

Simone de Beauvoir on Freedom

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Abstract

While accepting ontological freedom, anchored in her existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir also shows how, material conditions limit women's freedom. I suggest we read de Beauvoir's account of freedom, not only alongside existentialism but importantly Marxism. De Beauvoir's account makes clear that although women's situation allows for some choices, the range of possibilities open to them is different from, and more restricted than the majority of men. Her notion of freedom is gendered. Freedom varies with circumstances, and women's freedom in society is curtailed. She draws attention to the ways in which social position can produce damaging situations of alienation and oppression. Marx stressed that in all circumstances agency was possible but constrained by circumstances. He was also concerned with what changes in material conditions would enable the proletariat to have possibilities which would reduce alienation and facilitate human potential. De Beauvoir took up this issue with regard to women. She however, adds the way in which ideologies of femininity become *internalised* and frame the possibilities which seem open to women. I argue, there is no neat distinction between ontological and practical freedom in de Beauvoir's account, and that changes in circumstances can improve ontological freedom.

Introduction

Toril Moi (1999: viii) suggests, "freedom – not identity, difference or equality – is the fundamental concept in de Beauvoir's feminism." Simone de Beauvoir insists that women and men are free human beings capable of independent, creative action. However, women's situation, historically, economically, biologically and psychologically conspire to render them as inferior oppressed beings, made into objects; which leaves a woman's road to liberation a complicated issue.

For Moi, *The Second Sex* (1949), "provides a brilliant starting point for future feminist investigations of the body, agency and freedom." (Moi 1999: 83) The basis of this article is to explore de Beauvoir's view of freedom and

agency for women, and how she argues, their freedom in society is curtailed. I will argue the complexity of her account is informed by her acceptance alongside her existentialism, of Marxism. I argue that by examining de Beauvoir's work in the light of Marx we can resolve some of the tensions previously highlighted in her work (Le Doeuff 1980; Lloyd 1983), and, in particular we can derive from *The Second Sex* a coherent, and enlightening account of human freedom.

On the last page of the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir cites the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), as an endorsement of Marx' vision, of a non-alienated society where humans (including women), have the possibility of exercising freedom and agency without oppressive circumstances. I suggest that de Beauvoir modifies key existentialist concepts by reading them within the context of a historical materialism derived from Marx.

De Beauvoir identifies herself as an existentialist and shares the insistence on humans as for-themselves defined in terms of ontological freedom:

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future. (De Beauvoir 1949: 17)

Existential freedom is often described as having two different aspects (McCulloch, 1994):

1. Ontological freedom is the freedom which makes us human. The responsibility of choice and the consequence of such a choice lay entirely with the existent. There are no excuses or conditions that determine or require any decision to be made. A person is the sum of their freely chosen actions. This is the freedom as transcendence, referred to in the previous quote; freedom in this sense is usually regarded as an all or nothing matter.

2. Practical freedom refers to one's situation, a condition of our freedom, that which the subject asserts itself against. One always finds oneself in a situation in relation to which freedom to make choices is conceivable. I choose future actions from the range of possible options this particular situation affords. Practical freedom admits of degrees.

I shall suggest, however, contrary to the traditional view of de Beauvoir as merely incorporating concepts from Sartre's existentialism, that de

Beauvoir's account interprets these concepts in a Marxist way. De Beauvoir argues that woman's current existence operates differently to that of man's, as hers sets limitations to what projects are possible for her, in ways men's do not. The notion of freedom is gendered. De Beauvoir's view of women is, "our freedom is not absolute, but situated." (Moi 1999: 65/6) Choices are to be understood as reactions to situations and, in the case of woman, her situation is experienced as oppressive, and constricts her from engagement in projects. However, what she makes of that situation is nonetheless not fixed. Choices, for de Beauvoir are always possible; but they may each be problematic in some way. For her, this situation impacts on a woman's ontological freedom; on her capacity for transcendence.

