



BRILL

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR STUDIES 32 (2021) 187–206



brill.com/sdbs

# Masculinity as an Impasse

## *Beauvoir's Understanding of Men's Situation in The Second Sex*

*Manon Garcia* | ORCID: 0000-0002-0933-3683

Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

*manon.garcia@fu-berlin.de*

### Abstract

*The Second Sex* can be read as a compelling philosophical exploration of masculinity. Beauvoir proposes to understand masculinity as a situation. It is an impasse as men are stuck in a position where they seek recognition from women, but they construct women in such a way that the recognition women can give them is incomplete and unsatisfying. This understanding of masculinity is crucial for Beauvoir's emancipatory agenda and suggests that men have nonaltruistic reasons to take part in feminist movements.

### Résumé

*Le Deuxième Sexe* peut être lu comme une enquête philosophique convaincante sur la masculinité. Si Beauvoir propose de comprendre la masculinité comme une situation, cette dernière implique toutefois une impasse : les hommes recherchent la reconnaissance des femmes et, en même temps, construisent les femmes de manière telle que cette reconnaissance ne peut demeurer qu'incomplète, insatisfaisante. Cette compréhension de la masculinité est fondamentale dans le projet émancipateur de Beauvoir, et suggère que les hommes ont des raisons non altruistes de prendre part aux mouvements féministes.

### Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir – masculinity – bad faith – emancipation – situation – feminism – men

The central question of *The Second Sex* appears on the first page of the introduction: What is a woman?<sup>1</sup> This question is ontological, existential, and phenomenological: Simone de Beauvoir investigates what a woman is, what it means to live as a woman, and what the lived experience of a woman is like. Beauvoir is not the first philosopher to pay philosophical attention to the category of “woman”—Jean-Jacques Rousseau and G.W.F. Hegel, for instance, did before her—but she is the first one to make it a philosophical problem.<sup>2</sup> “Woman” is not only a topic of investigation but also a prism through which philosophy’s inability to say something about the gendered division of the world is made manifest. Indeed, many scholars consider *The Second Sex* the starting point of the subfield of feminist philosophy and the first philosophical account of “woman” and “femininity.”<sup>3</sup>

Beauvoir’s contribution to philosophy has been widely acknowledged, but scholars have not emphasized one important consequence that follows from this groundbreaking work: by making the category of “woman” a philosophical problem, Beauvoir is the first philosopher to explicitly bring the topic of masculinity into the realm of philosophy. In investigating womanhood, she turns sexual difference into an object of philosophical scrutiny; in defining “woman” ontologically according to its difference from “man,” she makes “man,” understood as male human, a philosophical object as well. Other philosophers have evoked and sometimes even tried to account for sexual difference—including Rousseau, of course, but also Plato in Aristophanes’s speech in the *Symposium*.<sup>4</sup> However, Beauvoir goes beyond a simple analysis of sexual difference: she challenges the common tendency to take sexual difference for granted and to view masculinity as the norm. At least in the binary framework that she adopts, “What is a woman?” implies “What is properly masculine in a man?” or “What is it that women have, as women, that men do not have?”

1 I would like to thank Todd Reeser and Kalliane Ung for nudging me to put on paper my thoughts on Beauvoir and masculinity. I also thank two anonymous reviewers as well as Filipa Melo Lopes, Heather Wallace, and the participants of the Warwick Post-Kantian Philosophy Seminar for their very helpful comments and questions.

2 Stella Sandford, “Beauvoir’s Transdisciplinarity: From Philosophy to Gender Theory,” in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, 15–27, p. 20.

3 See, for instance, Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991 [1989]; and Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York, Basic Books, 1979 [1762]; Plato, *Symposium*, trans. M.C. Howatson, ed. M.C. Howatson and Frisbee C.C. Sheffield, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Beauvoir scholarship, for good reasons, says very little about the philosophical analysis of masculinity brought about by *The Second Sex*.<sup>5</sup> First, *The Second Sex* is so evidently a book on women and femininity that people interested in masculinity have not seen it as a potential source of scholarship. Second, when one reads—as one should—*The Second Sex* as the first book of philosophy devoted to the half of humanity that has been overlooked—namely, women—there is an understandable reluctance to read the book as a source of analyses of men.

However, reading *The Second Sex* through the prism of masculinity is important and consistent with the history of critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM).<sup>6</sup> It is indeed widely recognized that the development of this field is indebted to feminist analyses of womanhood.<sup>7</sup> However, not much, if anything, has been written on the contribution of Beauvoir's thought to the emergence of CSMM. Yet, *The Second Sex* initiated the feminist objection to the universalization of men's experiences as human experiences, and this objection is crucial for revealing the ways that masculinity has been concealed as a possible object of study.<sup>8</sup> Masculinity had been conflated with humanity to such an extent that it was not even thinkable as a category. Beauvoir was the first philosopher to uncover the sexist biases of the traditional conceptions of humanity and, in so doing, created a new space to examine masculinity. The silence about Beauvoir's contribution to the analysis of masculinity—except for Bonnie Mann's important work on sovereign masculinity—is easily explained, but it is nonetheless striking. Beauvoir is a pioneer of gender studies, not only insofar as she was one of the first thinkers to shed light on the social construction of sex, but also because she makes masculinity, and not only femininity, a legitimate topic of philosophical investigation.

