

What is Beauvoir's answer to the question "what is a woman?" What role does 'situation' play in her account?

In this essay I will be explaining Simone de Beauvoir's approach in answering the question of 'what is a woman?'. In her book 'The second sex', Beauvoir made the realization that there are discrepancies in the representation of views that dominate society between men and women. She set out to find where these discrepancies originate, determine if they are fair and believes a lack of equal freedom leads to inequality. To begin with, I will explain why the question 'what is a woman?' is posed and what it means. I will then elaborate on Beauvoir's theory on women being 'Other'. Historically, women have been bound to their homes due to the obligation of taking care of their children and the vast amount of rudimentary household tasks. In the second part of this essay, I will explain how this situation for women has affected societies perception of them and how it has caused them to be characterized as the inferior sex. I will also explain Beauvoir's view that the characterizations of the feminine nature are gross misinterpretations, and these characterizations are instead representative of the oppressed acting in defiance.

The first clarification Beauvoir makes in defining 'what is a woman' is the difference between being biologically female and identifying (or being recognized) as a woman. She explains there is obviously no argument about whether a human being is male or female. It is biologically apparent. But to be deemed a 'woman' is independent of a person's biological reproductive system. This solidifies the fact that the question of what it means to be a woman is philosophical. Beauvoir points out that the defining characteristics of what makes a woman is so ambiguous it can be questioned whether women even exist and if they will continue to exist in the future, "it is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold." (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 23). To be called a woman, one must have the attributes of femininity, but what exactly those attributes are or how to attain them is ambiguous. What is apparent to Beauvoir is that women are not proud of their femininity, it is often a source of shame, accompanied with the feeling that they lack qualities. She provides some examples where women actively attempt to adopt masculine attributes to feel equal their male counterparts, "She was denying her feminine frailty; but it was for the love of a militant man she wanted to be equal to" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 24). The reason why 'femininity' is deemed inferior is a male proposition. To be a male is to not be a female. For a male to adopt attributes of a woman he becomes less of a man and is considered inferior to his more masculine male counterparts. Beauvoir provides examples of where this view was held quite strongly in ancient times. She quotes Aristotle, "The female is female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities. We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 25).

Men also consider women to be burdened by her body. It is believed that a woman is rendered to subjectivity because her anatomy includes a uterus and ovaries which produces hormones that cause irrationality. Beauvoir points out that men tend to forget that their body also produce hormones, but for some mystical reason those hormones do not condemn men to subjectivity. The question then remains, why is the mind of a woman subjective and that of a man considered objective? The theory Beauvoir creates to explain this phenomenon stems from a deep rooted

inherent human concept, alterity. That is the incentive of humans to define their familiar counterparts as 'us', and those who are not familiar are 'them'. In the terminology Beauvoir uses the familiar counterparts are 'Self' or 'One' and those who are not familiar are 'Others'. A very basic example of this is nationalism. All over the world people have divided up the landscape into areas called 'countries' where they can collectively call themselves by a certain name which becomes their 'nationality'. The people situated beyond their arbitrary borders are the 'others'. Throughout history it is apparent that those deemed as other are considered hostile. Wars are invoked for a variety of reasons that can all be attributed to the discrepancies in identities. The boundary of who 'self' and 'others' are not absolute. People divide themselves into groups within groups. For example, the global population is divided into countries. The people occupying the countries are divided into different races. Those same people are also divided by class, by occupation, family connections, friends etc. One of these divisions is gender. And, according to Beauvoir, it is the women who are classed as 'other'. One of her examples that makes this apparent is how women are viewed to symbolize sex. Women are "the sex" only from the male perspective. There is no special connection between women and sex that differs in any significant way from men and sex, yet it is the woman who is considered to represent sex. The perspective of the woman that 'man is sex' is ignored and not accepted by society. How only the perspective of the male is considered the truth supports the view that women are the Other. It is that men see their perspective as the absolute truth, they believe they see the world through the unbiased eye. Men define themselves, men define women, and women accept the definition that men have given them. The view of a woman is considered inessential because it is biased in relation to the man. Beauvoir states "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is 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" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 26). Throughout history men have been able to convince women of their inferiority via religion. They claim that their superiority was willed by the Gods, and the religious scripts proves so. They also turn to the use of ancient mythology to highlight the 'evidence' of their superiority. Beauvoir points out that the definition of superior is vastly ambiguous. An example she uses to explain this is men's conviction that because they have greater strength they must be superior. But what exactly constitutes strength? If one believes strength relates directly to the muscles of the body being strong, then men have more strength. But if strength is interpreted to mean endurance or longevity, then it is the women who have greater strength.

What is not obvious is why women have accepted this position of Other. According to Hegel, the reciprocal should also be true, that women must then consider men the Other and themselves as One, however, this is not the case. Women have collectively submitted to being the Other. Thus Beauvoir poses the question, "Where does this submission in woman come from?" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 27). The first realization Beauvoir makes is that woman as a collective do not have a 'group identity'. A group identity is where a collective share a sense of belonging to a group. This is via a common identity such as race or religion, etc. People who identify as Jewish or Proletarians say 'we', they refer to themselves as a common. Women do not refer to themselves, they don't identify as 'we'. Beauvoir theorizes that this is because women do not share a common history as a collective. Women did not at some point band together as a group and call themselves 'women' as an opposition to men. It was the men who posited themselves as the superior and referred to the other as 'woman'. This label has thus been accepted and left uncontested. Beauvoir explains that for a group of people to contest against being Other they must have the means to be able to organize themselves as a group and together take on a role of opposition. Women lack this ability. Generally people with a group identity have their own place in society, for example they have their own communities where they live together, or they are able to band together over a common interest.

