

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: ARE WOMEN COMPLICIT IN THEIR OWN SUBJUGATION, IF SO HOW?

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“The Second Sex” was the first book that I have read, in English, in regards to feminist philosophy. It immediately intrigued me, where I immensely admired Simone de Beauvoir and furthermore fell in love with continental philosophy. In this paper, I will, according to de Beauvoir, answer the question, are women complicit in their own subjugation? I will also use “The Second Sex” and “The Ethics of Ambiguity” to illustrate some of the ways of how and/or why some women are/aren’t complicit in their own subjugation. I will, finally, go over de Beauvoir’s solution for such problematic.

For de Beauvoir, many women are complicit in their own subjugation and many cannot be considered as such. She proposes that many women have, directly or indirectly, contributed to their oppressive conditions. This is common to oppression, in general, and mainly due to the difficulty of choosing freedom over living in bad faith.¹ In other instances, many women never had the capability to choose an alternative to oppression due to being naturalized by an unforgiving reality and a brutal system. This makes them victims rather than contributors to their own subjugation. De Beauvoir, here, is not exactly contradicting herself. She is basically faced by the uneasy task of explaining and upholding the subjective notion of individuals’ freedom, the responsibilities and consequences that accompany such choice and, on the other hand, embodying all that in an unforgiving world. The question, therefore, whether women are complicit in their oppression or not, is not really easy to answer.

A main manner in which women contribute to their own oppression is living, inauthentically, in bad faith. Living in bad faith is, basically, when one lives according to externally imposed values and ways instead of having the freedom to choose for oneself. Living in bad faith is not one’s own way of being. This inauthentic way of being is a deficient mode of being.² It, additionally, negates de Beauvoir’s notion that one is not born a woman but becomes one through her own choices and not what is decided for her.³ In helping to understand a more concrete situatedness of bad faith, I would like to borrow an example from Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre tells a story of a waiter who tries to persuade others and, above all, himself that he is really a waiter, even though, he is aware of a higher possibility for himself.⁴ Living in bad faith is existentially like being a feather in the wind of life, where one is taken where the wind goes without the slightest idea of what is taking place. One, here, is existentially futile.⁵

Women, for de Beauvoir, can live inauthentically and be complicit in their own subjugation in three major ways. There is the Narcissist, the Woman in Love and the Mystic.⁶ The Narcissist lives as an object of beauty, where she does not have anything more to offer. Instead of living an authentic free life, the Narcissist, for example, is ruled by standards that were politically and socially set for her within her particular situatedness. The Woman in Love lives for and is defined by her male partner. She, for example, is not in charge of creating her essence as an authentic human being and a

woman. Her male and relationship take over that responsibility, which makes her lead an empty life. Finally, the Mystic's freedom has been appropriated by a blind devotion to an absolute. The Mystic, for instance, is defined by doctrine and religious standards.

Freedom, for de Beauvoir, is contextual and within situatedness.⁷ We are living embodiments within an intersubjective world, therefore, our freedom is not totally independent of other humans and circumstances. De Beauvoir takes this stand to argue that some oppressed women have a limited choice, or none, but to be a victim rather than being complicit to their own subjugation. In such situation:

those beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads.⁸

Situatedness such as social, political and biological, therefore, affects our abilities of free and moral choices. Thus, humans are not equally free, where masters and slaves significantly differ. This argument for relative freedom shows that many women are not in bad faith, but instead have limited choices compared to the aforementioned women who are in fact complicit to their oppression.

Before diving deeper into The Ethics of Ambiguity, it is important to provide an understanding of some of de Beauvoir's themes. The first theme is ambiguity, which basically describes the ambiguousness of the human situatedness of being caught among different polarities. We are, for example, in the world subjectively conscious of others and ourselves, yet, we also exist objectively as being conscious of by others. We, additionally, are the totality of consciousness and matter, thought and body. The second theme is freedom. De Beauvoir distinguishes between two kinds of freedoms; ontological and moral freedom. Ontological freedom is the freedom, so to speak, that the human being is born with. It is the natural spontaneous freedom that we always already have. Moral freedom, on the other hand, is the freedom we decide to exercise. It is, as we shall see later, what de Beauvoir asserts that women must exercise by not avoiding to empower themselves against oppression.

