

Simone de Beauvoir and the feminist revolution



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Introduction

Are we always free to choose one course of action over another, regardless of the situation that we are facing? Many of us would answer 'no' to this question. Yet, existentialist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre in particular, think that human beings always have a choice. Existentialists tell us that we are free – but what do they mean? And, if we are all free, won't an individual's freedom be limited by other people's freedom? Sartre also says that freedom is not something we enjoy but rather a burden. Why should it be a burden? The answers to these questions spring out of the existentialists' original view of the human being, which you will be introduced to by briefly exploring some of the philosophical ideas of Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre encourages people to become what they want to be, to create themselves. However, some people are arguably more restricted than others in their self-creation by the way in which others categorise and perceive them. These ideas provide useful context to exploring Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that women's freedom is affected by the way they are perceived, and indeed the way they perceive themselves.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A113 Revolutions](#). It is one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. [Learn more about these OpenLearn courses here](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- get acquainted with the works and ideas of twentieth-century philosopher Simone de Beauvoir
- develop an understanding of the key ideas of existentialism, its conception of the human being, freedom and the 'Other'
- develop your ability to analyse modern philosophical texts
- develop your critical skills by evaluating philosophical ideas.

1 Freedom and women: Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir and her partner, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, shared not only their lives but also their ideas. However, Beauvoir's originality has often been overlooked. Here, you will compare Sartre's ideas about freedom of choice with Beauvoir's, and evaluate whether there is in fact an important difference.

This 2-minute video will introduce you to key existentialist ideas. The video presents those ideas as exclusively Sartre's, but in fact the view that there is no human nature, no God and no purpose or meaning in life beside those that human beings create for themselves are also Beauvoir's ideas. Because of their close and lifelong collaboration, there is no way to establish whether their shared existentialist ideas are due to one or the other.

[Video: Jean-Paul Sartre and Existential Choice](#) (open the link in a new tab or window so you can come back to the course when you have finished).

You heard that for Sartre we are 'condemned to be free' and that we have to make choices. He believed that although we act and live our lives in very different situations, we make free choices, whether we want it or not; even not to choose, he argues, is a choice. Sartre discarded the suggestion, advanced by French writer Émile Zola, that heredity and social and cultural environments shape our character. For Sartre, human beings are not moulded but rather mould themselves, through their choices and actions. In the video, you heard that for Sartre, the fact that human beings are not moulded or designed is what distinguishes them from objects like a penknife or a book. However, the Other (individuals beside oneself) makes a person aware that other people see him as a determined being, an object.

But are all human beings really free to become what they want to become? Although Sartre, like most philosophers, talks about humans in general, in human societies individuals have been perceived as belonging to different types and categories. In all of them, the distinction between men and women has been fundamental. Female and male bodies are different, and only the former are able to carry babies. In all societies, women and men have played different roles, received different types of upbringing, have had unequal access to education, and generally have been perceived as fundamentally different. Are men and women equally free to create themselves, and to be who they want to be? The existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir addresses these questions in *The Second Sex*.

1.1 Who was Simone de Beauvoir?

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908 and died in the same city in 1986. She studied philosophy at the University of Paris (Sorbonne). She taught in high schools for a number of years, before concentrating on writing. She is particularly famous for her novels, including *She Came to Stay* (1943), and *The Mandarins* (1954). Her autobiography is published in four volumes: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), *The Prime of Life* (1960), *Force of Circumstance* (1963), and *All Said and Done* (1972). She engaged in the traditional philosophical essay format in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947).

You shall read from arguably her most famous work, which has become a classic of feminist literature: *The Second Sex* (1949). Although she was a successful and famous writer, for a long time her philosophy was relatively neglected, especially in comparison with her partner, the existentialist writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Certainly this was due in large part to sexist prejudice. Recently, however, the great value of her philosophy has been acknowledged by scholars, and her influence on the feminist movement has been substantial.



Figure 1 Simone de Beauvoir, 1965.

1.2 *The Second Sex*, the 1960s and the feminist revolution

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* became a crucial work for the feminist movement that developed from the 1960s onwards, although it was first published in 1949. Beauvoir was not only aware of the delay of its impact, but also regarded it as consistent with the inevitable obstacles that women encounter in understanding their own situation. In fact, she herself had not grasped the social condition of women, incorrectly projecting her own lucky situation as a financially independent, respected and successful intellectual, onto other women. In an interview with an American magazine in the early 1970s, Beauvoir said that only when writing *The Second Sex* had she 'understood that the vast majority of women simply did not have the choices that [she] had had, that women are, in fact, defined and treated as a second sex by a male-oriented society' (Beauvoir, 1976).