This article argues that *The Second Sex* can be read as a compelling philosophical exploration and critique of masculinity. In particular, I demonstrate that the masculinity under scrutiny is an *impasse*. Beauvoir proposes to under-

5 Two exceptions are Penelope Deutscher, "Disaffiliations: Beauvoir and Gorz on Masculinity as Aging," *philoSOPHIA*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 88–101; and Bonnie Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

6 See for instance Todd W. Reeser, "Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies," in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Stefan Horlacher, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2015, pp. 11–38.

7 R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 1995; Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

8 See, for instance, Larry May, Robert Strikwerda, and Patrick D. Hopkins, eds., *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, 2nd ed., Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.

stand masculinity as a situation. This situation is historically, socially, and economically defined; it is not oppressive, but it is nonetheless an impasse as men are stuck in a position where they seek recognition from women, but they construct women in such a way that the recognition women can give them is always incomplete and unsatisfying. Showing that masculinity is an impasse is important in itself, and it is also crucial for Beauvoir's feminist emancipatory agenda. Beauvoir indirectly, but convincingly, argues that even though men's fear of losing their privileges will lead many of them to oppose women's emancipation, patriarchy restrains men's possibilities to live authentic and joyful lives. There are compelling reasons, beyond altruism, for men to take part in the movement of women's emancipation, which is also, for men, a pathway to emancipation from traditional masculinity.

## 1 The Correlative Definitions of Manhood and Womanhood

*The Second Sex* defines "femininity" and "masculinity"—or "womanhood" and "manhood," as they are, for now, taken to refer broadly to what makes men *men* or women *women* and not simply unsexed human beings—in relation to one another. This correlation establishes the book as one of the first philosophical explorations of masculinity. As many commenters have noted, *The Second Sex* makes two main philosophical innovations. It posits a new question for existential ontology—"What is a woman?"—and it genders phenomenological experience.<sup>9</sup> Even though it is not their primary objective, these two innovations, I claim here, have a collateral effect of making masculinity a topic of philosophical investigation. Beauvoir asks what a woman is. That leads her to show that the two questions of what a man is and what a human is have been conflated, and she argues that they should not be.<sup>10</sup> By showing that phenomenological experience is gendered, Beauvoir invites us to consider the possibility that before her work, phenomenology, which was taken as analyzing human experience, may well have been analyzing solely man's experience.

Beauvoir posits the question of what a woman is, and then she debunks both the nominalist response and the "binary but equal" view of sexual difference. Instead, she writes:

9 Sandford, "Beauvoir's Transdisciplinarity," p. 15.

10 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Vintage Books, 2011 [1949], p. 4. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *ss*.

The categories 'masculine' and 'feminine' appear as symmetrical in a formal way on town hall records or identification papers. The relation of the two sexes 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, the particular meaning of the word *vir* being assimilated into the general meaning of the word *homo*. Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity.<sup>11</sup>

What Beauvoir does in this passage is of tremendous importance and can be read as the beginning not only of feminist epistemology but also of gender studies in general. She claims that sexual difference is not a simple, neutral difference between men and women. Rather, Beauvoir shows us, femininity is understood as a distance from the norm of masculinity. Masculinity and humanity are assimilated, and femininity is defined by its contrast with them. In saying this, Beauvoir turns sexual difference into a philosophical problem insofar as it is not purely descriptive but also normative: women are the beings who fail to be the full, good human beings that men are. She also hints that this definition of femininity is a consequence of men's social power. But more importantly—and to my knowledge, this has not been discussed in the literature on Beauvoir—she is the first philosopher to identify that men's social power has made masculinity both invisible and hegemonic. This thesis will become one of the departure points of CSMM.<sup>12</sup> Men have such power that the question of what they are cannot even be posited. Masculinity is at the same time positive and neutral; it is both the norm of humanity and what cannot be seen or analyzed because it seems so unproblematic that it becomes invisible.

The hierarchy of the sexes is such that femininity is defined as a failure, as a deviation from the norm of humanity that is masculinity. And this definition is, albeit paradoxically, the reason why the contours of masculinity are revealed through the study of femininity. In *The Second Sex*, a philosophical account of masculinity arises from Beauvoir's philosophical account of femininity. Although woman is made to be the Other by men, from the perspective of philosophical investigation, 1. masculinity is actually defined by its contrast with femininity and not on its own, 2. it is only when one investigates what women are that masculinity as a topic of philosophical investigation can arise, and 3. one needs to have the specific social position and perspective that Beau-

<sup>11</sup> SS, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*.

voir has to be able to make masculinity appear as a topic of scrutiny. Masculinity is even more elusive than femininity, in part because it is not a question for men themselves. Beauvoir writes, "It would never occur to a man to write a book on the singular situation of males in humanity."<sup>13</sup> It is because she is a woman that she thinks to raise the question of what women are and, correlatively, almost necessarily, of what men are.

