

Marxism and psychoanalysis in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*

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Existentialism and the women's condition

The Second Sex is acclaimed as the most significant contribution to feminist literature. The work dated from 1949 when the first feminist movements had already disappeared, and the new feminism, which would emerge 20 years later, was not yet in sight. The most important feature of the work is the attempt to combine an account of economic and social conditions with the study of psychological processes in a unified explanation of the "female condition".

Beauvoir, the author of numerous literary works, was a member of the *Temps Modernes* group, the editorial team of the journal founded by Sartre, her companion in life. After World War II, this group represented a trend of left-wing culture, critical of traditional leftist ideologies, especially the dialectical materialism of the French Communist Party.

Sartre's positions were known at the time as existentialism; the group's typical intellectual equipment was yet a sort of spiritualism of Bergsonian ascent, onto which Husserl's and Heidegger's contributions were grafted. A mark of the group was a peculiar reading of Marx that tried to privilege the humanistic and historicist aspects and one specific reading of Freud that inserted his theoretical contributions in existential psychoanalysis.

The work attempts to give a theoretical approach to the "feminine question" by adopting the group's intellectual weaponry. Contributions from Marxism and psychoanalysis were accepted, but with the

ambition to include them in a broader approach. Beauvoir's thesis is that the female condition is a condition of oppression, only externally occasioned by a historically given necessity of a division of tasks and difficulties of psychological adaptation in childhood heavier for females than for males. This condition is, however, decisively originated by the radical conflict that opposes human individuals, which the woman settles with a surrender to male domination in exchange for security coming with such servitude.

According to this thesis, the women's condition is, above all, *a choice* either made by women or imposed by others and then accepted by women themselves. Therefore, liberation should consist, first of all, of an existential option. And it also appears that the natural differences between the sexes are and should be irrelevant: they were the occasion that allowed the establishment of oppression, but after liberation, they will no longer play any significant role or bear any positive value. To understand this particular and typical approach to the feminine question, it is worth examining the role played in this approach by the reading of Marx and Freud shared by the *Temps Modernes* group.

The terms of the question: a Galilean feminism

Beauvoir's starting point is the nature of the object under examination: what is a woman? Indeed, do women exist? The starting point must be the rejection of answers resorting to definitions in terms of essences such as those of pre-Galilean science. In Aquinas's time, the woman seemed to be an essence, like the poppy's soporific virtue¹.

However, making the female character a result of history while excluding the "feminine" as an essence should not head to its opposite: excluding the problem itself with a nominalist solution, affirming the existence of human individuals, each different from the other, among whom those called women have no shared trait. The problem is legitimate because we are faced with a group of individuals with specific *cultural* factors that make it so that they are women, albeit without swearing on the eternity and necessity of such characteristics. Some individuals have manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, gait, interests and tasks: these differences may be either superficial or bound to disappear. What is

¹ S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (1949-50), Gallimard, Paris 1990-91, vol. I, p. 14 (hereafter DS I, p. 14); all references are to this edition; translations are by the author of present paper; for an English version see *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (ed.), Pan books, London 1988.

certain is that they exist with dazzling evidence for now².

In any case, to define a woman, we have to start with the peculiarity of her nature of something asymmetrical to man. Nevertheless, man is not a problem; he does not need to be defined as such because he is at the same time the positive and the negative: it is the woman who seems to be in the peculiar condition of residue within the genus *man* who remains after having subtracted what a man in the strictest sense of the word is.

Man represents both the positive and the negative, to the extent that we say 'men' to indicate human beings, the singular sense of the word *vir* having been assimilated into the general understanding of the word *homo*³.

Physical differences play a role in this situation, as they are interpreted differently for males and females. For the male, it appears that the body is something neutral, that even the hormones and testicles endowed with his body are innocently part of the body "as a direct and normal relationship with the world that he believes he grasps in its objectivity". In the language of Sartre's existentialism, it seems that the male body is interpreted as a body *for itself* (i.e., a body that exists as I experience it to which the body belongs). For the female, on the other hand, the body seems to be interpreted in common opinion as a conditioning factor, as something that prevents her from enjoying the *standard* freedom and objectivity that the male instead enjoys: the woman's body is seen as an obstacle, a cage. In other words, it is interpreted as the body *for others* (the body as it is experienced by others to whom it does not belong, and therefore as an object among objects).