Figure 2 Simone de Beauvoir sat at her desk in her home, Paris, 1976. (Notice Sartre's photograph on the wall.)

If the 'vast majority of women', as Beauvoir thinks, are oppressed everywhere, why do they often accept their situation? She thinks that women, like all 'economically and politically dominated peoples anywhere' first have to realise that they are in a

disadvantaged and unfair position, and then they have to think it possible to change it. She also explains the reasons why it is not a matter of course that women are united in their struggle:

... those [women] who have the most to lose from taking a stand, that is, women like me who have carved out a successful sinecure or career, have to be willing to risk insecurity – be it merely ridicule – in order to gain self-respect. And they have to understand that those of their sisters who are most exploited will be the last to join them. A worker's wife, for example, is least free to join the movement. She knows that her husband is more exploited than most feminist leaders and that he depends on her role as the housewife-mother to survive himself. Anyway, for all these reasons, women did not move.

(Beauvoir, 1976)

The last sentence of the quotation, '...for all these reasons, women did not move', refers to the time when *The Second Sex* was published. Although she had written a seminal feminist book, there was no feminist movement to join. Then, as she put it, 'came 1968, and everything changed'. She continued:

[Women] became activists. They joined the marches, the demonstrations, the campaigns, the underground groups, the militant left. They fought, as much as any man, for a nonexploiting, nonalienating future. But what happened? In the groups or organizations they joined, they discovered that they were just as much a second sex as in the society they wanted to overturn. Here in France, and I dare say in America just as much, they found that the leaders were always the men.

(Beauvoir, 1976)

Beauvoir thought that it is important that women fight their own specific struggle. Here, though, you will study her philosophical writings, rather than following her on demonstrations and political activities – although in a sense, this cannot be separated from her philosophy. In several pictures in this course, you can see her in action!



Figure 3 Simone de Beauvoir during a demonstration organised by the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) [women's liberation movement] in favour of free abortion and contraception. Paris, 1971.

1.3 What does it mean to be a woman?

Freedom is at the core of both Beauvoir's and Sartre's philosophies. For Sartre human beings are always free, and in particular free to self-create. If they blame their circumstances for their choices, rather than taking responsibility for them, they are in fact deceiving themselves, they are in 'bad faith'. Bad faith is self-deception. For him, we always have a choice.



Figure 4 Maurice Henry, Simone de Beauvoir, twentieth century, lithograph.

Beauvoir presents women as an oppressed category of people, who are shaped by their position in society to the point that often they do not even realise that they are oppressed. Are women for her as free as the general human being whom Sartre discusses? Or is there a difference between Sartre's and Beauvoir's respective ways of conceiving human beings and freedom? The philosopher Gary Gutting thinks that there is indeed a difference. Let us read what he says.

Activity 1 Gutting – French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

Allow approximately 20 minutes

Read the extract and answer the following questions.

What, Beauvoir asks, does it mean to be a woman? There two standard answers: Essentialists say that there is a female nature (the 'eternal feminine'), while anti-essentialists (nominalists) say that there is no such thing, that women are just human beings, as men are, their 'femininity' merely an accidental characteristic no different from having red hair or being over six feet tall. We will not be surprised that Beauvoir rejects the essentialist view, which contradicts the fundamental existentialist claim that existence precedes essence, that the free choices of our consciousness determine what we are. In this sense, her famous formula 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (*Le deuxième sexe* II: 13/267) is for her, a philosophical platitude. But Beauvoir also rejects the anti-essentialist view: Being a woman is, at least in our world, not a casual fact, irrelevant to a person's core identity - any more than is being Jewish or black or old. Nor is being a woman simply a matter of one's own choice: precisely how you are a woman may be up to you, but the fact that you are a woman and that this fact makes a great deal of difference is imposed on you by your situation.

Here is clear that Beauvoir has moved beyond the simplistic existentialist view of freedom that is at least often suggested by [Sartre in *Being and*

Nothingness]. On that view, being a woman could limit my freedom only to the extent that I chose it to be a limitation. Beauvoir, however, recognizes that some features of my situation may well be obstacles to my freedom no matter how I choose. It does not follow that such a feature must always be an obstacle: we can imagine a situation in which being a woman is of no more significance than having blue eyes. But the fact is that in the current historical situation, being a woman does restrict your freedom, no matter how you choose to live your life. This is a significant revision of the naïve existentialist conception of freedom (and... a revision Sartre himself later develops in [his *Critique of dialectical reason*]).