*The Second Sex* makes masculinity visible through a typically Hegelian dialectical movement. Because she has been taught by society that when she writes and speaks, it is *qua* woman, Beauvoir sets herself the task of elucidating what a woman is. The most obvious answer is a negative one: a woman is the other sex, the negative, what is *not* a man. Beauvoir must negate this negativity to make femininity a positive thing, to give a definition of it. When she does, masculinity appears as the negative of femininity, as a contrasting tool through which femininity will be defined. Proposing an existential analysis of femininity produces a positive account of masculinity.

An example of this movement appears in the introduction to *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir explains that one of the forms of male power is to make their bodies disappear, while women are reduced to sheer bodies. She writes:

Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it.<sup>14</sup>

To be a woman is to have a particular importance granted to one's body, while men can allow themselves the luxury of not being defined by their body. What it is to be a woman is defined by contrast to what it is to be a man. Yet, the distinctive traits of masculinity—for instance the fact of being able to pretend one's body doesn't matter to one's identity—only appears when one analyzes the distinctive traits of femininity. Masculinity does not offer itself as a topic of investigation; it is too transparent. It becomes one only when what it constructs as what it is not—femininity—starts to be analyzed.

Beauvoir is therefore the first philosopher to establish that sex and gender are always relational (although she does not use the sex/gender distinction,

---

13    *SS*, p. 5.

14    *SS*, p. 5.

which is only articulated decades after *The Second Sex*). When Beauvoir seeks to identify the “biological data” that contribute to defining what femininity is, she finds that male and female “can be defined only correlatively.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout *The Second Sex*, masculinity functions as a contrasting tool, and its significance in this role is what makes it a topic worthy of philosophical investigation. For instance, in order to understand the ways that women’s relations to their bodies alienate them, Beauvoir contrasts men’s experiences of their bodies with the experiences women have. Beauvoir observes that men enjoy the experience of having their needs as individuals coincide with the needs of the species. Men can be pure individuals: the perpetuation of the species does not require that they go against the demands of their individuality.<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir defines the biological alienation of women—their “enslavement to the species”—in contrast to this experience.<sup>17</sup> The perpetuation of the species requires that women negate their individuality. There are parts of women’s bodies that have no purpose for the individual (mammary glands, for instance) and moments in a woman’s life where she works for the species and against herself, to the extent that “there is no way to escape that tyranny because it enslaves individual life at the same time that it nourishes it.”<sup>18</sup> Because Beauvoir wants to render women’s experiences of embodiment visible, she contrasts them with the experiences men have and thereby investigates what masculinity is.

In the same way, at the beginning of the second volume of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir contrasts the education of boys with that of girls. By showing that boys’ education is an education of freedom, Beauvoir can analyze precisely the ways that girls’ education is an education in submission.<sup>19</sup> In so doing, she does not simply observe that girls are educated in a certain way *qua* girls and that education is *gendered*. She also establishes that there is a form of education that is an education in *masculinity*, which would have remained invisible outside an investigation of femininity because of the hegemony of masculinity. Beauvoir and the immense majority of her contemporaries presuppose a binary nature of the sexes, and so when she undertakes the enterprise of searching for a positive definition of femininity—a definition not in terms of what women *lack* by virtue of being women, but of what they are—she finds herself scrutinizing

15 ss, p. 21.

16 Beauvoir writes, “The male’s sex life is normally integrated into his individual existence: in terms of desire and coitus, his surpassing toward the species is an integral part of the subjective moment of his transcendence: he *is* his body. Woman’s history is much more complex.” ss, p. 39.

17 ss, p. 48.

18 ss, p. 40.

19 ss, pp. 283–340.

sexual difference, which, in turn, directs her attention to the otherwise always elusive masculinity.

Beauvoir turns masculinity into a topic of investigation because of her investigation of femininity, and this move raises two sets of issues. First, what is the ontological status of these categories of masculinity and femininity? And what is the status of the concrete beings they are associated with—men and women? (Is Beauvoir providing an essentialist definition of masculinity—saying that being a man is having a certain essence?) And a second issue follows: Does she imply there is only one way of being a man? Does a masculine essence destine men to be in the world in a certain way? Is masculinity a destiny?

## 2 Masculinity, Like Femininity, Is a Situation

I have been using “masculinity” and “manhood” interchangeably up to now, as descriptive terms referring to what, if anything, makes men *men* and not simply unsexed human beings. But if one wants to understand exactly what Beauvoir is doing in *The Second Sex* and how it relates to contemporary analyses of masculinity, a distinction has to be drawn. “Masculinity” has been used in gender studies and in CSMM as allowing for instability, tensions, and plurality, whereas “manhood” “tend[s] to connote a more stable, and perhaps even a biologically based one.”<sup>20</sup> Works in CSMM have shown that “masculinity” encompasses ideas beyond hegemonic or traditional masculinity.<sup>21</sup> Throughout history, space, and social milieu, multiple masculinities are deployed and manifested. Sometimes “masculinity” has been used as a value judgment, to describe “real men,” whatever this expression may mean. This parallels the way the expression “feminine woman” is used to praise women who follow the social norms of femininity.

