In relation to de Beauvoirs quote, I do, however, have some objections to the view that we are simply formed by our environment. I stated earlier that the woman is treated as a woman because of her physical sex, which is different from her emotional and social gender. But if for instance a girl walked and talked like a boy, would this change her gender? I don’t think so. This could be because her gender was already set, but why would that be? An answer could be that her gender was decided by the way her parents treated and raised her, but

that would mean her gender identity was decided very early on in life. To me it seems quite obvious that gender is a factor from very early on in life, but at the same time, this makes the distinction between being “born” a woman and “becoming” a woman quite meaningless, especially if one cannot change gender identity again later, and I don’t really see how that would happen. There are of course people who change their physical sex later on in life, but gender identity seems to be quite stable and not created and recreated again simply by the environment. Another objection is that there are people who have grown up looking like and being treated like one gender and choose to change to change their sex to correspond to the other. How can the theory that we are formed by the environment explain this? Some transgender people can also illustrate why de Beauvoir’s strict separation of physical sex and emotional gender, and similarly of mind and body, isn’t credible. The physical differences between the sexes include not only genitals, but hormones as well, and these influence our behaviour. The fact that female athletes have wished to change their sex after years of using performance-enhancing drugs and hormones, is an extreme manifestation of this. Moreover, genetics plays such a huge role concerning personality and abilities, why should it not affect gender identity as well?

The last objection is not actually an objection to the credibility of the answer. However, I believe this explanation, that we are simply formed by the environment, undermines a lot of the *point* of the quote. By ‘the point’ I do not mean “what is de Beauvoir trying to relay in the quote?” I have already tried to formulate an answer to this, or at least discussed it at some length. The question is rather why she wants to relay this: Once we think we understand the content of the quote, what should we do with the information? Although I have argued above that our environment cannot be the only thing that forms us, it is obvious to me that we are formed by the environment to some degree. Men and women are treated differently, there is no way around that, and no doubt it affects us. What I have argued against is the notion that the physical sex is irrelevant for the emotional/social gender and that there must be a preconceived inclination towards a gender, not that the environment isn’t relevant at all. Thus, the quote could serve as a reminder of this, and create awareness so that we can change certain things about our society for the better. However, if we are simply products of our environments we have no choice whatsoever as to what we become, and this undermines the free will completely. We are not free to change anything. Thus it seems to me that an individual essence, as discussed above, is completely necessary to be able to make any individual choices at all.

To conclude, the quote from Simone de Beauvoir clearly calls attention to the way women are treated differently in society and how it affects them. However, saying that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, is going too far, in my opinion. It raises several questions, and it simply does not correspond to my experiences. However, for the quote to have a point besides simply being a statement, we have to be free to act on it. Whether we

are born as blank slates to be formed by our environment or with something like a preconceived essence, this is, as discussed above, not entirely unproblematic either way.