Kruks (2012: 33), suggests for de Beauvoir, "oppression" is an obstacle to autonomy. Oppression is produced by objectifying woman, restricting social roles and making woman the non-reciprocal Other. Life is experienced by woman (more so than man), as a conflict; a conflict between her human existence and the societal demands of womanhood. How one engages and makes sense of the world as human, is bound with the fact that one is a woman. De Beauvoir examines power and oppression and the effects this has on agency and freedom, not only for an individual but also on a general, social level. De Beauvoir discusses how patriarchal ideology and practice require women to choose between embracing her womanhood, or rejecting femininity and therefore womanhood altogether, in order to embrace her humanity and freedom. Moi states:

In a sexist society women often find themselves in situations where they are obliged to make a choice between being imprisoned in their femininity or having to disavow it altogether (...) The amount of time feminists have spent worrying about equality or difference is a symptom of the success of this ideological trap. A genuinely feminist position would refuse either option, and insist rather, that women should not have to choose between calling themselves women and calling themselves writers, or intellectuals. (Moi 1999: 206)

For Moi (1999: 206), de Beauvoir held, "a genuinely feminist position."

De Beauvoir is making a number of claims; firstly from an existential perspective woman is a human existent and therefore a free subject. Secondly from a phenomenological perspective, woman is produced and defined by man rather than by herself, and the definition is reliant on a patriarchal

ideology. Thirdly the contradictions that exist for woman, as a consequence of a patriarchal ideology, serve to promote her oppressed status and therefore inhibit her freedom. She is in effect claiming, that from a phenomenological point of view, there are limits to a woman's ontological freedom which, as an existentialist she embraces. Similarly a woman's possibilities are limited as her body is *experienced* as a potential obstacle, a burden to the exercise of freedom. However, she stipulates that woman is still free to transcend her practical situation. Persisting with her existentialism appears to be at odds with her phenomenology.

I suggest however that her argument, although displaying tensions is not incoherent. Women have to make some sense of their lives and they do this by choosing from the limited roles society offers, for example wife and mother. Many of the options are not satisfactory, they are limited and consequently this reduces the possibilities that women envisage for themselves. This limitation of choice within a framework that emphasises freedom and agency may seem contradictory. However, de Beauvoir views the human condition as one of ambiguity. Consciousness and materiality, freedom and constraint are *combined*, as fundamental within the lived experience of any embodied subject. De Beauvoir accepts ambiguity, the contradictory element of existence, and I will return to this later.

The apparent tensions between the phenomenological and the existential aspects of de Beauvoir's thought are, I shall argue, mediated by her historical materialism, influenced by Marx. Marx himself stressed that in all circumstances some agency was possible, but *what* agency was possible, was constrained by those circumstances. He was also concerned with what changes in material conditions would enable the proletariat to have possibilities which would reduce alienation and facilitate the expression of their human potential. De Beauvoir took up this question with regard to women. She recognises the importance of the material and ideological dimensions of existence, and suggests that we need to make changes to these dimensions of existence, if women's potential for freedom is to be extended and improved. For de Beauvoir, what becomes apparent is that there is no neat distinction between ontological freedom and practical freedom; her account is more complex than this neat categorisation allows. The organisation of society privileges one group at the expense of another, this I argue is a Marxist insight; but de Beauvoir put it to work to provide an account of the position of women.

This view has the support of a number of writers. Lundgren-Gothlin (1996: 177), argues de Beauvoir's position is influenced by Marx, she stipulates:

A recurrent theme in *The Second Sex* is the necessity to distinguish between abstract freedom according to the law and concrete freedom i.e. the ability actually to undertake positive action in society. This aligns de Beauvoir with a Marxist concept of freedom.

Kruks (2012: 8) agrees:

as de Beauvoir further developed her thinking she also began to increasingly attend to the practical material constraints on freedom, and in doing so, to incorporate elements of a non-reductionist Marxism within her analysis.

