SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR:

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

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INTRODUCTION  

Simone de Beauvoir's revolutionary feminist work, The Second Sex, which was first published in 1949, probably has had a more profound impact on the lives of women than any other feminist work, because this pioneer effort asked probing and disturbing questions to which women have been seeking answers ever since 1949. The issues raised by de Beauvoir in The Second Sex have forced many women to confront the unpleasant reality of their own lives and acknowledge that society is in large part responsible for their second-class status. Feminist leaders, also, recognize their debt to de Beauvoir. Betty Friedan, writing in her book, It Changed My Life, says, "It was The Second Sex that introduced me to an existential approach to reality and political responsibility -- that, in effect, freed me from the rubrics of authoritative ideology and led me to whatever original analysis of women's existence I have been able to contribute to the Women's Movement and to its unique politics."  

In The Second Sex de Beauvoir makes very clear her attitude toward the inferior position of woman in society, which she sees as caused by woman's peculiar biology and society's male-dominated institutions. This unfortunate  

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state of affairs in society's structure as we know it today must be radically altered. However, this treatise was "primarily a purely intellectual and theoretical work." There has been some debate among feminist scholars as to whether de Beauvoir's ideological stance, as presented in *The Second Sex*, finds its logical extension in the author's own lifestyle and in her activities and attitudes now, thirty years after the publication of this ground-breaking book. An examination of de Beauvoir's memoirs and interviews, when juxtaposed with the original insights offered in the pages of *The Second Sex*, may shed some light on this complex woman's personal method of resolving the many conflicts presented by today's society.
I. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE SECOND SEX

The final chapter of *The Second Sex*, entitled "The Independent Woman," contains de Beauvoir's thoughts on how women attain freedom; since the concept of the necessary of woman's quest for independence is basic to the whole work, this chapter is a fairly accurate indicator of the author's orientation toward related topics covered in previous chapters. "The Independent Woman" is also one of the most lucid chapters in the book and ties together many of de Beauvoir's ideas within a unified structure. Since this chapter does deal with a variety of related topics, only a few of these will be selected for further discussion in the sections of this paper on de Beauvoir's autobiographies and interviews. "The Independent Woman" gives the reader a clue as to de Beauvoir's intellectual and political perspective, and also holds forth a promise for the future.

This chapter begins with the thesis that with economic freedom comes women's liberty. Civil liberties, according to this line of thought, mean nothing so long as women are supported by men. "When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject; in connection with the aims she pursues, with the money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility." But de Beauvoir goes on to say that because workers are exploited today, only in a socialist country would working necessarily
bring about freedom. Then the author makes the point that those women who develop a "political sense" can see meaning in everyday drudgery and therefore can overcome the traditional submissiveness they inherit. Next de Beauvoir considers the case of secretaries and others in traditionally female fields who are bound in "double servitude" to their jobs and to male protectors in order to make enough money to survive. She contrasts these women with other professional women who are able to maintain some degree of economic and social autonomy. De Beauvoir feels that these latter women are not yet the equals of men in every situation, for professional women are constrained by their past socialization as women and the limitations that are imposed on every member of the female sex. In other words, "the fact of being a woman today poses peculiar problems for an independent human individual."4

The next section of the chapter explores the conflicts which the emancipated woman experiences as a result of her role as female versus her role as professional. "The advantage man enjoys, which makes itself felt from his childhood, is that his vocation as a human being in no way runs counter to his destiny as a male."5 The woman, on the other hand, faces contradiction at every turn. She does not want to remain confined in the role of female, but she also cannot renounce the fact of her female-ness.

The question next arises as to whether woman should abandon feminine attributes; de Beauvoir says that the woman
who rejects conformity to feminine characteristics does not thereby acquire masculine attributes and the woman who does try to conform to the feminine role finds it difficult to resolve her activity with the passivity demanded of her by the world. She finds this conformity even more difficult because she is judged solely according to her appearance: clothes, shoes, hairstyles, and face make-up demand constant attention. But it is not regard for the opinion of others alone that leads her to give time and care to her appearance and her housekeeping. She wants to retain her womanliness for her own satisfaction.  

The intellectual woman, especially, is in a no-win situation in this regard. She realizes that she will never be a match for the coquette who devotes all her time and energy to charming men. De Beauvoir speaks out vehemently against the men who force women in to these stereotyped roles: "If they would be willing to love an equal instead of a slave... women would not be as haunted as they are by concern for their femininity; they would gain in naturalness, in simplicity, and they would find themselves women again without taking so much pains, since, after all, that is what they are."  

The chapter continues with de Beauvoir's observation that the independent woman who undertakes tasks and responsibilities similar to those of a man needs to partake in
sexual adventures for purposes of relaxation and amusement. She suggests several possible ways women could gain access to men of easy virtue — use of male brothels, "pick-ups," and other methods. But she points out the one obvious flaw which makes these alternative untenable — men possess much greater physical strength than women do and therefore women must necessarily fear for their safety in such encounters. 8

Sartre’s discussion of permanent lovers taken by women as opposed to mistresses taken by men follows. She points out that only women with substantial incomes can afford to keep a man with dignity and style, but notes that in France women who take lovers cause public scandal and shocked protests. Even in bed, insists Sartre, does a woman encounter public opinion, for the man often "views the bed as the proper terrain for asserting his aggressive superiority." 9 Next, the author makes the interesting observation that a proud and demanding woman in an adversarial relationship with her male lover necessarily occupies a weaker position than the male because of her inferior physical strength and because "when woman departs from passivity, she breaks the spell that brings on her enjoyment; if she mimics dominance in her postures and movements, she fails to reach the climax of pleasure; most women who cling to their pride become frigid." 10 Of course, this statement needs to be examined in light of recent sexual and psychological research. Sartre goes on to explore the supposedly all-too-easy alternative of
masochism, or escape through domination by a man in bed. The discussion continues with the comment that a woman generally finds it more difficult to regard a man with affectionate friendship than vice versa because a man is what he has made of himself and must be loved solely on that basis, while in light of woman's sheltered situation, in which she is defined solely in terms of her appearance and her woman-ness, not in terms of her actions, her mistakes and shortcomings are excusable, as a child's would be. 11