Beauvoir’s core topic is womanhood rather than femininity, and it leads her to propose an analysis of masculinity rather than manhood. To put it differently, in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir is interested in giving a descriptive, phenomenological account of what it is to be a woman rather than a normative one.<sup>22</sup> This approach drives her to look at what men do to women that shapes

20 See, for instance, Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 13.

21 C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, eds., *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

22 One could convincingly argue that this is not the case in Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*, for instance. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, New York,



women's lived experiences, what norms of masculinity and femininity constructed by men shape women's lives—that is, what men are when they are taken as a monolithic group. At times, she accounts for the fact that there are wildly different ways of being a man and of conceiving of one's masculinity. She does it explicitly when she studies the works of Henry de Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Claudel, André Breton, and Stendhal through the prism of their representations of masculinity and femininity. And she does it implicitly when she recognizes the oppression of Jews, Blacks, and workers, and, therefore, probably implies that their masculinity is different than the fully dominant one—the white, middle-class one.<sup>23</sup> Yet, given the function of her analysis of masculinity—understanding how it shapes what it is to be a woman—she focuses broadly on a dominant, unified masculinity rather than on unstable and plural masculinities as they are often studied in CSMM. The masculinity she examines is therefore not the “hegemonic masculinity” coined by R.W. Connell in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Connell and James W. Messerschmidt explain in their 2005 reevaluation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, this concept is grounded on the premise, put forward by gay thinkers, that multiple masculinities always coexist in a hierarchized way.<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir's masculinity is linked to a project of dominance, as Bonnie Mann shows when she describes the “sovereign masculinity” that is at the core of the War on Terror, but it is not “hegemonic” in the sense that it is not conceived as one masculinity among others that has a hegemony over the others.<sup>26</sup> It is “hegemonic,” however, in the sense that it is the norm that defines femininity as defective.

This connection between masculinity and femininity does not mean, however, that masculinity is conceived as an essence: masculinity, like femininity, is a situation. There are widely held beliefs and social norms about what men are, just as there are beliefs and norms about what women are, but Beauvoir argues that these social norms do not capture fixed essences. She demonstrates that these norms evolve across times and cultures; they do not inescapably determine what men can be. Masculinity, like femininity, may have recurring traits throughout history, but these are fundamentally the products of a certain, historically situated environment. They can and must therefore be historicized.

---

W.W. Norton, 1996 [1970]. On the phenomenological account of what it is to be an old man in *The Coming of Age*, see Deutscher, “Disaffiliations.”

23 ss, p. 12.

24 R.W. Connell, “Class, Patriarchy, and Sartre's Theory of Practice,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1982, pp. 305–320.

25 R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–859.

26 Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity*, pp. 1–14.

As I argue elsewhere, Beauvoir employs the concept of “situation” to propose an alternative to the dichotomy between essentialism and denying the reality of sexual difference.<sup>27</sup> Being a woman or a man is not having a set essence, yet being a man and being a woman are not the same, nor do these identities give us what Beauvoir calls the same “grasp on the world.”<sup>28</sup> The concept of “situation” allows Beauvoir to acknowledge two aspects of human experience. On the one hand (and against Sartre), individuals are not equally free, and they each hold a certain place in the world that is a function of their social and economic position. On the other hand, individuals are not fully determined by their situations, as they would be if they had an essence that was inescapable and determined the possibilities of their being.

Beauvoir’s ontology explains that masculinity and femininity must be studied at the individual as well as social level. Hegel, Edmund Husserl, and later Jean-Paul Sartre conceive of humans as individuals who have a self before they encounter others and the world in general. In contrast, Beauvoir, inspired by Martin Heidegger, conceives of humans as being fundamentally part of a world they have in common: every individual is always already situated in a world of meaning and of other people. This contrast applies specifically to sexual difference. It is impossible to imagine any individual before sexual difference. Every person is born into a world in which being a woman and being a man already means something, and every person is born into a world in which they are in relation with other people. This ontology has consequences for any inquiry into sexual difference. To understand what femininity and masculinity are, one must recognize two levels: 1. that of the individual, who makes choices and behaves in certain ways, and 2. that of society, which prescribes certain behaviors to individuals and shapes their preferences.

To follow these social norms is thus not a form of bad faith since authenticity requires us to recognize how we are situated. Beauvoir writes, “No woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex,” and the same is undoubtedly true for men—since the way they can be, their possibilities for action, are opened to them by virtue of their being men.<sup>29</sup> Yet, being situated does not mean that we cannot change or that we have no freedom. Beauvoir states it very clearly: “It is about the scope of the verb *to be* that we need to be clear; bad faith entails giving it a substantial value, when in fact it has the Hegelian dynamic meaning: *to be* is to have become, to have been made as one

27 Manon Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women’s Lives*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2021, ch. 3, pp. 41–67.

28 *ss*, p. 46.

