Soleil Laberge
Alain Beauclair
PHIL-333 AS01
November 3, 2025

In Hindsight

"It is because humanity puts itself into question in its being - that is, values reasons for living over life - that man has set himself as master over woman; man's project is not to repeat himself in time: it is to reign over the instant and to forge the future" (75)

The human condition is as humorous as it is tragic. We can only love what we lack, desire what we do not have, possess wisdom in ignorance, know truth through death, and find freedom in Other. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir conducts a penetrating exploration of this last paradox- the tangled relations between humans, their freedom, and each other- and how an engendered existence reconfigures these relations. The passage above provides an appropriate guideline for the fundamentals of Beauvoir's philosophies of feminism and freedom. Beauvoir's first conviction on freedom is that it is a uniquely human characteristic. Freedom is a potentiality that is intrinsically woven into our shared fabric of humanity. Self-conscious beings- meaning, us- all possess the ability to interpret our situation- or facticity- and transform it; a continuous act of becoming that Beauvoir refers to as our ethical duty of transcendence. Man's metaphysical projects forge identity from the inside out, so the act of becoming must be continuous for a being, lest his humanity erodes into immanence. If we were to draw on a definition that long predates contemporary postcolonial criticism: humankind ascended nature's imposed immanence, conquered her and declared itself civilized. This was primarily achieved by virtue of the human capacity to create, our own process of individuation,

which allows us to realize our wills and posit them. This profound *poiesis* prescribes a person's paramount purpose. To manifest meaning in an ostensibly meaningless existence is the immemorial human incentive. Threaded through our psyche, strumming our sinew, stiffening our spine, coiled up in our capillaries, and stitched along our seams, this impulse to give our subjectivity meaning, reason, and form is perhaps the only quality Beauvoir would deem inborn in a human, but the freedom itself springs from transformative action; human intentions shape their lived reality and their subjectivity can be encountered as an object, rather than being confined to dreams and passivity. However, engaging with the world comes with the caveat of encountering other conscious, capable beings; therein lies the absurdity of Being and Self- our grip on it is dependent on "*the existences of other men [to] wrest [us] from [our] immanence... accomplish the truth of [our] being, [and] to accomplish [ourselves] as transcendence... as a project.*" (159). Grounding of subjectivity remains incomplete if unrecognized, and this is where the Other must make her debut.

Historically, there has been one steadfast Other whose position in oppression seemingly predates recorded history, the woman. Tenacious in his tyranny, the greater masculine mindscape never seems to seek a *mitsein* with its co-constitutive counterparts. Instead, they have found more value in her servitude. In fact, they have found immeasurable, interminable value in female subjugation; they cling fervently to their precious patriarchy and are increasingly petrified by threats of her transcendence. Men marshal culture, science, faith, and politics, MacGyvering their society's pillar

institutions to legitimize masculine reign at every level. Man uses his own freedom to deny women's freedom, manufacturing a facticity that will trap her in immanence, then claims her immanence proves she's naturally suited for subordination. This process is most efficient when he reduces women to biological mechanisms, as biology is perceived as something immutable. If women's subordination is natural law rather than social construction, it requires no justification and permits no resistance. He doesn't have to recognize her as conscious because consciousness has now been eliminated. He so deeply embeds her Otherness that his humanity has come to occupy the all-powerful position of neutrality to the point of her negation. His freedom is now safe from being truly contested by her, and simultaneously open to her validation and favour. In his tireless labour, he preserves his monopoly on transcendence with ease through the spoils he siphons from women confined to his maintenance.

