

THE
SECOND SEX

211

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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SECOND
SEX**

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
H. M. PARSHLEY

INTRODUCTION TO THE VINTAGE EDITION BY
DEIRDRE BAIR



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BOOK TWO: WOMAN'S LIFE TODAY

Part IV THE FORMATIVE YEARS

XII	Childhood	267
XIII	The Young Girl	328
XIV	Sexual Initiation	371
XV	The Lesbian	404

Part V SITUATION

XVI	The Married Woman	425
XVII	The Mother	484
XVIII	Social Life	528
XIX	Prostitutes and Hetairas	555
XX	From Maturity to Old Age	575
XXI	Woman's Situation and Character	597

213

Part VI JUSTIFICATIONS

XXII	The Narcissist	629
XXIII	The Woman in Love	642
XXIV	The Mystic	670

Part VII TOWARD LIBERATION

XXV	The Independent Woman	- 679
X	CONCLUSION	- 716

INDEX

follows page 732

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Contents

	PAGE
× INTRODUCTION TO THE VINTAGE EDITION	vii
× INTRODUCTION	xix
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	xxxvii

BOOK ONE: FACTS AND MYTHS

CHAPTER	Part I DESTINY	
I	The Data of Biology	3
II	The Psychoanalytic Point of View	38
III	The Point of View of Historical Materialism	53

Part II HISTORY

IV	The Nomads	61
V	Early Tillers of the Soil	66
VI	Patriarchal Times and Classical Antiquity	82
VII	Through the Middle Ages to Eighteenth-century France	97
VIII	Since the French Revolution: the Job and the Vote	109

Part III MYTHS

IX	Dreams, Fears, Idols	139
X	The Myth of Woman in Five Authors	199
	1. MONTHERLANT or the Bread of Disgust	199
	2. D. H. LAWRENCE or Phallic Pride	214
	3. CLAUDEL and the Handmaid of the Lord	224
	4. BRETON or Poetry	231
	5. STENDHAL or the Romantic of Reality	238
	6. Summary	248
XI	Myth and Reality	253

Introduction to the Vintage Edition

“ONE IS NOT BORN, but rather becomes a woman,” Simone de Beauvoir declared boldly in *The Second Sex*. The book startled readers when it was first published in her native France in 1949; more than forty years later, it continues to provoke spirited response in women and men alike throughout the rest of the world. In over 700 pages of analysis, Beauvoir scrutinizes the facts and myths of women’s lives, using the disparate methodologies of (among others) literature, history, biology, and philosophy to examine not only the problems women encounter but also the possibilities open to them. Elizabeth Hardwick, who reviewed the first American translation of *The Second Sex* in 1953, probably spoke for many readers when, exhausted by the originality of its thesis and the intensity of its argument, she called it “madly sensible and brilliantly confused.”

From the very beginning, *The Second Sex* was controversial. “How courageous you are [to have written it],” one of Beauvoir’s friends said. “You’re going to lose a lot of friends!” Twenty-two thousand copies were sold the first week, as the French “read, as it were, with averted eyes.” Beauvoir described what happened next in her memoirs:

I received—some signed and some anonymous—epigrams, epistles, satires, admonitions, and exhortations addressed to me by, for example, “some very active members of the First Sex.” Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother. People offered to cure me of my frigidity or to temper my labial appetites; I was promised revelations, in the coarsest terms but in the name of the true, the good and the beautiful, in the name of health and even of poetry.¹

The American writer Nelson Algren, visiting Beauvoir in Paris at the time, was outraged by the hostility in which she was “cartooned, ridiculed, sometimes made gentle fun of and, at other times, reviled with no restraint.” By 1960, when he was next in Paris, Algren noted a striking difference:

There was no more laughter. she was feared. She had broken through the defenses of the bourgeoisie, of the church, the businessmen, the right-wing defenders of Napoleonic glory, and the hired press. She was, at once, the most hated and the most loved woman in France. It had become plain: she *meant* it.²

And all of this because Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer who until 1949 was better known as Jean-Paul Sartre's companion of more than twenty years than as the author of several well-received novels, decided to write a book about women in order to learn more about herself.

She said in her memoirs that the book originated "by chance." For several years, she had wanted to write about herself but had not yet identified autobiography as the genre in which to do so. Intending to write a nonfiction essay couched in the philosophical framework of existentialism, the theory Sartre had propounded in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), she soon realized that she would first have to describe the condition of women in general. As she later told a French interviewer: "One day I wanted to explain myself to myself . . . and it struck me with a sort of surprise that the first thing I had to say was 'I am a woman.'" ³

Beauvoir claimed to have "spent two years" on the research and writing of *The Second Sex*, from October 1946 to June 1949.⁴ In actuality, it took fourteen months once she had decided upon the book's form. However, the process from initial conception to final manuscript was much longer and might have actually begun as far back as 1935-36. She was then a philosophy teacher in a Rouen *lycée*, or high school, where her life-long friend, the feminist writer and political activist Colette Audry, was a fellow teacher.

In Rouen, the two women often spoke of their lot in life, and from the beginning they were surprised by how differently they perceived their situations. Audry, whose primary interest was politics, chafed at the fact that French women could not vote (they were not granted suffrage until 1947) and cited this fact as her primary reason why, as a woman, she could not participate fully in French society: "No matter how kindly, how equally men treated me when I tried to participate in politics, when it came right down to it, they had more rights, so they had more power than I did."⁵

But in the mid-1930s, Simone de Beauvoir was happy with the status

her relationship with Sartre ensured and was puzzled by Audry's frustration, claiming she felt none at all, Audry recalled, "precisely because she had an egalitarian relationship with a man":

It was enough for her [that] all Sartre's friends treated her exactly as they treated him. [Within] her family, she was trained from the beginning to have a career, so there, too, she did not suffer the frustration of many women of her class who wanted a career but were prevented from having it by that false comfort, the security of their family's money and position.