However, de Beauvoir claims that when most affairs end, it is the woman who feels used or hurt, or who wants to prolong the affair, rather than the man. Therefore, de Beauvoir feels that woman is better suited to monogamy than to a life of sexual freedom because of these difficulties. Men, however, have a much easier time reconciling either affairs or marriage with a career than do women. Even independent women naturally assume that household chores are their responsibility, that they must necessarily occupy an inferior position in the family. But de Beauvoir sees an advantage in woman's subordinate situation. "Since she is from the start less favored by fortune than man, she does not feel that she is to blame a priori for what befalls him; it is not her duty to make amends for social injustice, and she is not asked to do so." 12 Notwithstanding this advantage, claims de Beauvoir, all women, even independent women, have secretly waited for Prince Charming ever since adolescence. Because she is not
raised to believe in her own efficiency, as boys are, she still treasures the myth of the rescuing hero. Women seek comfort in love when professionally disappointed because they do not have confidence in their own liberty and because they are not in fact truly equal to men.13

The next subject addressed by de Beauvoir is that of maternity, the "one feminine function that it is actually almost impossible to perform in complete liberty."14 The author feels that many times women are forced to choose between children and a career because of a lack of viable alternatives and options which could reduce the heavy load of raising a family. If it were not such a stigma to be an unwed mother, if abortions were readily available, and if there were large numbers of good child-care centers, then professional women might not feel so torn between the demands of marriage versus the demands of a career.15

De Beauvoir feels that this conflict between professional interests and sexual needs, rather than purely physiological factors, is responsible for "the nervousness and frailty"16 often observed in women. The strain of a career attempted despite the harassment of society, coupled with the sheer difficulty of being a newcomer in an unfamiliar field, are two of the reasons de Beauvoir thinks the accomplishments of the independent woman should be evaluated according to a set of standards different from that used to judge the accomplishments of a man. Also, woman must cope with the attitudes of family and friends toward her work -- often she
will be urged to reaffirm traditional values in her lifestyle and forego her career; at any rate, her career will not be viewed with the same respect as a man's. However, probably the greatest temptation to the independent woman trying to make it on her own, according to de Beauvoir, is seeing her married or "kept" friends in as comfortable a position as she herself is, but having gained this situation with a minimum of effort. How natural it is to feel resentment at having fought for every victory, while others have achieved success by the easy road. 17

The author sums up very well a point which is the key to all the disadvantages suffered by women in the professions: "In so far as a woman wishes to be a woman, her independent status gives rise to an inferiority complex; on the other hand, her femininity makes her doubtful of her professional future." 16 Therefore, the girl student feels sure that she has less ability than does a boy. De Beauvoir points out that girls achieve significantly less in French secondary schools, which is partly the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, socialisation, and girls' consequent superficial level of study. Apparently the over-conscientious and methodical way girls attack their work does them the most harm in subjects which require a high degree of originality and imagination. De Beauvoir says that girls are not aroused by their studies, they do not integrate them into the totality of their lives; consequently, the minute girls put their books down, their minds are on other things. Girls are dis-
heartened by their mediocre prospects, and think little of their abilities, so they tend to accept limited success as the best women can achieve in a man's world. 19

The independent woman, in fact, is aware that she engenders less confidence in her employees when she is in a position of responsibility than a man does. She must always try to win the confidence of others, and the constant strain of struggling against biased opinions, says the author, leads to a "defence reaction in the form of an exaggerated affectation of authority . . . Man is accustomed to asserting himself; his clients believe in his competence; he can act naturally; he infallibly makes an impression. Woman does not inspire the same feeling of security; she affects a lofty air, she drops it, she makes too much of it." 20 This is de Beauvoir's great point: woman cannot lose herself in the pursuance of lofty goals because she lacks the self-confidence which frees a person from constant self-examination. De Beauvoir points out that American women in particular enjoy their careers, but are more concerned with the fact of their jobs, rather than their content. And because women are so concerned with themselves, small successes and failures are blown out of all proportion. This constant measurement of each accomplishment hinders total abandonment in a career. In sum, "What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself; but to forget oneself it is first of all necessary to be firmly assured that new and
for the future one has found oneself. Newly come into the world of men, poorly seconded by them, woman is still too busily occupied to search for herself. 21

De Beauvoir departs from this line of analysis to discuss actresses, dancers, and singers, these women whose professional lives tend to affirm and strengthen, rather than conflict with, their femininity. The author sees these artists as the only class of their sex to maintain real independence for several centuries because they support themselves and more importantly, find the key to their lives in their careers. These women are not torn between contradictory roles as other independent women are because through the successful execution of their art they transcend their given characteristics, find worth in themselves, and at the same time indulge their narcissism in personal care and elegant dress. De Beauvoir sees disadvantages, too, in the artistic career. It is easy for these women either to over-value their artistic brilliance or to desire salvation from the rigors of a career in the arms of an available man. 22