Beauvoir explores the numerous forces that shape a woman's facticity, but she derives the title of her text from one recurrent pattern across patriarchy: the reduction of a woman to the essence of her sex. Though man has subordinated nature and leveraged it in the service of his transcendence, he cannot overcome the primordial dread it stirs in him as both his maker and life-taker. Women, consequently, are pressed into a tacit covenant with nature: both are invoked as Mother, and both are subjected by man's unceasing efforts to script their stories in accordance with his projects. Despite the binaries' uniform ontological footing, her physicality does cast an impression of precarity. Menstruation, hormones, pregnancy, lactation, "*woman- like man- is a being*

rooted in nature; she is more enslaved to the species than the male is, her animality is more manifest..." (317). Centuries after humankind has institutionalized, woman still finds herself subjugated to her capability of perpetuating the species. This is where Her immanence takes root. Her oppression does not inherently manifest because of the body she is situated in, but is determined by the meaning in his fluctuating construct(s) of her. Man's identification of woman with nature and object is the paradigm for her immanence, but also allows him to perceive it as her immutable reality rather than something imposed by him. They don't allow her to separate herself from nature, so, like nature, she becomes a territory for man to colonize, passively waiting to be moulded and dominated to his will.

Because man so concretely perceives her as his object to be moulded, she becomes defined in her relations to him- *"she will gain value in the eyes of males not by increasing her human worth but by modelling herself on their dreams"* (402). The man's understanding of femininity goes as far as his understanding of what anxieties and desires possess his psyche. Her pliability means she will always be available for his gaze. He may use her image as an Idea for validation, pleasure, reflection, inspiration, or justification. If her body is not invoking wonder, it's remoulded to instead inspire horror. Though some might say they are both ever-present; the flesh that promises pleasure is also his origin, and so he is flesh, and flesh can perish, and so he can perish. His solution is to treat women the way he treats nature; as a threatening, fecund Other to be dominated, instrumentalized, and stabilized into a *"perfect intermediary between nature that is foreign*

to man and the peer who is too identical to him" (194). The conquest of her personhood reaches the apex of subjection in that of the prostitute. Dispossessed or impoverished, her reduction to flesh reaches its final form when she is thrust back into nature's realm, completely alienated by how she possesses her body and forced to utilize her flesh as a means for survival; her body entirely reduced to the means of another's pleasure. The prostitute is so dehumanized that her suffering is a negligible byproduct of male pleasure and her personhood an inconvenience to be managed. Prostitution forces her to instead value life over reason for living, truly becoming like that of an animal, a body with no project. Much like the animal, the prostitute now takes on the role of prey for man- Beauvoir provides us the striking imagery: *"He wants to conquer, take and possess; to have woman is to conquer her; he penetrates her as the plowshare furrors; he makes her his as he makes his the earth he is working: he plows, he plants, he sows."* (206). There is a cruel irony that in her most extreme subjugation, she finally succeeds in extinguishing the egotistical expectation of unmediated desire. Even the most narcissistic of men resist internalizing the prostitute's attention as admiration, and he is rightfully ridiculed if he tries. The prostitute gives the man an undeniable glimpse into how he comes to reduce himself in patriarchy. Authentic recognition cannot be found in the desperation of the disenfranchised. A transparent methodology on how to ethically Other one remains elusive, yet freedom remains reliant on intersubjectivity. Beauvoir's philosophy gives rise to an unpalatable paradox. We need other humans to realize our freedom, but their liberty threatens our own. One must relent(?). This dynamic easily devolves into one

attempting to dominate the other, a process that destroys the conscious reciprocity that would grant freedom meaning. In the case of women, men dictate that women are less than; they establish their mastery by excluding her from the defining characteristics of being human: individuation, curiosity, self-questioning, projecting herself, and choosing how to take up the projections of others. His action removes both man and woman from the category of human, placing himself as more than or above human when he diminished her as less than human. This is a violent severance from reality and humanity, and both have become dehumanized. The shared ground on which their authentic freedom relied has been destroyed, stripping them both of their ability to be authentically free and to confirm their Others' freedom. Consumed by denial, he appears blind to how his oppression of women handicaps him, and his freedom is perverted.