I will therefore argue that de Beauvoir's existentialism is refracted through Marxism. Kruks (2012) acknowledges de Beauvoir's Marxism as present in later works and in particular de Beauvoir's discussion of *Old Age* (1970) but I suggest that her Marxist historical materialism, was the dominant strand of her thinking in the *The Second Sex*. Lundgren-Gothlin (1996) acknowledges the influence of Marx in this earlier text, but I argue that this influence can be used to resolve criticisms which have been made of de Beauvoir's position, in ways Lundgren-Gothlin did not pursue. De Beauvoir becomes primarily concerned not only with the metaphysical possibility of freedom, which characterises the human condition as such, but, more concretely with the material and social conditions which make the meaningful exercise of freedom possible. To understand her we need to see the interweaving of these two strands.

I will begin with a discussion of the existential concept of freedom which focuses on Sartrean thought primarily described in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) but also in *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948). I will then move on to Marx and his concept of freedom and how de Beauvoir was directly influenced by this. (She quotes Marx, particularly his early texts, throughout *The Second Sex*.) Marx argues, the possibility of exercising our freedom by engaging in freely chosen projects is linked to the material and social circumstances, and this I argue de Beauvoir recognised and endorsed. She advocates changes in legal, social and economic conditions for women to

achieve greater emancipation and create the possibility of labour which is not alienated and has the possibility of transcendence. Human action has created social institutions which serve as limitations to women's freedom, and it is these institutional aspects of a woman's situation that de Beauvoir argues require change. De Beauvoir reiterates Marx' view, that changes in material circumstances have the potential to reduce alienation, and promote human flourishing and the possibilities for freedom.

The Existential Conception of Freedom

Freedom is integral to existentialism. For the existentialists, the world is divided into two categories; the for-itself and the in-itself. An in-itself is an object, it has no consciousness, it cannot realise other possibilities. A being-for-itself has consciousness; this is us, as human beings and we are unlike other objects in the world. We are both object and subject and so can view the world as having future, as yet unrealised possibilities. (McCulloch, 1994)

Sartre and Absolute freedom

For Sartre, a for-itself views the world as a nothingness. We experience the world as a world of unrealised possibilities. As nothing is pre-determined for Sartre, we can negate the world and the self as it is, and create ourselves and our possibilities anew. This Sartre in, *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948), suggests is human reality, "Existence precedes essence." (Sartre 1948: 26) A for-itself is a being which experiences the world as it is, yet also, as it is not, as a nothingness. It encounters a situation in which it finds itself, and from here is able to negate the present and envisage other possibilities and opportunities related to that situation. To act is inescapable and the responsibility for such actions is also inescapable:

abortive attempts to stifle freedom under the weight of being (...) show sufficiently that freedom in its foundation coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man. Human-reality is free because it is not enough. It is free because it is perpetually wrenched away from itself and because it has been separated by a nothingness from what it is and from what it will be. (...) Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be. (Sartre 1943: 440)

There are particular facts or situations that a for-itself has to encounter. Embodiment, material status, historical status and economic status, all contribute to a situation, out of which freedom asserts itself. Freedom therefore is only realised in response to a situation. For there to be freedom there must be a context in which one acts, a context which can be surpassed or transcended. One cannot be free to choose an action or direction if there were no options. (Morris, 2008) Sartre acknowledges that there is a facticity within a situation, that one did not choose. Facticity refers to these factual conditions of our existence. Facticity is a necessary condition out of which transcendence occurs; it is actual possibilities for the exercise of freedom. Without facticity, transcendence is unattainable, there is no point of reference or range of possibilities; yet without transcendence, facticity and the human experience is reduced to the in-itself, to no more than an object.

