

What is implied in the question “What is a woman”?

Jingyun (Selina) Qian

HUM103

October 4, 2019

### The Difficult Passage

“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 male in humanity. If I want to identify 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 sets 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... Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Engagement Passage

“The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size... Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity — and this at the same rate at which it produces commodity in general... Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the worker... So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work... the worker becomes a servant of his object, first, in that he receives an object of labor, i.e. in that he receives work, and secondly, in that he receives means of subsistence. This enable him to exist, first as a worker; and secondly, as a physical subject.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, 25. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic And Philosophic Manuscripts Of 1844*, 28-29. New York: International Publishers [1964. Print.

The difficult passage I selected from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* contains many sweeping words, like "never", "positive", "negative", and "absolute", which convey very binary and strong ideas. For example, she says that "the man represents both the positive and the neuter", and "woman is the negative." Why does de Beauvoir assume that men-women relationships are completely adversarial and non-negotiable? After pointing out women and men are assigned to two separate categories, de Beauvoir attempts to argue that men have devised a "pernicious path" and that individuals who are "passive, alienated and lost" are "prey to a foreign will."<sup>3</sup> To paraphrase her words, the weaker class (women) are forced into a system created by men for their benefits and to women's detriment. The relationships between men and women in de Beauvoir's passage resembles Karl Marx's discussion about the worker and capitalists.

In *Economic and Philosophy Manuscript of 1844*, Marx points out that "the worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object,"<sup>4</sup> and "the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes."<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Marx contends that the world is divided into two categories: the property owner and the property-less worker, which is comparable to men and women, men being analogous to the property owner and women to the property-less worker. The property owner—capitalist—appropriates the production of the worker, which is the worker's "means of subsistence."<sup>6</sup> Moreover "he (the worker) puts his life into it."<sup>7</sup> This means that the worker devotes his life to a product that does not belong to him, that is, an "alien object". As a result, the more the worker works, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, 30. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic And Philosophic Manuscripts Of 1844*, 29. New York: International Publishers [1964. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> ibid

more he contributes to an "alien world of objects which he creates against himself."<sup>8</sup> By using "an alien world against himself", I mean that the capitalist appropriates the capital the workers produce in the way that benefits the capitalist and traps the worker into a cycle in which the worker "spends" his physical and intellectual resources to maintain a "world of objects" that reinforce the power of capitalists. Therefore the "alien world" is designed against the worker.

Let's put this idea back to the male-female structure de Beauvoir is arguing. De Beauvoir claims that "biological need—sexual desire and desire for posterity—which makes the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially."<sup>9</sup> Men benefit from women's fertility, just as the capitalist benefits from the worker's products, because their offspring, which are produced and raised through women's labor—in a traditionally patriarchal society—must defer to the father's authority. To put into Marx's terms, the woman's fertility, and the life she gives birth to, are all alien objects to her, belonging to men and the society, which do not change her subservient in relation to men. This reinforces her alienation and subordination to men even more, because she is contributing to a world that benefits them that against her. In another word, as de Beauvoir describes "It's a pernicious path." In this scheme, women are like poor "prey" who lack the power to challenge the forces that lead her to the "pernicious path".

Furthermore, de Beauvoir says that "[the scheme] always plays in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed." She provides examples to this theory but does not explain why. If a woman has no economic resources other than those of her husband, she is forced to stay married for her "means of subsistence," just as Marx's workers must work in order to stay alive. In de Beauvoir's words, "Master and slave are also (meaning men and women are

---

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, 29. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

in this kind of relationship too) linked by a reciprocal economic need that does not free the slave.”<sup>10</sup> Women need men as an economic source as slaves need the masters, and workers need work. Therefore, women have to cling to men who allow them to fulfill their basic need to live. This ensures that the “pernicious path” never ends, because survival is a human instinct.

Let me combine two paragraphs together. By using “positive” and “negative” to describe men and women, de Beauvoir proposes that the two opposing diverse categories lead to the result that “the two sexes have never divided the world up equally.”<sup>11</sup> Combined with Marx’s interpretation about the scheme devised “in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed”, de Beauvoir’s assumption that men have a built up a rigid system to suppress women becomes clearer and more nuanced.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, 29. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

I think the idea is expressed clearly in the previous paragraphs, yet the paragraph below is more or less not clear.

Before the passage in question, de Beauvoir seriously wants to know “What is a woman?”.

She then announces: “‘I am a woman’; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth.”

What other assertions? Beyond the assertions de Beauvoir makes that women are assumed to be “negative,” she also describes women as individuals who are “passive, alienated and lost.”

The word “lost”, according to de Beauvoir (?), suggests that they have no clear life purpose outside their roles as mothers and wives, which is the destiny assigned to them by men. She suggests that, to men, “the woman who is a ‘true woman’ [is] frivolous, infantile,

irresponsible, the woman subjugated to man.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I can infer that de Beauvoir’s

“other assertions” also implies that women are objectified by men and seen as no more than a static object without individual desires. To de Beauvoir, women do not decide who to

become, which is a denial to human’s natural desire for “transcendence” and “freedom.”<sup>13</sup>

Marx expands these ideas when he differentiates between “animal functions” and “genuinely human function.”<sup>14</sup> Marx suggests that humans are different from animals because they aspire

more than just to exist. Unlike the animal who can only accepts the gene or natural force on their decisions, the “genuinely function” is chosen by self-inventing of individuals. An

example Marx provides is that work satisfies only the basic “means of subsistence”, and

never allows one to realize a “means of life” other than work. In Marx’s word: “the worker therefore feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.”<sup>15</sup> The worker

does not feel himself as a human when doing work, which does not satisfy his “genuinely human function,” the means of life other than work. Returning to de Beauvoir, women are

---

<sup>12</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, 32-33. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*,37

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

assigned by men with certain life-purposes, forced on them by social and family conventions. As with workers, these narrow life purposes act as “animal function” that keep women from thinking and deciding their life purposes as fully as human. Women don’t think for their possibilities if they content the role of mothers and wives. Her “genuinely human function”, or in de Beauvoir’s words, her “autonomous freedom of transcendence”, is trapped in the singular identity she is imposed as.

By asking the question “what is a woman?”, we look though a hierarchical suppression imposed on female who suffers not only on a lack of social-power autonomy, but also severe objectification of her own freedom. Yet unexplained by Marx, the suppression on women gives them material advantage, which avoids the “anguish” of freedom for some women. We must always be alert to the possibility of *self*-objectification via complicity.

Bibliography

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. New York: Vintage, 2011.

Karl, Marx. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts Of 1844, 28-35. New York: International Publishers [1964. Print.