We have the privilege of taking up Beauvoir's work in a modern-day context with over fifty years of philosophy, political theory, and feminist critique since she pioneered second-wave feminism. Feminist momentum is at a historical high, but the contemporary sociopolitical landscape is radically polarized, particularly amongst young adults. The wider grasp feminist ideology has on today's youth is easily attributed to women's access to equal education, a privilege many utilize to its full extent. Tools of interpretation and economic independence restore her capacity for transcendence, cultivate her consciousness, and expand female solidarity. Beauvoirs' theory that the prescription of immanence was imposed, not intrinsic, has been demonstrated. However, there are a few outcomes of female liberation that tempt men to contest and negate her

education. With survival no longer dependent on masculine provisions, women are placing more value in their relationships with one another, building networks independent of masculine approval, rejecting rivalry and embracing, or even enforcing, sisterhood. Beauvoir observed women under patriarchy relating to each other primarily through rivalry, but the modern woman is socially sound if she is comfortable relying on other women for validation as a subject.

With their self-worth no longer tethered to the man, women are more willing than ever to sever relations with men when they compromise their subjectivity. Interpersonally, her withdrawal thrusts men to confront their reliance on women's emotional and domestic labour; systemically, this is still a monumental undertaking. A woman's becoming of an object is remarkably difficult to overcome, as it informs every aspect of her life. Her perspective shifts from first to third person, and she becomes incessantly aware of her body-as-self and its appraisers. She is sickeningly aware of her comparison to sedimented myths of femininity. The facets of facticity that Beauvoir surfaced, unfortunately, persist; she must still be vigilant of her flesh, she must still encounter her body in its vulnerability, and she must not only assert herself but defend and maintain herself. Although a girl's internal male voyeur remains extraordinarily difficult to exterminate, the vermin is, at the very least, no longer invisible. Pandering to or leveraging patriarchy now registers among many young women as a form of social deviance. Rejection of the male voyeur, in tandem with the strengthened sisterhood, materializes in a social phenomenon referred to as the "pick-me girl". While she tries to

extract herself from women-as-category, as all feminists do, it doesn't come about through any means of authenticity. The pick-me girl functions analogously to the Jim Crow pejorative "Uncle Tom"; both utilize respectability politics to make themselves palatable to the hegemony, in the hopes of receiving recognition or some other social credit through proximity to them. In each case, the subject attempts to become exempt from devaluation by distinguishing themselves from their own class. At best, both occupy the fundamentally unstable position of "one of the good ones". The oppressor approves while it is convenient, but that is not to be mistaken for genuine mutual recognition between free subjects. The problem with the positing of a pick-me is that she makes it clear she takes no issue with openly disparaging other women to achieve this distinction, and almost seems proud to perpetuate the hierarchy that necessitated her strategy in the first place. Assumedly once a method to climb the social ladder, appeasing men by disavowing women is now an act of gendered treason. Situated within the same objectification as her sisters, the pick-me possesses the contingent experiential knowledge of that facticity and is therefore expected to maintain female solidarity. Her disruption of the collective female project cuts a much more personal moral injury than the average man; he possesses somewhat of an epistemic impediment regarding subjectivity and sex, most would disregard his trifling piddle. As a result, the pick me almost always becomes socially ostracized by her fellow women. The pick-me girl, much like the man empowered by patriarchy, deforms her own subjectivity through her bad faith positing.

As women move steadily toward transcendence, the long-standing stability of the male subject now finds the ground beneath him shifting. Despite men and women paying the same bill of overall shrinking economic and romantic prospects, men in ontological panic insist, even beg, that women understand the cost of his transcendence is far greater than her liberation. Her becoming might be a painful or intense experience, but the feelings of a woman who has her subjectivity called into contestation does not disturb the order of the universe. In contrast, female transcendence has provoked a merciless unbecoming of men who root their identity in patriarchy. Now uprooted, his selfhood is sent to the ether and settled in the doctrine of the manosphere. Here, every female who steps outside of the kitchen constitutes a threat. The manosphere operates through an apparatus that must presume essence precedes existence for both genders. All are stripped of nuance, personhood collapses into evolutionary psychology, and life can be gamed if you buy one more course. The magnitude of norm and sexual administration saturating every level of the manosphere microcosm is of such obscene excess it's enough to undo Foucault all over again. Because of their reverence for hierarchy, men who subscribe to this particular concept of masculinity often exist among themselves as rivals, collaborators, or combatants; their relationships require constant performance, are unstable, and competitive. They do not validate each other's subjectivity; there is much profit to be found in the vulnerable boy-to-be-incel. All "solidarity" is built on a shared resentment for women and each other. The young man who falls victim to the radical right is not rescued; he will find himself ruthlessly ravaged