29 *ss*, p. 4.

manifests oneself.”<sup>30</sup> Saying that human beings are situated means that we are in a world in which our being always already has a meaning and a norm, but this meaning and this norm are products of history and do not have a fixed nature. Neither a woman nor a man can pretend they are simply an (unsexed) human being, for in this world, sexual difference exists and structures one’s possibilities for action. But they can, by their actions, by their freedom, participate in the transformation of the meaning of sexual difference and of the social norms governing masculinity and femininity.

Femininity and masculinity are therefore two situations, but they are radically different ones. Of course, “every concrete human being is always uniquely situated,” however, Jews, Blacks, workers, and women are in a situation of inferiority whereas men are in a situation of superiority.<sup>31</sup> The first volume of *The Second Sex* should be read as a response to the question “What is a woman?” from the perspective of men—that is, from the perspective of those who have the power to define it. But this volume can also be read as a description of the ways that women’s and men’s situations differ. In the part titled “Destiny,” Beauvoir describes how the situation of women diverges from that of men through the lenses of biology, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. In the part devoted to “History,” she provides a history of women’s oppression, which is also a history of men’s power. In “Myths,” she demonstrates how masculinity builds myths of women that allow men to escape the existential anguish that is at the heart of the human condition.

Beauvoir defines masculinity and femininity as situations, and she shows that these situations are the product of history and power dynamics. She describes the situation and history of women as one of people who are inferior because they have been defined from the outside by a group that has power over them. In recognizing this, she also shows that masculinity is a situation that rises from the power of being able to define oneself.

30 ss, pp. 12–13, translation modified.

31 ss, p. 4. A very serious issue appears here. Should we read this quotation as Beauvoir implicitly acknowledging a form of intersectionality, in which each individual’s situation should be understood as an intersection of their situation qua Jew, qua Black, qua woman, for instance? Or does Beauvoir overlook the possibility that someone might be Black and a woman? In this latter case, then the masculinity of Jews or Blacks would not be a possible topic of analysis for her. On this issue, see Kathryn T. Gines (Kathryn Sophia Belle), “Comparative and Competing Frameworks of Oppression in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 251–273; and Nancy Bauer, “On the Limits of Philosophizing,” *Symposia on Gender, Race, and Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–4.

### 3 Masculinity as Morally Wrong

Some scholarship on Beauvoir claims that Beauvoir envies men's situation, evaluates women against the norm of masculinity, and proposes masculinity as an ideal.<sup>32</sup> These interpretations of *The Second Sex* are mistaken. *The Second Sex* can and should be read as a subtle demonstration that traditional masculinity is a harmful impasse: instead of freeing men from the costs of authentic recognition, it places them in a position that is morally wrong and that constantly drives them further away from the goals that they are seeking.<sup>33</sup>

Many thinkers accuse Beauvoir of promoting masculine values and of thinking men's way of life should function as a model for women's emancipation. This perspective can be found among the "French feminists" of the 1970s and in Anglophone feminist theory. When one reads Beauvoir's analyses of masculinity closely, however, it becomes clear that she condemns traditional masculinity. She shows that men are in a situation that could enable them to live an authentic, enviable life. Yet, they choose, out of bad faith and lack of courage, to avoid the anguish and ambiguity of such an authentic life and build or at least accept masculinity as an inauthentic escape. Beauvoir's positive depiction of men's situation is not contradictory but complementary to her analysis of masculinity as an impasse.

Beauvoir's argument regarding traditional masculinity is threefold. First, men are in a privileged situation, which gives them access to transcendence, to projects, and to genius. Second, this privileged situation also grants them the power to inauthentically escape existential ambiguity. In other words, the privileged situation of masculinity renders a certain kind of bad faith possible. Third, the bad faith at the heart of masculinity is not only morally wrong insofar as it is inauthentic; it also places men in an impasse, where they constantly fail

---

32 See, in particular, Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1988; and Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Re-Reading*, London, Virago, 1986. See also the account given of disagreements on this issue in Céline T. Léon, "Beauvoir's Woman: Eunuch or Male?" in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 137–160. Beauvoir addresses this issue in her interview with Susan Brison in Rome on September 7, 1976. See Simone de Beauvoir and Susan J. Brison, "Beauvoir and Feminism: Interview and Reflections," trans. Thomas Trezise and Susan J. Brison, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 189–207.

33 Even though she does not address this point directly, the traditional masculinity Beauvoir analyzes is in its essence heterosexual: it is a masculinity that conceives of love and sex only with women.

to get the recognition, absolute power, and infinite pleasure they are looking for, and cannot get these as long as they abide by the norms of this traditional masculinity.