Sartre's notion of freedom makes us free in all aspects of our mode of being in the world. We are free to choose what is of value and significance to us as the people that we are, and in respect of the projects that we choose to engage in. The meaning that an individual places on their facticity has a bearing on the situation they find themselves in, but the meanings and values that are employed, are entirely of their own choosing. There are no excuses for how an individual lives their life or how they conduct themselves in the face of their facticity. Human existents are the sum of their actions, but are not fixed by their past. They are free to be and to live their situation, however they choose, "man is condemned to be free." (Sartre 1948: 34)

Transcendence and Immanence

Consequently, transcendence is an ontological human feature. Fully human existence has the freedom to expand in to an undefined future, a future not fixed by a past, "Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself." (De Beauvoir 1949: 17) Immanence is the opposite, where the projection into future projects and liberties is either denied or refused. To live in immanence, an individual is not living an authentic existence as a subject, in the existential sense, but in accordance with the world of givens, the immediate. (Bergoffen, 2003)

Transcendence and immanence have a gender orientation for de Beauvoir, she points out that, transcendence has been aligned with the male and immanence with the female, "the male is still the only incarnation of transcendence." (De Beauvoir 1949: 85) Of woman de Beauvoir insists, "she

lives condemned to immanence; she incarnates only the static aspect of society.” (De Beauvoir 1949: 85) These concepts are gendered in two ways. Firstly the concept ‘man’ is defined to include transcendence and the concept ‘woman’ to include immanence, de Beauvoir (1949: 61) states, “behaviour where the subject posits his transcendence is considered masculine.” Secondly, the situation of men and women makes transcendence possible for men and difficult for women. In the historical situation in which she is placed a woman’s body is not simply an instrument of her will, and a woman’s activities in general are not easily viewed as transcendent.

Suggesting that transcendent activity is male and immanence is female seems to leave de Beauvoir open to critique. (Moi, 2008; Le Doeuff, 1980) To differentiate between transcendence and immanence as gendered categories, implies that male activities which are linked to transcendence are of a higher quality and therefore ones which women should also pursue. Women’s activities are viewed as immanent.

The point I would like to make here, is that both notions of transcendence and immanence are necessary to activity, and the concept of freedom is not reducible to either; for de Beauvoir, transcendence and immanence are irreducible aspects of human existence. (Scarth, 2004) Lundgren-Gothlin (1996), points out that transcendence and immanence are confusing concepts in de Beauvoir’s account; de Beauvoir, does appear to regard male activities as transcendent and female ones as immanent. However she is reflecting on the *historically situated*, gendered subject, whose activities take on the dominant values of the society in which they are positioned. De Beauvoir’s position on transcendence is therefore a complex one, and I think the claim that she has adopted masculinist values is misplaced. She accepts, along with Sartre that freedom as transcendence is of high value. Such freedom has been traditionally associated with men and she is asserting it also for women. But unlike Sartre, she views the opportunities for transcendence as tied with the material and social conditions and women’s situations restrict the possibility of transcendence for them.

The difference between the situation of men and women can be illustrated through one of Sartre’s examples. Sartre uses an example of a woman meeting with a man in the early days of a relationship. For Sartre, the woman denies her desires for intimacy, yet seeks intimacy nevertheless, and is therefore in bad faith:

She is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her. Yet she would find no charm at all in a respect which would be only respect. (Sartre 1943: 55)

These are abstract issues until the man takes her hand in his. She is then in the moment and has to decide whether to leave her hand there, or remove it. She leaves it there and for Sartre, this encounter is bad faith on the woman's behalf. By not removing her hand she is not reciprocating the desire, but is enjoying it without having to acknowledge this to the man, or to herself. She is exhibiting bad faith also by regarding her hand as an object, something passive, with no possible options, but something upon which events and actions just happen.

A problem for Sartre's account however, is the lack of recognition that the way we do experience the world can constrain what choices are visible and available to us. Circumstances can and do impose limitations. There is no acknowledgement that society and circumstance can impact on an individual and impact upon their decision making, or in fact limit choices. To refer back to the example of the woman on a first date, she may not have removed her hand because she was in a public place and did not wish to draw attention to the situation. She may have feared the judgement of others. Would she have the choices that Sartre suggests she does? Can she feel empowered enough in certain circumstances, to either remove her hand or reciprocate the man's advances? As a woman her choice here seems circumscribed in a very different way from the man making the advances. Because the man grabbed the woman's hand, he made a move on her. Whatever she decides to do, the woman's situation now is one that has been forced on her by the man; she will be acting on his terms, rather than her own, this is symptomatic of patriarchal social power. The way society and subsequently woman views herself and her situation does not enable her to believe she does in fact have a choice to either resist, or to freely express her own desires. (Moi, 2008)

De Beauvoir recognised that choices are made within circumstances in which certain possibilities come into view and others do not. What comes into view is a consequence of one's past and present situation and these possibilities are very different for men and women.

