

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 25

December 2nd, 2015

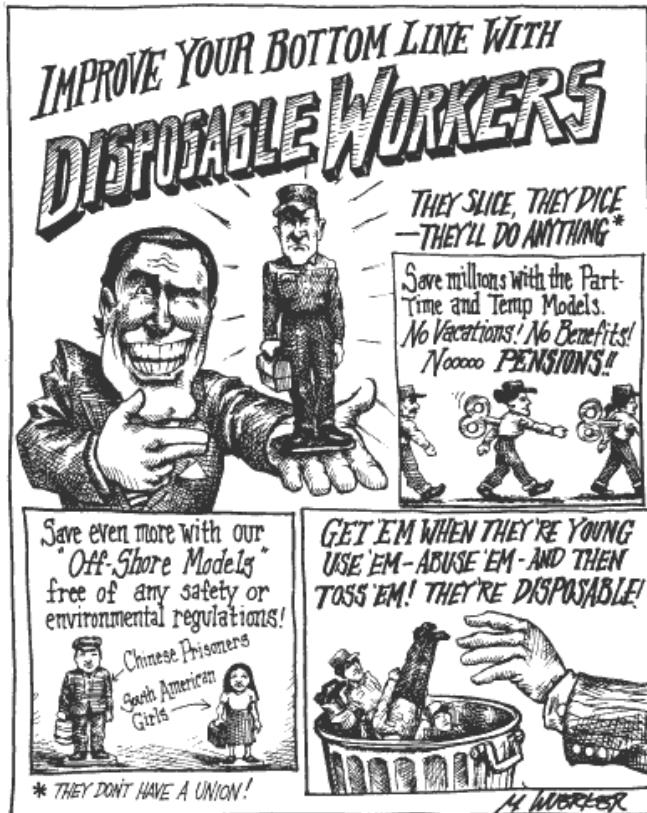


Race & Gender: (Young &) de Beauvoir

continuing Young's list of the five faces of oppression:

3) **powerlessness**: being prevented from “making decisions that affect the conditions of [one’s] lives and actions”

- Young explains that “**the social division of labor between professionals & non-professionals**” (‘middle class’ vs. ‘working class’) **often leaves non-professionals powerless**,
 - » because “they must take orders & rarely have the right to give them”



- Powerlessness also designates a position ...that **allows persons little opportunity to develop & exercise skills**.
 - The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise...
 - [They] lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have, have limited upward mobility, follow employers' orders & policies without freedom of choice, [&] are treated with less respect."

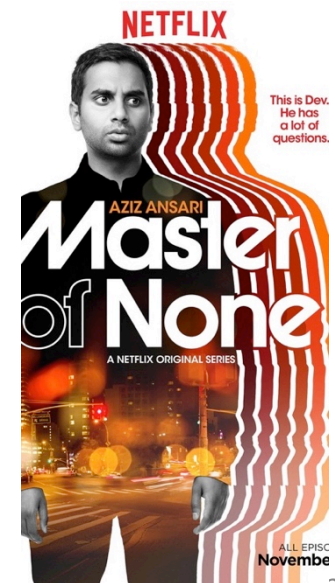
4) **cultural imperialism:** “how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group & mark it out as the Other.



- Cultural imperialism **involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm...**
 - » Often without noticing they do so, the **dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such.**”

• ...The culturally dominated undergo a *paradoxical oppression*, in that **they are both marked out by stereotypes & at the same time rendered invisible.**

- ...Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside...from those with whom they do not identify & who do not identify with them.”
 - » *Think about how rare it is to see TV shows & movies where people of color get to be leading characters instead of stereotypical, token minority side-kicks.*



- example of cultural imperialism:

- *cultural appropriation*: members of the dominant culture take stereotypical markers of a group identity as use them out of context
 - » **video:** bit.ly/1NgbEvK



5) **violence:** “Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person.



- ... I also include in this category less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members.