In 1936, Audry actually began to keep notes for a book about women, but eventually she lost interest in it. The project became a running joke between her and Beauvoir on the infrequent occasions when they met throughout the next decade. When, on a chance encounter in a Paris café in 1948, Beauvoir told Audry that she was going to write such a book, Audry believed it was because the friend who had always insisted her "life as a woman was as free and equal as any man's" had probably "encountered some serious obstacle that made her change her mind."

It was not so much one serious obstacle as a succession of experiences that led Beauvoir to write *The Second Sex* in the form we now have before us. Arriving at the point where her original idea—for only an essay—evolved into the book she actually wrote was a long, drawn-out process, at times haphazard and unfocused. The actual composition was begun in the fall of 1946, after she finished the philosophical essays published as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She thought she would write another essay that would be a continuation of the book, and a "sort of credo" of herself as "both woman and Existentialist."⁶

This was the period during which Sartre was under sustained verbal attack in Paris by those who disagreed with his politics and philosophy, and because of their relationship, Beauvoir was also the frequent brunt of gossip and insult. She believed she could defend Sartre's positions as well as their unmarried liaison by writing an essay in which she defined herself personally as a woman and philosophically as an existentialist. Her intention was to relate them both to Sartre's system, which she had accepted unquestioningly as her own, but as in all her writing to this date, there was a strong, if still unfocused autobiographical element involved. In order to defend what she believed were Sartre's universal

principles, she had to begin with the specific and the individual, which in this case was her role within his system.

One idea began "to emerge with some insistence, with clarity," from her thinking. It brought her to "the very profound and astonishing realization" that she was different from Sartre "because he was a man and I was only a woman." In a 1982 conversation she explained what she meant by "only":

I had not yet settled on the idea of woman as the other—that was to come later. I had not yet decided that the lot of woman was inferior to the allotment of men in this life. But somehow, I was beginning to formulate the thesis that women had not been given equality in our society, and I must tell you that this was an extremely troubling discovery for me. This is really how I began to be serious about writing about women—when I fully realized the disparity in our lives as compared to men. But [in 1947], none of this was clear to me.

These thoughts were interrupted that year when she went to the United States for the first time, sent by the French government to lecture in American colleges and universities on contemporary French literature. In the course of her travels, she began to think about enlarging her "essay about women" into a book that would be a comparative analysis of the situation of women in the United States and France. This time she intended it to be grounded solidly in existentialism but with a political cast "not . . . Marxism *per se*, but certainly . . . the politics of the Left."

Whenever she had the opportunity to talk to American women she asked questions about the differences between their culture and her own. When she returned to France she asked French women to tell her the story of their lives, intending to use them as case histories in her book. Listening to these stories made her realize that she owed a great deal of her success and independence to the good fortune of having chosen Sartre as her first and most enduring male companion.

She abandoned the idea of a comparative study of women in the two cultures shortly after she returned to France, and instead wrote a series of impressions about American life, collected in book form as *America Day by Day*. By mid-1947 she was envisioning "a long chapter on women," and planning to model it on *America Day by Day* as a series

of independent, purely reportorial articles about the situation of contemporary women. It was not until the fall of that year that all her formerly haphazard ideas coalesced into the form that became her long, serious, and sustained examination of the condition of women throughout history.

"Sexuality and socialization" became Beauvoir's "poles of analysis and reflection"⁷ as she turned first to the lost or missing history of women. She began "at the beginning, with biology," then continued with history, mythology, politics, and gender. She decided to divide her research into two parts, which ultimately appeared as two separately published volumes in French and as Books One and Two in the English translation.

Book One is a historical overview that she called "Facts and Myths" about women. These she divided further into three separate sections called "Destiny," "History," and "Myths," all of which are further divided into individual chapters. "Destiny" discusses the condition of women through biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. "History" follows women through nomadic societies, as early tillers of the soil, and from the time of the patriarchs and classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the granting of French suffrage in 1947. In "Myths" she speaks of dreams, fears, and idols, then follows the mythical woman created by five different male authors. Four are French: Montherlant, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal; the fifth is English, D. H. Lawrence. She follows this with a discussion of "Myth and Reality."

In the second volume, or Book Two, she deals with "Woman's Life Today," which, following form, she also divides into three sections: "The Formative Years," "Situation," and "Justifications." These are followed by a conclusion called "Toward Liberation." Here she is both contemporary and personal, as she writes of childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age. She also describes sexual initiation and various expressions of sexuality from lesbianism to heterosexual marriage as she deals with the idea of love in its many forms, from narcissism to mysticism. Her conclusion is optimistic, as she defines both a way of being and a model for action by women of future generations.

As Beauvoir filled in the details of her ambitious outline, the word "other" became increasingly important in her vocabulary.⁸ She defined white men in Western civilizations as being the central figures in their societies, and according to this definition, not only women were

"other," but also anyone whom she considered barred from empowerment by color or sexual preference. To her, the next logical step seemed "the need to define what these 'others' were in relation to white men, then to study the historical situations which made such alterity possible in the first place and what circumstances made it legitimate."

