**Simone de Beauvoir, Introduction to *The Second Sex***

Her book is an analysis and critique of 1) the fact that the essence and role of woman has been constructed, not determined by nature or God, 2) how this essence and role has been constructed and justified in bad faith by men, and 3) how and why women have accepted their constructed role as Other.

The aim of showing that these gender roles—along with the other roles constructed for marginalized Others in society—are constructed is to then be able to deconstruct them in order to reconstruct them in more positive and just ways.

If something or someone is the way they are because of a law of nature or God, then there is no possibility of changing it—one must simply accept the fact. No one would try to change the law of gravity, or try to get bears to stop eating salmon, or change the arithmetical fact that 2+2=4. If we believe that the nature of woman is determined by her biology, then one has no choice in the matter—one must simply accept this fact.

But why would woman’s nature be determined by biology but not a man’s? Why should woman be defined as “womb” (xli), but a man be defined by his mind and his thinking?

Furthermore, the biological and social sciences have already shown that there are no unchangeable, fixed entities that determine fixed characteristics, and even in genetic theory we know that genes are only half of the story. Genes need the proper environment or situation in order to be expressed. Beauvoir writes: “The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a situation” (xlii).

So how has woman been constructed? How has man been constructed?

She argues that man represents “the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general” (xliii). Man is the standard, the norm, or the One. He is a Subject or a Self.

Woman, on the other hand, is constructed as what man *is not.* She has only a *negative identity, that is, she is not-man, not-standard, not-the norm.* She is the Other and an object.

See the important passages about this on page xliv (44).

Beauvoir notes that the Other is a fundamental category of human thought (xlv); the Other is an epistemological category. In order to identify anything, we have to differentiate it from what it is not. Opposites help us differentiate one thing from another. This is how group identity is formed too. “Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself” (xlv). This is evident in the role that friendly rivalries play between schools or teams in building group cohesion and identity.

Who is the One and who is the Other is actually arbitrary and often depends on who has power in a particular circumstance—the power of the majority, the power of more opportunity, etc. You may find that at home you are the One, but when you go abroad people see you as the Other!

Binary oppositions like Self-Other, Subject-Object, Light-Dark, Man-Woman, etc. are part of a deeper unity; they actually belong together. However, such dualistic thinking often leads to the tendency to place one side of the opposition above the other. A hierarchy is formed in which one side is seen as superior and the other inferior, even though with more thoughtful reflection one sees how opposites actually work together and need one another.

Instead of cooperation we get competition. But this does not have to be.

On xlvi (46), Beauvoir asks why women have consented to be the Other.

She begins the analysis by showing that women’s position as Other is different from other Others; there is no historical moment, no revolutionary moment, that we can point to—like we can with the Jewish people, or with African-Americans—at which they became Others.

Women have always been tied to men; their history and religion has always been shared. So it appears as if their situation of subjugation has always been the norm—this makes it harder to see beyond.

Second: to decline to be the Other represents an extreme economic and metaphysical risk (l). They risk the advantages and privileges given to them by their “masters” as well as having to justify their own existence to others on their own terms and possibly failing. There is an existential anxiety and despair in this situation that women face. A certain security is gained, but at the cost of freedom, and becoming an object or thing.

Beauvoir writes: “Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence” (l).

She then analyzes the pseudo-arguments given to justify the inferiority of women and the roles given to them. She gives a lot of evidence from literature in many fields—science, philosophy, anthropology, theology, etc.—to show how men have constructed the role of woman as inferior in order to justify withholding rights to vote, to be educated, to work in many fields, to hold public office, to own land and other property, etc. (li-lii).

Beauvoir then makes an analogy with African-Americans and their constructed role as Other. She shows that the oppressing class bases its argument for the inferiority of the Other on circumstances that the oppressing class itself has created, but in bad faith refuses to acknowledge and pretends is a law of nature—or just “the way things are.”

Beauvoir quotes George Bernard Shaw in this important passage: “In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, ‘The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy; and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes.’ This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he *is* inferior” (liii).

But what does she mean by “inferior” and “superior” here? And what would “equal” mean?

We understand this use of the term when she says, “Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?” (liii).

Inferiority is determined by the number of possibilities you have to pursue in order to create yourself—the number of crayons in your box, so to speak. Superiority and equality are also determined by the number of possibilities for self-creation, that is, the number of possibilities we have to *be free.*

Beauvoir contends that “we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh” (lvii). Thus, she writes, “we shall pass judgment on institutions according to their effectiveness in giving concrete opportunities to individuals” (lviii). Equal opportunities is the only sense in which we can talk about equality; it’s up to the individual to create themselves and their world with them, and what they create will be different.