

Further passages from de Beauvoir

Ethics of Ambiguity

Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means. The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces... Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect within the immense collectivity whose limits are one with the earth's. Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their grandeur more brilliantly, and in no other age has this grandeur been so horribly flouted. In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men... Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting. [from Part I: Ambiguity and Freedom]

The word 'useful' ... can be defined only in the human world established by man's projects and the ends he sets up. In the original helplessness from which man surges up, nothing is useful, nothing is useless. It must therefore be understood that the passion to which man has acquiesced finds no external justification. No outside appeal, no objective necessity permits of its being called useful. It has no reason to will itself. But this does not mean that it cannot justify itself, that it cannot *give itself* reasons for being that it does not *have*. [ibid.]

Value is [a] lacking-being... It is desire which creates the desirable, and the project which sets up the end. It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged. [ibid.]

Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence... [I]t is opposed to the totalitarian doctrines which raise up beyond man the mirage of Mankind. But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him. [from the Conclusion]

existentialism does not offer to the reader the consolations of an abstract evasion: existentialism proposes no evasion. On the contrary, its ethics is experienced in the truth of life, and it then appears as the only proposition of salvation which one can address to men... [Accepting] the pride of the thinking reed in the face of the universe which crushes him, it asserts that, despite his limits, through them, it is up to each one to fulfill his existence as an absolute. Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of

catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness... And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive...If it came to be that each man did what he must, existence would be saved in each one without there being any need of dreaming of a paradise where all would be reconciled in death. [from the Conclusion]

The Second Sex

One is not born a genius, one becomes a genius; and the feminine situation has up to the present rendered this becoming practically impossible. [Bk. I, Part 2, ch. 5: "Since the French Revolution: the Job and the Vote," p. 133]

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine...Existing in itself, the child would hardly be able to think of itself as sexually differentiated...it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts. The dramas of birth and of weaning unfold after the same fashion for nurslings of both sexes; these have the same interests and the same pleasures; sucking is at first the source of their most agreeable sensations...Their genital development is analogous; they explore their bodies with the same curiosity and the same indifference; from clitoris and penis they derive the same vague pleasure. As their sensibility comes to require an object, it is turned toward the mother: the soft, smooth, resilient feminine flesh is what arouses sexual desires, and these desires are prehensile; the girl, like the boy, kisses, handles, and caresses her mother in an aggressive way; they feel the same jealousy if a new child is born, and they show it in similar behavior patterns: rage, sulkiness, urinary difficulties; and they resort to the same coquettish tricks to gain the love of adults. Up to the age of twelve the little girl is as strong as her brothers, and she shows the same mental powers; there is no field where she is debarred from engaging in rivalry with them. If, well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy, she seems to us to be already sexually determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it is because the influence of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years. [Bk 2., Part 4, ch. 1: "Childhood," pp. 273-274]

To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile. The girl is supposed not only to primp and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters. Any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness. [Bk. 2, Part 4, ch. 2: "The Young Girl," p. 334]

During the period of engagement...she continued living in her accustomed universe of ceremony and reverie; her suitor spoke in romantic or at least polite accents; it was still possible to play hide-and-seek. And all at once she finds herself gazed upon by real eyes, grasped by real hands: it is the implacable reality of this gaze and this grasp that appalls her... Lover or husband, it is for

him to lead her to the couch, where she has only to give herself over and do his bidding. Even if she has mentally accepted this domination, she becomes panic-stricken at the moment when she must actually submit to it.