Marx' Conceptions of Freedom

Marx discusses freedom in several ways, most importantly in his early writing, and there are some important parallels between the discussions here and the conceptions of freedom found in existential thought. True freedom is only possible for Marx under communist forms of social organisation. This position I argue places de Beauvoir, closer to Marx than to Sartre. She grounds her account of freedom in material, social, economic and ideological conditions.

Metaphysical Freedom

A key feature of human nature, for Marx is praxis, our ability to actively transform the social and material conditions of our existence, in terms of goals we have set ourselves. However, as society develops in a particular way, so too our nature as human beings develops in particular ways, which can either promote or constrain the human potential for praxis. Some freedom of action is always possible for Marx however agency is exercised in conditions not of our choosing.

For Marx, it is not possible for man to fully exercise his metaphysical freedom within a capitalist structure, as he is unable to realise his species being. His historically contingent nature, (the way he has become formed by the society he is in) is at odds with his human potential. A division becomes apparent whereby man is divided into a public self and a private self, Marx (1846: 83/4) states:

But in the course of historical evolution (...) there appears a division within the life of each individual, insofar as it is personal and insofar as it is determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it.

The material and social circumstances of capitalism, divides labour in a hierarchical way and as a result, man's activity becomes fixed as a *something* that is not a result of his own decision making process. For Marx, the position of the working class within capitalism is an exploited one and their freedom is constrained. Yet, however fixed a position may appear there is always some possibility of resisting. (Wolff, 2010) Something can always be done to bring about change, but what change this is, is constrained by circumstances and in some circumstances the changes are very small. Marx was therefore interested in exploring what combination of circumstances would enable

major social change in ways that would promote genuine human emancipation, and the maximisation of the human capacity for praxis.

Political Freedom

Marx (1844), argued that genuine human emancipation could not be found within the political/ economic system of liberal capitalism. Although the fully liberal state would claim equal freedom for all and formal equalities for all; freedom remained formal and had little bearing on everyday life. At its best, liberalism makes us all citizens subject to its laws; but, in everyday life we have different amounts of freedom. Marx insists that liberalism assumes egoism as fundamental to human nature. The laws of society are conceived as a means to protect us, as individuals, from other individuals, who we regard as in competition with us. Under capitalism the supposed equalities and freedom attached to us politically as citizens, are undermined by the conditions of everyday life:

The perfect political state is, by its nature, man's species-life, as opposed to his material life. All the preconditions of this egoistic life continue to exist as civil society outside the sphere of the state, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its true development, man – not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life – leads a twofold life (...) in which he considers himself a communal being, and life in civil society, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means and becomes the play thing of alien forces. (Marx 1844: 6)

Consequently the liberal/ capitalist state produces alienation. Man is alienated from society (as it appears to be structured in a way that is inevitable), other individuals (as we are in competition with them), and from his self, (as projects in which he is engaged do not originate in himself). Under capitalism, the labour that has developed is not of man's own free activity and as a consequence the proletariat, whose labour produces products that have no value or meaning for them, is alienated labour. The activity and the product produced are regarded as something that is imposed and therefore contrary, to the exercise of freedom. He therefore insists that man cannot fully exercise freedom under capitalism. Moreover capitalist ideology serves to disguise the possibilities for freedom; the notion that agency and change is actually a possibility is obscured. Ideological change is therefore a requirement.