From this perspective, Beauvoir singles out a fact of consciousness as the decisive factor turning a human being into a woman: she is a woman as far as she is a reified consciousness, not experienced in her immediate self-consciousness but in the way in which others experience her. The woman's existence can be accounted for in this way if we admit that one of the essential elements in the structure of human consciousness is the category of otherness. Again, quoting Hegel and Levi Strauss, Beauvoir asserts that each human group succeeds in existing as a whole only as it manages to place *the Other* before itself. These phenomena can be explained if one discovers, with Hegel, a fundamental hostility in consciousness in the face of all other consciousness: "the subject poses itself only by opposing"⁴.

At this stage, Beauvoir resorts to Engels's claims on the family's origin: he compared the condition of

² DS II, pp. 13-14.

³ DS I, p. 16.

⁴ DS I, p. 19.

women facing men with that of proletarians facing capitalists. However, Engels's identification is too simple. It should be rejected: the differences between the two conditions are given by the biological factor that differentiates women from men, and secondly by the fact that women live mixed with men and cannot constitute themselves as a group with the identity and autonomy that are the mark of the proletariat. Finally, they are differentiated by a fact of "consciousness" that Beauvoir seems to see as the determining fact; besides, unlike the proletariat, who wants the disappearance of the capitalist class, women do *not* want men's disappearance; they want equality.

There is nonetheless a conflict between man and woman: we need to establish what kind of conflict it is. That the conflict exists is undeniable. It is the symptom of the female consciousness's reification: the woman lives as for others, the woman is reified, the woman is oppressed, and she is oppressed by the man. Having admitted the existence of the "man-woman contradiction", Beauvoir is keen yet to limit its scope: it is less radical than the one between proletarians and capitalists because it arises from within a *Mitsein*, the human couple. This is the woman's defining character: she is the Other within a totality, whose two elements are indispensable to each other⁵.

The conflict between man and woman and the enslavement of women may be accounted for in light of the Hegelian struggle of servant and master. The former has fewer chances to win because the master has less need of the other than the servant has. To refuse to be the Other, denying complicity with the man, would mean for women

forfeiting the advantages which alliance with the upper caste brings [...] by shirking the economic risk, she shuns the metaphysical risk of a kind of freedom that must create its ends without the concurrence of others. There seems to be for woman's condition more than for that of other servants, a reason not historical but ontological that condemns her to defeat: the constitutional tendency of conscience to reify itself. In reality, every individual, in addition to the need to affirm himself as a subject, which is an ethical need, carries within himself the temptation to escape his freedom and to turn himself into a thing; it is a destructive path because it is passive, alienated, lost, in which the individual enters into the game of extraneous wills, he is separated from his transcendence, stripped of all value. But it is an easy path; the anguish and tension of an authentically lived existence are avoided. Conversely, when the man considers the woman as the Other, he meets her complicity⁶.

Taking the existence of conflict for granted, since the duality of the sexes results, *like any duality*, in conflict, what is left to account for is women's servitude and why they are those that have been

⁵ DS p. 19.

⁶ DS I, pp. 23-4.

defeated. Men's explanations, as Beauvoir notes, are flawed from the outset by their being a party to the conflict: men have always maintained that women are inferior, weaker, and less capable. Moreover, it is an explanation in bad faith because it gives the term "being" a fixist meaning: women *are* indeed inferior, but this *de facto* state does not explain women's inferiority. The latter needs to be accounted for by historical reconstruction of the reasons that led to the current conditions. Who will be able to pose the question correctly? The man is the judge and the litigant, the woman too⁷. Beauvoir is in trouble when faced with this problem because she cannot resolve it as Marx and Lenin had done, resorting to scientific practice as sufficient to destroy false appearances.