The author points out, however, that other fields are now open to women. Literature and art offer opportunities to women who wish to register on paper the emotions and feelings they experience in life. "To prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebel- liously, to create a world other than that in which she fails
to attain her being, she must resort to self-expression. De Beauvoir sees the same situation which allows women the leisure to write and paint as also being a hindrance to the production of masterpieces of literature and art. When women undertake these occupations solely to fill time or begin them late in life, as when the children have gone, works of art are seldom produced because these women either view writing and painting as hobbies or lack the intensive training which is so necessary for the development of the requisite skill. De Beauvoir feels that women are used to loafing all day and therefore will not be able to adapt to a rigorous schedule. De Beauvoir's opinion that the housewife's day is filled with leisure is highly debatable in light of recent studies on American workers, so this whole line of analysis necessarily must be called into question. The author cites the example of a French writer, Colette, who depended in large part on her novels for her livelihood; de Beauvoir felt that this fact accounted for her professionalism and greatness. Moreover, great artists rely on errors and failings as lessons to be learned from and as steppingstones to better work. Women, on the other hand, value spontaneity of expression and disdain the careful assembly of ideas in written discourse. This is precisely Colette's triumph: she effects the illusion of spontaneity in her works by choosing only the ideas and images which work for her, and discarding those which do not lend to the atmosphere she is trying to create.
De Beauvoir considers it common for women to use writing to flatter herself, instead of losing herself in her work and the topics she covers in her work.\textsuperscript{24}

The author laments the fact that women use writing and painting to escape from a hostile world -- she understands this tendency, but regrets it nevertheless. Great and original works require fearless ventures into unexplored realms. Women fail in this respect, says de Beauvoir, because they have been trained to conform to do the expected, and because they are still awe-struck at being admitted into the exalted world of ideas and are reluctant to stir up trouble. Woman produces the charming and acceptable books that are expected of her, but definitely does not question current convention or forge new paths. De Beauvoir does not mean to say that these women lack creativity, but they exercise it only in their personal lives, not in their books. Paradoxically, there are women who stifle their creativity under a heavy covering of "male" discipline -- they will achieve only competence. "There are women who are mad and there are women of sound method; none has that madness in her method that we call genius."\textsuperscript{25}

De Beauvoir feels that women's success in this field has been stifled most by this hesitancy to break barriers and do the unexpected and unacceptable. No woman has ever transcended all convention in order to discover a reality different from the one we know now. The author cites the poetesses of the bourgeoisie as glorifiers of the present system; they
have no desire to change society. Then there are the women writers who have dared to challenge the inequities of this world. "... Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, have had to expend so much energy negatively in order to free themselves from outward restraints that they arrive somewhat out of breath at the stage from which masculine writers of great scope take their departure; they do not have enough strength left to profit by their victory and break all the ropes that hold them back."26 de Beauvoir feels that women should embrace a healthy cynicism when assessing the effects of centuries of discrimination on their abilities. The author feels that a recognition of woman's limitations is the point at which she can begin to discover the truth. Unfortunately, however, up to this time woman exhausts her courage dissipating mirages and she stops in terror at the threshold of reality."27

I think that de Beauvoir is describing herself when she makes these observations. She speaks of the numerous women who are great reporters of facts, who have the ability to bring to life on paper the essence of the thing under scrutiny, and I think she includes herself in this number. Her beautifully- and sensitively-written descriptions of the works of these women is a superb example of this kind of writing; "... they have often aptly described their own inner life, their experience, their own universe; attentive to the hidden substance of things, fascinated by the peculiarities of their
own sensations, they present their experience, still warm, through savory adjectives and carnal figures of speech. Their vocabulary is often more notable than their syntax because they are interested in things rather than in the relations of things; they do not aim at abstract elegance, but in compensation their words speak directly to the senses."28 But I think de Beauvoir sells herself and other women writers short when she maintains that they do not question the established order, and therefore cannot produce truly great works. The Second Sex, an original and penetrating masterpiece, is a truly powerful testament to the fact of woman's literary and intellectual abilities. Also, it may have been a fact in 1949 that no woman had ever transcended all convention in order to discover a reality different from the one that is already known, but the works of such feminist scholars as Shulamith Firestone and Marge Piercy are certainly evidence that women can envision a radically different future for the world.

But I think what de Beauvoir really means to say is that the majority of women are severely constrained by societal factors which limit women's freedom. To be able to explore, to challenge, to roughhouse, to do -- these activities are sources of valuable experience which have hitherto been denied females. "...[through such experiences] an individual, in the intoxication of liberty and discovery, learns to regard the entire earth as his territory."29 Only the privileged,
those who own the earth can attain greatness because they have the confidence to experiment with audacious new schemes. So the author feels that because of the inequality of the sexes, woman must still struggle to discover her self, and leave the discovery of larger realities to man.\textsuperscript{30}

\textquote[Le Beauvoir]{Le Beauvoir concludes this chapter with a reiteration of its unifying theme, which is also the unifying theme of the whole book. Woman's subordinate and inferior position and development are due to societal forces, such as socialization and discrimination, and are not attributable to her "natural" inferiority. Every aspect of society contributes to woman's continued second-class status, and everyone -- both men and women -- perpetuate that status.}\textsuperscript{31} But the chapter ends on a high note -- because women are just beginning to taste freedom, the future is uncertain, but still open. Le Beauvoir feels that only when woman occupies the same situation as man does will she be liberated. She finds it hard to predict the form of this liberation in the future -- no one knows how much or little the free woman will or will not resemble man. "What is certain is that hitherto woman's possibilities have been suppressed and lost to humanity, and that it is high time she be permitted to take her chances in her own interest and in the interest of all."\textsuperscript{32}
II. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POINT-OF-VIEW

Simone de Beauvoir’s theoretical perspective on woman’s situation in society is outlined in “The Independent Woman” chapter of *The Second Sex*, which is discussed above. In my opinion this particular perspective on woman is both verified and contradicted in two early segments of the author’s autobiography, *The Prime of Life* and *Force of Circumstance*. *The Second Sex* is commonly viewed as a manifesto of female liberation and a declaration of woman’s potential; and much of the author’s autobiography seems to suggest a similar spirit of independence, self-confidence and freedom. But, especially in the passages of these latter works that deal with de Beauvoir’s relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, French existentialist, author and de Beauvoir’s long-time companion, it seems that the author is telling us that in her own life as relationships, she does not truly view herself as man’s equal. However, I feel that de Beauvoir’s description of her relationship with Sartre is a good behavioral yardstick against which to judge and compare the author’s more general theoretical formulations. The section of *The Second Sex* outlined above serves as a backdrop or frame of reference, which can be kept in mind when analysing specific observations made by de Beauvoir about Sartre and herself.