by the grift. Seduced by the promise of restoration, he must have been surprised to find his humanity was consumed for their profit. They proceed to leave him strategically misinformed that a woman's liberation does not have to negate any others. Freedom need not rely on domination or denial; there was no inherent requirement for the subjugation of one sex. Both can participate in creation.

The core parallel between the pick-me and the manosphere devotee is that both organize their identity around oppressive patriarchy. They accept the framework that upholds their facticity and the bad faith identity it has prescribed for them; then they experience suffering as a personal failure of self, rather than an indictment of the prescribed identity and a call to self-actualization. The underlying hoax is that under oppression, all available positions are deformed. Any prescription of identity is oppressive and in bad faith. It's antithetical to a free subject's authentic self-creation. Human is not anything in its being, and certainly not in its sex. To accept a prescribed identity, especially one reliant on denying the subjectivity of others, you impoverish both sides from transcendence; the prostitute's patron's freedom isn't perverted as a consequence of his physiological responses to her. Authentic freedom is a mutual undertaking, a *mitsein*, or there is no freedom at all. To posit oneself as free is to remain open, unfinished, and irreducible to any role prescribed, and for true liberation, this must be upheld for Other.

Beauvoir never promises a resolution to the gender war. Her analysis suggests that it's found in the dissolution of the patriarchy. If a woman's transcendence destabilizes

man only because his identity was built on her subordination, then the dissolution of patriarchy offers neither chaos nor collapse, only an expansion of opportunity for both parties. Beauvoir does not see feminine characteristics as authentic virtues, believing they only exist in the first place as a method of response to having to navigate patriarchy. In contrast, contemporary feminism recognizes them as authentic virtues to be valued. A Beauvoir of today might respond that feminine characteristics do not inherently tie you to immanence, or even femininity. It is we who forcibly gendered immanence. It's hard to argue whether or not these characteristics would exist without a framework she describes as predating known history, but attempting to would no doubt be a fruitless labour. It's much more worthwhile to focus on today and how we can repurpose the results of our gendered history. One could picture a rather miserable state of being in a world void of "femininity". How can learning proceed without her humility? Where is comfort to be found without her nurturing? How deep can connection be without her vulnerability? There is a struggle to see more than an all-consuming monotony in a world disciplined by his linear, logical, and lonely masculinity. Redefining freedom to include relationality, care, vulnerability, and maintenance as transcendent allows men to freely embody these characteristics and derive value for themselves without feeling confined to immanence. The irony in the condemnation of feminine characteristics is that rationality is something we must come to learn for ourselves. A natural predisposition for rationality is an anomaly; one usually comes about rationality by overcoming one's inherent emotionality. Because emotional depth is intrinsic to the

human condition, it cannot be severed from it. It's a framework that cannot be redefined because it is our soul; it possesses us. When you ask someone to define what it means to be human, they give you humane examples- deep emotion, empathy, kindness; endless parallels of femininity. True human wisdom is in coalescence—a merging of what we recognize as masculine and feminine. To transcend is to create, and creation oft demands the full range of our humanity: reason and emotion, strength and softness, assertion and receptivity. Patriarchy draws power from the gender binary, and the severance of sexes into categories is an assault on identity that is to be recognized as nonsensical outside of a statistical capitalistic function. There is no metaphysical value in splitting the soul into discrete categories when the beauty of humanity lies in unpredictability, uniqueness, and diversity. Surely, true human freedom and transcendence cannot be found nestled amongst those constraints.