Beauvoir, consistent with existentialist thinking, abhors science more than witches garlic. She solves the problem by resorting to the unlimited confidence she and Sartre have in "intellectuals", mainly themselves. "Claiming to imprison Epimenides in the notion of Cretan and the Cretans in that of liars is sophistry: good and bad faith are not dictated to men and women by a mysterious essence; it is their situation that inclines them more or less towards the search for truth"⁸. Thus, the women who find themselves in a privileged position nowadays are the ones who can judge the matter most impartially because, on the one hand, they don't care, being completely uninvolved, and on the other hand, because they have more experience in the female world.

The historical reconstruction: the woman, the warrior and Goddess Nature

Biological data condition humans' way of being, especially their awareness of their existence. However, we cannot think such data alone constitute a fixed destiny. The origin of the female condition cannot be explained either by psychoanalysis or Marxism, even though these disciplines have given us some valuable acquisitions. Both yield reductive views: a sexual monism and an economic monism. Conversely, we can hope to understand how the hierarchy of the sexes was established by taking up data from prehistory and ethnography⁹. History and ethnology provide data that do not speak by themselves and need to be interpreted in the light of Sartre's philosophy. Individual disciplines are, therefore, reservoirs of raw data.

⁷ DS I, p. 31.

⁸ DS I, p. 31-2.

⁹ DS, p. 111.

One basic activity in primitive societies, Beauvoir notes, was war. Women have permanently been excluded from this activity because of pregnancy and menstruation. This exclusion led, even *more* than a division of labour, to a cultural crystallisation that survived changing conditions: man rises above animals not by giving life but by risking it and “in humankind superiority is granted not to the sex that begets but to the one that kills”¹⁰.

Beauvoir excludes the hypothesis of a matriarchal period, arguing that the myth of a matriarchal age reflects distorted awareness of a kind of superiority attributed to women in all historical societies: women have always been equated either to nature or to divinity. However, it was a false superiority: it turned the woman into something else, extraneous to the human community. The source of this false superiority is the original conflict between consciousnesses. The perpetuation of unequal division of labour, amounting to serfdom, results from inequality generated by such conflict. If friendship, not conflict, had been the original condition, the division of work would not have carried oppression.

Marxism as economic monism

In this reconstruction of the origin of women’s oppression, Beauvoir inserts Marxist and Freudian theses, to which she acknowledges some partial truth. In addition, two chapters are devoted to Marxism and psychoanalysis to establish the methodological shortcomings of these disciplines, preventing them from providing a comprehensive answer to the question of women.

The positive contribution Beauvoir acknowledges to Marxism is the historicisation of human institutions and practices. Indeed, the question in the *Second Sex* is set from a historicist perspective. The denial that women here and now embody the feminine follows the spirit of *German Ideology*. She acknowledges the Marxist contribution to the discovery of the feminine question, which may be described as setting biological differences in a socio-economic context within which they only take on meaning¹¹.

A “less extensive hold characterises the woman on to the world compared with the man; moreover, she is more closely subservient to the species. But these facts have different values in distinct economic and social contexts”. Beauvoir sees this context as determined not by “modes of production” but by

¹⁰ DS I, p. 95

¹¹ DS I, pp. 98-99.

“technical instruments”. According to the different evolution of technology, biological differences take on greater or lesser importance: in the days when it was necessary to fight against beasts by wielding stone clubs, physical strength could be decisive; when it is a question of operating machines that do not require muscular strength, a difference in strength becomes less important.

Beauvoir finds this link between women’s oppression and technological evolution in Engels and August Bebel. She sees in these authors the indication of technical progress as a strategy for women’s liberation, assuming that women’s oppression will be reduced through access to industrial work. But, of course, this is what would have already happened in the USSR. Nevertheless, Beauvoir declares herself dissatisfied with this strategic indication, no less than with the other traditional strategic hints in Marxism: for example, the abolition of the family, an abstract and empty declaration.