Nelson Algren, with whom she carried on an almost fifteen-year long-distance love affair, was responsible for giving a particularly American slant to *The Second Sex*. He suggested that she conduct her study of women along the lines of the experience of black Americans in a segregated society and introduced her to the writings of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, among many others, and introduced her to his black American friends in Chicago, urging them to share their experiences with her. She adopted Algren's view in part because of her own friendship with the black American writer Richard Wright and his white wife, Ellen. Seeing the problems they encountered as a couple convinced her that white men had succeeded in relegating both black men and all women into positions of "alterité" or "otherness." Algren also insisted that she read American literature of the 1920s and 1930s, with its strong political and social content. When he was in Chicago and she in Paris their correspondence often contained discussions about such writers as James T. Farrell, John O'Hara, John Dos Passos, Frank Conroy, Tess Schlessinger, Maridel LeSeur, and others.

From reading fiction and sociology, she turned to history to ascertain women's role in it. She discovered that in general there was none, for they were seldom mentioned, if at all. She found support for her views in the French writer Poulain de la Barre, whom she called "a little-known feminist of the seventeenth century." She shared his belief that "All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit."⁹

Beauvoir's citation of Poulain to prove a point is only one example of the scope of her research and methodology. She was also inquisitive about contemporary scholarship and incorporated much new information from developing disciplines into her book. Using anthropology, she was an early practitioner of gender theory as she sought ways to extract and define common characteristics among women from within studies that only mentioned them as figures in the larger background. Although she held a life-long distrust of psychology, she nevertheless attended some of Jacques Lacan's lectures, hoping again to find patterns and trends common among women.

She drew upon earlier feminist writers, among them Virginia Woolf, to develop still another perspective. Woolf's view of the relationship between economic independence and intellectual freedom had long been her own. She also used the documentation of women themselves, as she studied, evaluated, and formed theories about letters, diaries, personal psychoanalytic histories, autobiographies, essays, and novels. In many ways she deserves credit for focusing the attention of later generations of scholars upon these heretofore neglected areas that are now valued as important sources for revising history to include the participation and contribution of women.

These are only several examples of the scope of her research and methodology. The global influence of the book is all the more extraordinary when we realize that it was written by a French woman of a specific social and intellectual background who had very little firsthand knowledge of previous feminist movements, writings, or ideas within France itself to guide her initial explorations, and almost no knowledge of feminist activity elsewhere in the world. Yet she was able to go unflinchingly to the important documents, sources, and writings in many fields, and to synthesize all this information within her self-imposed framework of existential philosophy.

The book that resulted has been many things to many readers in the years since it was published and translated into more than twenty-six different languages. One of the fairest assessments is by British scholar Terry Keefe, who called it "one of the most important and far-reaching books on women ever published," but who also noted that

This highly ambitious project leaves a good deal to be desired, for the book cannot be said to be very carefully composed, or even, on the whole, particularly well-written. . . . While almost every section contains some fertile ideas and valuable insights, argument of the highest quality is rarely sustained for long.¹⁰

Criticism of the book was quick in coming and has continued ever since, even though it is generally praised for having changed how "official anti-feminist and feminist discourse have been carried on [since] the Middle Ages."¹¹ One of the most sustained criticisms has been that Beauvoir is guilty of unconscious misogyny, that having written about women, she has taken great care to separate herself from them. The French writer and political activist Francis Jeanson accused

her of writing as someone who understood the feminist condition only because she herself had escaped from it.¹² A similar charge was made by the British poet and novelist Stevie Smith: "She has written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them, nor does she like being a woman."¹³ Another oft-repeated criticism is British scholar C. B. Radford's, that she has been "guilty of painting women in her own colors" because *The Second Sex* is

primarily a middle-class document, so distorted by autobiographical influences that the individual problems of the writer herself may assume an exaggerated importance in her discussion of femininity.

Radford recognized, however, that though

her image of woman may be distorted: it is nevertheless sincere. In all her work she is motivated by the honest conviction that her own solution is the best . . . that accounts for the exaggeration and even the violence of her work.¹⁴

The debate grew stronger when the first English translation appeared in the United States in 1953.

Blanche Knopf, wife of the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, deserves credit for discerning that *The Second Sex* would be an important book worthy of translation but not for the reason she first assumed: that the book "was a modern-day sex manual, something between Kinsey and Havelock Ellis." Mrs. Knopf bought the book on a trip to France because she thought the popularity of existentialism among college-age Americans would result in healthy sales. Her husband wanted an expert's judgment before agreeing to publish it, and because the book was purported to be a study of female sexuality, he asked H. M. Parshley, a professor emeritus of zoology at Smith College, to provide one.

Professor Parshley was not as unlikely a candidate to evaluate it as many critics of his translation have since charged. He was considered an expert on human reproduction and collaborated frequently on translations from the French of works of a scientific nature. In choosing him the Knopfs believed they had carefully selected the most trustworthy candidate to provide them with the expert judgment such a work demanded, and it was because of Parshley's perceptive analysis and strong belief in it that *The Second Sex* was translated so early on in its

long publishing life. In his initial report Parshley called it "a thoughtful and well-written work which throws new light on an old question." He continued:

A book on women by an intelligent, learned, and well-balanced woman is, I think, a great rarity, and this is indeed such a book. It is not feminist in any doctrinaire sense, nor is it an attack on the male sex; and it does not belong to the category of ululations about the "lost sex," etc., of which we have plenty. . . . The book is a profound and unique analysis of woman's nature and position, eminently reasonable and often witty; and it surely should be translated. . . . It should pay for itself, and in any case will be a credit to the publisher.¹⁵

Alfred Knopf had a slightly different opinion:

[Beauvoir] certainly suffers from verbal diarrhea—I have seldom read a book that seems to run in such concentric circles. Everything seems to be repeated three or four times but in different parts of the text, and I can hardly imagine the average person reading the whole book carefully. But I think it is capable of making a very wide appeal indeed and that young ladies in places like Smith who can afford the price, which will be high, will be nursing it just as students of my generation managed somehow to get hold of Havelock Ellis.¹⁶

From the beginning it was clear that the unwieldy French text had to be cut and condensed. Also from the beginning, Beauvoir refused to cooperate on the translation. After several frustrating years, Blanche Knopf told Parshley regretfully that nothing could be done about "la Beauvoir," as they had dubbed her, as she refused even to give them her address in Paris, insisting that all communication be sent through her agent. "I think you will simply have to carry on as you did [thus far]," Mrs. Knopf concluded.

