

Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: Woman, Man, and the Desire to be God

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Beauvoir and Sartre share an existential vocabulary. Both invoke the categories of bad faith and the look, both describe consciousness as a transcendence and a freedom, and both refer to freedom as a negating intentionality. Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity stands between this shared vocabulary. For Sartre, the intentionality of consciousness is an unambiguous negating activity saturated with an unambiguous desire to be that coalesces around the desire to be God, that impossible synthesis of the for-itself-in-itself. For Beauvoir, the intentionality of consciousness is ambiguous. It is the site of a twofold relationship to being and a doubled desire. Employing the logic of the either/or, Sartre assails the bad faith of the desire to be God. Invoking the logic of ambiguity, Beauvoir embraces the failure of this desire. According to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, our vain attempt to be God makes us human. It is also a source of joy.¹

Moving from the abstract ethical perspective of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to the political-ethical frame of *The Second Sex*, we discover that the desire to be, as concretely embedded in the everydayness of the lifeworld, is sexed and bodied. Instead of attending to the ways in which the *pour-soi's* desire to be is captivated by the abstract idea of God, Beauvoir now attends to the ways in which the embodied desire to be is lured by the particular images of woman and man. She is particularly concerned with the ways in which the image and myth of woman marks the embodied consciousness of women.

In turning her attention from our existential-ontological condition to our existential-historical situation and in moving from an analysis of the lure of the desire to be God to the powers and seductions of the myth of woman, Beauvoir alerts us to the fact that the desire to be expresses itself in the objects as well as in the structure of our desire. Structurally, the desire to be takes up its home in mythical thought – thought that essentializes existence. With respect to content, the desire to be embraces eternal objects – objects that cannot exist because they always already are. As structure and content, the desire to be represents a flight from the anxieties of existential freedom and the demands of existential thinking. If it is the case that as concrete men and women our desire to be God is sexed; and if it is the case that as concrete men and women we are not so much seduced by the image of God (an image that in a sense announces its impossibility and therefore the failure of our desire) as we are captivated by the myths of man and woman (images that are more seductive insofar as they present themselves as true

portraits of human beings and therefore as attainable); and if, as Beauvoir says, it is in our failure to be God that we discover the ambiguity of our condition and the joy of our existence, then we must ask how and whether the myths of woman and man lead us to the truth of our being and desire.

Like Beauvoir, Sartre also insisted on the failure of our desire to be God. He too found the key to our humanity in this failure. Sartre coined the phrase “useless passion” to describe this dialectic of consciousness. As a useless passion we are the desire to be God as negation. That is, we can neither not desire to be God nor fulfill our desire to be God. In calling us to the truth of our desire, Sartre was not arguing for the futility of human life. Beauvoir understood this. She also understood that though Sartre may have correctly identified the universal structure of our necessarily failed desire, he was mistaken in claiming a singular content for our “useless passion.” She saw that it is as human beings not pure consciousness that we are lured by the desire to be. Insisting on the sexed reality of our humanness she argued that as sexed, our desire to be is captured by different images. To understand our existential situation, we must identify how our desire to be is sexed and explore the ways in which this sexed desire is and is not like the un(pre?)sexed ontological desire to be God. (Following Irigaray, who follows hints within Beauvoir’s thought, we might also ask whether what has been represented as ontological/universal is not already secretly sexed.) Thus the question before us is this: How are we to understand the desire to be woman or man? In what sense must these desires fail? In what sense must the failure of these desires endure? That is, how do the desires to be woman and man ensnare us in the structure and images of the failure of the desire to be?

If we take up Sartre’s phrase “useless passion” and if we understand that what makes our passion for being useless is the futility of satisfying it and the necessity of returning to it, then we cannot escape the conclusion that it is as failed that the desire to be lives. However we intercede in child-rearing practices, however we challenge the myths of femininity and masculinity, the desire to be man and woman will assert itself. Women will want to be woman. Men will want to be man. Our liberation strategies need to give these desires their due. For feminists, the issue is not whether the myth of woman prevails. The issue concerns how it prevails with regard to its content, structure, and position in the life of desire.