As we have seen previously, the specificity of men's situation is that theirs is a situation of power. Being a man is to be in a situation in which one is not determined from the outside but instead gets to determine oneself.<sup>34</sup> It is a situation of existential freedom, in which one has access to transcendence, one can exert one's freedom through projects, and one has access to the world in such a way that one can aspire to literary genius, for instance. This depiction of masculinity is the ground on which several analyses of *The Second Sex* have argued that Beauvoir was idealizing masculine values. Some interpret Beauvoir's seeming preference for transcendence over immanence as a valorization of a masculine—and Sartrean—ideal of existence over a more feminine one.<sup>35</sup> Others criticize her apparent endorsement of Hegel's view that risking life is more worthy than affirming it; they see this position as an androcentrism that "sometimes verges on being misogynist."<sup>36</sup>

Yet other Beauvoir scholars have challenged this interpretation of her work.<sup>37</sup> The most compelling argument against this reading recognizes that Beauvoir argues that masculinity is a form of bad faith. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir adopts an anthropological framework inspired by Hegel, according to which each individual is a subject who wants to be recognized as such by other subjects, instead of being seen by others as a sheer object. Yet, contrary to Sartre, for instance, Beauvoir does not see this ambiguity of being both a subject and an object as insurmountable. She thinks it is possible to transcend the "tragedy of the unhappy consciousness" in play in the search for recognition.<sup>38</sup> Nancy Bauer convincingly argues that Beauvoir holds together the Heideggerian *Mitsein* as an ethical horizon and the Hegelian fight for recognition as a concrete experience.<sup>39</sup> Though Hegel presents the demand for recognition

34 Being a man in that sense seems to mean, in Beauvoir's eyes, being a man who is not a Jew, a Black person, or a worker.

35 See for instance Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 50; and Léon, "Beauvoir's Woman." For an overview and a critique of this literature, see Nadine Changfoot, "Transcendence in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: Revisiting Masculinist Ontology," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2009, pp. 391–410.

36 Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex"*, trans. Linda Schenk, Hanover, NH, Wesleyan University Press, 1996 [1991], p. 81.

37 See Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, pp. 202–210.

38 *ss*, p. 159.

39 Nancy Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against: Heidegger Meets Hegel in *The Second Sex*," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2001, pp. 129–149.

as agonistic and perpetual, Beauvoir shows us this struggle can be resolved through the acceptance of one's ambiguous nature and through authentic friendship and love. Beauvoir claims that human beings can regain the original and harmonious *Mitsein*: "The conflict can be overcome by the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement."<sup>40</sup> But for this conflict to be overcome, individuals must face the difficulties of authentic friendship and love, which require recognizing and respecting the other's freedom instead of trying to possess the other. Yet men's situation allows them to avoid this costly authentic recognition.<sup>41</sup> Because men "have always held all the concrete powers," they have the power to turn women into the Other.<sup>42</sup> They try to reap the benefits of reciprocity without paying for its costs. Men *could* reach it in an authentic way, through friendship and generosity—but these things take time and are costly, and men are "afraid of danger."<sup>43</sup> And it is easier and less dangerous to obtain recognition inauthentically through the construction of woman as the Other.

Scholarly literature has discussed at length what it means to make woman the Other and how this move constitutes a flight from authenticity.<sup>44</sup> But this discussion has focused on the ways that this move provides an explanation for women's oppression and submission. It has largely ignored the ways that making woman the Other makes masculinity a moral fault and an impasse.

The first part of the argument is what we can call an external critique: if one takes a step back from the usual perspective, which is the masculine one, one sees that masculinity is not the norm of the good but rather is morally wrong. It is wrong because it is a flight from the risks that are inherent to human existence and therefore is an inauthentic way to live one's life. As Mann writes, "Masculinity, in Beauvoir's perspective, is marked by the denial of the risks and vulnerabilities of freedom."<sup>45</sup> Men escape the risk and vulnerability that is at the core of human experience.

This flight, which is a temptation for everyone, is even more morally problematic since men—or at least men that are not working-class, Black, or Jewish—are in a situation where authenticity is much more attainable for them

---

40 ss, p. 159.

41 ss, pp. 159–160.

42 ss, p. 159.

43 ss, p. 160.

44 See Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, ch. 2, pp. 19–45; and Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive*, ch. 6, pp. 111–131, and ch. 9, pp. 177–206.

45 Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity*, p. 42.

than for others. Men have the power to invent themselves, to make projects, and to build authentic relations with women, but they choose not to. Women, Blacks, Jews, and workers do not have this same choice available to them, as their situations are defined from the outside, by people who have power over them. Therefore, in their case, it is not bad faith nor is it immoral for them to submit to the destiny written for them—though Beauvoir still thinks they should endeavor to overcome this limitation. Men's situation, however, is not determined for them from the outside: it does not shape a destiny. They have a choice, and they choose not to confront the costs of their existential freedom; therefore, they live in bad faith.