Apart from the strategic indications, Friedrich Engels’s discourse needs to be revised to account for the origin of women’s oppression: to deduce such oppression from private property is a *non sequitur*. Engels understood that the muscular weakness of women became a specific form of inferiority only when bronze and iron tools were introduced. Still, he had not seen that the limits of her work capacity do not constitute a substantial disadvantage unless in one particular aspect. As far as he is transcendent and ambitious, man projects new needs into each new tool: once bronze tools were invented, he was no longer content with cultivating vegetable gardens; he wanted to till and cultivate vast fields, but this did not spring up from bronze¹².

The structure of the human consciousness that formulated this project was the reason why the most significant weakness of women resulted in conflict *and thus* in oppression: *the division of labour could have been implemented in a friendly association* if the relationship between consciousnesses had been originally friendship, not conflict.

Finally, Engels’s explanation needs to be revised concerning the nature of women’s oppression: Engels compared it to class oppression. The comparison is awkward because a woman is not just a worker. Her productive capacity is as important as her reproductive capacity.

The sexual relation which unites woman to man is not the same as that which he has with her; the bond which connects her to her child is irreducible to any other. She was not created by the bronze tool: therefore, the machine is insufficient to abolish her. To claim for her all the rights and possibilities of the human being, in general, does not mean that we may be blind before her unique situation. And to understand it, we must go beyond the historical materialism that sees men and

¹² DS I, p. 104.

women just as economic entities¹³.

Thus, Engels's explanation's inadequacies prompt us to go beyond historical materialism. Engels's description remains on the surface, and the truths it uncovers are contingent. It is impossible to go in-depth without overcoming historical materialism as it cannot solve the problems indicated because they are problems that concern man in his entirety, not such an abstraction as *homo economicus*¹⁴. In short, historical materialism is "economic monism", just as psychoanalysis is sexual monism. If this is so, these doctrines will not explain much about the condition of women.

Beauvoir's reading of Marx and Engels

It has been noted that Beauvoir judges historical materialism as insufficient, having only considered Engels's *Origin of the Family*. We can see in this reading of Marxism both a lack of information and a contradictory key to interpreting texts: sometimes she identifies Marxism with the dialectical materialism of the French Communist Party, sometimes she reduces it to Feuerbach's humanism, and occasionally she rejects it in its entirety or believes she finds her claims in it.

As we have seen, Beauvoir sees the positive aspect of Marxism in its historicism, which she correctly applies to the problematisation of the notion of femininity, but then theorises it as an absolute distinction between nature and history. Sartre draws again this distinction inspired more by Bergson than by Marx in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. On the other hand, the negative aspect she attacks lies in materialism and evolutionism: the former is seen as the idea that consciousness derives from the bronze of the axe. The conception that history evolves according to the evolution of technical instruments was typical of French communist "theorists" but less so in Engels, not to mention Marx.

Beauvoir considers both historicism and historical materialism as philosophical worldviews rather than heuristic principles. This can explain the strange accusation levelled at Marxism of being a doctrine of *homo economicus*: the charge is out of place since Marx's critique of political economy is precisely a critique of such a doctrine. Even if this were not the case, Beauvoir does not see the possibility of seeing a difference between a pan-economic doctrine that is wrong if meant to be a worldview and an

¹³ DS I, pp. 106-7.

¹⁴ DS p. 102.

economic doctrine that is poor and insufficient but not entirely wrong if understood as a scientific hypothesis. Thus, the critique of Engels's reconstruction as not comprehensive enough seems inspired by the lack of such a distinction. If the *Origin of the Family* wants to sketch a scientific explanation, it is not scandalous that it leaves facts unexplained taking them as starting point for an explanation. The demand to explain why private property originated seems to correspond to the need for an "ideology" providing a complete account of reality.

The tendency to accredit as Marxism everything that was taken for granted by Communist "theorists" gives rise to gross misunderstandings: for example, that of making social relations depend directly on the evolution of technical instruments, a view from which Beauvoir dissociates herself but after attributing it to historical materialism as such. Another gross misunderstanding is the meaning of the "abolition of the family": this perspective is challenged with the example of Sparta and Nazism, where women, removed from the family, were nevertheless subjected to the tyranny of the state. Such an answer may suggest with certainty that Beauvoir's knowledge of Marxism was poor enough not to suspect the existence of a doctrine of the extinction of the state.