Genuine Emancipation

For Marx the conditions required for genuine human emancipation, requires communism. For Marx the possibility of exercising our freedom by engaging in freely chosen projects is linked to material and social circumstances. (Wood, 2004) Real human freedom, is found within co-operative and inter dependent relationships with other people. It is also found in the opportunities individuals have to choose their own actions and the product of their labour. This for Marx is only possible within a communist structure in which each recognises that their own freedom requires the freedom of others:

Within communist society, the only society in which the original and free development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase, this development is determined precisely by the connection of individuals. (Marx 1846: 118)

What Marx is advocating in order to reach freedom in its true sense is a freedom *to* form relationships with other people in a communal enterprise, which adopts concepts of co-operation, rather than separation and alienation. Non-alienated labour has clear echoes in Sartre's account of freedom as requiring self-directed projects originating, not in external conditions, but in the for-itself. However, unlike Sartre, Marx saw change of economic and material conditions, alongside change at the level of ideology, as the only way that such emancipation is humanly possible. It is this position that I am arguing, de Beauvoir directly reiterates, "(...) woman among others is a product developed by civilisation (...) if this process were driven in another way, it would produce a very different result." (De Beauvoir 1949: 777) Changes in legal, ideological, social and economic conditions for women are required to enable the exercise of meaningful freedom.

De Beauvoir's Conceptions of Freedom

De Beauvoir as an existentialist makes use of concepts and vocabulary that resonates with Sartre. However, I argue that her use of existential categories, are mediated by Marxist ones. De Beauvoir argues the situation for men and women is not the same in society, (one group benefits at the expense of another). The range of possibilities open to many women is *different* from, and *more restricted* than, those of the majority of men. The material conditions, practices and institutions of society (which includes the economic, labour and political structures as well as the materiality of the

body), co-here in ways which are more oppressive to women; they limit women's freedom. In this way de Beauvoir (1949: 679) makes the bold claim:

If these same situations are compared, it is obvious that the man's is infinitely preferable, that is to say he has far more concrete opportunities to project his freedom in the world.

Her detailed discussion of lived experiences of women demonstrated that she believed choices for them were possible and that choices were inescapable, this she accepts from Sartre. These choices however are limited because of women's situation. In order to promote their capacities to exercise freedom there needed to be changes in these circumstances. Men will not willingly give up the position they have as the autonomous subject and as it stands, women develop characters which make them ill-equipped to assert their autonomy. In these circumstances therefore most choices women have available, result in an unsatisfactory outcome. This de Beauvoir argues is how, for women, freedom is curtailed and how oppression occurs. To project forward to future intentional projects requires freedom. To struggle with another consciousness in order to assume the position of the Subject requires freedom. For de Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, woman does not begin as a free subject. De Beauvoir (1962: 346) states, "not every situation was equally valid: what sort of transcendence could a woman shut up in a harem achieve?"

Throughout *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir spells out ways in which a woman's freedom is constrained. Social institutions, (marriage for example) serve to reinforce the notion that inequality is a natural (biological) state. For her, however, such institutions are human creations, and so historically variable and therefore changeable. She recognised, as did Marx that for freedom to be a possibility, the organisation of production and reproduction must change. If one party is already privileged, materially and socially, even physically, then reciprocal relations disappear. For de Beauvoir, the male and female relationship has a different dimension to that of two, general individuals. Woman is always the Other, never in a position to challenge the primacy of man. Ideological myths about women's positions and women's bodies become internalised by women and constrain the possibilities that society offers and the possibilities that they see for themselves. A woman's body is a situation and woman acts in response. The consequences of the

situation of women, de Beauvoir shows concretely, in the day to day lived experiences of women, how limited the choices available to them really are.

Tensions

I have shown that for de Beauvoir, social structures and institutions have a real material impact on a woman's existence. This is where de Beauvoir's debt to Marx is clear, and her difference from the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* is marked:

Forbidding her to work and keeping her at home is intended to defend her against herself and ensure her happiness. We have seen the poetic veils used to hide the monotonous burdens she bears: Housework and maternity; in exchange for her freedom she was given fallacious treasures of 'femininity' as a gift. (De Beauvoir 1949: 773)

She recognises that within these circumstances, a woman's ability to exercise transcendence is limited.