But Beauvoir's critique of masculinity goes further than this external one: it shows that masculinity is an impasse in that it is a path that does not even provide men with the benefits that they were intending to acquire inauthentically. Masculinity is an impasse as it inherently fails to provide the sort of happiness and dominance that was the motivation of the inauthentic flight. To say it differently, men build a norm of masculinity that is supposed to grant them recognition and pleasure, and instead, it impairs them and puts them in a situation where recognition and pleasure are intrinsically unattainable. Beauvoir presents gender inequality and, therefore, the correlative constructions of femininity and masculinity as the results of a desire to get recognition without having to pay the price for authentic recognition. And she shows how the sexual objectification of women is part of this quest for recognition: possessing women sexually, especially when they are deemed beautiful and sexy by other men, is one way among others to inauthentically get recognition. In a way, it does get men recognition. And it does grant men power, prestige, and extreme privilege. Yet Beauvoir shows that ultimately through masculinity and its correlative construction of femininity, men condemn themselves to permanently miss the very forms of recognition and pleasure they were seeking. To do so, Beauvoir gives a few examples of how men put themselves in a situation that deprives them of the (questionable) goal that was theirs in the first place.

First, men construct women as everything that men are not. This negation leads to women being constructed as contradictory figures, and as contradictory figures, they cannot bring men the comfort men were expecting them to bring:

She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness [...].

[...] [W]oman embodies no set concept; through her the passage from hope to failure, hatred to love, good to bad, bad to good takes place cease-

lessly. However she is considered, it is this ambivalence that is the most striking.<sup>46</sup>

Second, men's valorization of purity, virtue, and virginity is in tension with their goal of erotic satisfaction. In construing woman as the Other, man desires in her the fact that she is foreign, other, unattainable. There is thus what Beauvoir calls an "implacable dialectic" that makes woman as the Other systematically unattainable for the man.<sup>47</sup> Beauvoir shows that in traditional love, the sexual use that man wants to make of woman destroys the very virtues that made her desirable in the first place:

[N]ew seductions have to be invented for the lover, she has to become that woman he wishes to meet and possess. But all effort is in vain: she will not resurrect in herself that image of the Other that first attracted him, that might attract him to another. There is the same duplicitous and impossible imperative in the lover as in the husband; he wants his mistress absolutely his and yet another; he wants her to be the answer to his dreams and still be different from anything his imagination could invent, a response to his expectations and an unexpected surprise.<sup>48</sup>

In her critique of the feminine mystery, Beauvoir is very clear: through this love of a mythical, unreal vision of woman, man fails at encountering woman. He is alone with his love instead of having an authentic relationship with another human being.

Last, in oppressing women—in making them submit to men, and love men in a way that alienates them—men put themselves in a position where they are a source of continuous disappointment for the women who love them. As Beauvoir shows in her chapter devoted to the "Woman in Love," women are destined to abdicate themselves in favor of their husbands, to see in their husbands the source of meaning in their lives. Beauvoir demonstrates how submission can transform itself into a form of power and domination: when a woman, contrary to what she was hoping, does not find the justification of her existence in the man she loves—that is, when the man does not seem sufficiently worthy of and grateful for the sacrifice she thinks she made for him—"her generosity

46 *ss*, pp. 162–163, translation modified.

47 *ss*, p. 160, translation modified.

48 *ss*, p. 704. See also *ss*, p. 178, translation modified: "The very use man makes of her destroys her most precious virtues."



is immediately converted into demands.”<sup>49</sup> This is the inevitable deadlock of loving submission: “Her joy is to serve him: but he must gratefully recognize this service; giving becomes demand according to the customary dialectic of devotion.”<sup>50</sup> In making herself a “slave” (in the Hegelian sense of the term), the woman acquires a form of power over the man: she considers that her sacrifice gives the man some duties. Out of love, she makes herself his slave and thus enchains him to a certain extent.

These examples show that masculinity, which was meant to be an inauthentic, easier way to obtain the sort of recognition that one usually gets through friendship and authentic love, impairs men and inevitably prevents them from reaching this recognition. A very convincing, albeit extreme, example of this has been offered by Filipa Melo Lopes who shows that the contradictions of incels can be understood through Beauvoir’s analysis of masculinity.<sup>51</sup> Incels believe in a norm of masculinity that marks them as deficient (they are not sexy alpha males); this norm of masculinity is supposed to grant men unlimited access to women’s bodies and women’s love; yet, this norm is unattainable for these very men who worship it, which makes them angry and frustrated to the point of violence and sometimes murder. This example shows how masculinity is constructed as an inauthentic way to get recognition—in this case, a way to get women’s favors without engaging in a meaningful relationship with them out of a desire to avoid the costs of such a relationship—and functions in a way that pushes the goal even further out of reach.

This analysis of masculinity does not seek to make men look like victims of a masculinity that would be imposed on them. Masculinity is a privileged situation that results from the power men have always had over women, and it also provides men an avenue to inauthentically reap the benefits of their privileged position. This situation is unambiguously better than the situation of the oppressed. Yet, this masculinity, which was until Beauvoir’s critique an invisible norm, suddenly appears in a completely different light: it is morally wrong, and it constitutes a path that inevitably deprives men of the satisfaction they were

49 ss, p. 695.

50 ss, p. 699.

51 Filipa Melo Lopes, “What Do Incels Want? Explaining Incel Violence Using Beauvoirian Otherness,” paper presented at “Simone de Beauvoir: New Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century” International Conference, Institute of Philosophy, Leuven, Belgium, June 2, 2021. A recording of the presentation is featured on the podcast *Simone de Beauvoir: A Toolkit for the Twenty-First Century*, Husserl Archives, 44:13, <https://anchor.fm/husserl-archives/episodes/Filipa-Melo-Lopes-What-do-incels-want-Explaining-Incel-Violence-Using-Beauvoirian-Otherness-e1eck5g>.

hoping for, both in terms of recognition from another freedom and in terms of sex and love.