*The Prime of Life* is replete with examples of de Beauvoir’s characteristic deference to Sartre’s superior knowl-
edge, experience or character. The author's account of their relationship seems to suggest that she views herself as Sartre's helpmate, or student, or companion in the mode of the traditional dependent female. Statements such as "...the resolution which Sartre displayed set him above me. I admired him for holding his destiny in his own hands, unaided; far from feeling embarrassed at the thought of his superiority, I derived comfort from it"[33] belie an image of de Beauvoir as an independent, self-confident individual. Even though de Beauvoir seems to be discussing the thoughts and feelings of an earlier time in this passage, its almost reverent tone suggests that while de Beauvoir might not still believe Sartre to be so overwhelmingly superior, at one period she definitely did. The fact that she uses such language at the date of the writing of this autobiography leads me to believe that she remains a little in awe of her famous companion. I expected a reading of the author's autobiography to reveal a woman who is acutely aware of the societal factors which limit her emergence as an active human being and who therefore consciously attempts to transcend these limitations in her everyday life. It would seem that a writer and scholar who was able to produce a masterpiece such as The Second Sex, who was able to identify and pinpoint with such precision so many of the layers and facets of sexual discrimination, and above all, who was able to deliver such a searing indictment of the male-dominated culture's disastrous influence on women's self-actualisation
and freedom, could be expected to have possessed a high degree of awareness of the dangers and pitfalls which threaten every woman who searches for true equality with men. But this does not appear to have been the case, at least on the surface level of analysis of her statements.

S. Beauvoir is a very complex character who seems torn by conflicting emotions, the influence of societal forces, and the responsibility she obviously feels as an intelligent woman to change established patterns of discrimination. And it is in her account of her association with Sartre that this conflict becomes most apparent and easily identifiable.

"Though I was less wholeheartedly committed to literature than Sartre, my thirst for knowledge rivaled his. Even so he pursued the truth far more persistently than I did. I have attempted to show, in my book The Second Sex, why a woman's situation still, even today, prevents her from exploring the world's basic problems. I longed to know the world, to find a way of expressing that knowledge, but I had never envisaged tearing its final secrets from it by sheer brain power." Here de Beauvoir confesses that she had succumbed to the forces of male culture by her inability to abandon herself in the search for ultimate truth. But is she really so severely handicapped by the fact of her femininity and its concomitant restrictions that she is unable to penetrate the heretofore male sphere of ideas in pursuit of bold new answers to society's problems? Again, the fact that de Beauvoir wrote a brilliant exposé of the centuries of woman's oppres-
sion at the hands of the male telling class in *The Second Sex* makes it difficult for me to believe that she is not a truly great thinker. The brilliance of her numerous works, including several novels, attests to the fact that de Beauvoir deserves equal status with the great male thinkers of her time, while the author's own evaluation of her capabilities seems at times to underestimate and devalue them.

Another example of de Beauvoir's characteristic deference to male judgment is recounted in *Force of Circumstance*, the segment of her autobiography which follows *The Prime of Life*. de Beauvoir describes how she came to write *The Second Sex*:

... I wanted to write about myself. ... I realized that the first question to come up was: What has it meant to me to be a woman? At first I thought I could dispose of that pretty quickly. I had never had any feeling of inferiority, no one had ever said to me: "You think that way because you're a woman"; my femininity had never been irksome to me in any way. "For me," I said to Sartre, "you might almost say it just hasn't counted." "All the same, you weren't brought up in the same way as a boy would have been; you should look into it further." I looked, and it was a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy.

de Beauvoir's version of how the book came into being gives much of the credit to Sartre! She acts as if it was solely Sartre's idea to explore the parameters of femininity, and as if she blindly followed his direction. Even if Sartre was mainly responsible for de Beauvoir's initial interest in the topic, it was de Beauvoir's experience of being a woman in a man's world, her craftsmanship in acting upon those ex-
periences on paper, and her creative genius in vividly transmitting these ideas to her readers that made *The Second Sex* the monumental work it was, and still is. I think de Beauvoir may have been saying the grueling task of actually writing such a tome is her woman-fate's "revelation."

An explanation for this seemingly deliberate discounting and minimizing of her talents and abilities is not readily forthcoming. She Beauvoir may really consider herself inferior because of her sex, or she simply may have been socialized very thoroughly by her formal education and the everyday experiences of her life to believe that it is correct to defer to men and to gloss over her own accomplishments. Whatever the reason for the overtly self-deprecatating stance of her autobiography, this attitude is nevertheless unfortunate, and what is more, discouraging for those young women looking for role models and symbols of success to emulate. However, this stance is most damaging to de Beauvoir herself, because I think it would feed on itself, engender hesitancy and obstruct a free flow of ideas; in other words a self-fulfilling prophecy may have been created.