- **Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group.**



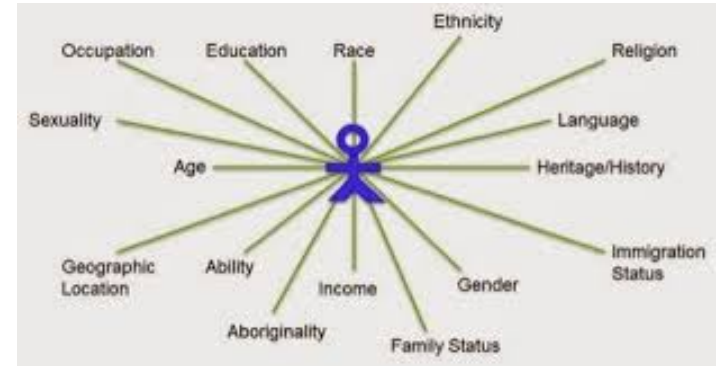
- Any woman, for example, has a reason to fear rape.
- Regardless of what a black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality or powerlessness, he lives knowing he is subject to attack of harassment.
 - » Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy.

- **An important aspect of random, systemic violence is its irrationality:**

- [it is] **motivated by fear or hatred** of those groups," not merely insecurity about one's own groups' dominant status.

Young *does not* give “an account of separate systems of oppression for each oppressed group: racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, & so on”:

- because “this way of conceiving oppression fails to accommodate the similarities and overlaps in the oppressions of different groups.
- [Also, it falsely represents the situation of all group members as the same.”



On Young's view,

- **“The presence of any of these five conditions is sufficient for calling a group oppressed.**

- But different group oppressions exhibit different combinations of these forms, as do different individuals in the groups.

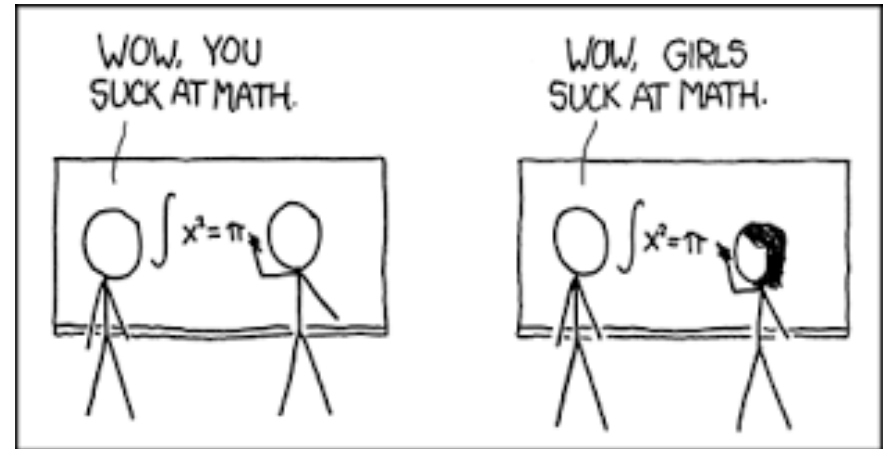
➤ **This makes her concept of oppression *disjunctive*, rather than conjunctive:**

- *One needs not experience all 5 faces to be oppressed (1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5)*
- *instead, any single face or combination of faces is adequate (1 or 2 or (1&2) etc.)*

» ...Applying these five criteria to the situation of groups **makes it possible to compare oppressions without reducing them to a common essence or claiming that one is more fundamental than another.”**

- Now we'll focus on oppression on the basis of *gender*.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986):
French existentialist philosopher
& feminist theorist



- **feminism** = belief that the sexes should enjoy equal rights, treatment, esteem, etc.

- *NOT a belief in the superiority of women and/or inferiority of men!*
- Though feminists often focus on correcting for injustices perpetrated against women,
 - feminists are also concerned with unjust treatment of *any* people on the basis of their sex and/or gender.
- Anyone can be a feminist, regardless of their biological sex or gender identity.



There are *many varieties* of feminism.

