

Gender Identity and Expression and Simone de Beauvoir

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”¹ This is perhaps the line most often quoted from Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking work *The Second Sex*, and as such has raised some interesting questions. Because Beauvoir first published the book in 1949, her biological interpretations and social commentary are somewhat constrained by the information that was available at the time. I do not think that this weakens her arguments, but do find that some important questions about her work can only be answered by evaluating her ethical arguments and seeing what conclusions they lead to. One example of such a question involves what her attitude would have been towards people who are now considered “transgender”- that is those who decide to live as a gender different than the one assigned at birth. In this paper, I will argue that Simone de Beauvoir’s ethics and concept of gender roles would commit her to the acceptance of transgender individuals. Thus, this compels her second-wave feminist followers to the same commitment, which should lead to an environment of transgender-inclusivity in these feminist circles.

The American Psychological Association defines “transgender” as “an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.”² The APA goes on to define gender identity as a “person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else”, and gender expression as “the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics.”

¹ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283

² American Psychological Association. *Answers to Your Questions About Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression*. (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2008)

An important subset of transgender people that I will be discussing in more depth is people for whom their assigned sex conflicts specifically with their gender identity. Often times these persons live as the gender that they feel, and may use or desire medical means to change their bodies to more closely conform to the anatomy of the sex that matches their gender. A person born with female anatomy who transitions to live as a man is known as a “transgender man”, a “trans-man” or “FTM”, but may wish to identify simply as a “man”. Similarly, a person born with male anatomy who transitions to live as a woman is known as a “transgender woman”, a “trans-woman”, or “MTF”, but may wish to identify simply as a “woman”.

According to Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* was written as an inquiry into why, when asked to describe herself, the first descriptor that came to mind was “I am a woman.”³ Thus, the book aims to ascertain what a woman is and why a woman is a woman, and discusses why our societal concept of “woman” is problematic. To determine what is problematic, Beauvoir insists that we must not look at societal good, but individual good. She writes, “In our opinion, there is no public good other than one that assures the citizens’ private good; we judge institutions from the point of view of the concrete opportunities they give to individuals.”⁴ From there, she claims that we must be careful to distinguish the difference between private interest and happiness, as happiness is impossible to concretely conceptualize. Instead, she proposes that the position on which we should judge superior from inferior, better from worse, and progress from regression from the perspective of “existentialist morality”. To Beauvoir, existentialist morality is rooted in what she terms “transcendence.” She writes, “Every subject posits itself as a

³ Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 5

⁴ Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 16,17

transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future.” This transcendence, she insists, is at threat from “immanence”. Professor Sally J Scholz, a philosophy professor whose research focuses on feminist theory, elucidates the terms “transcendence” and “immanence” in plainer terms in the context of *The Second Sex*. She claims that to Beauvoir, “transcendence” is to reach into the future by pursuing projects that increase freedom, while “immanence” is simply to stagnate within a situation.⁵ Beauvoir argues that women face particular issues with transcendence. Despite being autonomous beings rooted in freedom, women find themselves in a society where they are pushed to the position of the “Other”, or the object. Attempts are made to reduce them to immanence and prevent their transcendence.⁶ This is the source of the problem for Beauvoir: Woman ought to be able to achieve transcendence, and the concept of womanhood and “femininity” constrain her ability to do so.

Part of what Beauvoir finds to be a constraint on women’s ability to achieve transcendence is a concept she terms “the eternal feminine.” This construction, she claims, is a way of idealizing woman that keeps her in the position of immanence and object. This sort of femininity requires passivity, maternal caring, submission, and constant deference to males. “Feminine” women must remain beautiful objects, under this belief, and are deemed to not be “real women” if they should refuse to do any of these things. Attempting to fulfill the impossible expectations of the feminine ideal prevents women from choosing their own projects, and thus dooms them to immanence.

⁵ Scholz, Sally J, “The Second Sex,” *Philosophy Now*, September/October 2008

⁶ Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 16,17

If one cannot choose to pursue projects of their own, one cannot choose to pursue projects that will lead to freedom and cannot play a role in determining one's future. This directly prevents women from attaining transcendence.⁷ Thus, women must reject the eternal feminine.

Beauvoir writes of some women and their attempts to cast off femininity in the chapters *The Girl* and *The Lesbian*, from a standpoint of female masculinity. In *The Lesbian*, in particular, Beauvoir constructs portraits of women who eschew femininity by romantically pursuing other women. Ursula Tidd, a professor of philosophy at Manchester University, views these non-pathologizing depictions of female masculinity as evidence that such masculinity is seen by Beauvoir as a more fulfilling option for women than femininity.⁸ I see this as a good indication that Beauvoir does not have a fundamental objection to women taking on male gender roles, or the queering of gender overall.

If the ultimate goal for humans ought to be transcendence, and femininity prevents women from achieving transcendence, then casting off femininity as trans-men do holds the possibility of allowing individual women to become subjects and thus achieve transcendence. Thus, it only makes sense that Beauvoir would accept the decision of people to live in a gender opposite their birth sex as transgender people do, as it leads to her most crucial values: transcendence and thus freedom.