Gutting, 2001, p. 165

1. With which of the following views do essentialists (about women) agree, in Gutting's presentation?

- ☐ There is no feminine nature; women do not share a way of being.
- ☐ There is a feminine nature that all women share.
- ☐ Women share in a general human nature, but do not have a specific feminine nature.

2. With which of the following views do anti-essentialists agree?

- ☐ There is no such thing as a feminine nature, women are just human beings.
- ☐ Each individual woman has a different essence.
- ☐ There is a feminine nature that all women share.

3. Why, according to Gutting and what you have studied so far in this course, is Beauvoir's rejection of the essentialist view consistent with Sartre's existentialism?

Provide your answer...

Answer

For Sartre, human beings have no essence that precedes their existence, actions and choices. Beauvoir's view that there is no feminine essence, or feminine nature, is consistent with Sartre's view, as nobody has an essence.

4. Why is her rejection of anti-essentialism a departure from Sartre's existentialism?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Whereas Sartre thinks that we are free in every situation, Beauvoir thinks that the situation of being a woman in this historical moment limits women's freedom, no matter what she chooses.

2 Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Now hear from Beauvoir herself. You will read some passages from the Introduction of *The Second Sex*, in which she lays out the main issues. First, you will see how she draws the distinction between essentialists and anti-essentialists. Note that she employs the term 'nominalist', which in this context means anti-essentialist, as defined earlier.



Figure 5 *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

Activity 2 Simone de Beauvoir – *The Second Sex* (Part A)

Allow approximately 20 minutes

Read the extract reproduced from *The Second Sex* then answer the following questions.

[W]hat is a woman? 'Tota mulier in utero: she is a womb,' some say. Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, 'They are not women', even though they have a uterus like the others. Everyone agrees there are females in the human species; today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that 'femininity is in jeopardy'; we are urged, 'Be women, stay women, become women.' So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant's vocabulary.

If there is no such thing today as femininity, it is because there never was. Does the word 'woman', then, have no content? It is what advocates of Enlightenment philosophy, rationalism or nominalism vigorously assert: women are, among human beings, merely those who are arbitrarily designated by the word 'woman'; American women in particular are inclined to think that woman as such no longer exists. If some backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to undergo psychoanalysis to get rid of this obsession. Referring to a book—a very irritating one at that—*Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, Dorothy Parker wrote: 'I cannot be fair about books that treat women as women. My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, whoever we are, should be considered as human beings.' But nominalism is a doctrine that falls a bit short; and it is easy for anti-feminists to show that women are not men. Certainly woman like man is a human being; but such an assertion is abstract; the fact is that every concrete human being is always uniquely situated. Rejecting the notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul or the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, blacks or women: this denial is not a

liberation for those concerned, but an inauthentic flight. Clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex.

Beauvoir, 1949 [2010], pp. 3-4

Notes: Beauvoir mentions a 'Platonic heaven'. 'Platonic' is the adjective derived from the name of the philosopher Plato. 'Platonic heaven' is the perfect realm of ideas, such as goodness and beauty. For Plato, the imperfect world that we perceive receives its characteristic from those ideas, but can never reach their perfection. For instance, we can see a beautiful object, which relates to the perfect idea of beauty, but never equals it. In the context of *The Second Sex*, this means that some people think that there is a perfect idea of woman, to which concrete women relate, and possibly aspire to. In the vocabulary that we have also used, this would be the 'essence' of woman, which essentialists think exists. 'Femininity' is also here an equivalent to the 'idea of woman' and 'essence of woman'.

Beauvoir also mentions Enlightenment philosophers and rationalism. The former lived in the eighteenth century, and advocated that each human being should use his or her reason in all aspects of life, rather than relying on authority, tradition or religious belief. Rationalism is a type of philosophy which emphasises the use of reason in the acquisition of knowledge, generally as opposed to the use of our senses. Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) was an American writer, poet and satirist.

Analyse Beauvoir's arguments, but also note her tone, looking out especially for irony when she presents ideas that she opposes.

1. Where in the text does Beauvoir describe the position that Gutting presents as 'essentialist'? What does she think of it?