Structurally, the myth of woman functions like all myths. It imposes being upon becoming and marks the particular as the failed universal. For Beauvoir, the myth of the eternal feminine is to the concrete woman as the Platonic idea, the transcendental idea, and the timeless, necessary, absolute truth are to existential reality.² An essentializing structure, whether dignified as a metaphysical principle or unreflectively presumed in everyday life, is a myth. It prescribes the movement of becoming in order to contain it. It conceals its imaginary status. Following Lacan’s description of the mirror stage, we assume that this is required. That is, we assume that imaginary objects must present themselves as real in order to lure our desire into tractable paths. Aligning Freud’s description of the instinct as a

demand on the mind for work with Beauvoir's description of intentionality, however, suggests otherwise. For, according to this description, the desire to be is a secondary affect of consciousness. It takes up a prior moment of consciousness, the opening of consciousness to its other, and freezes it in acts of judgment. These acts transform the becoming of the event into the being of the everyday world. Though Beauvoir privileges the intentionality of the event (it is the ground of the intentionality of judgment), she does not call the intentionality that stabilizes the event bad faith. It only becomes bad faith when it sets itself up as the truth of consciousness, that is, when it forgets that it is not self-grounding. Telling us that it is not possible for us to exist without tending toward the being that we can never be, Beauvoir alerts us to the power of the myth (a product of the second intentional moment). Telling us that we are not condemned to become prisoners of our myths, however, Beauvoir reminds us that the desire to be that sustains the power of the myth is challenged by the desires of becoming (the desires of the first intentional moment). Taken together, the desires of the first and second intentional moments lead us to the truth of the ambiguity of desire, and the joy of the failure to be.

Experiencing the ambiguity of desire does not immunize me from the lure of the desire to be. It does, however, save me from its hypnotic spell. Instead of establishing the object of my desire (the image of the myth) as the truth of my being, I identify the truth of my being with the (failed) desire to be. Now, despite being seduced by the myth of woman, I expose the object of my desire for what it is, a product of my desire to be. Instead of falling into bad faith, I live my desire to be in the mode of its failure. That is, I affirm the meaning of my existence as a becoming that can never be. By recognizing the mythical status of the being I aspire to be, I understand the object of my desire as a product of my desire and realize that it is in my vain attempt to become the object of my desire that I succeed in sustaining my desire. As a feminist rather than a feminine/patriarchal myth, the myth of woman announces its ambiguity. It presents itself as impossible. I am drawn to it as I deflect it. As feminist, my desire to be woman takes up its object ironically (I think of Madonna).

In living my desire to be as the ambiguity of my desire, the structure of my desire would be transformed. Still lured by the imaginary object (man, woman, God), I would value the object for the desire that produced it rather than for itself. Thus, I would desire to be a woman in the mode of not being one so that I could always pursue the desire of becoming one. The focus would be on the effort of the desire to be rather than on the idealized object of being. The object of my desire would shift from the myth of woman to the play of desire. Woman would now be both a means to the play of desire (it is a lure) and a threat to the play of desire (if realized desire would freeze). Keeping sight of this ambiguity, the failure to become a woman would be a cause for celebration.

Identifying the ways in which the concept of ambiguity resets our understanding of and relationship to our desire is important to thinking through the future of

feminism. It cannot, by itself, however, speak to the central feminist issue of *The Second Sex*; for this analysis of the ambiguity of desire is as applicable to men and the object of their desire – man – as it is to women and their relationship to the myth of woman. Though in the end it is important to see that patriarchy robs men as well as women of the joys of their ambiguous desire, it is essential to see that men and women sacrifice their desire at different alters and that this difference makes a difference. It is more than a matter of resetting our desire and of returning to and retrieving the ambiguities of our desire and its intentional structure. It is also a matter of examining the content of the particular myths that seduce us.

Here again *The Ethics of Ambiguity* sets the course of *The Second Sex*. It is our vain attempt to be God, Beauvoir tells us, that makes us human. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir does not tell us what she means by God. In calling this work the ethics called for by Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, however, we may assume that she means for us to turn to Sartre to fill in the gap. God, Sartre tells us, is the impossible synthesis of being and nothingness. He is consciousness without lack, plenitude with consciousness.

My use of the masculine pronoun here is no feminist lapse. It accords with what *The Second Sex* tells us about man, the image of men's desire. It reflects what *The Second Sex* tells us about the respective subjective positions of men and women in patriarchal society. To be seduced by the desire to be God, the absolute subject, one must at least occupy the existential position of being a subject. According to Beauvoir, men are positioned as subjects, women are not. Given this existential difference, only men are positioned to figure their desire to be as the desire to be God. Women's desire to be will either have to find another object or image God as something other than the absolute subject. (Here again, Irigaray's discussions of the female divine takes up this theme.)