Another element from Sartre's orthodoxy is the break between nature and history; humanity is *anti-physis*, a term that will recur in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This idea is part of the tendency to consider humanity first and foremost as consciousness. Note that consciousness, being what does not exist in space, is not *a thing*.

Another element deriving from Sartrean orthodoxy is the idea of the originality of the conflict and the imperialism of consciousness: it is a discourse that may be made, provided it wants to be a sapiential discourse positioned as an overarching doctrine more comprehensive than a scientific and practical discourse on history and is prepared to conclude that everything is a hunger for wind (Kohelet), something that no scientific and practical discourse can afford to prove. Suppose one introduces the imperialism of consciousness as a term used to explain historical events. In that case, one falls into the difficulty of using an extremely arbitrary factor as a basis for the explanation, and therefore one that can explain very little. The inconsistencies become enormous if we want to introduce this factor into a discourse incorporating historical materialist elements. In this case, we see, in the same discourse, historical-materialist statements and others that are their reverse: explaining the origin of agriculture from a mode of consciousness or private property from a tendency inherent in human nature is the opposite of the Marxian theory of ideology, which seeks instead to explain as far as possible the modes of consciousness from the modes of production.

We may note, in connection with Beauvoir's rejection of the Marxist perspective, namely women

liberation through access to industrial work and abolition, or better extinction, of the family, that she considers the generic notion of technical evolution instead of the genuinely Marxist idea of modes of production and ignores the young Marx's critique of the *Trennung*, the separation ruling in the capitalist society, which confers meaning sense to the idea of the extinction of the family, parallel to the extinction of the state and religion, but with the hardly Marxist social engineering projects of Bolshevik revolutionaries.

We may be tempted to think that Beauvoir considers Marxism, not in terms of *critique* but of science, that is, explanation and prediction, or as a "philosophy of history". To a certain point, the *Origin of the Family* could justify this interpretation, but the Capital and the German Ideology scarcely corroborate the latter. On the other hand, since Beauvoir interprets Marxism in these terms, the idea of integrating it into a more encompassing *philosophie de l'homme* may look less arbitrary.

Psychoanalysis as sexual monism

Beauvoir recognises one merit of psychoanalysis: having begun to consider the human body no longer as an object among other objects but as what Husserl calls the "lived body", the body as the subject experiences it. This makes it possible to escape from fixism and biologism when discussing the woman's nature. "Not nature defines the woman, but the woman redefines herself by capturing nature in her affectivity"¹⁵.

For Freud, the lived body is made of erogenous zones: we might think that Beauvoir tends to value Freud's reassessment of the importance of sex positively. But instead, the first critique of psychoanalysis is the excessive importance of sex. Psychoanalysis, a religion like Marxism and Christianity, dogmatic but elastic, seems to swing between the correct statement that "every sexual phenomenon has an existential meaning" and the less correct one that "every incarnation of existence has a sexual meaning".

Freud's attempt to explain everything by reducing it to sexual factors is unacceptable because it does not explain enough: enclosing a concrete woman in the categories "clitoral" or "vaginal" is impossible¹⁶. On the other hand, for Freud, the very conception of "sexuality" seems to have an

¹⁵ DS I, p. 80.

¹⁶ DS p. 107.

oscillating extension, running the risk of explaining everything or nothing. When we distinguish “sexual” from “genital”, the conception of sexuality becomes foggy. “According to Freud, sex is the intrinsic disposition to set the genital in motion [...]. But nothing is more disconcerting than the idea of “disposition”, that is, of the possible: only reality provides irrefutable proof of the possibility”¹⁷.