A tension appears however, as she also argues that woman can transcend her situation and it is her responsibility as a human existent to do so. Yet, rather than view this as a simple re-assertion of Sartre's position, I think we can also relate it to Marx. Marx had claimed that it is always possible for us to exercise praxis of *some kind*. Circumstances however, can ensure that whatever choice we exercise, we are not able to fulfil our human potential. De Beauvoir also disclosed, in her discussion of the options open to women, that women could exercise choice; but whichever option they chose in the circumstances in which she was writing, led to unsatisfactory outcomes.

De Beauvoir is in effect subverting Sartre's concept of freedom by insisting that woman cannot live her situation as a free choice, but, she is also arguing here, that if a woman's circumstance were to change, then transcendence would become achievable. Such transcendence however, requires a different society. De Beauvoir (1949: 13) argues:

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 (...) Many men wish it would be: not all men have yet laid down their arms.

However, de Beauvoir's position here also reflects the fact that in her account of freedom, she insists that we must respect the ambiguities of existence. For de Beauvoir part of what it is to be human is to exist in a state of ambiguity, this is relevant for *both* men and women. True human existence creates ambiguity; it creates a paradox, whereby bodies are required in order to exist and therefore transcend, yet bodies as integral to a human being are also part of the objective dimension of our lives, they are immanence. There is a dialectic at work here, "that if the body is not a thing it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline of our projects." (De Beauvoir 1949: 46) The ambiguities of subjectivity/embodiment play out in a number of ways that condition the lived experience for both men and women. The binaries of subject/object, one/other, interdependence/conflict, (to name a few) are inescapable yet unresolvable and are at the core of social relationships. (Scarth, 2004) De Beauvoir argues this ambiguous position is representative of *both* men and women. The male body is just as ambiguous and subject to finite existence as is the female body, however, men, de Beauvoir argues, try to evade this recognition. Men (as a social category), view their bodies as something transcended in pursuit of their chosen projects. Both men and women therefore need to accept the ambiguities which inhabit freedom; an interplay of transcendence and immanence. With this recognition, de Beauvoir is arguing not only that freedom as transcendence requires certain conditions to be realised. She is also insisting that a transcendence unconstrained by immanence is not an achievable state for anyone.

Freedom and Old Age

De Beauvoir's account of freedom is re-addressed in her work *Old Age* (1970). In this work, she also makes explicit that bodily change and material and social conditions impair the possible exercise of ontological freedom.

The aged are, (just as are women) entrenched in social institutions and structures which view them as inferior. Denied the public realm of productive work, (as just one aspect), they are regarded as superfluous and experience poverty and degradation as a result. De Beauvoir (1970: 443) states:

For man living means self-transcendence. A consequence of biological decay is the impossibility of surpassing oneself and of becoming passionately concerned about anything. It kills projects.

For de Beauvoir physical decline is combined with objectification, economic poverty and social superfluity. If one lives in material poverty then freedom is limited. Here, in the discussion of the aged de Beauvoir again acknowledges that the social structures and institutions are at fault. Kruks (2012: 23) states:

Irrespective of which particular modes and dynamics are at play, what always makes a situation one of oppression is that it curtails the ambiguities of an embodied subject and forecloses freedom.

For the aged to be given freedom would require a socialist revolution of the kind Marx described. De Beauvoir (1970: 603) argues, “what should a society be, so that in his last years a man might still be a man? The answer is simple: he would always have to have been treated like a man.”

Summary: Can Liberation be achieved?

