

3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

Plan of the essay:

- I. Introduction – a broad historical account of the perception of the body
- II. The origins of womanhood – biological determinism or cultural influence?
- III. The implications of “becoming a woman” within the context of modernity
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I. Introduction – a broad historical account of the perception of the body

As a discipline focused primarily on discussing the abstract, philosophy provides one with various accounts of numerous societal, cultural and anthropological issues. Despite the continuous progress and development of philosophical thought, certain topics have managed to remain compelling throughout the ages. Questions such as the purposefulness and aim of human life, the implications of the human condition, the relationship and hierarchy between the mind and the body and the genuine scope of one’s personal freedom can surely be listed among such issues. All of the aforementioned inquiries, given their relevance to the functioning of both men and women, have given way to a myriad of perspectives from which one can explore my current subject matter – the origins and role of gender and femininity in society, be it contemporary or suspended within a historical context. The question of womanhood is intricately bound with the relationship of society with the female body and the philosophical perception of physicality on a far broader terminological basis. Bodily appetites and sexuality have long been restrained to a very shallow level of exploration due to the

difficulty of grasping the whole of their complexity from a purely rational standpoint. Since the very advent of critical thought, philosophy has shown a striking affinity for somatophobia. Concerns related to the nature, the demands and the role of the body have been subjected to incessant marginalisation in favour of regarding the mind and sober reasoning as more conducive to human functioning. Gender and sexuality have been equally side-lined as nothing but vapid affects and bodily traits which ought to be exempt from the elaboration of human nature. This trend can be tracked all the way back to Ancient Greece, with notable minds such as Plato and Aristotle either describing the body as a prison that reason is entrapped within, prevented from attaining absolute and objective knowledge, or as a mere companion of the mind, a subordinated cohort serving as inert and inactive means to an end. Moreover, the very term *soma*, the body, has its roots in the Greek word *sema*, a prison. This prominent tendency to treat the body as either irrelevant or downright detrimental to one's optimum functioning and identity can be followed throughout the centuries. Christian morality conveniently found additional ways in which the body can be demonised, portraying it as a material manifestation of sin (bodily ailments were thought of as divine punishment for indecency) or the lusty obstacle that is to be overcome by will. Even though the body could not be blatantly disregarded as bad in itself, as it is a product of God's intentional design, it was still treated as an aspect of personhood which was to be regulated and controlled with conscious and precise effort. Human sexuality, as well as any explicit manifestation of lust or desire, ought to be restrained to procreation, as the only morally sound usage of reproductive organs *clearly* had to be limited to reproduction itself. Cartesian dualism managed to verbalise the very common-sensical concept that the structure of the thinking mind is somehow different in nature to the world which can be perceived through the senses. However, Descartes only succeeded in providing additional wheat to the somatophobic mill, comfortably describing the body as a "*vessel*" which the mind navigates as its conscious captain. Following this stream of thought, even if the body cannot be deemed absolutely harmful, it is still exempt from actively impacting one's everyday functioning and social persona. Within this introduction I will attempt to elaborate the consequences of such a dualist approach on the perception of women and femininity. The essential problem to be found at the basis of every dichotomy is the presence of a hierarchy. If one chooses to separate two parts of a certain whole, one is extremely likely to perceive one as superior to the other. As a constant parallel to the distinction between the mind and the body, there has been a clear

dichotomy between *that which is male* and *that which is female*. The usage of the term *parallel* in this context is not to be considered an arbitrary choice, as *that which is male* was considered synonymous with the mind, while *that which is female* was to be linked to matters of the body. Consequently, being a man correlated with possessing mental strength and acuity, traits of a clear and sober mind. Similarly, being a female implicitly characterized one as weak and of secondary importance, subject to whims and passions so infinitely inferior to the intellectual bravado of the mind. This proved to have a detrimental effect on the societal perception of women as it catered to the general unwillingness to accept and equally value the capacities of female thinkers and philosophers. Spinoza's monism can be considered one of the first instances of the depiction of the mind and the body as congruent, and, more importantly, one of the first notions of the body as more than a mediator between the mind and the external world. Describing each concept related to physicality within the wealth of universal philosophical legacy would be a task far too all-encompassing for a single essay. However, structuralism and post-structuralism have provided us with a compelling reversal in interpreting the way the body has predominantly been approached. According to the likes of Foucault, the societal and conceptual tendency to remove both the body and human sexuality from their morally neutral nature has resulted in the creation of a society in which sex, gender and sexuality are utilized as means of collective manipulation and societal control. Foucault is particularly critical of the contemporary hyper glorification of sex, marked by its sudden transition from a source of shame to the highest societal aim. The experience of daily life teaches us that, if we choose to regard sex and sexual attractiveness as our sole aim and the pinnacle of our potential as a conscious human being, we ought to be ready to adapt and conform in order to attain that highly esteemed goal. Women have thus become subject to a multitude of conflicting or downright contradictory societal demands which simultaneously command extreme physical attractiveness, meekness and timidity, willing subordination to the desires of others and endless patience in addressing male whims. This very pattern of reasoning is what Foucault chose to describe as the process of "encouraging hysteria in women" and the introduction of notions regarding sexuality completely unrelated to what sexuality truly ought to be, a manifestation of emotional affection or physical attraction. How is all of this related to being and becoming a woman? Not only is it related, but it is absolutely impossible (or, rather, unwise and epistemologically irresponsible) to attempt to approach

such a complex issue without regarding the background of the rejection of femininity as secondary to manhood.