De Beauvoir herself speaks to this question in a section of *The Prime of Life* and offers us her analysis of the peculiar attitude she exhibits toward the fact of her sex:

"... My main purpose has been to isolate and identify my own particular brand of femininity. I received a young lady's education, and when my studies were finished, my position was still that of any woman in a society where the sexes are divided into two embattled
eastes. In a great many ways I reacted like the woman I was: what distinguishes my thesis from the traditional one is that, as far as I am concerned, femininity is neither a natural or innate entity, but rather a condition brought about by society, on the basis of certain physiological characteristics. For reasons which I have set forth in some detail in _The Second Sex_, women... are averse to questioning the fundamental premises of existence, or to organizing and controlling the world. Therefore it suited me to live with a man whom I regarded as my superior; my ambitions, though stubbornly held, were nevertheless timid...

So, up to this point de Beauvoir’s analysis is consistent with the one put forth above; the author freely admits the influence of her socialization and her conscious choice of a man whom she considered to be better than her as a companion. She insists that she never pretended, in _The Second Sex_, to be able to transcend the traditional feminine role; she is literally a function of her society, for she realizes the influence of socialization, yet staunchly refuses to admit that she has transcended it! Admittedly this is a somewhat perplexing and even irritating position for an intelligent and accomplished woman to adopt, but the confusion mounts as de Beauvoir continues her explanation:

... I attached small importance to the actual conditions of my life; nothing, I believed, could impede my will. I did not deny my femininity, any more than I took it for granted; I simply ignored it. I had the same freedoms and responsibilities as men did. I was spared the curse that weighs upon most women, that of dependence — and whether they are afflicted by it, adapt themselves to it, or treat it as a subject for self-congratulation. In the last resort it still remains a curse... Material self-sufficiency enables one to realize oneself fully as an individual; with this achievement behind me I was able to reject a life of moral parasitism and all the dangerous conveniences
it had to offer. On the other hand, neither Sartre nor any of my other male friends ever showed a superiority complex where I was concerned, so it never occurred to me that I was in a disadvantageous position. . . . My feminine status has been for me neither an embarrassment nor an alibi. In any case, it is a given condition of my life, not an explanation of it."

This latter part of de Beauvoir’s explanation of her attitude toward and consequent reaction to the fact of her female-ness seems to contradict, or at least not fit well with the former section of this passage. The author unequivocally states that she was as free as any male, in the sense of moving about her surroundings freely and without restraints. Without attaching too much importance to this single passage and maintaining that it contains de Beauvoir’s final word on the subject, I think it is safe to say that she ascribes to the general notion that she somehow escaped the effects of the scourge of her femininity, that she was able to transcend this terrible infirmity. That is to say, even though the naive posture of her youth -- that she alone of women was a special case and therefore deserved the preferential treatment and privileges naturally accruing to a man, eventually came to be replaced by the realization that the fact of her female-ness was an integral part of her definition as a person, that this fact affected her every day of her life, perhaps adversely, de Beauvoir still appears to cling to the rather far-fetched notions that being able to support herself freed her absolutely from dependency and that the men in her circle of friends did not patronize her or treat her differently from the men. I believe that the
author still sees herself as different from the ordinary woman and still believes that her unique position and extraordinary accomplishments isolate her from the great mass of women and actually cause her to identify more with successful and intellectual males. She certainly is special, in that her intellectual prowess sets her apart from the ordinary woman, and it is probably very natural for her to long for membership in the exclusive male club, with its concomitant privileges and ready-made ruling position in society; however, it is also very futile. Ignoring one's femininity is simply not an effective or realistic way of dealing with the problems it poses, for women simply are not seen or treated as the equals of men in our society, no matter how one wishes it were so. De Beauvoir is affected in a very real sense by the curse of dependence; hers may not be financial, but it is evident that she believes that she leans very heavily on Sartre for emotional and psychological support.

It is precisely because de Beauvoir describes her peculiar situation in The Prima of Life that it does not fit well with the more general theoretical notions set forth in The Second Sex. Because her autobiography describes one woman's experience, one woman's specific reaction to her own personal characteristics coupled with the fact of her femaleness, it lacks generalizability to many women. De Beauvoir's enlightening comment "... I did not think of myself as 'a woman'; I was me..." is the key to understanding the discrepancies between the author's purely theoretical works
and her own life story. De Beauvoir was one of the first to pinpoint the inequities and pitfalls in the relations between the sexes, but this understanding does not translate to the more basic reality of her relations with Sartre, the most prominent man in her life. The reasons for de Beauvoir's deference to this "clearly superior being," or perhaps more accurately, her reported deference to Sartre seem to be many and complex; the author's resultant attitudes toward herself and those around her seem to me to be unfortunate, but possibly inevitable considering the circumstances of her upbringing and her subsequent position in French intellectual circles.

Greater congruence exists between de Beauvoir's intellectual and autobiographical statements on a final related topic mentioned in both sources -- marriage and maternity. The author prefaces her discussion of her reasons for forgoing childbearing by a statement of the reasons Sartre would be hindered and inconvenienced by marriage. "To have joined the ranks of the married men would have meant an even greater or renunciation...Were elementary caution prevented my choosing a future that might be poisoned by remorse. I did not even have to think it over; the decision was taken without any effort on my part -- no hesitations, no weighing of the pros and cons." Even though de Beauvoir speaks of "their" decision, I wonder what her feelings were on the matter; did she feel marriage would curtail her own freedom or was she merely deferring to Sartre's wishes and supposed better judgment?
In Beauvoir discusses the related topic of children next. "There was only one consideration that could have carried sufficient weight to make us pass under the yoke of so-called legitimacy: the desire for children. This we did not possess." And on the reasons for their lack of desire for children: "If now I turned aside from such a scheme it was, primarily, because my happiness was too complete for any new element to attract me. A child would not have strengthened the bonds that united Sartre and me; nor did I want Sartre's existence reflected and extended in some other being. It was sufficient both for himself and for me. I too was self-sufficient. I fervently dreamed of rediscovering myself in the child I might bear." This dislike of the idea of having children echoes the sentiments she expresses on the subject in *The Second Sex* -- she calls maternity the "one feminine function that it is actually impossible to perform in complete liberty." Even though the author's attitude on this topic remains consistent across her different works, again it remains difficult to attribute it solely to her own formulations, rather than to some melding of her's and Sartre's thoughts, in light of the above remarks. The author is very definitely opposed to the idea of children, whether because of her own relationship with her parents, her assimilation of Sartre's viewpoint and ideas, or her own personal make-up and point-of-view.