One might object to my argument on the basis that Beauvoir would look poorly upon trans-women for choosing to live in a gender role that would heavily push them

⁷ Ibid., 3-4, 266-271

⁸ Tidd, Ursula. "Female Masculinities and Simone de Beauvoir." *Lesbian Inscriptions in Francophone Society and Culture*. (Durham U.K.: Durham University, 2007) 148-149

towards immanence, when they had the option to continue living as male and being regarded as subjects and retaining autonomy without the societal constraints imposed on women's transcendence. Choosing a role that may force one into immanence would surely be contrary to all of Beauvoir's ethics. If women should reject the societal notion of femininity, so too should men. This is an important objection because it highlights a crucial issue in Beauvoir's piece. Beauvoir finds the feminine ideal particularly problematic because women are socialized to believe that they must pursue it. This is where gender as a "becoming" comes into play.

Beauvoir insists, "No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between male and the eunuch that is called feminine."⁹ One way that Beauvoir examines this becoming is by seeking its beginning, which she argues is in childhood. In infancy, Beauvoir claims, boys and girls both retain a similar level of subjectivity. Birth is the same for both sexes, and both experience nursing and weaning in the same manner. Both sexes have similar genital development at this time, and both explore their bodies in the same fashion. Both obtain the same pleasure from their phalluses, whether penis or clitoris. Children of both sexes have the same attachment towards their mother, and exhibit the same behavior when upset. Beauvoir claims that girls are equal to their brothers up until the age of twelve. They are just as physically robust and have the same intellectual aptitudes. However, differences in their behavior and attitudes arise, that cannot yet be explained by hormones or puberty. Beauvoir attempts to explain them through socialization and traditional attitudes toward genitalia.

⁹ Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 283

Boys from a young age are socialized to be proud of their genitalia, while girls do not experience this same attitude toward their own genitalia. Having external genitalia provides an organ that can be clearly seen and held, and viewed as separate from oneself while still remaining a source of identity. This separation allows the boy to see himself as the subject, not influenced by the organ and glands that separate him from woman.

Beauvoir claims that girls suffer from this, because their sex organs are internal. This, along with the indifferent attitude towards the clitoris, forces girls to identify inseparably with their sex, and for boys to think of women in this manner. Girls are then given dolls, which Beauvoir sees as alter egos for them to identify with in a similar way that boys identify with their genitals. These dolls represent whole female forms, and as mere objects represent purely passive things.¹⁰ Beauvoir writes, “While the boy seeks himself in his penis as an autonomous subject, the little girl pampers her doll and dresses her as she dreams of being dressed and pampered; inversely, she thinks of herself as a marvelous doll.”¹¹ Beauvoir claims that this analogy between the woman and the doll remains through adulthood, as woman is vulgarly called a “doll” in French. Furthermore, according to Beauvoir, “Thus, the passivity that essentially characterizes the “feminine” woman is a trait that develops in her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society.”¹² Beauvoir believes the problem peaks at puberty. She claims that social context turns menstruation into a disgusting event, one that produces shame in the girl because her body is now seen as defective and undesirable when bleeding. This is emphasized in

¹⁰ Ibid., 283-293

¹¹ Ibid., 293

¹² Ibid., 294

many cultures. Beauvoir uses the example of the harsh punishments for associating with a menstruating woman present in the Christian bible to show the reduction of woman to an undesirable animal when menstruating. To be seen this way, Beauvoir claims, requires being seen as a feminine object, an Other.¹³ Thus she claims that girls cannot become “grown-ups” without confronting and accepting their femininity as inevitable.¹⁴

If femininity is seen as an inescapable part of becoming an adult woman in our society, femininity is not a choice among young women. They know nothing else, and have been raised from childhood identifying as Other. Thus, I do not believe that Beauvoir would be able to say that femininity was a valid choice for young women, as it was not a choice they freely made but were instead under intense and almost inescapable pressure to make. Trans-women do not undergo the same pressures. From childhood, they are raised as boys, as subjects. They are taught and pressured to remain autonomous in their lives, and that being a woman is undesirable and occasionally disgusting. Thus, if someone raised as male desires to become a woman, the pressure did not come from society. Beauvoir repeatedly asserts that there is no biology that commits a person to either gender, so she must also believe that there is no biological basis for a male to want to become woman. Thus, the only remaining factor is the biological male’s free choice to assume a gender role, even one that pushes a person toward immanence. This is the ultimate free choice, one that could only come from the biological male himself. If Beauvoir believes in freedom as the ultimate ideal, she would have to accept that choice, and thus accept trans-women. Thus, the objection does not conflict with my thesis that

¹³ Ibid., 328--340

¹⁴ Ibid., 340

Beauvoir would be compelled by her existentialist ethics to accept transgender individuals.

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