II. The origins of womanhood – biological determinism or cultural influence?

One of the most common arguments presented in modern discussions regarding the appropriate treatment of men and women in society is the biological inferiority of women. Rather, I probably ought to define it as an argument which used to be ascribed a level of credibility far greater than it genuinely deserved. It could be described as an elaboration of the statement that “one is born a woman”, uttered with a cynically lifted brow and a sly smile. To put it simply, this particular line of reasoning is based on the premise that women ought to be considered biologically determined as inferior to men. Female bodies are fragile and weak, subject to hormonal cycles and imbalanced which pose as obvious obstacles to perfect rationality. Women are meant to be mothers and wives, bearers of children, a function they are evidently biologically predisposed to fulfil. Strangely enough, Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most prominent feminist theorists throughout history, based one of her key arguments on a bizarre reversal of this bigoted thesis. She held that women are unfairly constrained by the nature of their bodies and that society is unlikely to willingly opt out of the faulty perception of women as objectively lesser than men. Consequently, female bodily traits were something that a woman had to overcome in order to truly become a woman, as it is the only way she could fully reject the false identity forced upon her with no regard to her individuality. A woman who uncritically accepted the role society poses upon her on the basis of her feminine constitution (e.g. motherhood, subordination, gender roles, pregnancy) was at her core an individual unwilling to accept responsibility for constituting the meaning and purpose of her own life, allowing others to make that decision in her place. If one was simply “born” a woman, her role as an individual who is subject to self-definition and self-creation would thus be completely annihilated, reducing her to a being which is passively compliant to what she is taught to believe to be. I will refrain from contextualising this dichotomy between authentic and non-authentic living as integral to the 20th century French existentialist tradition and focus on it purely within the context of the societal view of womanhood. However, de Beauvoir’s stance is strange, as it states that a woman can only attain her true potential by giving up an aspect of her womanhood. This hardly seems like a statement affirming femininity as being intrinsically equally valuable as manhood, since there is no parallel notion that men ought to

abandon their objective physical dominance in order to let their mind shine in its purity. If becoming a woman is only possible by striving to be objectively *less* of a woman, how can one pretend to truly deem womanhood as inherently worthy in itself? From this point, sex seems to precede gender in an entirely unwelcome way which additionally seems to impose restraints on the subjective interpretation of gender roles. Supporters of the structuralist approach to feminism rejected this view, claiming that femininity and masculinity are nothing but societal constructs aimed to keep women subservient to men by the means of countless methods of social control. Biology should thus be considered, in itself, completely guileless in determining the social, cultural and intellectual hierarchy of men and women. There is no objective reason or cause to ascribe a moral agenda to something as universal and neutral as bodily functions. The conclusion which can be derived from this stance is that the unquestionable differences between male and female bodies should be deliberately disregarded in all discussions aiming to elucidate societal gender roles. However, can we truly simultaneously consider ourselves unbiased and willingly demote such an ubiquitous source of debate and conflicts? Structuralist feminist theorists subsequently proceeded to deconstruct common behavioural norms in order to portray them as conducive to the unfair treatment of women in society. Allow me to provide several examples. A young man taking his partner out for dinner and offering to pay for her courses? Not a manifestation of care and affection, as you might falsely assume, but a product of a long maintained heritage of male economic dominance. The societal tendency to favour monogamy and marriage? Not the genuine desire to dedicate the remainder of one's life to a loved partner, as you might falsely assume, but a form of socially accepted prostitution in which the wife is shown gratitude for her incessant efforts through nothing but bizarre constructs such as dinners or jewellery. Proponents of structuralism thus held that society subconsciously maintains and encourages the marginalization of women as it is an essential aspect of power relations in everyday life. One can attempt to find balance between these two approaches by recognizing that there are obvious and undeniable biological differences between men and women which ought not to be disregarded as completely unrelated to the process of identity formation or the acquisition and maintenance of true beliefs, but should instead be approached in a sensible manner. Similarly, the fact that men and women are taught different behavioural patterns throughout their lives is undeniably true and should be evaluated in proportion to the particular cultural

environment, without being ascribed excessive or marginalized impact on one's perception of the self.