So Beauvoir's admission at the end of this passage seems to suggest that her choice of career and peculiar temperament are the major reasons for her decision to forgo motherhood.
and this seems reasonable in light of her frequent assertions of this point. "The risk of compromising [my life] could only have been justified had I regarded a child as no less vital a creative task than a work of art, which I did not. Literature, I thought, was a way of justifying the world by fashioning it anew in the pure context of imagination -- and, at the same time, of preserving its own existence from oblivion. Childbearing, on the other hand, seemed no more than a purposeless and unjustifiable increase of the world's population." It seems that not only does de Beauvoir reject motherhood for herself, but that she devalues it as a worthwhile and viable alternative for other people. It is easy to understand de Beauvoir's choice of writing over motherhood because of the relative values she puts on each. Also, after reading passages embodying this point of view in *The Prime of Life*, it became clear how the author's own bias influenced the sections on maternity in *The Second Sex* and gave that whole discussion such a negative feeling. Even though the author's point of view on maternity deserves a hearing, I think it is important to understand the predispositions that undergird her more general pronouncements on the subject in a reference work on the topic of woman, such as *The Second Sex*. 
III. CONVERSATIONS WITH SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR

When recent interviews and conversations with Simone de Beauvoir are examined in light of the perspective provided by The Second Sex and the author's early autobiographical works, some interesting observations can be made. Certain of de Beauvoir's attitudes have remained the same, some new topics have attracted her attention, and the author's prescriptions for the future have become more focused and explicit. I think it is instructive and enlightening to analyze what I assume are relatively unrehearsed dialogues with de Beauvoir in order to glean additional insights into her character, attitudes and ideas because these conversations add depth and life to the author's works already in print.

De Beauvoir's thoughts on The Second Sex almost thirty years after its publication are especially interesting. During an interview in the January 1976 Society, de Beauvoir says:

In writing The Second Sex I became aware, for the first time, that I myself was leading a false life, or rather, that I was profiting from this male-oriented society without even knowing it. What had happened is that quite early in my life I had accepted the male values, and was living accordingly. Of course, I was quite successful, and that reinforced in me the belief that man and woman could be equal if the woman wanted such equality. . . . Through The Second Sex I became aware of the struggle needed. I understood that the vast majority of women simply did not have the choices that I had had, that women are, in fact, defined and treated as a second sex by a male-oriented society whose structure would totally collapse if that orientation was genuinely destroyed.
This excerpt from her conversation with John Perry reveals the author's insight that she was a woman with special advantages not shared by many or most of her sisters. de Beauvoir says that the writing of *The Second Sex* made her understand that simply because men allowed her into their world they would not necessarily do the same for other, less exceptional women. The fact that de Beauvoir's comfortable social and economic status allowed her to get the education which facilitated her acceptance into predominantly male intellectual circles, which in turn led to her success as an author and engendered self-confidence in her own abilities.

de Beauvoir realizes that her success made her ignore her femininity and aided her identification with her male peers. In fact, she believes that, until the writing of *The Second Sex*, her "privileges were the result of [her] having abdicated, in some crucial respects at least, [her] womanhood." 45

I doubt that de Beauvoir's status in life was due solely to the fact that she had implicitly renounced some aspects of her womanhood; in other words I believe that she could have acknowledged her womanhood while retaining some "privileges" and acceptance in a man's world; also, her "privilege" was due in large part to factors beyond her control, such as the social class into which she was born and her native intelligence and literary ability.

But de Beauvoir is magnanimous enough to declare in this interview her affinity with the great mass of undis-
tinguished and unremarkable women who have not been free to choose the direction of their lives, who have been constrained by their sex. De Beauvoir says that the writing of *The Second Sex* awakened her identification with these women, but the tenor of some of the descriptions of them in that book suggests that she still did scorn these weaker, less privileged people. I think de Beauvoir does have more in common with these women than is apparent at first, however. Even though she had the advantage of independence, the author maintains in her autobiography that she felt Sartre to be her superior.

De Beauvoir's womanhood affects her in undeniable and insidious ways, which the author also admits in *The Prime of Life*. These cross-pressures on de Beauvoir from opposing forces can sometimes result in contradictory statements from her.

Another topic addressed by de Beauvoir in her books and in interviews is marriage and motherhood. When asked by Alice Schwarzer in an interview for *Ms* in July 1977 for her advice to women on this subject, de Beauvoir has this to say:

> I think a woman must not fall into the trap of children and marriage. Even if a woman wants to have children, she must think very hard about the conditions in which she will have to bring them up, because childbearing, at the moment, is real slavery. Fathers and society leave to women, and to women alone, the responsibility of bringing up children... And if a woman is still determined to have children, it would be better to have them without being married, because marriage is the biggest trap.