If we look at the myths that seduce men and women, we find something like this: man is imaged as the absolute subject; woman is imaged as the eternal feminine, an undermined subject. If men can't be God (the *pour-soi-en-soi*), they can be man (the autonomous subject). If *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is right, however, men can neither be God nor man. If *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is right, men ought to experience their failure to be either God or man as a delight, and move to affirm their existence as men. *The Second Sex* shows *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to be wrong. Men do not experience their failure joyfully. Psychology trumps phenomenology. Patriarchal men experience their failure in the register of psychoanalytic lack. Responding psychologically rather than phenomenologically, patriarchal men enact their failure along Oedipal lines. Discovering that they cannot be God, patriarchal men decide to possess Goddesses. Oedipal man creates the myth of woman, "an opaque plenitude that nevertheless would be involved with consciousness" (158) and hopes to fulfill himself by carnally possessing her (159). The impossible (useless) passion to be God becomes the impossible (possessive) passion to have a Goddess. Following the psychoanalytic dynamic of

lack, being, and having, the myths of man and woman allow men to experience their lack of being as a mode of not having that can be compensated for by ownership. Beauvoir gives us a sense of how this works when she writes:

Man dreams of an Other not only to possess her but also to be ratified by her; to be ratified by other men, his peers, demands a constant tension; hence he wishes consideration from outside to confer an absolute value upon his life, his enterprises and himself. . . . this divine role has often devolved upon woman. Being the Other she remains exterior to man's world and can view it objectively; and being close to man and dominated by him she does not establish values foreign to his nature. (206)

Within patriarchy, the desire to be God, an absolute subject, is impossible for women. The object of women's desire to be, woman, is an inessential other, a failed subject. As the Goddess who has the power to confer being on man, woman seems to lay claim to being a subject. As the Goddess who can and must be possessed, however, woman is marked as the one who must be subjected to the other. With this mark she cannot lay claim to being a subject.

The effects are disastrous. They exceed the disaster of bad faith. As directed toward the myth of woman, women's very desire to be is undermined and with this undermining, the possibilities of discovering her existential ambiguities are ruined.

We cannot go so far to say, however, that patriarchal women do not desire to be God. As undermined and delegitimated, the desire is driven underground. It is not silenced. It speaks another, the other's, language. In Beauvoir's words:

A myth always implies a subject who projects his hope and fears towards a sky of transcendence. Women have not set themselves as Subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own; they still dream through the dreams of men. (161)

The situation could not be more complex. For women to fulfill men's patriarchal desire to have God, they must alienate themselves from their desire to be God and present themselves to men as the Goddess that can be, that desires to be, possessed; and that will upon being possessed confer the status of God on the one who lays claim to her. Her only hope of fulfilling her desire to be is to refuse the right to that desire and its failure, and to align herself with men's projects of being. Refusing to accept the failure of their desire, men refuse their ambiguity. Blind to the legitimacy of their desire, women erase theirs.

According to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the possibility of experiencing ourselves in the ambiguity of our humanness is conditioned on the possibility of experiencing and taking delight in our failure to be God. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* seems to assume that the desire to be God is ontologically given. Not so, according to *The Second Sex*. Our desires are set historically not ontologically. Historically, women's desire has been set toward the desire to be the eternal

feminine – a being who subverts her subjectivity, not God, a being who exceeds the possibilities of the human subject. The experience of failing to be woman is not the same as the experience of failing to be man/God.

As the desire to be is always captivated by an imaginary object, the problem with the myth of femininity is not that it presents us with an imaginary object. As we cannot help but be each other's other, the problem with the myth of femininity cannot be laid to the fact that it posits woman as other. The problem with the myth of femininity is that it directs women's desire to be toward an inessential being such that women cannot experience the failure of the desire to be God and cannot take delight in the ambiguity of their humanity.

In positing woman as the inessential other, patriarchy offers – or seems to offer – men a free lunch. Recognition without risk. Men may think that the free lunch is a deal. Beauvoir thinks otherwise. The free lunch comes with a price. Politically it is a matter of freedom. Morally it is a matter of friendship, love, and the flesh.

The myth of femininity, in positioning women as woman, the inessential other, allows men to elude the difficulties of their ambiguity (158). Sounding more like a synthesis of Camus and Hegel than an echo of Sartre, Beauvoir describes patriarchal man as engaged in three distinct types of relationships: a relationship with nature, "the stranger to man"; a relationship with other men, "the fellow being who is too closely identical"; and a relationship with woman, "a conscious being who can be possessed in the flesh" (159). In describing men's relationships with other men, Beauvoir seems to plow familiar Hegelian territory. She adopts the account of the master slave relationship to account for human violence and appeals to its vision of mutual recognition (158).

