

## Lecture 4

Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986)

1925-9 Studies at Ecole Normale Superieure  
(becomes Sartre's partner)

1930's Teaches at Lycées

1947 *An Ethics of Ambiguity*

1949 *The Second Sex*

Also wrote: novels, plays, autobiography, essays.

### 2. 1947 *An Ethics of Ambiguity*

Very Sartrean

'Ambiguity' = Transcendence + Situatedness

Ethics: - situated freedom

### 3. Sartre on women in *B&N*

Young woman in 'bad faith' (55-6)

Woman's body as body of 'the other' (390ff.)

Female sexuality as 'slimy appropriation' (613-4)

### 4. 1949 *The Second Sex*

Too long!

Iffy translation

Basic thesis: woman is 'the other'

(SdeB broadly assumes Sartre's account of a basic conflict between 'subject' and 'object'; but holds that in this case no Sartrean reversal of roles takes place)

### 5. 'What is a woman?'

No simple 'essence' (14)

Why the question? (compare: what is a man?)(15)

Woman as 'the inessential ..... the other' (16)

But why no easy Sartrean reversal? (18-9)

Because of the social bond (19-20)

But more needs to be said ....

## 6. S de B's perspective

'Existentialist ethics' (28-9)

'.. our perspective is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the 'en-soi' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions ....

Now what particularly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilise her as an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another consciousness which is essential and sovereign.'

So how does a 'free and autonomous' woman find herself confined to the role of the Other? (29)

(cf Rousseau's question:

*Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.)*

Her concern is with liberty, not happiness (29)

## 7. Does Biology explain this?

No - against 'vague naturalism' (66)

Humanity – defined by possibilities (transcendence) (66)

Body as 'situation' (66);

but it is our ends which define the significance of this situation - the existential significance of 'weakness' (67)

Mitsein (67) - Inescapability of society (68-9)

## 8. Does psychoanalysis explain this?

No – Freud assumes masculine perspective ('sovereignty of the father') and takes male libido, anatomy and sexuality as the primary case of desire. (So woman is understood only as – the other) (80-1)

SdeB's emphasis on choice and value (76-7)

Hence: existential significance of sexuality (77): sexuality is a 'concrete expression of existence'.

The 'ambiguity' of human reality: to be at once with others (*Mitsein*) and individual (for-onself)

And: need for women to find their free types of sexuality (82-3)

'I shall place woman in a world of values and give her behaviour a dimension of liberty. I believe that she has the power to choose between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as an object ...' (82)

Psychoanalysis 'never gives more than an inauthentic picture, and for the inauthentic there can hardly be found any other criterion than normality' (82)

9. Does Marxism explain this?

No – neither the division of labour nor the introduction of private property account for the fate of women (85-8)

And it's absurd to assimilate human reproduction to material production (89-90)

Hence: reaffirmation of her existentialist perspective –

10.

'Underlying all individual drama, as it underlies the economic history of mankind, there is an existentialist foundation that alone enables us to understand in its unity that particular form of being which we call a human life' (91)

11. From negative to positive

Three main claims:

(i) Creative freedom ('bursting out of the present' and opening up the future') as characteristically exemplified by masculine activities (94)

(Childbirth and rearing don't count: why not?)

(ii) Importance of danger in giving one consciousness of one's own freedom (95-6)

(But childbirth used to be very dangerous)

(iii) Transposition of the Hegelian master/slave argument to the relation of man to woman (96-7).

12. The Hegelian argument

Reflective self-consciousness requires an other (171)

(self-respect requires mutual respect)

The other cannot be Nature (171); it must be another consciousness, a consciousness of me (171)

Danger of conflict (172) (why?)

Possibility of free recognition (172) – 'man's highest achievement' and 'his true nature' (172)

But this is difficult – hence the easy option:

### 13. The masculine dream

‘He dreams of quiet in disquiet and of an opaque plenitude that nevertheless would be endowed with consciousness. This dream incarnated is precisely woman; she is the wished-for intermediary between nature, the stranger to man, and the fellow being who is too closely identical. She opposes him with neither the hostile silence of nature nor the hard requirement of a reciprocal relation; through a unique privilege she is a conscious being and yet it seems possible to possess her in the flesh. Thanks to her, there is a means for escaping that implacable dialectic of master and slave which has its source in the reciprocity that exists between free beings.’ (172)

### 14. Evidence? - Typical masculine myths of women

‘Thus the ideal of the average Western man is a woman who freely accepts his domination, who does not accept his ideas without discussion, but who yields to his arguments, who resists him intelligently and ends by being convinced. The greater his pride, the more dangerous he likes his adventures to be: it is much more splendid to conquer Penthesilea than it is to marry a yielding Cinderella ....

Man’s true victory ... lies just in this: that woman freely recognises him as her destiny’ (216)

### 15 . Literary Representations – Lawrence?

Birkin and Ursula – the ideal reciprocity?  
But Birkin’s perspective dominates

### 16. Stendhal - Clearly S de B’s favourite

‘Test, reward, judge, friend – woman truly is in Stendhal what Hegel was for a moment tempted to make of her: that other consciousness which in reciprocal recognition gives to the other subject the same truth that she receives from him. ....

But all this presupposes that woman is not pure alterity: she is a subject in her own right. Stendhal never limits himself to describing his heroines as functions of his heroes: he gives them a destiny of their own. He has attempted a still rarer enterprise, one that I believe no novelist has before undertaken: he has projected himself into a female character’ (277)

## 17 'Women's situation'

'She is not familiar with the use of masculine logic. .. It is an instrument that she hardly has occasion to use. A syllogism is of no help in making a successful mayonnaise, nor in quieting a child in tears; masculine reasoning is quite inadequate to the reality with which she deals' ! (610-1)

Complicity of some women in their own oppression:

'she is for him: pleasure, company ...; 'he is for her the meaning, justification of existence' (731)

## 18. Conclusion

Try to 'assume the ambiguity' of existence with a clear-sighted modesty (737)

For women: relinquish the Hegelian role as double and mediator (739)

But preserve many differences (740)

## 19. Comments – what good here?

Broadly existential, anti-reductive, perspective

Appropriation of Hegel's Master/Slave argument

## 20. Comments – what's not so good?

(i) SdeB accepts the (masculine) association of positive value with 'transcendence' – active creative freedom (even danger); and the judgment that traditional activities of women, esp. child-bearing and rearing, are not of this kind and therefore are of less value.

- i.e. 'public life' is worthwhile, 'private life' is worthless.

(ii) SdeB accepts the Hegelian model of conflict as fundamental to life with others; contrast with those who hold that individual self-consciousness always presupposes intersubjective shared consciousness (conversation vs solitary thinker).