III. The implications of “becoming a woman” within the context of modernity

Having provided you with a reasonably sound account of the dominant theories regarding being and becoming a woman, I can now distance myself from the decadence of philosophical abstraction and attempt to contextualise these notions within modern culture. Clearly, most of the aforementioned concepts and thought experiments have been long disregarded as either ethically and epistemologically unsound, or rejected as uncondusive to societal progress. It is no longer acceptable or sustainable to claim that women are biologically worse off than men, or that there is any conceivable argument that could defend and affirm the unequal treatment of women. On the surface, it would seem that “*being and becoming a woman*” can no longer be considered radically different from being and becoming a man. From this position, it could be claimed that it is no longer relevant whether sex precedes gender. Concurrently, the questions regarding the extent to which gender roles can be considered haphazard could be newly omitted as redundant. Both boys and girls are dragged through the same educational system, exposed to the same structural demands and forced to function within the same societal norms and the same labour market. It would seem that one now “*becomes a woman*” by simply adhering to the general and comprehensive rules of leading a dignified and worthwhile existence. Recent years have gone so far as to witness the advent of the tendency to disregard Western feminism as a theory which has ostensibly fulfilled its purpose, given that numerous studies have shown numerous sources of conflict, such as the notorious wage gap, have been radically reduced. Furthermore, the once omnipresent model of the “*glass ceiling*”, a conceptual margin of success which women could not surpass purely because of their gender, has been replaced by the notion of the “*labyrinth of femininity*”, an intricate whole which consists of many new prospects of female functioning. However, the melioration of the perception of female intellectual capacities is irrefutably a double edged sword. The fact that women are now considered perfectly capable of performing the same functions as men does not mean that men are simultaneously encouraged to share the workload historically attributed to women. While women are no longer *just* inert and irrational vessels of reproduction or glittering displays of physical attractiveness to be presented as thoughtless pendants of male superiority, they are now expected to perform both their previously present

and recently attained tasks. The optimistic and rose-tinted idea that “girls can become anything that they wish to be” is often shamelessly misinterpreted as truly meaning that “girls can not only become what they want to be, but they should additionally do everything that they are expected to do on a ethically questionable sociocultural basis”. The fact that women are now likely to be appraised and applauded for their intellectual excellence does not excuse them from societal expectations of, for example, adhering to standards of beauty in order to attain male attention or the ideal of being a caring, patient and responsible mother. It could be contested that this era is very favourable of de Beauvoir’s plea for consciously “*becoming*”, rather than being passively “*born*”, a woman, but this does not necessarily affect the position and public treatment of the woman as a free and responsible (female) member of society. One’s freedom of self-creation, no matter how unrestricted it may seem from the somewhat existentialist perspective intentionally interwoven throughout this essay, is still inseparable from the sociocultural conditions one is surrounded by. There is a certain compliant necessity to find balance between the ideal of attaining the glorified absolute of deliberate self-definition and simply accepting the prevalent societal narrative.

IV. An argument for the active implementation of gender equality in contemporary society

To sum up, allow me to quote the American contemporary conceptual artist Jenny Holzer, whose works include a hermetic collection of lucid aphorisms known as “*Truisms*”. Listed in perfect and uninterrupted order, one of the most commonly quoted statements provides a laconic account of a very simple idea:

“Raise boys and girls in the same way.” (Jenny Holzer, Truisms)

At a first glance, this sentence strikes one as banal and overly unspecific to be worthy of such philosophical treatment or likely to contribute to social progress. However, it manages to sum up most of the aforementioned viewpoints, conflicts, polemics and observable consequences of cultural contexts. Yes, there are irrefutable differences, both biological and sociocultural, between the sexes. No, they should not be disregarded as irrelevant, as no individual is a perfectly objective and unbiased ethical and epistemic agent within a culturally unmarked context. Gender, on a plainly theoretical basis, can be considered a social construct, but it is so profoundly woven into the fabric of contemporary civilisation that trying to reject it for being arbitrarily created and fabricated would be unlikely to result in any actual advancement.

The only truly sustainable and, less idealistically, truly achievable way of encouraging equality is to attempt to blur the lines between the harmful implications of the male and the female gender. When de Beauvoir speaks of “*becoming a woman*”, she is truly advocating for a deeply humanistic view of womanhood. One does not become a woman by indiscriminately accepting the societal definition of femininity or by passively adhering to an externally constructed identity. “*Becoming a woman*” ought to be equally demanding as *becoming a person*, a conscious and engaged individual possessing enough strength of character to accept responsibility for their self-creation. However, if you were to turn the page dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir in the vast majority of currently used philosophy workbooks, the introductory sentence would be unlikely to contain a reference to her rich bibliography or enviable political engagement. Instead, it would portray her as “Jean-Paul Sartre’s lifelong partner and philosophical companion, who understood and supported the fundamental concepts underlying his humanistic account of existentialism”. After several sentences snugly placing her in the midst of various prominent (male) French existentialists and providing accounts of her discourses with various (male) political thinkers, you could potentially come across a diminutive and shy mention of her cardinal works. This is deeply ironic at its core. What this ridiculous educational injustice emphasises is the necessity that humanity, as a whole, knowingly accepts that women can no longer be perceived and evaluated exclusively from the male perspective. A woman is not an object to the male subject or the accident to the male absolute. We can only attempt to actively strive towards a society which would genuinely raise boys and girls the same way in order to surpass limitations unfairly imposed by gender definitions. Only such a society could truly provide women with the opportunity to seize full responsibility for becoming a woman. And, finally, is there anything more humanistic in its profound affirmation of the comprehensive human capacity for intentional engagement?