Simone De Beauvoir  
*The Second Sex*  
*Session 1*

**Introduction. (pp. ix-xxxvi)**

She begins by claiming that she hasn’t wanted to write a book on women. People maybe are sick of it, but many people were claiming that that women were losing their way. She thinks this is a sign that some still cling to the notion of “the eternal feminine.”

**But what is woman?** Some claim the defining characteristic is her biology (Tota mulier in utero) while others cling to some kind of “Platonic essence” as the decisive feature. Others, like Dorothy Parker, have claimed that “woman” is just a name (nominalism) and we are all human beings after all. But SdB wants to point out that they clearly exist. You can see them everywhere in the streets. Some want to point to her “glands” and claim that the hormones they secrete give her a special perspective, but they never question the influence of the male glands. Aristotle saw a female as a female because of a certain “lack of qualities.” She is differentiated in reference to man as a sexual object. (pp. ix-xxii)

**The Self-Other construction** seems to be at the base of organizing human behavior, and this is how we can understand woman. She is always Other; man is Self. She shares this situation with other groups—Jews, Blacks, slaves—but she is different in that she cannot free herself from this situation. Her life is tied up with him. She lives not in solidarity with other women, but in solidarity with the men in her life and class. (pp. xxii-xxvi)

We might expect that her sexual power, that is the fact that she is seen as desirable to men for sex, would lead to real power, and we have literary examples of this, but this never materializes. This is because though their relationship is one of mutual need and interest, man is in the position of power and woman cannot wrest that from him. (xxvi)

But males could not allow themselves to enjoy their privileged position unless they believed it was founded on “the absolute and the eternal.” Believing this, they make the “fact of their supremacy into a right.” Men are the ones who maintain and write the laws, and they have been written in their favor. Legislators, priests, philosophers, and scientist have all worked to demonstrate the subordinate position of women. Pandora and Eve are examples. Aristotle and St. Thomas are examples. Roman law limited women pointing to the “imbecility and instability of the sex.” St. Augustine declared that woman is “a creature neither decisive nor constant.” But Montaigne recognized how wrong it was for women to submit to laws since they were not able to participate in the formation of them. (xxviii)
The Industrial Revolution introduced a new phase in this development. Women, especially when they work for lower wages, were seen as competitors in the field. We see this even in modern occupations, where a medical student complained that women were taking the jobs away from men, but he never questions why he should be allowed a special privilege. (xxviii-xxxi)

Men who feel inferior find women convenient because they can be glad that they are not women. (xxxi)

 Democratically-minded people will no longer think of themselves as subordinating women. The liberal-minded young man sees his wife as an equal, but he still may consider her unfit for certain professions because of her gender. SdB thinks we must get out of the rut of the inferior-superior arguments. (xxxi-xxxiv)

READ pp. xxxiv-xxxv. She begins a description of her existentialist ethical philosophy. She says the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens. She doesn’t think the word “happy” really clarifies much; in fact, it masks a lot. Maybe the woman in the harem is happier than the woman in the voting booth, but should we prefer the former situation? She says the existentialist ethic proposes that what is important is that “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.” Every time existences falls back into essence, there is stagnation. “Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen project.” (xxxiv-xxxv)

The problem woman faces is that though she is free, in one sense, her status as Other means she is stabilized as Object “since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign.” SdB’s books is trying to throw some light on how a woman’s path is blocked. (xxxv)

When she refers to “woman” and “feminine” she does not refer to an archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand she is always referring to what normal education and custom mean by those terms. (xxxvi).

Conclusion (pp. 716-732)

She begins with a description of the fact of the conflict between men and women. Laforgue and, in his own way, Montaigne, suggested that this conflict was inevitable. SdB will try to challenge this assertion. But this battle is really a battle between the Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine, and these are just ideas. But this also is a state of repression, which is why it leads to a state of war. (716-717)
Man might well be frustrated by the arrangement today in which women seem to want to be both victim and liberated. The “feminine” woman tries to reduce man and make herself passive, trapping him in his desire for her. The “emancipated” woman wants to be active, a taker, refusing the passivity man requires. The “modern” woman tries to declare herself equal to masculine values. But the tendency is still to “play on both sides, demanding old-fashioned respect and modern esteem, banking on their old magic and their new rights.” (718) She takes herself as both self and other at the same time. This is frustrating for everyone and will continue until men and women recognize each other as peers. (717-719)

One of the problems is that man constructs his sense of a male self in terms of opposition to the female other. He fears a loss if this other is somehow lost. But he too could be liberated by her liberation, but some men refuse. They try to follow Balzac’s counsel to treat her like a slave while making her believe she is a queen. This way of thinking suggests that she is getting what she really desires most. This has left a situation where for him she is a pleasure, and amusement, etc. while for her he is the source of her meaning, the justification for her existence. (p719-722).

But SdB thinks that the current state of things is somewhat different. Take, for example, the situation in which man and mistress interact. For man, time is a commodity with real value, so any time spent with his mistress is time he could be spending pursuing other things. But for the mistress, not granted an external direction for her life, time is something she has to fill up. So, while the man might conceivably desire to spend no more time with her than the physical act requires, she wants to consume time with talking, going out, dinner, etc. He tires of this, she resists. If he is a decent person he feels guilty over his superior position, while she feels a kind of justification in her rage and demands. (722-723)

Similarly, the man who finds himself working to support a woman he doesn’t love, resents it/her, while the woman abandoned feels justifiably resentful. (724)

It’s not hard to imagine a way out. The Soviet vision was one such imagining. But how do we get there from here? We have to raise girls in a different environment, all at once. (cf. with Emma Bovary p. 726) One of the key objections regards sex, but giving girls honest information about sex, and even definite sexual encounters, is not harmful at all, especially when compared with the repressive measures endorsed by our culture now. We should not pile obstacles gratuitously in her path. (725-727)

We should instead let people, in relationship, live out the ambiguities of their situations with forcing the other to relinquish subjectivity. Each can retain subjectivity while the other also becomes object. The foundation is to allow more liberty. (727-732)