In the first place, she shuns the enveloping gaze. Her modesty is in part a superficial acquirement, but it also has deep roots. Men and women all feel the shame of their flesh; in its pure, inactive presence, its unjustified immanence, the flesh exists, under the gaze of others, in its absurd contingency, and yet it is *oneself*. Oh, to prevent it from existing for others, oh, to deny it! There are men who say they cannot bear to show themselves naked before a woman unless in a state of erection; and indeed through erection the flesh becomes activity, potency, the sex organ is no longer an inert object, but, like the hand or face, the imperious expression of a subjectivity. This is one of the reasons why modesty paralyzes young men much less than women; because of their aggressive role they are less exposed to being gazed at; and if they are, then they have little fear of being judged, for it is not inert qualities that their mistress demands of them: their complexes will rather depend upon their amatory power and their skill in giving pleasure; at least they can defend themselves, try to win the encounter. It is not given to woman to alter her flesh at will: when she no longer hides it, she yields it up without defence; even if she longs for caresses, she revolts at the idea of being seen and touched; and all the more since her breasts and bottom are a peculiarly fleshly growth; many adult women hate to be looked at from behind even when dressed; and one can imagine what resistance the neophyte in love must overcome in consenting to let herself be gazed upon. Doubtless a Phryne need have no fear of man's gaze; she unveils herself, on the contrary, with arrogant pride—she is clothed in her beauty. But even if she is Phryne's equal, the young girl never feels certain of it; she cannot take arrogant pride in her body unless male approval has confirmed her youthful vanity. And just this fills her with fear; her lover is still more redoubtable than a look: he is a judge. He is to reveal her to herself in very truth; though passionately enchanted with her own reflection, every young girl feels uncertain of herself at the moment of the masculine verdict; and so she wants the light out, she hides under the bedclothes. When she admires herself in the mirror, she is still only dreaming of herself, dreaming of herself as seen through masculine eyes; now the eyes are really there; impossible to deceive, impossible to struggle: a mysterious free being will make the decision—and without appeal. In the actual trial of the erotic experience the obsessions of childhood and adolescence are at length to be dissipated or confirmed forever. Many young girls are distressed by these too thick ankles, these too meagre or too ample breasts, these slender thighs, this wart; and often they dread some hidden malformation. According to Stekel, all young girls are full of ridiculous fears, secretly believing that they may be physically abnormal. One, for example, regarded the navel as the organ of copulation and was unhappy about its being closed. Another thought she was a hermaphrodite.

Girls without these obsessions are often alarmed at the idea that certain actually non-existent parts of the body will suddenly become visible. Will her new aspect arouse disgust? Indifference? An ironical remark? It must undergo the test of masculine judgment: the stakes are placed. This is the reason why the man's attitude will have deep and lasting effects. His ardour and affection can be a source of confidence that will stand the woman in good stead: to the age of eighty she will believe herself to be that blossom, that delightful creature, who one night caused the burgeoning of a man's desire. [Bk. 2, Part 4, ch. 3: "Sexual Initiation," pp. 373-374]

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. [Bk. 2, Part 5, ch. 1: "The Married Woman," p. 438]

The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving. It is even more deceptive to dream of gaining through the child a plenitude, a warmth, a value, which one is unable to create for oneself; the child brings joy only to the woman who is capable of disinterestedly desiring the happiness of another, to one who without being wrapped up in self seeks to transcend her own existence. [Bk. 2, Part 5, ch. 2: "The Mother," p. 522]

How could one expect her to show audacity, ardour, disinterestedness, grandeur? These qualities appear only when a free being strikes forward through an open future, emerging far beyond all given actuality. Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly." [Bk. 2, Part 5, ch. 6: "Woman's Situation and Character," p. 574]

Many women do not abandon themselves to love unless they are loved in return; and sometimes the love shown them is enough to arouse their love. The young girl dreamed of herself as seen through men's eyes, and it is in men's eyes that the woman believes she has finally found herself. Cecile Sauvage writes:

To walk by your side, to step forward with my little feet that you love, to feel them so tiny in their high-heeled shoes with felt tops, makes me love all the love you throw around me. The least movements of my hands in my muff, of my arms, of my face, the tones of my voice, fill me with happiness.

The woman in love feels endowed with a high and undeniable value; she is at last allowed to idolize herself through the love she inspires. She is overjoyed to find in her lover a witness. This is what Colette's *Vagabonde* declares:

I admit I yielded, in permitting this man to come back the next day, to the desire to keep in him not a lover, not a friend, but an eager spectator of my life and my person...One must be terribly old, Margot said to me one day, to renounce the vanity of living under someone's gaze.