Provide your answer...

Answer

In the first paragraph. She points out that in fact there is no clear idea of what 'femininity' (the essence or perfect idea of woman) is.

2. Where does Beauvoir describe here the position that Gutting presents as 'anti-essentialist', or nominalist? What does she think of it?

Provide your answer...

Answer

In the second paragraph she points out that many philosophers, as well as contemporary intellectuals and apparently American women, tend to deny that there is a feminine nature, or essence. She thinks that anti-essentialism/nominalism is wrong, because in fact women, as distinct from men, do exist.

3. In the last sentence, she employs the expression 'bad faith'. What does that last sentence mean?

Provide your answer...

Answer

The sentence means that a woman who claims that she lives as a human being in general, rather than a woman, deceives herself.

2.1 Women as the 'Other'



Figure 6 Philip Mendoza, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, twentieth century, gouache on paper.

Beauvoir claims that there is no such thing as the 'essence' of woman; in other words, she does not think that women are in a certain way that cannot change, or be changed. At the same time, she claims that a woman cannot escape, in current societies, her situation of being a woman. As you saw, she writes '[r]ejecting the notion of the eternal feminine ... is not to deny that there are today ... women'. But how can we then say that some human beings are women? You will see what Beauvoir says about this.

Activity 3 Simone de Beauvoir – *The Second Sex* (Part B)

Allow approximately 25 minutes

First read the whole of the extract, then re-read the paragraphs as directed in the questions below. Do not worry if some of the language and terminology in this reading is unclear.

And the truth is that anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests and occupations; these differences are perhaps superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that for the moment they exist in a strikingly obvious way. If the female function is not enough to define woman, and if we also reject the explanation of the 'eternal feminine', but if we accept, even temporarily, that there are women on the earth, we then have to ask: what is a woman? Merely stating the problem suggests an immediate answer to me. It is significant that I pose it. It would never occur to a man to write a book on the singular situation of males in humanity. If I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. The categories 'masculine' and 'feminine' appear as symmetrical in a formal way on town hall records or identification papers. The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word *vir* [Latin] being assimilated into the general meaning of the word 'homo'. Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to

her as a limitation, without reciprocity. I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: 'You think such and such a thing because you're a woman.' But I know my only defence is to answer, 'I think it because it is true,' thereby eliminating my subjectivity; it was out of the question to answer, 'And you think the contrary because you are a man,' because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity; a man is in his right by virtue of being man; it is the woman who is in the wrong.

Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularises it. 'The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' Aristotle said. 'We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas in his turn decreed that woman was an 'incomplete man', an 'incidental' being. This is what the Genesis story symbolises, where Eve appears as if drawn from Adam's 'supernumerary' bone, in Bossuet's words. Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being.

She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.

The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies... No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travellers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travellers to become vaguely hostile 'others'. Village people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious 'others'. For the native of a country, inhabitants of other countries are viewed as 'foreigners'; Jews are the 'others' for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes.

But the other consciousness has an opposing reciprocal claim: travelling, a local is shocked to realise that in neighbouring countries locals view him as a foreigner; between villages, clans, nations and classes there are wars, potlatches, agreements, treaties and struggles that remove the absolute meaning from the idea of the Other and bring out its relativity; whether one likes it or not, individuals and groups have no choice but to recognise the reciprocity of their relation. How is it, then, that between the sexes this reciprocity has not been put forward, that one of the terms has been asserted as the only essential one, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative, defining the latter as pure alterity? Why do women not contest male sovereignty? No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to

submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in woman come from?

Beauvoir, 1949 [2010], pp. 5-7

1. Re-read from the beginning to the end of the second paragraph (...an autonomous being) and explain why for Beauvoir 'woman' and 'man' are not two equivalent categories of human beings.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Men and women are not two equivalent categories of human beings because men are also seen as 'neutral' human beings, who represent the species beyond sexual differences. Women, on the other hand, are always seen as a particular type of human being. Even their bodies are regarded as a variation on a supposed neutral type, and their physiology is seen as meaningful, in a way that male physiology is not.

2. Re-read the remainder of Part B. Beauvoir explains that human beings regard themselves as a Subject, or essential, or 'the One', and pose other people as 'Others'. Groups do the same: people for instance often regard themselves as belonging to a nation, and regard people who do not belong to their nation as foreigners, or 'others'. Does Beauvoir think that the same happens to women and men, namely that men regard women as 'others' (not men) and women regard men as 'others' (not women) in a symmetrical way?