Parshley worked diligently to keep as much of the text and to compose as faithful a translation as possible in the four years, from 1949 to 1952, during which he worked on the book. Difficulties arose because many of Beauvoir's sources were French, to be found only in France, and were thus unavailable to him. Also, she used terms that had a particular meaning in existential philosophy; without Beauvoir's expla-

nations and despite Parshley's trying to read as widely as possible in Sartre and his precursors, Hegel and Heidegger, many philosophers believe he has either misconstrued or misused much philosophical terminology.

Because Parshley received no suggestions from Beauvoir about cutting the massive manuscript, he had to make decisions on his own. One of the most extensive cuts was in the "History" section, where he deleted fully half the chapter and the names and histories of seventy-eight women. Since there is no note to indicate these deletions, much of Beauvoir's subsequent analysis of nineteenth-century European and American suffrage movements is seriously impaired, as is her treatment of the development of socialist feminism in France. She was upset to learn that any cuts had been made at all, but was furious about the "History" section, because, as she noted to her agent, "the detailed studies . . . make my writing vivid and convincing." Shortly after, she "agreed in principle to the idea of cuts," but only if they were submitted to her for approval first. Unfortunately, she lost interest in the project and her comments and suggestions were few and haphazard. All she really wanted from publication in the United States was "lots of dollars," so she made no further protest about changes in her text. When Mrs. Knopf sent her a copy of the finished book, Beauvoir replied insincerely via her agent that she found the book "superb" and the translation "excellent." She added that she hoped Mrs. Knopf (with whom she had never cooperated, and whom she had simply never liked) would return to Paris so she could tell her personally "how much I appreciate Mr. Parshley's work and the appearance of my book."¹⁷

One day a new, uncut translation of *The Second Sex* will no doubt be done. The book has become a classic and should therefore be available to readers exactly as its author wrote it, no matter how repetitious, unwieldy, or awkward the text. In the meantime, however, until we have a "definitive" text before us, this one will serve to alert readers to the remarkable variety and richness of Simone de Beauvoir's thesis and its continuing importance. It remains, as one of the first reviewers noted, "more than a work of scholarship; it is a work of art, with the salt of recklessness that makes art sting."¹⁸

In another instance, I tried to assess Simone de Beauvoir's contribution to our time, and I concluded:

Only one thing is certain: there has been no other woman in contemporary literature who has been so completely associated with the major events, causes and actions of her society. . . . Considered separately, most if not all of her remarks make splendid sense; seen together they create a crazy quilt kaleidoscope of image and reality, opinion and fact. Feminist ideology cannot ignore Simone de Beauvoir; her importance should be unquestioned and is undeniable. The real question will be how to assess her contribution, and what use to make of it in the future.¹⁹

I believe we would do well to start with *The Second Sex*.

—DEIRDRE BAIR

NOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1978)

2. Nelson Aigren, *Who Lost an American?* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 97 ff.

3. Madeleine Chapsal, "Une interview de Simone de Beauvoir," *Les Écrivains en personne* (Paris: Julliard, 1960), pp. 17-37, reprinted in Claude Francis and Fernande Contier, *Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1979), p. 385. My translation.

4. Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 196.

5. Interview with Colette Audry, March 5, 1986, Paris. All subsequent comments by Audry are from this interview.

6. These remarks are taken from a series of interviews I conducted with Simone de Beauvoir from 1981 to 1986 in Paris and New York for the book *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). Hereafter, any unattributed remarks by Simone de Beauvoir are taken from these interviews and conversations.

7. Christine Fauré, "The Twilight of the Goddesses, or The Intellectual Crisis of French Feminism," translated by Lillian S. Robinson *Signs* 7, 1 (Autumn 1981): 82. This article was originally published as "Le Crépuscule des déesses, ou La Crise intellectuelle en France en milieu féministe," *Les Temps Modernes* 414 (January 1981): 1285-91.

8. Throughout the composition of the book, when people asked Beauvoir what she was writing, she usually said "just something about the other sex." She had no title until she was almost ready to publish. Then, during a night of friendly drinking and conversation, her friend and Sartre's, Jacques-Laurent Bost, made a scatological joke calling homosexuals "the third sex, and that must mean women come in second." She decided to call her book *The Second Sex*.