In one of her letters to Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield wrote that she had just bought a ravishing mauve corset; she at once added: 'Too bad there is no one to *see* it!' There is nothing more bitter than to feel oneself but the flower, the perfume, the treasure, which is the object of no desire: what kind of wealth is it that does not enrich myself and the gift of which no one wants? Love is the developer that brings out in clear, positive detail the dim negative, otherwise as useless as a blank exposure. Through love, woman's face, the curves of her body, her childhood memories, her former tears, her gowns, her accustomed ways, her universe, everything she is, all that belongs to her, escape contingency and become essential: she is a wondrous offering at the foot of the altar of her god...

We have seen that the act of love requires of woman profound self-abandonment; she bathes in a passive languor; with closed eyes, anonymous, lost, she feels as if borne by waves, swept away in a storm, shrouded in darkness: darkness of the flesh, of the womb, of the grave.

Annihilated, she becomes one with the Whole, her ego is abolished. But when the man moves from her, she finds herself back on earth, on a bed, in the light; she again has a name, a face: she is one vanquished, prey, object.

This is the moment when love becomes a necessity. As when the child, after weaning, seeks the reassuring gaze of its parents, so must a woman feel, through the man's loving contemplation, that she is, after all, still at one with the Whole from which her flesh is now painfully detached. She is seldom wholly satisfied even if she has felt the orgasm, she is not set completely free from the spell of her flesh; her desire continues in the form of affection. In giving her pleasure, the man increases her attachment, he does not liberate her. As for him, he no longer desires her; but she will not pardon this momentary indifference unless he has dedicated to her a timeless and absolute emotion. Then the immanence of the moment is transcended; hot memories are no regret, but a treasured delight; ebbing pleasure becomes hope and promise; enjoyment is justified; woman can gloriously accept her sexuality because she transcends it; excitement, pleasure, desire are no longer a state, but a benefaction; her body is no longer an object: it is a hymn, a flame.

Then she can yield with passion to the magic of eroticism; darkness becomes light; the loving woman can open her eyes, can look upon the man who loves her and whose gaze glorifies her; through him nothingness becomes fullness of being, and being is transmuted into worth; she no longer sinks in a sea of shadows, but is borne up on wings, exalted to the skies. Abandon becomes sacred ecstasy. When she *receives* her beloved, woman is dwelt in, visited, as was the Virgin by the Holy Ghost, as is the believer by the Host. [Bk. 2, Part 6, ch. 2: "The Woman in Love," pp. 611-612; 613-614.]

On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself—on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger. [Bk. 2, Part 6, ch. 3: "The Mystic," p. 632]

All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception. The existent who is regarded as inessential cannot fail to demand the re-establishment of her sovereignty. Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. [Conclusion, p. 717]

Other sources

It was said that I refused to grant any value to the maternal instinct and to love. This was not so. I simply asked that women should experience them truthfully and freely, whereas they often use them as excuses and take refuge in them, only to find themselves imprisoned in that refuge when those emotions have dried up in their hearts. I was accused of preaching sexual promiscuity; but at no point did I ever advise anyone to sleep with just anyone at just any time; my opinion on this subject is that all choices, agreements and refusals should be made independently of institutions, conventions and motives of self-aggrandizement; if the reasons for it are not of the same order as the act itself, then the only result can be lies, distortions and mutilations. [*Force of Circumstances* Vol. III (1963)]

What is an adult? A child blown up by age. [*A Woman Destroyed* (1967)]

In itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: the ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, without feeling fear, restraint, or obligation. [as quoted in *Bisexual Characters in Film: From Anais to Zee* (1997) by Wayne Bryant, p. 143]

A life is such a strange object, at one moment translucent, at another utterly opaque, an object I make with my own hands, an object imposed on me, an object for which the world provides the raw material and then steals it from me again, pulverized by events, scattered, broken, scored yet retaining its unity; how heavy it is and how inconsistent: this contradiction breeds many misunderstandings. [From *After the War*]

It is old age, rather than death, that is to be contrasted with life. Old age is life's parody, whereas death transforms life into a destiny: in a way it preserves it by giving it the absolute dimension. Death does away with time. [*Coming of Age*, Conclusion, p. 539]

By the fate that it allots to its members who can no longer work, society gives itself away — it has always looked upon them as so much material. Society confesses that as far as it is concerned, profit is the only thing that counts, and that its “humanism” is mere window-dressing...Society turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species. That is why the whole question is buried in a conspiracy of silence. [*Coming of Age*, Conclusion, p. 542]