Obviously the author's ideas on this important subject have not changed much since *The Second Sex*. She still believes
that women should reject marriage and childbearing because it is in their roles as wives and mothers that male society exercises the most rigid control over them and keeps them in a subordinate position.

On this issue de Beauvoir obviously adopts a radical, and I think an inflexible and impractical stance. She advocates a total restructuring of society: "... as long as the family and the myth of the family and the myth of maternity and the maternal instinct are not destroyed, women will still be oppressed." While it is certainly desirable that men and women have the freedom to choose their lifestyle and not have to conform to a socially accepted standard which in its very nature relegates women to a second-class place in society, I feel that de Beauvoir is not being very practical when she totally rejects childbearing in today's society.

De Beauvoir seems caught up in a vision of a perfect future; consequently her pronouncements have a certain dogmatic quality. This is not to say that her particular approach to the problem of women's inequality is wrong -- on the contrary, the women's movement needs visionaries to think of new possibilities for the future which can then be discussed and chosen or rejected on their merits. Even with this in mind, I share Betty Friedan's incredulity and dismay when she asks, in her dialogue with de Beauvoir for Saturday Review in June 1975, how de Beauvoir proposes to "perpetuate
the human race in the meantime, and receives the answer, "There are enough people on earth!" These remarks of de Beauvoir's on motherhood seem akin to the radical ideologies of Shulamith Firestone and Marge Piercy. These feminists totally reject the institutions of family and motherhood as we know them. Concomitant with these views, they see no need, given our advanced technology, for mothers to give birth to children. They argue that some version of the "test-tube baby" method of procreation will go far in freeing women from the chains of their biology. I am not sure that I agree with these thinkers' rejection of childbearing within the nuclear family. My question remains: Are motherhood and the nuclear family such instruments of the subjugation of women in today's society that they must be done away with in order for women to attain equality? Motherhood today can be a trap if it is linked with housework rather than market work, as it often is, and if it stifles freedom because it ties the woman to the home, as it often does. But, I personally feel that even though much restructuring of these institutions needs to be done, because there certainly are built-in discriminations in them, equality can be achieved without discarding the nuclear family entirely.

Because this alternative of rejecting motherhood in today's society deserves to be considered as a way of equalizing the relative positions of the sexes, however, I think that the possibilities of its being adopted also deserve consideration.
On an individual basis, the choice of not marrying and procreating is a viable one. But I would venture to say that the majority of women still see childbearing as worthwhile and even desirable. (Whether they should have this attitude is, as pointed out above, debatable). Women today simply will not cease to marry and procreate until de Beauvoir's vision of a better future materializes. The author does not explain how the great mass of women are to avoid marriage and motherhood in everyday life, and more importantly, does not explain how she would convince them that this is desirable.

Also, I do not see clearly the linkage between rejection of childbearing and the transition from the nuclear family, with its concomitant traditional male and female roles, to an equitable structure. I would think that a massive socialization and education effort would have to be launched in order to convince the women of today that motherhood, the family, and society's structure as we know it should be discarded and some form of socialism should replace capitalism. However, if it could be shown that the goal of a communal structure would be the optimal way to attain equality between the sexes, then we should work toward that goal, no matter how difficult it would be. I do not think it would be impossible if the great mass of women could be convinced that the goal would be desirable. Another major obstacle to be surmounted would be the choice of a system of government which would allow true equality; for example, would a
"Marxist economic system necessarily have to be adopted if we choose to discard the family? It is clear that de Beauvoir feels that under a capitalist system, true equality can never be attained; therefore, I feel it is necessary to provide a sketch of the author's ideal system and the methods she espouses to achieve that desired goal.

De Beauvoir advocates a change in the economic structure of capitalist countries to a form of socialism. She feels that this change is necessary in order to effect the goal of true equality between men and women, but she realizes that economic change does not automatically bring about equality. She also believes that the way to achieve this desired end is through mass action. "What is really needed is that a whole group of women, from all sorts of countries, assemble their living experiences, and that we derive from such experiences the patterns facing women everywhere."50 She sees women of the working classes as the key to the struggle, but also as the most difficult group to arouse. Only when this group's consciousness is raised and these women are alerted to the fact of their subordinate position relative to men will any progress be made. As women stimulate their sisters to realization and action, women as a group gain in power. De Beauvoir sees the coupling of the class with the sex struggle as the only viable solution to the problem of woman's subordination--this is why working-class women are so crucial to the movement.

However, de Beauvoir feels that socialist countries to-
day are not really socialist in the spirit of Marx. In
other words, women in existing socialist countries are not
truly liberated from the traditional female role because for
the most part only economic change has been effected, not
far-reaching changes in the definitions of men's and wom-

en's roles. They are certainly more liberated than women
in capitalist countries, says de Beauvoir, because they work
and therefore are economically independent of men. Because
of this, de Beauvoir feels that women have a more respected
place in society and have more respect for themselves. She
sums up their situation in this way: "Women in socialist
countries have gained some of the 'male privileges,' while
keeping all the 'female duties.'"51 Therefore, the author
does not see the current situation in socialist countries as
an example to be imitated by those searching for a way to
achieve sexual equality.

A final topic discussed by de Beauvoir in various in-
terviews, sexuality, relates back to the overall question
of human equality. The author feels that only when men and
women exist in a society of equals will sexual and love rela-
tionships not be oppressive to women. De Beauvoir maintains
that as it is now, the relationship is one of a higher caste in
relation to a lower caste.52 She realizes that in love and
sexual relationships the woman always takes a bigger risk
than does the man. In the dialogue between de Beauvoir and
Betty Friedan published in Saturday Review in 1975, the two
feminists agree that "a woman feels debased in sex because
she has the underneath position. . . . [This is a way of] expressing her resentment at being underneath in society generally." So, the consensus is, and I agree, that because "sex is the symbol of what society does, when we change society, we can choose our sexuality." Only when women are allowed to feel respect for themselves as persons will mutually fulfilling relationships with men be encouraged to develop.