It is clear that freedom is the key to the door of imprisonment of oppression. Having such freedom and one's understanding that one is free is the first opening for transcending such captivity. It is, thus, an ethical obligation. Kristina Arp comments:

One of the central tenets of existentialism is that all values spring from human freedom. So an existentialist ethics must be founded on freedom... according to Beauvoir the moral person takes a certain stance towards his or her freedom. If one wills oneself free by affirming one's freedom instead of running from it or denying it, one can achieve what Beauvoir calls genuine or moral freedom.⁹

The Ethics of Ambiguity practically treats the human situatedness of being wedged between an ontologically spontaneous freedom and an external world often

trying to have the last word. De Beauvoir's response to such contention is not to flee the problem by pretending, for example, that women are socially, biologically and/or politically fated. It's by:

coming to recognize and accept oneself in one's ambiguity is the necessary pre-condition of the moral life.¹⁰

Instead, Women are to recognize their ontological freedom as the base that meaningfulness is built upon, where moral freedom allows them to conquer their own most possibilities. Moral actions, consequently, will follow leading eventually to the end of oppression. This is the freedom to self-create; to become a woman:

To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence.¹¹

De Beauvoir's resolution, of course, is that women have the moral obligation to transcend the facticity of their situatedness towards freedom. Any other options, hence, are not moral:

Every time transcendence falls back into immanence there is degradation. If the subject consents to this, it is a moral fault. If inflicted upon the subject, it is an oppression. In both cases it is evil.¹²

Women have to empower themselves, as ontologically free existents, into moral freedom. Ontological freedom, as the base for self-creating and self-empowering, is not dictated by any external forces of the world. Only one's power to have the freedom from political, social and biological control can be externally influenced and, therefore, one has to empower oneself to transcend such burdens. Moral freedom is consequently achieved when one acts upon one's ontological freedom when having the power over external burdens:

Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The [one] who seeks to justify [one's] life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else.¹³

However, human beings do not create the world. They succeed in disclosing it only through the resistance that the world opposes to them. The will is defined only by raising obstacles, and by the contingency of facticity certain obstacles let themselves be conquered, and others do not.¹⁴

De Beauvoir, in addition, concludes *The Second Sex* with a more concrete solution to women's oppression, where she depicts a world of equal women and men. It is a world where women have financial independence, equal education and intellectual opportunities to men and, above all, a world where women achieve the transcendence to be who they truly are and be respected as equals. In order for everyone to be equal,

however, this world cannot have some free humans where the rest are oppressed. It is essential, therefore, for the subjugated to be free in order for everybody to truly be free. It is part of the moral freedom of every woman and man to elevate society from its facticity and burdens, social or otherwise, so everyone is equally free:

In this respect, others' freedom helps to make one's own freedom possible... Thus the very fact of one's freedom exists because of other human beings willing their (moral) freedom; and the very act of willing one's own freedom helps make others' freedom possible.¹⁵

This solution, proposed by de Beauvoir, haves subjugated women whether complicit in such subjugation or not. It involves the individual without alienating the larger human community. It makes it rooted in the intersubjective social structure that oppression is very frowned upon and will not be tolerated.

To conclude this paper, I will thematically abridge de Beauvoir's account. Some women are complicit in their own subjugation and some are not. Being shackled in bad faith is the main cause of such complicity. Those who are not, on the other hand, are mostly so damaged by oppression to the point where they are not even aware of better possibilities.

It is common for oppressed women to choose the easy inauthentic life of being a thing, rather than the difficulty of rebelling to be free. The inauthentic life takes many forms of which three are substantial: the Narcissist, the Woman in Love and the Mystic.

The solution, for de Beauvoir, starts by breaking the shackles of bad faith and be freely authentic. All deeds are worthless if not willed from freedom. Such will leads from oppression to freedom.

NOTES:

- 1) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 21).
- 2) This description was borrowed from Martin Heidegger's ontological account.
- 3) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, op. cit., p. 295.
- 4) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism*, ed., forward Wade Baskin (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1965, pp. 168-169).
- 5) It is worth mentioning, here, that there are some differences between de Beauvoir's existential account and that of Sartre, however, I am using the story of the waiter to show a concrete example of bad faith.
- 6) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, op. cit., p. 641.
- 7) This is part of her answer in "The Ethics of Ambiguity" to Sartre's ontological account of freedom as presented in "Being and Nothingness".
- 8) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, New York: The Citadel Press, Kensington Publishing, 1976, p.18).
- 9) Kristina Arp, "Moral Obligation in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*," *Labyrinth*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Winter 1999), www.kristinaarp.com
- 10) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, op. cit., p. 81.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 12) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, op. cit., p. 29.
- 13) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, op. cit., p. 24. Words between [parentheses] are mine and are there to avoid sexist language.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 15) Kristen Oganowski, "Centralizing Ambiguity: Simone de Beauvoir and a Twenty-First Century Ethics," Syracuse University Surface, (December 2013), www.surface.syr.edu