Provide your answer...

Answer

No. Groups of people, such as people belonging to a national group, are aware that they themselves are the 'others' of people belonging to another group. So, for instance, a French person would be aware that other nations regard her as a 'foreigner'. By contrast, women are always the 'other' of a supposedly neutral way of being human, which is seen as embodied by men.

2.2 The Second Sex and existentialism

You will now continue to explore Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.



Figure 7 Simone de Beauvoir's class of Philosophy, Lycée Molière, Paris, 1938.

Read the following extract, then answer the questions about it.

Even when her rights are recognised abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs. Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so on, and they hold the most important positions. In addition to their concrete power they are invested with a prestige whose tradition is reinforced by the child's whole education: the present incorporates the past, and in the past all history was made by males. At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men: men have no doubt about this, and women barely doubt it. Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them. Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence: along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help. Indeed, beside every individual's claim to assert himself as subject—an ethical claim—lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing: it is a pernicious path because the individual, passive, alienated and lost, is prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, robbed of all worth. But it is an easy path: the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence are thus avoided. The man who sets the woman up as an Other will thus find in her a deep complicity. Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as Other.

Beauvoir, 1949 [2010], pp. 9-10

The Second Sex develops several existentialist ideas. In the passage you have just read, Beauvoir expresses some ideas in a way that may not be clear to the reader who is not very familiar with existential philosophy. In particular, she writes about 'the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help'; 'the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing'; and the 'anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence'. Let us take these ideas in turn.

What is '*the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help*'? It is not important for our purposes that you understand the adjective 'metaphysical', derived from metaphysics, a branch of philosophy. Here, just take it to mean that the risk affects the very nature of the individual's existence. Beauvoir refers to the existentialist conception of human beings as free, as seen above. Why for her do goals have to be invented 'without help'? This is because, like Sartre, she thinks that there are no values outside ourselves; therefore nobody can tell us which goals are worthy and which are not.

Human beings have no predetermined destiny; human existence has no meaning outside the meaning that we create ourselves. For existentialist philosophers, human beings can create goals and meanings because they are free. We have also seen that this freedom is a 'heavy responsibility', and that in fact for Sartre 'we are condemned to be free'. In other words, it is often easier to pretend that we have no choice, rather than make difficult decisions and assume the responsibility of their consequences.

Beauvoir agrees with Sartre that freedom is a heavy responsibility. In the passage that you have read, she claims that it is characteristic of the female condition to avoid the risk that the exercise of freedom involves. Precisely because freedom is such a heavy burden, any human being is tempted '*to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing*'. Like Sartre, Beauvoir thinks that if human beings regard themselves as having a pre-determined nature and purpose, they make themselves into things. As explained in the video, [Jean-Paul Sartre and Existential Choice](#), for Sartre, and for Beauvoir, an object like a penknife is unlike a human being, as it has been designed to be a certain way and to serve a determined purpose. However, for Beauvoir, girls are raised to accept the (false) idea that being a woman in the way that society, upbringing and history suggest, is an inescapable condition. Women are 'prey to a foreign will' – a will other their own – as they accept the ideas and goals that have been imposed on them. However, she writes that this is an 'easy path': once again it is easier to avoid the 'heavy responsibility' of freedom than to embrace it.

Activity 4 Simone de Beauvoir – The Second Sex (Part C)

Allow approximately 25 minutes

1. At the end of the excerpt, Beauvoir lists three reasons why a woman does not exercise her freedom. What are these?

Beauvoir explains that it is an easy path to accept one's condition as unchangeable, and to submit to other people's wills because it avoids '*the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence*'. To live 'authentically', for existentialists, is the opposite of living in bad faith: it means to live without self-deception, embracing one's freedom and taking responsibility for one's actions. This freedom is not easy to embrace, in fact it produces a sense of 'anguish'. 'Anguish' is another key term of existentialist philosophy, which aims to describe the feeling associated with carrying the responsibility of choice without the help of objective values, authorities who can guide you, or religious beliefs.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Beauvoir claims that a woman does not exercise her freedom because she lacks the 'concrete means' to do so; because she senses 'a necessary link' connecting her to a man in an asymmetrical relation; and because she 'often derives satisfaction from her role as Other'.