De Beauvoir did not, however, think that a socialist revolution would be sufficient to bring about the liberation of women:

One must certainly not think that modifying her economic situation is enough to transform woman: this factor has been and remains the primordial factor of her development, but until it brings about moral, social and cultural consequences it heralds and requires, the new woman cannot appear; as of now, these consequences have been realised nowhere: in the USSR no more than in France or the United States; and this is why today's [new] woman (...) appears as a real woman disguised as a man, and she feels awkward in her woman's body as in her masculine garb. She has to shed her old skin and cut her own clothes. She will only be able to do this if there is collective change. (De Beauvoir 1949: 777)

In the (now former) USSR, de Beauvoir makes reference to above, a form of socialism was practiced. However de Beauvoir makes it clear that women were still suffering oppression. Changes in social and economic organisation are necessary but also crucially, ideological changes in men were needed if women were to be able to exercise the freedom, which was constitutive of their humanity:

Simone de Beauvoir on Freedom

When finally it is possible for every human being to place his pride above sexual differences in the difficult glory of his free existence, only then will woman be able to make her history, her problems, her doubts and her hopes those of humanity. (De Beauvoir 1949: 767)

De Beauvoir argues, for women, transcendence only becomes achievable through raising awareness of the current exploitative (for her patriarchal) social, economic and ideological situations. This raising awareness for both men and women is what *The Second Sex* is trying to achieve. What de Beauvoir is stressing here is that woman's situation is contingent; woman's situation is created by man rather than by woman herself. The central aim de Beauvoir sets out to achieve within *The Second Sex* is a greater sense of clarity for women; that sexual difference does not justify cultural stereotypes and socially accepted norms; that myths of femininity do not determine what women are. Clearly an important step for her in bringing about change is to achieve such clarity, so that women can become aware of what is forming them, reflect on it rationally and make choices, as she did, which resist dominant ideologies of femininity. However liberation was not simply a matter of such rational clarity and self-determining choices, women are very limited in what such self-determining choices can achieve. Liberation for women is not achieved merely by individuals acting in good faith. Moi (2008: 213) argues:

If there is one point ceaselessly repeated in *The Second Sex*, it is the fact that under oppressive social constraints, women are never truly free to choose: Beauvoir's utopia consists in the vision of a society where no choice would be unfairly constrained by social conditions.

The way for women to begin to achieve a positive, concrete freedom is within the public realm of work. To make productive work possible she must have choices about her reproductive role. De Beauvoir (1949: 142), argues, "Relieved of a great number of reproductive servitudes, she can take on the economic roles open to her, roles that would assure her control over her own person." The sexual division of labour as it has historically developed limits a woman to alienated labour, in particular to domestic labour, which is outside the remit of creativity, in the sense that de Beauvoir wishes to argue. More control over their biological bodies will create more roles within society as viable options, roles other than those of wife or mother. But to achieve this

she places emphasis on society, rather than the individual. In a move that is more Marxist than existentialist, she insists society must create such opportunities.

For de Beauvoir then, it is not just about enlightening women with regards to the current exploitative ideology, it is also about changing the material and economic dimensions of society. This is the central most important point. Freedom for women requires social and material change. Productive labour within the public realm would also give women the opportunity to unite as a collective, in order to become a greater, politically active voice. Change for de Beauvoir also involved changing relations with men. To achieve liberation two transcendent consciousnesses must meet as equal. The only way for women (and men) to live authentically, is to achieve an interdependent existence with each other. This has echoes of Sartre *and* Marx with his view of human nature as co-operative and interdependent. What de Beauvoir argues is that to realise true human potential is to acknowledge and allow both subjects the freedom to be transcendent, this is the only way to authenticity; freedom is paradoxically about inter-dependency:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them; while she posits herself for herself, she will nonetheless continue to exist for him as well; recognising each other as subject, each will remain an other for the other; reciprocity in their relations will not do away with the miracles that the division of human beings into two separate categories engenders. (De Beauvoir 1949: 782)

De Beauvoir's account opens up the possibility, "that greater freedom will produce new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman's body." (Moi 1999: 66) But freedom requires structural and material changes. This recalls one quote by Marx, one in which I think de Beauvoir endorses throughout her writing, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it." (Marx 1845: 11) For de Beauvoir the human conditions of ambiguity, consciousness and materiality *combined* are inter-connected and cannot be viewed in isolation, in the account she offers of freedom and agency.

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