For Hegel this mutual recognition is a political event, a moment of synthesis in the life of the spirit and the state. For Beauvoir the political moment of freedom is rooted in the ethical, not the political domain. "Friendship and generosity," she writes, "permit this [mutual] recognition of free beings. . ." (158). And friendship and generosity she tells us are our highest virtues, marks of an authentically moral attitude. Also, where for Hegel, this mutual recognition is a dialectical accomplishment from which we move forward, for Beauvoir, it is an unstable achievement, an ongoing struggle, "a difficult enterprise with success never assured" (158).

After *The Second Sex* we understand that the Hegelian moment of recognition is reserved for men and that the virtues of friendship and generosity cannot cross the lines of sex so long as the myth of woman as the inessential other prevails. If the vision of God lures men to the bad faith of the desire to be, the myth of woman provides men with the fantasy of recognition without struggle. As men's vision of the man God corrupts the life of desire unless it is lived in its failure, their fantasy of non-reciprocal recognition irredeemably corrupts the life of the polis.

Though Beauvoir sometimes compares women to slaves, it is important to remember that whatever descriptive insights this comparison may yield, it belies

the point of the myth of woman. Were women slaves they would participate in the master-slave dialectic. They could challenge men and demand mutual recognition. They could establish themselves as worthy of men's generosity and friendship. The point of the myth of woman, however, is to remove women from the domain of the master-slave relationship so that men can find a non-contentious space where they can be recognized as man (159).

Patriarchy gives men to each other as masters and slaves. It gives women to men as flesh. As flesh woman offers man two things: first, a respite from the struggle for recognition and the difficulties of the virtues of generosity and friendship; second, access to the strange realm of nature. As flesh woman offers man a double transcendence. The transcendence of a free subject and the transcendence of subjectivity itself. In Beauvoir's words:

When men feel the need to plunge again into the midst of plant and animal life. . . they make appeal to woman. . . . Religious prostitution. . . was a matter at once of unloosing and channeling the powers of fecundity. Popular festivals today are still marked by outbursts of eroticism; woman appears here not simply as an object of pleasure, but as a means for attaining to that state of *hubris*, riotousness in which the individual exceeds the bonds of the self. (171)

Positioning woman as the truth of the flesh, man is positioned as needing to go through her to access the cosmic powers of life. Gendered as man, the absolute subject, and refusing the logic of ambiguity, men cannot experience themselves as flesh. Barred from being flesh men, as man, are driven to possess it. Flesh, however, cannot be possessed. To become an object of possession it must be objectified. It must become a body. Woman, desired as the mystery of the flesh, is mystified. She becomes the inert, passive, beautiful body. Now she can be possessed. As body, however, she is:

a thing sunk deeply into immanence; it is not for such a body to have reference to the rest of the world, it must not be the promise of things other than itself; it must end the desire it arouses. (178)

Imaged as the beautiful body, women as the myth of woman betray the truth of the flesh. They offer no bridge to the cosmic other. The possessed body is not the desired flesh. Winners lose.

This failure to possess the flesh, like the failure to be God, directs us to a certain truth – the ethic of the erotic event. More than a strategy of man's evasion, the myth of femininity, in leading us to the meaning of the flesh, alerts us to the limits of an ethic of friendship and generosity that neglects our relationship to the strange, inhuman other and forgets to speak of the limits of the subject. The challenge for feminists is to retrieve this truth of the flesh, to recall the difference between the body and the flesh. Within patriarchy, the flesh is debased. Men are barred from experiencing themselves as flesh and women are taught to transform

their flesh into beautiful bodies. So long as the flesh is degraded, our bridge to the other of the subject will be closed and everything that falls outside the domain of the subject will be humiliated.