The rejection of the notion of possibility is typical of existential ontology. Here, Beauvoir rejects the legitimacy of such a notion within a scientific theory because it is vague. However, various disciplines have often found themselves using vague notions and, for this reason, have been contested by critics; think of action at a distance in Newtonian physics. Nevertheless, these notions had the advantage of “holding together” the explanatory schema. Beauvoir’s rejection of this notion seems to derive from an epistemology that demands the interpretability of all theoretical terms featured in the explanation. In addition to empirical interpretability, Beauvoir considers the ontological interpretability of all these terms mandatory. Freud, who was not a philosopher, refused to justify his system philosophically, and his disciples contended that this refusal put him out of reach of any metaphysical attack. However, according to Beauvoir, there is a metaphysical postulate behind each Freudian statement, and to use his language is to adopt a philosophy¹⁸.

According to Beauvoir, Freud did not pay much attention to women, and what he said about them is not convincing. Moreover, his explanation of female libido is poor and cumbersome because he insists on starting from a single type of libido, male libido, of which the female libido would be a particular instance. Nevertheless, she accepts Freud’s claim of the female libido’s greater complexity. All children pass through an oral phase which fixes them to the mother’s breast, then through an anal step, and finally, the genital stage; at this moment, their differentiation takes place. Freud highlighted a fact that no one before him had recognised the enormous importance of male eroticism located in the penis. At the same time, in women, there are two different erotic systems: one clitoral, which develops during the infantile phase, and the other vaginal, which does not begin to exist before puberty; when the boy reaches the genital stage, his evolution is complete; he will have to pass from the autoerotic attitude, in which he aims at purely subjective pleasure, to a heteroerotic perspective, which puts pleasure in relation with an object, usually, a woman; this jump takes place at puberty through a narcissistic phase but, as in childhood, the penis always remains the privileged erotic organ. The woman will also have to objectify her libido on the man going through the stage of narcissism, but the process is more complex

¹⁷ DS I, p. 81.

¹⁸ DS I, p. 81.

because she must move from clitoral to vaginal pleasure. For the man, there is only one genital stage; for the woman, there are two; the risk is more significant for her of not reaching full sexual development, thus remaining trapped in childhood, and developing a neurosis¹⁹.

Beauvoir acknowledges Freud's merit in highlighting this fact but criticises the general theory within which he looks at this fact. First, she believes that penis envy is a weak and far from empirically tested hypothesis; secondly, that the Electra complex, which is the counterpart for the girl of the boy's Oedipus complex, can hardly be linked with genital sexuality, having more to do with affectivity – a dimension Freud fails to distinguish from sexuality. These difficulties seem to derive from reconstructing the female libido, taking the male libido as a model. In contrast, it would have been more straightforward and more convincing to start by introducing an extra original *explanans*, the female libido, without trying to derive it from the male.

She mentions Adler's criticism of Freud: penis envy should not be interpreted in causal, mechanistic and individualistic terms. The girl envies the male penis because she sees it as the symbol of the higher social role the male enjoys. For Beauvoir, this criticism is sound yet not enough: though admitting among causal factors elements similar to the concepts of force in physics, Adler's explanation also is deterministic. However, no scheme seems sufficient to explain the human psyche. While introducing notions of motives and ends, Adler fully retains the idea of psychic causality; compared to Freud, he is in the same position as energetics vis-à-vis mechanics: whether it is a question of impact or force of attraction, physics always starts from determinism. All psychoanalysts share this postulate:

For them, human history develops through a play of determined elements [...]. This drama has a dynamism of its own: it blindly tends to unfold through all the unexpected events that alter it, and every woman suffers it passively²⁰.

Therefore, Beauvoir's criticism of psychoanalysis targets, on the one hand, the insufficient explanatory power of its account and, on the other, seems to reject any account²¹.

The first criticism of Freud is limited to the logic of scientific explanation: psychoanalysts find it easy to confirm their theories, but we know how, by subtly complicating Ptolemy's theorem, it was possible to maintain that it gave the exact position of the planets; similarly, by superimposing on Oedipus an inverted Oedipus, showing that every anguish conceals a desire, it becomes possible to assimilate to

¹⁹ DS I, p. 83-4.

²⁰ DS I, p. 87.