2. Some of the reasons why women do not embrace freedom appear not to depend on women's refusal to exercise their freedom, but rather on factors over which they have little or no control. What are these, in your reading?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Economic reasons are important, as women have less money and less significant jobs; power, which probably includes political, social and cultural power. Beauvoir also writes that this power is invested with prestige: men and their opinions have a social weight and authority that women's lack. Education is another important factor. Girls and boys are taught to respect the prestige that men carry. Beauvoir also mentions that neither men nor women doubt that the world belongs to the former.

3. Recall that Gary Gutting writes that Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, 'recognizes that some features of [a woman's] situation may well be obstacles to [her] freedom no matter how [she] choose[s]'. Do you think that in the excerpt you have just read there is some evidence in favour of Gutting's interpretation?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Yes. Beauvoir shows that women find themselves in a world that has been shaped by men, who have greater economic and political power. They do not appear even to know that things could be different, due to their situation and their upbringing.

2.3 Comparison with ethnic minorities

In the following extract, Simone de Beauvoir argues that forms of discrimination based on race, class or sex are ultimately similar, although their aims differ. She describes the views, including extremely violent ones, of racist, anti-Semite and sexist people. It goes without saying that in all her work she argued and fought against them.

Activity 5 Simone de Beauvoir – The Second Sex (Part D)

Allow approximately 15 minutes

To prove women's inferiority, antifeminists began to draw not only, as before, on religion, philosophy and theology, but also on science: biology, experimental psychology, and so forth. At most they were willing to grant 'separate but equal status' to the other sex. That winning formula is most significant: it is exactly that formula the Jim Crow laws put into practice with regard to black Americans; this so-called egalitarian segregation served only to introduce the most extreme forms of discrimination. This convergence is in no way pure chance: whether it is race, caste, class or sex reduced to an inferior condition, the justification process is the same. 'The eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul' or 'the Jewish character'. However, the Jewish problem on the whole is very different from the two others: for the anti-Semite, the Jew is more an enemy than an inferior and

no place on this earth is recognised as his own; it would be preferable to see him annihilated. But there are deep analogies between the situations of women and blacks: both are liberated today from the same paternalism, and the former master caste wants to keep them 'in their place', that is, the place chosen for them; in both cases, they praise, more or less sincerely, the virtues of the 'good black', the carefree, childlike, merry soul of the resigned black, and the woman who is a 'true woman'—frivolous, infantile, irresponsible, the woman subjugated to man. In both cases, the ruling caste bases its argument on the state of affairs it created itself. The familiar line from George Bernard Shaw sums it up: 'The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes.' The same vicious circle can be found in all analogous circumstances: when an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they are inferior. But the scope of the verb to be must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: to be is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself. Yes, women in general are today inferior to men; that is, their situation provides them with fewer possibilities: the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated.

Beauvoir, 1949 [2010], pp. 12-13

Read the extract and consider the similarities that Beauvoir draws between the condition of women and that of black people.

Provide your answer...

Answer

For Beauvoir, both women and black people have been assigned particular ways of being ('carefree' black person; 'frivolous' woman), and cannot be accepted if they do not conform to those models or stereotypes. Both women and black people have been kept in situations of inferiority, and they have had far fewer opportunities. For these reasons, Beauvoir argues, they are still inferior. In other words, their inferiority, in both cases, has been created.

Conclusion

In this course, you have learned some of the main ideas of existential philosophy, particularly those of Simone de Beauvoir. You have learned that, from the assumption that there is no God who has created human beings, existentialists including Sartre and Beauvoir conclude that human beings have no essence, unlike objects. Since they have no pre-determined nature, human beings are free, and they create themselves through their choices and actions. For existentialists, to deny that we are free means to be in 'bad faith'. You learned that Sartre believed the 'Other' makes a person aware that other people see him as a determined being, an object.

Simone de Beauvoir shares with Sartre this general picture, but also shows that women in current society are always the 'Other'. They are seen, and often see themselves, as having a pre-determined nature, that is as being 'feminine' and having fixed characteristics. Beauvoir criticises this state of affairs, but also emphasises that women find themselves in a situation which often prevents them from being free to create themselves. Beauvoir intended her philosophy as means and justification of revolutionary changes in the conditions of human beings in general, but also thought that women and black people in white majority societies experience specific constraints to their freedom and self-creation.



Figure 8 Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris, c.1955.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A113 Revolutions](#) and is also one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. [Learn more about these OpenLearn courses.](#)

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