In advocating the liberation of women from the myth of femininity, Beauvoir is not advocating that women break their bond with men. Neither is she advocating that women abdicate their alliance with the flesh. For her, it is a matter of rethinking the bond between women and men and of understanding the truth of the flesh. When Beauvoir thinks of the possibilities of a post-patriarchal world, she does merely think of a world where women and men can, in their generosity, become each other's friends and equals. She thinks of a world where new forms of intimacy are born (or perhaps we should say where intimacy between men and women become possible for the first time). She writes:

the humanity of tomorrow will be living in its flesh and in its conscious liberty. . . .
New relations of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise
between the sexes. . . . (812)

These new relations, this new couple, will affirm the ideal of equality according to the logic of ambiguity – a logic which affirms the difference of desire. In Beauvoir's words:

there will always be certain differences between man and woman, her eroticism and therefore her sexual world have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality; a sensitivity of a special nature. This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female and to the child; those who make much of "equality in difference" could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality. (813)

The existence of differences in equality may be read as the beginning of Beauvoir's formula for the ethics of the erotic – an ethic that articulates the generosity of the flesh in its sexed desiring difference. The point of dismantling the patriarchal myth of woman is twofold: one, to end the patriarchal domination of women by men; and two, to end the bad faith of patriarchy. Without aligning the attack on the myth of woman with the ethic of the flesh, we may succeed in ending the exploitation of women. We may not, however, evade the ruses of bad faith. If we succeed in destroying the patriarchal myth of woman, such that women as well as men may legitimately desire to be God, we will have succeeded in allowing women as well as men to experience their failure to be God as the truth of their existential ambiguity. Given, however, that patriarchal men, who have always had access to the experience of ambiguity, have preferred the comforts of bad faith to the tensions of their doubled desire, the liberation of women from the myth of woman will be a pyrrhic victory if the Oedipal dynamics of lack, being and having are still operative. Ending the reign of the Oedipal

patriarchal subject for the reign of the universal Oedipal bad faith of the desire to be God is hardly an inspiring cause.

The Ethics of Ambiguity describes the experience of the failure to be God as a delight. *The Second Sex* suggests that the experience of the flesh is the access to the delights of this failure. It indicates ways in which the desires of the flesh, once freed from the myth of woman, may become the ground of an ethic of the erotic that challenges the bad faith of the desire to be God. Beauvoir call this challenge the drama of the flesh. As Beauvoir relies on Hegel's master-slave relationship to describe the structure of patriarchal relationships, we may turn to her drama of the flesh to describe the possibilities of post-patriarchal relationships. She writes:

As a matter of fact, man, like woman is flesh, therefore passive, the plaything of his hormones and of the species, the restless prey of his desires. And she, like him, in the midst of the carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live out in their several fashions the strange ambiguity of existence made body. . . . If both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity. . . . In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence. (810)

Tracing the dynamic of what Sartre called the useless passion, the desire to be God, we discover the complex ways in which the notion of the absolute subject, the desire to be and to have, and the meaning of the flesh are sexed, bodied and exploited. It is difficult to know how to dismantle this complex dynamic. It may be that interceding at any point will disrupt the constellation of effects. I suspect, however, that the idea of the subject as absolute and man is a crucial. Here I take my cue from Beauvoir, who writes:

As subject [man] poses the world and remaining outside this posed universe makes himself ruler of it; if he views himself as flesh, as sex, he is no longer an independent consciousness a clear free being; he is involved in the world, he is a limited and perishable object. (183)

But just here he will learn – with the best of evidence – the ambiguity of his carnal situation. He takes great pride in his sexuality only in so far as it is a means of appropriation the Other – and this dream of possession ends only in frustration. In authentic possession the other is abolished as such it is consumed and destroyed. . . . Woman survives man's embraces and in that very fact she escapes him. . . . But her treason is more perfidious still; she makes her lover in truth her prey. Only a body can master another body; the male masters the flesh he longs for only in becoming flesh himself. (184–5)

if a man does not fear death he will joyfully accept his animality. (187)

Without going into the extensive analysis of the patriarchal subject called for by these words, let me suggest that the ways in which they align man's fear of and refusal of the bonds of the flesh for the privileges of the subject suggest that we will not be guided by the ethics of the paradigm of the erotic event unless and until the desire to be God, the desire to be the absolute subject, is embraced in its failure rather than pursued for its promise of fulfillment.

However utopian this vision of an alternative structuring of our subjectivity and desire may seem today, it is important to distinguish an apparent historical impossibility from an ontological, phenomenological or psychological impossibility. It is in the drama of the flesh, not the master slave dialectic that the existential truth of our condition is expressed. This drama expresses the lie of the absolute subject. It demonstrates the impossibility of acquiring being through having. It disputes the power of mythical thinking. It also situates us within the joy of the failure to be. This erotic passion, born of, with and in the flesh as useless passion returns us to each other not as subjects mourning their failure to be God, but as others returning to the site of their desire.

NOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 12–13.
2. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, tr. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 286 (hereafter cited parenthetically).