#### 4 Masculinity and the Possibility of Emancipation

Beauvoir defines masculinity as a situation that is shaped by the privileges that men's powers afford them and that is produced by men's power and bad faith. With this definition, Beauvoir implicitly argues that overcoming this masculinity is a necessary and possible endeavor. This undertaking is necessary for the advent of an authentic masculinity and a harmonious relation between the sexes. This concept of masculinity allows Beauvoir to give a nuanced account of men's responsibility in patriarchy. It also establishes that men have nonaltruistic reasons to want the emancipation of women and the advent of a world in which femininity and masculinity do not preclude the possibility of equality and reciprocity.

First, understanding masculinity as a situation enables Beauvoir to bring nuance to the issue of men's responsibility for the perpetuation of patriarchy. On the one hand, since masculinity is a situation and, as such, preexists individuals, shapes their existence, and prescribes a certain way of being in the world for them, individual men are not fully responsible for the existence and the perpetuation of patriarchy. Men, like women, are thrown into a world in which there are always already social meanings and norms. If women are constrained by their situation, so are men, although at a lesser degree: one cannot refuse to be a man or a woman, as Beauvoir shows in comparing men to colonial administrators.<sup>52</sup> A colonial administrator can cease to be one, a man cannot: "So here he is, thus guilty in spite of himself and oppressed by this fault that he has not committed himself."<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, men's and women's situations are not the same. Men bear a responsibility for patriarchy and for the way masculinity is defined since masculinity is defined by them and serves as an inauthentic way to escape the anguish created by the ambiguity of human life. Women are deprived by men of the possibility of changing their situation. Men, on the contrary, have their power, their education, and the social validation necessary to change gender roles. Men cannot refuse to be men, but they can easily change what being men means. Men have a responsibility to reject

---

52 One can reasonably argue that the presence of nonbinary people and society's slow move toward recognizing them as nonbinary means that there can nowadays be success in refusing to be a man or a woman.

53 ss, p. 759.

traditional masculinity and choose to authentically confront the anguish and the dangers of reciprocal recognition. When they play by the rules of the social norms of masculinity, they therefore are responsible for the perpetuation of patriarchy.

Second, Beauvoir shows that women's emancipation results in gains for men, despite the fact that women's emancipation might strip some privileges from men. There are gains for both sexes through emancipation. In discussions about paths to gender equality, people often claim that men have no interest in working for gender equality since it will deprive them of privileges. This is a serious obstacle, as people also acknowledge that equality will not be possible if men do not join the fight. Beauvoir herself seems to endorse this idea in the very last pages of *The Second Sex* when she writes, "[I]t cannot be denied that feminine dependence, inferiority, and misfortune give women their unique character; assuredly, women's autonomy, even if it spares men a good number of problems, will also deny them many conveniences."<sup>54</sup> In showing that masculinity is an impasse, Beauvoir paves the way toward a cooperation between men and women in order to fight patriarchy. If she acknowledges that men are worried that they have a lot to lose by accepting woman as a "companion" rather than the Other, she shows that this is likely the road to more sexual pleasure, and she praises the merits of a "brotherhood" between men and women.<sup>55</sup> The last sentence of the book reads:

Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.<sup>56</sup>

---

54 ss, p. 765.

55 On pleasure, see Manon Garcia, *La Conversation des sexes: Philosophie du consentement*, Paris, Flammarion, 2021, pp. 233–237.

56 ss, p. 766. The word "brotherhood," which could also be "fraternity" or "fellowship," comes as much more of a surprise to the English reader than to the French one. Beauvoir refers here to "*fraternité*," which is one of the three concepts of the motto of the French republic ("*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*") and was a core value of the French Resistance to Nazi Germany. The fact that she would use this word can be surprising, as it appears that she endorses masculine values. After all, as early as the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, the French feminist Olympe de Gouges was already highlighting the way in which this concept erases women. See Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, Paris, Gallimard, 2021 [1791]. But in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir is more an existentialist than a feminist and uses a vocabulary that reflects this commitment (for example, she also uses "man" to mean "human being").

The conflict between consciousness—and the alterity that results from this conflict—is not inevitable. When we recognize the impasse that masculinity is, we open up the possibility of a harmonious relationship between men and women: the relationship between two fraternal freedoms. Beauvoir does not make the mistake of saying that men *suffer* from patriarchy just as much as women do, but she does propose an analysis of masculinity as a *limitation* and a barrier to authenticity for men. Their possibilities for exerting their freedom are restrained in ways that are morally bad for women and for themselves. Through this analysis, Beauvoir paves a clearer road to emancipation, a road by which traditional femininity *and* traditional masculinity must be overcome. This is the only road that can lead us to an authentic and happy *Mitsein*.