²¹ DS I, pp. 94-7.

Freudian psychoanalysis even the very facts that contradict it. But when a theory multiplies secondary explanations indefinitely, when observation reveals that a given number of typical cases correspond to as many anomalies, it is as well to abandon the old account. The implied consequence would be a request to discard the Oedipus complex and penis envy when accounting for female libido²². However, Beauvoir's critique goes far beyond a call for a more comprehensive account. Making the Freudian account more elastic, she declares, is not enough. Freudism is guilty of over-complicating its theories on femininity and failing to pay due respect to the unity of the human soul: psychoanalysis, which seeks to reconstruct psychic life through an association of elements, reduces it to something meaningless. Psychoanalysis, which aims to reconstruct psychic life by associating its features, reduces it to something pointless.

The idea of a simple combination of elements cannot be accepted: psychic life is not a mosaic; it is whole in each moment, and this unity must be respected. This is possible only by finding the original intentionality of existence in the disparity of facts. Unless we return to this source, man is reduced to a battlefield between impulses and prohibitions equally meaningless and contingent. Psychoanalysts systematically reject the idea of *choice* and the correlative notion of value: this is the system's intrinsic weakness. Having separated prohibitions and impulses from existential choice, Freud fails in his account of their origin: he assumes they are given²³.

This critique adopts Sartre's existential psychoanalysis presented in *Being and Nothingness* as its starting point. Existential psychoanalysis is a reaction to causal accounts of human action aiming to explain the evolution of individual life as the fulfilment of a fundamental existential choice where the individual takes all the data he encounters in his "situation", including those which he has not chosen such as the fact of coming into the world, conferring them meaning within an existential project that the individual is forced to formulate. We may also note that Sartre and Beauvoir do not propose the theory of existential choice as a higher-level discourse co-existing with a scientific discourse accounting for

²² Sh. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Jonathan Cape, London 1971, pp. 49-69; see also J. Mitchell, "Women, The Longest Revolution", *New Left Review*, vol. 40, Nov-Dec 1966, pp. 11-37 who sets out to define the "female condition" through the Althusserian (and Freudian) notion of *overdetermination*: the condition of the individual woman, on this basis, would be resolved in the product of a specific class position, of particular cultural and psychological conditioning, or of a certain type of interpersonal relations within small groups such as the family. This notion could strip the female condition of its character of fatality and make possible an analysis of the place of the individual woman within a society of inequalities, which does not end in pitying her for the "evil of being a woman".

²³ DS, p. 88.

causally determined events in human life. Many of those who resort to *causal* accounts (more or less inclusive, more or less mechanistic) of human life do not *ipso facto* reject ethical discourse appealing to humans' capacity to choose while conceding the existence of aspects in which several factors condition humans. Instead, Beauvoir apparently rejects psychoanalysis as far as it resorts to casual accounts.

Ultimately, the reproach against psychoanalysis is that it is science, not philosophy. Having argued that psychoanalysis should be considered metaphysics, Beauvoir proves it is feeble metaphysics and explains less than Sartre's metaphysics. Alongside this series of criticisms prompted by a concern not to reduce the living unity of human beings to one element, there is another objection of a phenomenological kind: sexuality is only one of the ways of coming into a relationship with the world, just one of the activities in which the senses of the matter of which the world is made are revealed. Psychoanalysts think that humans' first truth is their relationship with their bodies and with that of their fellows. Still, a human being has a primordial interest in the substance of the natural world around him, which he seeks to discover in work, in play, in all the experiences of the "dynamic imagination", thus "crumbling the earth, digging a hole are experiences just as original as the embrace and coitus"²⁴.

Beauvoir's reading of Freud

The salient feature of Beauvoir's approach to psychoanalysis is a tendency to see the doctrine examined as an ideology or a philosophy. Only on this basis are the accusations justified of leaving facts unexplained and not accounting for the psyche *in its unity* but abstracting certain aspects instead. This refusal to discuss psychoanalysis to the extent that it can be considered a science is remarkably self-aware where, having drawn the parallel with Ptolemaic theory and its replacement by other theories, the possibility of a similar step is rejected. An unspoken presupposition may be that a theoretical account may work for the solar system, which is part of nature. Still, no account will ever work for humans because we cannot enclose a *unique* human life within a theory.

