

The Second Sex, Introduction

I. “I am a woman”

“If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman;’ all other assertions will arise from this basic truth” [5].

1. What is the force of this “have to” in Beauvoir’s claim?
2. Consider the following two quotes:

“It is only possible for a woman who does not feel highly vulnerable with respect to other parts of her identity...to conceive of her voice simply or essentially as a ‘woman’s voice.’” (Elizabeth V. Spelman)

“The feminist project is not to find a place in the existing grammar where ‘am a woman’ would be predicated of ‘I,’ but to put the conditions of predication themselves in question, to ‘jam the machinery,’ and to refuse the metaphysical lure of the verb, ‘to be.’” (Linda Zerilli)

Do these suggestions offer any kind of alternative to Beauvoir’s basic statement?

Is this assertion—“I am a woman”—metaphysically or politically useful? *Can* it ever be avoided?

II: The category “women”

“...every concrete human being is always uniquely situated. To reject the notions of the eternal feminine...is not to deny that there are today...women...Clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex” [4]. And: “we [women] know the feminine world more intimately than men do because our roots are in it; we grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we care more about knowing it” [15-16].

1. Is there only one women’s situation, or feminine world, or fact about what being female means for a human being?
2. What sort of generalization about women are you able to get behind—philosophically and politically?

III. Subject and Other

“Why do women not contest male sovereignty?...Where does this submission in woman come from?” [7]

1. By way of an answer, Beauvoir runs through a series of examples that contrast the situation of women with that of other subordinated groups. List the differences she describes.
2. “beside every individual’s claim to assert himself as a subject—an ethical claim—lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing” [10]. Express in your own words the existential dynamic Beauvoir describes here. Do you think it’s fair to say that women derive satisfaction from their role as Other?

IV. Men and feminism

1. How does Beauvoir think that “men profit...from woman’s alterity”? [13]
2. How is it that many men affirm “that women *are* equal to men and have no demands to make, and *at the same time* that women will never be equal to men and that their demands are in vain”? [14]

V. Objectivity

“I think certain women are still best suited to elucidate the situation of women.” [15]

1. Why does Beauvoir think this?
2. Do you agree? Who is best suited to elucidate the situation of men?