

Transcending the Patriarchy: A Reflection on de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

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“Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself. But what singularly defines the situation of women is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever be transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness.”¹

“If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding. Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antimony that coexists with him.”²

¹Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 37.

²Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 2.

In *The Second Sex*, French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir describes the power dynamics between men and women throughout history, and how women tend to be dominated by men. I found parallels in diction and theme between the introduction of *The Second Sex* and the introduction of *Black Skin, White Masks* by French West Indian philosopher Frantz Fanon, another mid-twentieth century work. Despite how de Beauvoir examines sexism and Fanon examines racism, both of these works use the term “transcendence,” and discuss the concept and implications of otherness. Comparing the passages grants a deeper understanding of de Beauvoir’s patriarchy as well as the logic and mechanics of oppression overall.

The word “transcendence” occurs repeatedly in de Beauvoir’s passage. What does transcendence mean in this context, and what does it contribute to the selection? To understand this term, I turned to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the book’s introduction, he states “consciousness is a process of transcendence.”³ Fanon attempts to define the difference between humans and animals; he asserts that the key characteristic of human consciousness is how it transcends animal consciousness, or goes beyond it. In the excerpt, de Beauvoir claims that “every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely.”⁴ In this case, the “subject” is men -- women are referred to as “Other”. In the most basic terms, de Beauvoir explains that men, by virtue of privilege, make themselves the standard for transcendence, which defines human consciousness.

De Beauvoir claims “[the subject] accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms,”⁵ elaborating on the condition of the men in contrast to the condition of

³ Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2.

⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 37.

⁵ de Beauvoir, 37.

women. To illuminate this claim, I once again draw from Fanon's introduction, in which he claims that "transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding."⁶ As previously stated, the "subject," in this case men, appoints themselves as the standard for human consciousness by virtue of their position of power. This arrangement goes unquestioned until people make an attempt to understand each other, employing the aforementioned "love and understanding," until the subject's legitimacy as the standard for humanity becomes suspect. Consequently, man is "doomed to watch the dissolution of truths that he has worked out for himself."⁷ When people empathize with one another, the subject-imposed standard of human consciousness no longer makes sense to them, and if enough people question a preconceived notion, it begins to fall apart. As a result, the subject becomes disoriented and insecure.

De Beauvoir's original claim provides insight into how the subject prevents this from happening: by "perpetually surpassing other freedoms."⁸ If the subject continues to be superior, it never has to worry about having to question its worldview. De Beauvoir elaborates, asserting that "an attempt is made to freeze [women] as an object and doom [them] to immanence, since [their] transcendence will be forever be transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness."⁹ This is one of the methods with which the subject maintains its superior status; it purposefully sabotages the perceived Other in order to transcend it; therefore, the subject is justified in their sovereignty.

In order to understand the full extent of this sabotage, we must understand the term "immanence." De Beauvoir states that "every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is

⁶ Fanon, 2.

⁷ Fanon, 2.

⁸ de Beauvoir, 37.

⁹ de Beauvoir, 37.

degradation of existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity.”¹⁰ This statement is an extension of Beauvoir’s beliefs regarding human consciousness and human existence. She claims that humanity’s capacity to transcend that of animals has the ability to falter into what she calls immanence, or innateness. Therefore, de Beauvoir believes existence for the sake of existence to be an inferior way of life; humans should strive for transcendence. Having the ability to strive for transcendence, yet choosing not to, is a “moral fault.”¹¹ However, she also recognizes that immanence can be inflicted upon others; “if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression.”¹² De Beauvoir specifically refers to how men subject women to immanence by forcibly limiting their means to transcend. This can be accomplished through a number of ways, the most likely of which being subjecting women to strict gender roles and associated activities, as they most likely were at this time.

De Beauvoir claims that another way to limit women to immanence is to “force [women] to assume [themselves] as Other.”¹³ To be labeled as “other” is to be labeled as different from the “subject,” and therefore not eligible for the same considerations, such as the extension of empathy. De Beauvoir’s use of general language like “subject” and “other” is intentional; prejudices like racism, sexism, and so on all stem from this lack of imagination. Therefore, Fanon’s description of the plight of black men is also applicable; in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, he describes how educated black men attempt to extricate themselves from the rest of their race. Black men recognize that being labeled as “other” is limiting, so they attempt to associate themselves with white men, or the “subject,” so that they may be allowed to

¹⁰ de Beauvoir, 37.

¹¹ de Beauvoir, 37.

¹² de Beauvoir, 37.

¹³ de Beauvoir, 37.

transcend and escape immanence. The otherness that de Beauvoir references is the weaponization of the aforementioned sentiment by men against women. De Beauvoir believes that this weaponization is deliberate, an attempt by men to “freeze [women] as an object and doom [them] to immanence”¹⁴ so that men may continue to achieve a higher level of transcendence.

Every group in a position of power makes itself the standard for human experience and consciousness. In order to justify that position of power, men subject women to conditions specifically designed so that men can continue to prove themselves superior. Consequently, women are denied the most basic of rights: the ability to transcend, without which, they fail to experience the full extent of their consciousness, and exist as incomplete humans. As women’s roles have expanded from those of de Beauvoir’s mid-twentieth-century France, they have been able to pursue this transcendence to a greater extent. However, men continue to define the condition of women since they continue to retain power; men still occupy the vast majority of political offices. Women’s ability to truly define themselves will come once women are able to engage with power to the same degree as men. Until then, we must continue to combat the designations of women through the extension of empathy and criticism of the power structures that impose such definitions.

¹⁴ de Beauvoir, 37.

Bibliography

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