- 9 François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1725), *De l'égalité des deux sexes (On the Equality of Both Sexes)*, (1673), (Paris Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1984)
- 10 Terry Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir A Study of Her Writings* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), p. 111
- 11 Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* (Amherst Univ. of Michigan Press, 1980), introduction, pp. 6 and 7
- 12 Francis Jeanson, *Simone de Beauvoir ou l'entreprise de vivre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 253
- 13 Stevie Smith, "The Devil's Doorway," review of *The Second Sex*, *The Spectator*, no. 6543 (November 20, 1953), 602-603
- 14 C. B. Radford, "Feminism's Friend or Foe?," *Nottingham French Studies* 6, 2 (October 1967) 89
- 15 H. M. Parshley, "Report on *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir, Vol. I," courtesy of Mrs. Elsa Parshley Brown
- 16 Alfred A. Knopf to H. M. Parshley, November 27, 1951
- 17 Simone de Beauvoir, quoted in Blanche Knopf's letter to H. M. Parshley, January 8, 1953
- 18 Brendan Gill, "No More Eve," *The New Yorker* 29, 2 (February 28, 1953) 97-99
- 19 Deirdre Bair, "Simone de Beauvoir: Politics, Language, and Feminist Identity," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72, 1986, p. 162

Introduction

FOR a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in the quarreling over feminism, now practically over, and perhaps we should say no more about it. It is still talked about, however, for the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? Are there women, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: "Even in Russia women still are women"; and other erudite persons—sometimes the very same—say with a sigh: "Woman is losing her way, woman is lost." One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be. "What has become of women?" was asked recently in an ephemeral magazine.¹

But first we must ask: what is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*," says one, "woman is a womb." But in speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a Platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination? Is a rustling petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women try zealously to incarnate this essence, it is hardly patentable. It is frequently described in vague and dazzling terms that seem to have been borrowed from the vocabulary of the seers, and indeed in the times of St. Thomas it was considered an essence as certainly defined as the somniferous virtue of the poppy.

¹ *Franchise*, dead today.

But conceptualism has lost ground. The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a *situation*. If today femininity no longer exists, then it never existed. But does the word *woman*, then, have no specific content? This is stoutly affirmed by those who hold to the philosophy of the enlightenment, of rationalism, of nominalism; women, to them, are merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word *woman*. Many American women particularly are prepared to think that there is no longer any place for woman as such; if a backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to be psychoanalyzed and thus get rid of this obsession. In regard to a work, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which in other respects has its irritating features, Dorothy Parker has written: "I cannot be just to books which treat of woman as woman. . . . My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, should be regarded as human beings." But nominalism is a rather inadequate doctrine, and the antifeminists have had no trouble in showing that women simply *are not* men. Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today—this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. Some years ago a well-known woman writer refused to permit her portrait to appear in a series of photographs especially devoted to women writers; she wished to be counted among the men. But in order to gain this privilege she made use of her husband's influence! Women who assert that they are men lay claim none the less to masculine consideration and respect. I recall also a young Trotskyite standing on a platform at a boisterous meeting and getting ready to use her fists, in spite of her evident fragility. She was denying her feminine weakness; but it was for love of a militant male whose equal she wished to be. The attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity. In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly

different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that right now they do most obviously exist.

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through "the eternal feminine," and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman?

To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male.² But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: "I am a woman"; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: "You think thus and so because you are a woman"; but I know that my only defense is to reply: "I think thus and so because it is true," thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: "And you think the contrary because you are a man," for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection

² The Kinsey Report [Alfred C. Kinsey and others: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (W. B. Saunders Co., 1948)] is no exception, for it is limited to describing the sexual characteristics of American men, which is quite a different matter.

with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. "The female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities," said Aristotle; "we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." And St. Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an "imperfect man," an "incidental" being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: "Woman, the relative being. . . ." And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: "The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself. . . . Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man." And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called "the sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual-being. For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.³

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the Self and the Other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works

³ E. Lévinas expresses this idea most explicitly in his essay *Temps et l'Autre*. "Is there not a case in which otherness, alterity [*altérité*], unquestionably marks the nature of a being, as its essence, an instance of otherness not consisting purely and simply in the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense, this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and thus remaining absolutely other. Sex is not a certain specific difference . . . no more is the sexual difference a mere contradiction. . . . Nor does this difference lie in the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms imply a pre-existing whole. . . . Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning."

I suppose that Lévinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.

as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumézil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.

Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile "others" out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are "strangers" and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are "foreigners"; Jews are "different" for the anti-Semite, Negroes are "inferior" for American racists, aborigines are "natives" for colonists, proletarians are the "lower class" for the privileged.

Lévi-Strauss, at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion: "Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality."⁴ These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society were simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become clear, on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.

But the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim. The native traveling abroad is shocked to find himself in turn regarded as a "stranger" by the natives of neighboring countries. As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity; willy-nilly, individuals and groups are forced to realize the reciprocity of their relations. How is it, then, that this reciprocity has not been recognized

⁴ See C. Lévi-Strauss: *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. My thanks are due to C. Lévi-Strauss for his kindness in furnishing me with the proofs of his work, which, among others, I have used liberally in Part II.

between the sexes, that one of the contrasting terms is set up as the sole essential, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative and defining the latter as pure otherness? Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?

There are, to be sure, other cases in which a certain category has been able to dominate another completely for a time. Very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers—the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth. Again, the two groups concerned have often been originally independent; they may have been formerly unaware of each other's existence, or perhaps they recognized each other's autonomy. But a historical event has resulted in the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger. The scattering of the Jews, the introduction of slavery into America, the conquests of imperialism are examples in point. In these cases the oppressed retained at least the memory of former days; they possessed in common a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion or a culture.

The parallel drawn by Bebel between women and the proletariat is valid in that neither ever formed a minority or a separate collective unit of mankind. And instead of a single historical event it is in both cases a historical development that explains their status as a class and accounts for the membership of *particular individuals* in that class. But proletarians have not always existed, whereas there have always been women. They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men,⁵ and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change—it was not something that *occurred*. The reason why otherness in this case seems to be an absolute is in part that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts. A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some

⁵ With rare exceptions, perhaps, like certain matriarchal rulers, queens, and the like.—Tr.

other time, as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved; but it might seem that a natural condition is beyond the possibility of change. In truth, however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change. Proletarians say "We"; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into "others." But women do not say "We," except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say "women," and women use the same word in referring to themselves. They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude. The proletarians have accomplished the revolution in Russia, the Negroes in Haiti, the Indo-Chinese are battling for it in Indo-China; but the women's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.⁶

The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible.

