

## Feminism and the Logic of Recognition

1. Welcome to our next video lecture on existentialism. Today we will turn from Jean-Paul Sartre to his life-long companion Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir translated Sartrean existentialism into a feminist voice. Her magnum opus, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 has often been referred to as “the Bible” of the modern feminist movement inspiring many post-war women to liberate themselves from the gender stereotypes of their day.
2. Women were already feeling the pinch and they were ready for her message. During the war with the men off fighting women were called upon to go to work in factories and offices. However as the soldiers returned home these same women were now expected to quit their jobs and return to the domestic sphere to enable men to return to their old jobs. But many of these displaced women came to miss the recognition, stimulation and freedom that had come from earning a paycheck.

Concurrently housewives were becoming increasingly isolated. (1) Servants were being replaced by appliances. While they saved time and labor, they also meant that the modern housewife could run the home by herself. So too the mass production of automobiles (2) were creating a new suburban lifestyle eliminating informal public spaces. Social interaction, informal and spontaneous with neighboring tenants, maids and cleaning women, while watching over children at play in public parks, and getting to know local tradespeople, such socializing now required deliberate scheduling. What spontaneity and informality remained tended to be mediated over the telephone or encountered while shopping in deliberately dedicated shopping centers, large grocery and department stores no longer within walking distance but only accessible by automobile through driving in solitude.

3. De Beauvoir began the *Second Sex* with a question--Why were women allowing this to happen to them? (1) Its perfectly understandable for returning soldiers to want to return to the jobs they had left. They were happy to see their wives return to the home. (2) But why did women go along? Why didn't they fight back? Even more perplexing why did the overwhelming majority of women even profess to want to return to domestic life if they found it so isolating, dull and routine? In existentialist terms why were women so quick to surrender their transcendence and re-inscribe themselves in their facticity?

De Beauvoir's answer was to argue (3) that transcendence and facticity, animating both bad faith and interpersonal relationships, was gendered. The stereotype of masculinity matched well with the logic of transcendence. (4) To be a man was to stand up for oneself, pursue his dreams, provide for those who depended upon him, and to be the final authority at home, to "wear the pants in the family." (4) Being a lady, on the other hand, was identified with pleasing others, acting nice, looking nice... being nice. (6) Femininity was about caring for other's desires, affirming their spouse and children, meeting their material needs of food, clothing, and shelter by cooking and sewing, shopping and cleaning. They were to find fulfillment in being "the wind beneath the wings" of their high achieving spouses.

4. Why did women choose to live this kind of a life? Because these expectations were enforced, sometimes even legally, more often though more invisibly, but as we saw with the returning vets, hardly subtly. De Beauvoir put it in a memorable way: "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female—whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male." By contrast, "I wanted that all *human* human life might be pure transparent freedom." In de Beauvoir's eyes, masculinity was no day at the beach either. Girls are weighed down by restrictions, but boys are weighed down with demands—both she notes are equally harmful disciplines. As with Sartre a couple of years before, de Beauvoir's funeral procession was massive, moving through the streets of Paris. One woman in the crowd shouted at the top of her lungs what multitudes of women felt on that day. "*Vous êtes la mere de nous tous!*" "You are the mother of us all!"
5. De Beauvoir also revised Sartre's understanding of interpersonal relationships. While often conflictual, she argued that interpersonal relations were not inherently and unavoidably so. She believed that mutual recognition is possible. (1) Domination and submission, (2) intimidation and seduction are rather one-sided extremes (3) along a quantitative continuum of more or less.
  - a. She argued that rather than dominate the other, (4) I can express my own freedom in a way that is also responsive to the other; (5) I can be assertive in a way that is also receptive to your thoughts and feelings. What is dominating is an undifferentiated expression of myself in which I do not recognize your distinctive individuality and history at all. You are simply an object in my world. What only

matters is my goals, not yours. Self-assertion on the other hand need not be aggressive or intimidating domination.