"He Beauvoir states in a 1976 interview in "Society" that she found this type of fulfilling relationship in her own life with Sartre. She feels that the quality of this relationship was due to the fact that

we had been similarly structured in our youth. Both our childhoods were very solid, very secure. This meant that neither of us had to prove something to ourselves or the other. We were sure of ourselves. It was as if everything had been preordained from the very beginning. . . . Thus, when Sartre and I met not only did our backgrounds fuse, but also our solidity, our individual conviction that we were what we were made to be. In that framework we could not become rivals. Then, as the relationship between Sartre and me grew, I became convinced that I was irreplaceable in his life, and he in mine. In other words, we were totally secure in the knowledge that our relationship was also totally solid, again preordained. . . . When you have such security it's easy not to be jealous. But had I thought that another woman played the same role as I did in Sartre's life, of course, I would have been jealous."

It is fortunate that de Beauvoir was able to transcend the barriers constructed by society to bar equality between the sexes in love relationships and was able to find true happiness in her life with Sartre. The fact that their relationship was so mutually fulfilling is a comment on de Beauvoir's
and Sartre's upbringing, socialization and exceptional characters. In fact, the author attributes their success mainly to their "solid" childhoods, which helped both de Beauvoir and Sartre come to the relationship feeling good about themselves and willing to offer their love and themselves to one another. However, the last sentence of the passage quoted above and remarks in various places in her autobiography seem to be recognitions of the fact that this supposedly ideal relationship is being carried out in a less than perfect world, that the world's negative forces can impinge on even de Beauvoir and Sartre. De Beauvoir seems to have to keep telling herself that she occupies a special place in Sartre's life, and that she does not have to be jealous of the other women with whom he has casual liaisons. Because Sartre did insist on the freedom to associate with women besides de Beauvoir, and possibly because she herself did not feel as strongly on this issue (even though she did have romantic involvements herself), de Beauvoir seems to occupy a somewhat "underneath" position in the relationship. When the rest of the world values men and women differently, it is probably impossible to maintain a perfectly equal relationship in the midst of an unequal society. Despite the many problems involved in sustaining a good relationship in present-day society, de Beauvoir and Sartre seem to have worked out the best possible lifestyle to fit both of their personalities and needs.
CONCLUSION

This analysis of three sources of Simone de Beauvoir’s thoughts and ideas on woman’s position in society — The Second Sex, early segments of her autobiography, entitled The Prime of Life and Force of Circumstance, and interviews with the author during the period from 1973 through 1978 — has revealed de Beauvoir’s fairly consistent general ideological stance over time and across the different vehicles used to transmit her ideas. De Beauvoir’s opinions on such topics as marriage, motherhood, and sexual and love relationships between men and women (specifically, her relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre) have undergone very little real change over the years; for the most part the author’s positions have been merely clarified, refined and extended.

Both marriage and maternity are rejected by de Beauvoir in The Second Sex, her autobiographies, and later interviews. She feels that the traditional role of wife and mother allows male society to exercise rigid control over women, which keeps them in a subordinate position and severely restricts their freedom. Therefore, in her own life, de Beauvoir declined to marry or bear children because she feels these are traps, forms of slavery to be avoided at all costs. Furthermore, de Beauvoir rejects the nuclear family and maternity as we know them today as alternatives for all women. She advocates a total restructuring of society, as
do other radical feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone and
Marge Piercy. De Beauvoir's formulations for the future
have undergone an evolution from the fuzzy and largely un-
defined ideas found in the conclusion of _The Second Sex_ to
the more specific, well-thought-out proposals presented in
later interviews. De Beauvoir's declaration of woman's
potential in _The Second Sex_, however, seems to be partially
contradicted by the author's apparent proclamation of
Sartre's superiority in _The Prime of Life_. On the other
hand, these two works may in fact be remarkably consistent
with one another, in that de Beauvoir's autobiography con-
tains descriptions of herself, a woman undeniably influenced
by the biological and cultural factors so brilliantly ex-
plored in _The Second Sex_, automatically referring to the
male and evaluating her own accomplishments and talents as
inferior and second-class.

In sum, Simone de Beauvoir's resolution of the personal
and the political in her life and in her works often defies
analysis. This brilliant, complex and confusing woman's
political pronouncements, containing her message to all
women to transcend the limitations imposed on them by male
society, as enunciated in _The Second Sex_ and in later inter-
views, sometimes find their logical extension in her own life,
as is true in the case of her rejection of maternity. But
in other cases, de Beauvoir seems to succumb to the over-
whelming influence of the male-dominated culture, and her
life, as evidenced by statements in her autobiography about her relationship with Sartre, seems to belie the brave and proud resolutions of her political works. Simone de Beauvoir, like many women today, is torn between the conflicting forces of tradition and culture, on the one hand, and a need for self-actualization and realization of herself as a person on the other; a study of her works reveals that they faithfully mirror this constant and on-going struggle in her life.


5 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 758.


8 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 763-768.

9 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 768.

10 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 768.


16 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 775.


20 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 780.


29 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 792.
34 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 45.
36 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 442.
39 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 89.
40 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 89.
41 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 90.
43 de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 90.
45 Gerassi, p. 80.
46 Schwarzer, p. 15.
48 "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma," p. 56.
49 "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma," p. 56.
50 Gerassi, p. 84.
52 "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma," p. 56.
53 "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma," p. 56.
54 "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma," p. 56.
55 Gerassi, p. 85.
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