⁶ See Part II, ch. viii.

Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.

One could suppose that this reciprocity might have facilitated the liberation of woman. When Hercules sat at the feet of Omphale and helped with her spinning, his desire for her held him captive; but why did she fail to gain a lasting power? To revenge herself on Jason, Medea killed their children; and this grim legend would seem to suggest that she might have obtained a formidable influence over him through his love for his offspring. In *Lysistrata* Aristophanes gaily depicts a band of women who joined forces to gain social ends through the sexual needs of their men; but this is only a play. In the legend of the Sabine women, the latter soon abandoned their plan of remaining sterile to punish their ravishers. In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need—sexual desire and the desire for offspring—which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female.

Master and slave, also, are united by a reciprocal need, in this case economic, which does not liberate the slave. In the relation of master to slave the master does not make a point of the need that he has for the other; he has in his grasp the power of satisfying this need through his own action; whereas the slave, in his dependent condition, his hope and fear, is quite conscious of the need he has for his master. Even if the need is at bottom equally urgent for both, it always works in favor of the oppressor and against the oppressed. That is why the liberation of the working class, for example, has been slow.

Now, woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's,⁷ and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores. In the economic sphere men and women can almost be said to make up two castes; other things being equal, the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages, and have more opportunity for success than their new competitors. In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolize the most important posts. In addition to all this, they enjoy a traditional

⁷ At the moment an "equal rights" amendment to the Constitution of the United States is before Congress.—T.R.

prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support, for the present enshrines the past—and in the past all history has been made by men. At the present time, when women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world, it is still a world that belongs to men—they have no doubt of it at all and women have scarcely any. To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. When man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.

But it will be asked at once: how did all this begin? It is easy to see that the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. And doubtless the winner will assume the status of absolute. But why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; or that the outcome of the conflict might never have been decided. How is it that this world has always belonged to the men and that things have begun to change only recently? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women?

These questions are not new, and they have often been answered. But the very fact that woman is *the Other* tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. These have all too evidently been dictated by men's interest. A little-known feminist of the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: "All that has been written about women by men should

be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit." Everywhere, at all times, the males have displayed their satisfaction in feeling that they are the lords of creation. "Blessed be God . . . that He did not make me a woman," say the Jews in their morning prayers, while their wives pray on a note of resignation: "Blessed be the Lord, who created me according to His will." The first among the blessings for which Plato thanked the gods was that he had been created free, not enslaved; the second, a man, not a woman. But the males could not enjoy this privilege fully unless they believed it to be founded on the absolute and the eternal; they sought to make the fact of their supremacy into a right. "Being men, those who have made and compiled the laws have favored their own sex, and jurists have elevated these laws into principles," to quote Poulain de la Barre once more.

Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination. In the legends of Eve and Pandora men have taken up arms against women. They have made use of philosophy and theology, as the quotations from Aristotle and St. Thomas have shown. Since ancient times satirists and moralists have delighted in showing up the weaknesses of women. We are familiar with the savage indictments hurled against women throughout French literature. Montherlant, for example, follows the tradition of Jean de Meung, though with less gusto. This hostility may at times be well founded, often it is gratuitous; but in truth it more or less successfully conceals a desire for self-justification. As Montaigne says, "It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other." Sometimes what is going on is clear enough. For instance, the Roman law limiting the rights of woman cited "the imbecility, the instability of the sex" just when the weakening of family ties seemed to threaten the interests of male heirs. And in the effort to keep the married woman under guardianship, appeal was made in the sixteenth century to the authority of St. Augustine, who declared that "woman is a creature neither decisive nor constant," at a time when the single woman was thought capable of managing her property. Montaigne understood clearly how arbitrary and unjust was woman's appointed lot: "Women are not in the wrong when they decline to accept the rules laid down for them, since the men make these rules without consulting them. No wonder intrigue

and strife abound." But he did not go so far as to champion their cause.

It was only later, in the eighteenth century, that genuinely democratic men began to view the matter objectively. Diderot, among others, strove to show that woman is, like man, a human being. Later John Stuart Mill came fervently to her defense. But these philosophers displayed unusual impartiality. In the nineteenth century the feminist quarrel became again a quarrel of partisans. One of the consequences of the industrial revolution was the entrance of women into productive labor, and it was just here that the claims of the feminists emerged from the realm of theory and acquired an economic basis, while their opponents became the more aggressive. Although landed property lost power to some extent, the bourgeoisie clung to the old morality that found the guarantee of private property in the solidity of the family. Woman was ordered back into the home the more harshly as her emancipation became a real menace. Even within the working class the men endeavored to restrain woman's liberation, because they began to see the women as dangerous competitors—the more so because they were accustomed to work for lower wages.⁸

In proving woman's inferiority, the antifeminists then began to draw not only upon religion, philosophy, and theology, as before, but also upon science—biology, experimental psychology, etc. At most they were willing to grant "equality in difference" to the *other* sex. That profitable formula is most significant; it is precisely like the "equal but separate" formula of the Jim Crow laws aimed at the North American Negroes. As is well known, this so-called equalitarian segregation has resulted only in the most extreme discrimination. The similarity just noted is in no way due to chance, for whether it is a race, a caste, a class, or a sex that is reduced to a position of inferiority, the methods of justification are the same. "The eternal feminine" corresponds to "the black soul" and to "the Jewish character." True, the Jewish problem is on the whole very different from the other two—to the anti-Semite the Jew is not so much an inferior as he is an enemy for whom there is to be granted no place on earth, for whom annihilation is the fate desired. But there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro. Both are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to "keep them in their place"—that is, the place chosen for

⁸ See Part II, pp. 115-17.

them. In both cases the former masters lavish more or less sincere eulogies, either on the virtues of "the good Negro" with his dormant, childish, merry soul—the submissive Negro—or on the merits of the woman who is "truly feminine"—that is, frivolous, infantile, irresponsible—the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, "The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy; and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes." This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he *is* inferior. But the significance of the verb *to be* must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of "to have become." Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?