- b. Similarly I can respond to you in a way that also expresses myself. In such a case I recognize your desires without simply submitting to them. Now you might find my responding to you in a way that communicates that I have been listening seductive, but that is not necessarily my goal. I am not necessarily trying to manipulate your freedom, I am simply listening to you and responding in a way that takes your thoughts and actions into account.
  - c. On this account, domination and submission fail precisely because they *are* extreme-- desperate lunges for recognition from the other that only makes me dependent on you. True interpersonal relations then are neither (6), (7) subjective, first-person nor (8), (9) objective, third-person orientations to the other, but (10) an intersubjective second-person orientation, in which the emerging relationship is not the product of either party alone, but a creative product of us both. Relationships need not be zero-sum games, but can embody the logic of cooperation where both of us ultimately benefit.
6. The most important benefit which each enjoys from the relationship is recognition in which (1) each finds their own freedom affirmed to one degree or another. Each feels that they count to the other, that they matter, enabling them to take the risk to assert their freedom. (2) On this view of interpersonal relationships then, freedom is neither (3) an illusion (4) nor a fact but (5) an accomplishment, the fruit of recognition. If *no one* recognizes what I do, if what I do does not matter to anyone, why should I even try to express myself? (6) While my life is the story I write, if no one will ever read it, (7) why would I even bother to write it down? (8) If I feel that you will not listen to what I think, (9) I will just say what you want to hear, (submission) (10) or withdraw and stop talking altogether. In either case my freedom is left undeveloped, like a muscle that atrophies from disuse.

Another way to put this is to say that freedom is neither an illusion nor a fact (11) but a power, that (12) develops through practice. (13) But self-assertion requires self-confidence, and (14) self-confidence requires recognition. And I can only receive recognition from you, if I recognize your recognition of me. What you do has to matter to

me, if your recognition of me is going to matter to me. (15) Thus recognition cannot be one-sided. It is either mutual or it devolves into desperate self-defeating lunges at trying to force the other's recognition through domination in order to intimidate them or through submission in order to seduce them, by simply mirroring them back to themselves. In neither case do I receive the recognition I crave. Recognition must be mutual to be recognition at all.

7. For de Beauvoir then, relationships are not necessarily conflictual. Between the extremes of aggressive domination and seductive submission there lies a middle ground, a creative play or tension of assertive responsiveness and responsive assertiveness. (1) Freedom feeds of such recognition, for freedom depends on self-confidence, a sense of our own self-worth, and self-confidence, mattering to ourself, is catalyzed by learning that how we think and act matters to others through their recognition of what we say and do.
8. To return now to feminism: De Beauvoir argues that women's liberation will require deconstructing the modern identification of femininity with sex and submission and (1) masculinity with dominance and autonomy. (2) Rather women will need to risk asserting their freedom and not be shamed or ignored as bossy bitches. (3) And men will need to risk being sensitive without being shamed or discounted as effeminate wimps.
9. More recent feminists have further extended the thought of de Beauvoir, arguing that the deconstruction of gender stereotypes can only happen by parents modelling different behavior to their children. That is, kids will need to be raised recognizing that their mother's lives extend beyond the home, and their fathers lives reaches into it. That is that mother's must have responsibilities outside the home that are recognized by all to matter, that are not simply additional activities to be done if and when they happen to have the time and energy. So too fathers need to have responsibilities within the home that are recognized by all to matter, that are not simply additional activities to be done if and when they happen to have the time and energy. (1) Only then will their children learn to associate femininity as well as masculinity with freedom and adventure and masculinity as well as femininity with sensitivity and nurturance.
10. But for that to happen, there needs to be a parallel transformation of the workplace. Employees, both male and female, will need to be recognized as not only working a job but also raising a family. Neither can be expected to devote all their time and energy to

either the job or the home alone. Domestic concerns such as (1) parental leave and (2) child care must be important for both male and female employees. (3) And public life outside the home must be important for both mothers and fathers.

11. We have seen earlier how literacy intensified both (1) objectivity and (2) subjectivity (3). The stark dichotomy between (4) masculinity and (5) femininity mirrors this (6) dichotomy, and as noted at the outset of this lecture, industrial modernity only further exacerbated it. Ultimately this dichotomy that can only be deconstructed if other industrial dichotomies between (7) work and (8) home(9) , (10) public and (11) private (12) , (13) reason and (14) love (15) are also softened and blurred. An ethic of mutual recognition represents a (16) (17) coincidence of industrial, literate oppositions. We shall see in the weeks that follow how the internet and other recent virtual technologies will introduce such a blurring of boundaries.