Several objections to Freud are inspired by Beauvoir's feminist inspiration, partly accepting Adler's suggestions. Nonetheless, objections calling for a more coherent account of the female libido or resorting to social factors to account for psychic events (the penis as a symbol of male power) are pretty to the point.

²⁴ DS, p. 90.

Beauvoir's attitude on the importance of sexuality is somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, she recognises the importance of Freud's discovery of the role of sexuality; on the other, she argues that the centrality of sexuality would usurp the centrality of existential choice. Calls for a different explanation of the female libido discarding the Oedipus complex and penis envy seem to forget her criticism of the Freudian centrality of sexuality. Feminists after Beauvoir have taken up these proposals without criticising the decisive role attributed by Freud to sex. This is what Shulamith Firestone did, putting the girl's relationship with her mother's body at the centre of the account of female libido (now a widely accepted claim in most feminist currents). Freud's "sexual monism" is even re-evaluated by Firestone as the translation into science, though partially distorted science, of the importance that early feminism had given to sexuality²⁵.

A separate discourse should be made for the critique that reaffirms the libidinal character of the relationship with the world and the cognitive nature of the sexual relationship. These elements are taken from Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl and anticipate Marcuse's discourse in *Eros and Civilisation*. It may be a fruitful starting point to design a utopia that envisages a re-eroticisation of our relationship with the world and a parallel discovery of sex as *knowledge* and a *relationship with nature*. But, unfortunately, when she sketches her utopia, Beauvoir forgets these hints; she tends to see sex as a marginal activity, playing no essential role in an authentic relationship between man and woman. In other words, she seems to share the view of sex as pure satisfaction through undifferentiated and quantifiable pleasure, which Erich Fromm describes as sex as exchange value.

As for the criticism that denies the Freudian centrality of sexuality, we should admit that it is reasonable but add that it is a criticism more of a particular way of interpreting psychoanalysis than of what psychoanalysis as such says. Psychoanalysis, indeed, may be interpreted in the light of a mechanistic or an organicist view. Freud himself, in 1920, considered criticisms of this kind: "we would like to remind all those who look down on psychoanalysis with an air of superiority, to what extent psychoanalysis's extended sexuality coincides with the eros of the divine Plato"²⁶.

²⁵ Sh. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, pp. 58-66.

²⁶ S. Freud, Preface, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1920), Hogarth, London 1962.

The female condition as existential decision and destiny

At this point, we may fix a few conclusions. *The Second Sex* was a highly innovative work, the first attempt to design a consistent theory of the female condition encompassing history, anthropology, sociology and psychology, an approach also pursued by later feminist literature. The doubts that this focus has raised verge precisely on the appropriateness of starting from such a point. Starting with such a subjective factor as the feminine condition as the focus of the investigation (and not, as Engels, from the *family* as an institution) runs the risk of making this condition, above all, a fact of consciousness possibly influenced only by an existential choice.

The female condition's twofold character of *choice* and destiny, not to say damnation, is a consequence of Beauvoir's approach. It is apparent that since this condition is linked to something such as the consciousness's imperialism, it becomes all the more difficult to think of a project for modifying the given conditions.

Moreover, the effort to deny the decisive and central character of sexuality heads in a paradox: sexual differences ultimately lose all meaning and chance to play a positive function. Even though, for a moment, Beauvoir sees sexuality as a way of relating to the world and the body as "my way of having a grip on the world", the consequence she draws is *not* that after liberation, the female body will offer a different possibility of *knowledge* of the world but just that biological differences will become irrelevant.

Using today's warped language, we cannot describe tomorrow's liberated and non-alienated world. This is understood. Nonetheless, we may suspect that Beauvoir, in the end, tends to exclude the body and sexuality from the domain where new opportunities may be created for enjoyment, self-knowledge and experience of the world we live in.