Many men hope that it will continue; not all have given up the battle. The conservative bourgeoisie still see in the emancipation of women a menace to their morality and their interests. Some men dread feminine competition. Recently a male student wrote in the *Hebdo-Latin*: "Every woman student who goes into medicine or law robs us of a job." He never questioned his rights in this world. And economic interests are not the only ones concerned. One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to *feel* superior; thus, a "poor white" in the South can console himself with the thought that he is not a "dirty nigger"—and the more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride.

Similarly, the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women. It was much easier for M. de Montherlant to think himself a hero when he faced women (and women chosen for his purpose) than when he was obliged to act the man among men—something many women have done better than he, for that matter. And in September 1948, in one of his articles in the *Figaro littéraire*, Claude Mauriac—whose great originality is admired by all—could⁹ write regarding woman: "We listen on a tone [*sic!*] of polite indifference . . . to the most brilliant among them, well knowing that her wit reflects more or less luminously ideas that come from us." Evi-

⁹ Or at least he thought he could.

dently the speaker referred to is not reflecting the ideas of Mauriac himself, for no one knows of his having any. It may be that she reflects ideas originating with men, but then, even among men there are those who have been known to appropriate ideas not their own; and one can well ask whether Claude Mauriac might not find more interesting a conversation reflecting Descartes, Marx, or Gide rather than himself. What is really remarkable is that by using the questionable *we* he identifies himself with St. Paul, Hegel, Lenin, and Nietzsche, and from the lofty eminence of their grandeur looks down disdainfully upon the bevy of women who make bold to converse with him on a footing of equality. In truth, I know of more than one woman who would refuse to suffer with patience Mauriac's "tone of polite indifference."

I have lingered on this example because the masculine attitude is here displayed with disarming ingenuousness. But men profit in many more subtle ways from the otherness, the alterity of woman. Here is miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility. Those who are not fear-ridden in the presence of their fellow men are much more disposed to recognize a fellow creature in woman; but even to these the myth of Woman, the Other, is precious for many reasons.¹ They cannot be blamed for not cheerfully relinquishing all the benefits they derive from the myth, for they realize what they would lose in relinquishing woman as they fancy her to be, while they fail to realize what they have to gain from the woman of tomorrow. Refusal to pose oneself as the Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial. Furthermore, the vast majority of men make no such claim explicitly. They do not *postulate* woman as inferior, for today they are too thoroughly imbued with the ideal of democracy not to recognize all human beings as equals.

In the bosom of the family, woman seems in the eyes of childhood

¹ A significant article on this theme by Michel Carrouges appeared in No. 292 of the *Cahiers du Sud*. He writes indignantly: "Would that there were no woman-myth at all but only a cohort of cooks, matrons, prostitutes, and bluestockings serving functions of pleasure or usefulness!" That is to say, in his view woman has no existence in and for herself; he thinks *only of her function* in the male world. Her reason for existence lies in man. But then, in fact, her poetic "function" as a myth might be more valued than any other. The real problem is precisely to find out why woman should be defined with relation to man.

and youth to be clothed in the same social dignity as the adult males. Later on, the young man, desiring and loving, experiences the resistance, the independence of the woman desired and loved; in marriage, he respects woman as wife and mother, and in the concrete events of conjugal life she stands there before him as a free being. He can therefore feel that social subordination as between the sexes no longer exists and that on the whole, in spite of differences, woman is an equal. As, however, he observes some points of inferiority—the most important being unfitness for the professions—he attributes these to natural causes. When he is in a co-operative and benevolent relation with woman, his theme is the principle of abstract equality, and he does not base his attitude upon such inequality as may exist. But when he is in conflict with her, the situation is reversed: his theme will be the existing inequality, and he will even take it as justification for denying abstract equality.²

So it is that many men will affirm as if in good faith that women *are* the equals of man and that they have nothing to clamor for, while *at the same time* they will say that women can never be the equals of man and that their demands are in vain. It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature.³ The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman's concrete situation. And there is no reason to put much trust in the men when they rush to the defense of privileges whose full extent they can hardly measure. We shall not, then, permit ourselves to be intimidated by the number and violence of the attacks launched against women, nor to be entrapped by the self-seeking eulogies bestowed on the "true woman," nor to profit by the enthusiasm for woman's destiny manifested by men who would not for the world have any part of it.

We should consider the arguments of the feminists with no less suspicion, however, for very often their controversial aim deprives them of all real value. If the "woman question" seems trivial, it is because

² For example, a man will say that he considers his wife in no wise degraded because she has no gainful occupation. The profession of housewife is just as lofty, and so on. But when the first quarrel comes, he will exclaim: "Why, you couldn't make your living without me!"

³ The specific purpose of Book II of this study is to describe this process.

masculine arrogance has made of it a "quarrel"; and when quarreling one no longer reasons well. People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man. Some say that, having been created after Adam, she is evidently a secondary being; others say on the contrary that Adam was only a rough draft and that God succeeded in producing the human being in perfection when He created Eve. Woman's brain is smaller; yes, but it is relatively larger. Christ was made a man; yes, but perhaps for his greater humility. Each argument at once suggests its opposite, and both are often fallacious. If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.