Women, however, do not share a common community. They live dispersed among men, bound to their homes, and do not identify with each other. What is meant by 'bound to their homes' and how it renders them inactive is explained later in this essay. It is this reason, Beauvoir believes, that women have remained passive and unable to take claim as opposition to strive to be seen as One or equal.

Now I will explain Beauvoir's take on how woman's situation plays a role in shaping her character and thus in defining what is considered to be a woman. Women in society are perceived to have certain negative characteristics. Beauvoir states the characteristics that society deems to be that of the feminine, "She is argumentative, she is cautious and petty, she does not have the sense either of truth or of accuracy, she lacks morality, she is vulgarly self-serving, selfish, she is a liar and an actress" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 724). She reasons that, although some of these have some truth to them, it is not due to the inherent nature of women, it is due to their specific situation that they have been forced into by society that have caused them to adopt traits like these as an act of defiance.

Women, according to Beauvoir, live in a unique situation that differs vastly from men, which causes them to *appear* to have an inherent different character than men. By situation it is meant that women, collectively, live in the world with completely different experiences than men with far different priorities and needs. Women, throughout the course of history, have been bound to their homes. Women have been forced to devote their existence to take care of their family and do monotonous household tasks. Women are not free to engage and experience the external world. The 'external world' is a term I will use to refer to the world that men live in that women are excluded from. Beauvoir points out that women are busy, just like the men, but their tasks are mundane, rudimentary, and repetitive. Women do not have the time nor are able to gain the experience to contemplate or engage in activities that men consider 'worthy'. This is what Beauvoir believes to be the root cause of why the growth of women as a collective has stifled and which has caused the unfair criticism from men who thus have deemed the nature of woman to be inferior. Beauvoir argues that it is true that women under these conditions *are* inferior, but it is not due to the inferiority of their inherent nature, it is due to their lack of freedom. Beauvoir states, "A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 731).

One of the consequences that women face from being stuck in their homes is their ignorance to the external world. The masculine universe is a mystery to women. And they have no power to act in it. Women see the things beyond their homes to be out of their control. They do not have the knowledge to be able to reason what is possible or impossible, what is likely or unlikely and thus they entertain or worry about all outcomes equally. This, to Beauvoir, is the source of the powerlessness women feel; their lack of knowledge and their inability to properly predict outcomes. This renders women to ruminate obscure catastrophes and due to their powerlessness their only resort is to worry or complain. Beauvoir argues that this lack of action and powerlessness also cannot be attributed to the nature of women. Again, she believes it is due to a lack of freedom. The lack of freedom to act. She states, "A free individual takes the blame for his failures on himself, he takes responsibility for them: but what happens to the woman comes from others, it is others who are responsible for her misfortune" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 732). The reason why women do not feel responsible for their misfortunes is because they lack any power to take action. Beauvoir believes that if women are not forced into this position of powerlessness, women know how to be as capable as a man in any undertaking.

Interestingly, Beauvoir takes on the position that she believes women aren't as powerless as they are led to believe. Beauvoir recognises the deep dependence men have on women, which she questions why this has not liberated women. She states, "Biological need – sexual desire and desire for posterity – which makes the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 29). Men are highly dependent on women to keep their societies populated and prosperous. Women take care of the future generations, a service that has remained extremely under-appreciated and under-valued. Men cannot act freely as they do if their home lives are not organised. Yet women do not take advantage of this dependence men have on them. Beauvoir reasons that, in some ways, women are content with their position. When one fights for freedom and achieves it, they are left with the responsibility to make an authentic existence for themselves, with no external help. In exchange for their submission to dependence, they omit the responsibility that comes with independence.

Women are still deeply frustrated by their powerlessness and submission. In an act of protest women seek to gain control over their lives by other, more superficial, means. This is often at the expense of their husbands, which they see to embody the external world that they are unjustly excluded from. Beauvoir states, "He is privy to a privilege she constantly resents as an injustice" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 734). Often women feel satisfaction from making their husbands pay for their privilege of being a man. The method in which women make men pay is quite subtle and often wrongly attributed to the 'female nature'. Such as infidelity, unpunctuality, a spendthrift and actively blaming their husbands for adversities out of their control. Beauvoir realises that these aren't inherently feminine traits, but they are actually small acts of protest by the oppressed.

In conclusion, Beauvoir does not seem to have a direct answer to the question 'what is a woman?'. Instead Beauvoir has created a foundation of reasoning for why it seems that women have certain characteristics that differentiates them from men. To Beauvoir it was important to ask this question because it was evident in society that being female was not enough to be considered a 'true woman'. But to determine what defines a true woman is completely arbitrary. It seems to Beauvoir that men and women aren't inherently all that different, as she often argues throughout her book that if men and women are given equal opportunity there is no logical reason to think women will not be as capable as men in any undertaking. There is only one thing that will forever differentiate the experience of women from men and that is the bearing of life. Beauvoir, however, does not give explanation of how to liberate women when it is this fundamental difference that plays a major role in how women are situated so differently from men. Due to this biological fact, a woman's body is considered a burden, condemning her to a rudimentary mundane life. Woman's inability to escape their responsibilities in their homes result in them being dependent on the man, thus men form the conclusion that women must be the inferior sex. Beauvoir realises this causes women to feel powerless in their lives, they lack control. In an attempt to regain power of the things they can control, they act out against their husbands in defiance, to make him 'pay' for being a privileged man. Beauvoir argues that these are not characteristic feminine traits, these are the traits of the oppressed.

References

Beauvoir, S. d. (2011). *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.