Very well, but just how shall we pose the question? And, to begin with, who are we to propound it at all? Man is at once judge and party to the case; but so is woman. What we need is an angel—neither man nor woman—but where shall we find one? Still, the angel would be poorly qualified to speak, for an angel is ignorant of all the basic facts involved in the problem. With a hermaphrodite we should be no better off, for here the situation is most peculiar; the hermaphrodite is not really the combination of a whole man and a whole woman, but consists of parts of each and thus is neither. It looks to me as if there are, after all, certain women who are best qualified to elucidate the situation of woman. Let us not be misled by the sophism that because Epimenides was a Cretan he was necessarily a liar; it is not a mysterious essence that compels men and women to act in good or in bad faith, it is their situation that inclines them more or less toward the search for truth. Many of today's women, fortunate in the restoration of all the privileges pertaining to the estate of the human being, can afford the luxury of impartiality—we even recognize its necessity. We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large we have won the game. In recent debates on the status of women the United Nations has persistently maintained that the equality of the sexes is now becoming a reality, and already some of us have never had to sense in our femininity an inconvenience or an obstacle. Many problems appear to us to be more pressing than those which concern us in particular, and this detachment even allows us to hope that our attitude will be objective. Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be fem-

ine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge. I have said that there are more pressing problems, but this does not prevent us from seeing some importance in asking how the fact of being women will affect our lives. What opportunities precisely have been given us and what withheld? What fate awaits our younger sisters, and what directions should they take? It is significant that books by women on women are in general animated in our day less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort toward clarity and understanding. As we emerge from an era of excessive controversy, this book is offered as one attempt among others to confirm that statement.

But it is doubtless impossible to approach any human problem with a mind free from bias. The way in which questions are put, the points of view assumed, presuppose a relativity of interest; all characteristics imply values, and every objective description, so called, implies an ethical background. Rather than attempt to conceal principles more or less definitely implied, it is better to state them openly at the beginning. This will make it unnecessary to specify on every page in just what sense one uses such words as *superior*, *inferior*, *better*, *worse*, *progress*, *reaction*, and the like. If we survey some of the works on woman, we note that one of the points of view most frequently adopted is that of the public good, the general interest; and one always means by this the benefit of society as one wishes it to be maintained or established. For our part, we hold that the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens; we shall pass judgment on institutions according to their effectiveness in giving concrete opportunities to individuals. But we do not confuse the idea of private interest with that of happiness, although that is another common point of view. Are not women of the harem more happy than women voters? Is not the housekeeper happier than the working-woman? It is not too clear just what the word *happy* really means and still less what true values it may mask. There is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them.

In particular those who are condemned to stagnation are often pronounced happy on the pretext that happiness consists in being at rest. This notion we reject, for our perspective is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties.

There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the "*en-soi*"—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects.

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome? These are the fundamental questions on which I would fain throw some light. This means that I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty.

Quite evidently this problem would be without significance if we were to believe that woman's destiny is inevitably determined by physiological, psychological, or economic forces. Hence I shall discuss first of all the light in which woman is viewed by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. Next I shall try to show exactly how the concept of the "truly feminine" has been fashioned—why woman has been defined as the Other—and what have been the consequences from man's point of view. Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live; and thus we shall be able to envisage the difficulties in their way as, endeavoring to make their escape from the sphere hitherto assigned them, they aspire to full membership in the human race.

Introduction to Book II

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations. We must therefore study the traditional destiny of woman with some care. In Book II I shall seek to describe how woman undergoes her apprenticeship, how she experiences her situation, in what kind of universe she is confined, what modes of escape are vouchsafed her. Then only—with so much understood—shall we be able to comprehend the problems of women, the heirs of a burdensome past, who are striving to build a new future. When I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand the phrase "in the present state of education and custom" after most of my statements. It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.

Translator's Note

A SERIOUS, all-inclusive, and uninhibited work on woman by a woman of wit and learning! What, I had often thought, could be more desirable and yet less to be expected? When I was asked, some three years ago, to read Mlle Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, then appearing in two successive volumes in France, and to offer my opinion on the advisability of its publication in English, I was not long in realizing that the unexpected had happened. My opinion, I need hardly say, was favorable, for the work displayed unique qualities of style and content which, I thought, would make it a classic in its often worked but far from exhausted field. And when, a little later, I ventured to undertake the arduous task of translation—not from any pretension to linguistic scholarship but because I had long been concerned with certain scientific and humanistic aspects of the subject (not to mention the subsidiary inducements of wealth and fame)—the ensuing more intimate acquaintance served to confirm and, indeed, to heighten my first impression of the work.

Much, in truth, has been written on woman from more or less restricted points of view, such as the physiological, the cynical, the religious, the psychoanalytical, and the feminist—some of it written even by women; but it has remained for Mlle de Beauvoir to produce a book on woman and her historical and contemporary situation in Western culture, which is at once scientifically accurate in matters of biology, comprehensive and frank in its treatment of woman's individual development and social relations, illuminated throughout by a wealth of literary and scientific citation, and founded upon a broadly generous and consistent philosophy. "Feminine literature," the author remarks, "is in our day animated less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort toward clarity and understanding." Her work is certainly a good example of this tendency, and if, in addition, it sometimes may provoke dissent and give rise to controversy, so much the better. Mlle de Beauvoir is in general more concerned to explain than to reform, but she does look forward to better things and, portraying with approval the independent woman of today, in the end gives persuasive expression to her vision of the future.