- ***Feminist projects have included:***

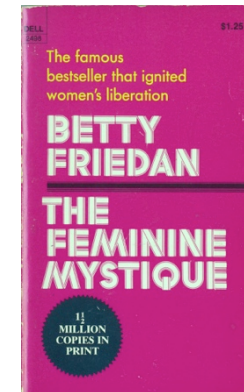
- **securing legal rights for women:**

- like suffrage (voting), property ownership, freedom from sexual harassment, access to birth control, reproductive choices



- **challenging traditional expectations for women:**

- like acting ladylike & polite, being demure about one's sexuality, staying a virgin until marriage, wearing feminine clothing, adhering to beauty standards, etc.



- **challenging philosophical perspectives that reflect misogynistic or male-biased attitudes**

Though all feminists agree that the sexes ought to be treated as equals, ***they may disagree*** on

- what changes need to be made to secure equality,
- or what actions should be done to make such changes.



Existentialists believe that people do *not* have essences that determine what sort of person they become.

- Sartre expressed this idea with the phrase “**existence precedes essence**”,
 - meaning *we define who we are through the choices we make.*
- He also wrote that we are “**condemned to be free**”:
 - *we are entirely responsible for the kind of person we become through our actions.*
 - (He held a very individualistic attitude about our identities.)
- He coined “**bad faith**” to criticize people who deny responsibility over their own lives & makes others decide for them.



➤ **de Beauvoir adds a crucial insight:**

- societal norms & conditions often restrict an individual’s freedom to choose how one leads one’s life
 - » by restricting the opportunities presented to us, limiting the choices we can make, or making our choices for us.

➤ *In particular, women & minorities are often forced into inferior social positions that are not of their choosing.*



By the time de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949,



- much **important progress was being made in women's rights** in the US & Europe.
 - For example, women gained the right to vote in the US in 1920, and in France in 1944.
 - Women began being admitted into careers & fields of study that were not open to them previously (e.g., philosophy, medicine, law).

– **But there was (and is) still a long way to go:**



- "...even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change.
- Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage.
 - *Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores.*" (5)



“We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

Malala Yousafzai

➤ **equality de jure (according to law) does not guarantee equality de facto (in reality).**

In response to the expansion of women's rights,

- many *anti-feminists* expressed worries that:
 - if women gain rights,
 - they will no longer truly be women,
 - “though they are equipped with a uterus like the rest.” (1)

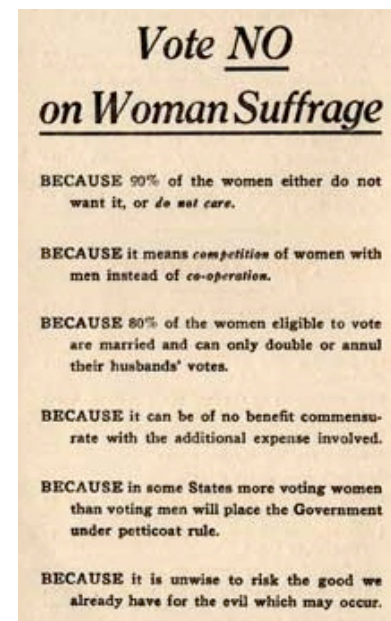
de Beauvoir writes,

- “we are told that femininity is in danger;
 - we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women.” (1)

She explains that **the anti-feminist response suggests that**

- **the concept of ‘woman’ involves something more than being female:**
 - “every female human being is not necessarily a woman” (1)
 - In other words, **being female is *not* a sufficient condition for being ‘a woman’.**

➤ *What more is there to being ‘a woman’ than being female?*



de Beauvoir reasons that:



- *when antifeminists say that expanding women's rights threatens womanhood,*
 - they are revealing that **they understand subordination & adherence to feminine identity as necessary conditions of being a woman.**
- Hence, **the common understanding of 'woman' is:**
 - *not* simply someone of the female sex,
 - **but someone who behaves a certain way and plays a prescribed role in society.**



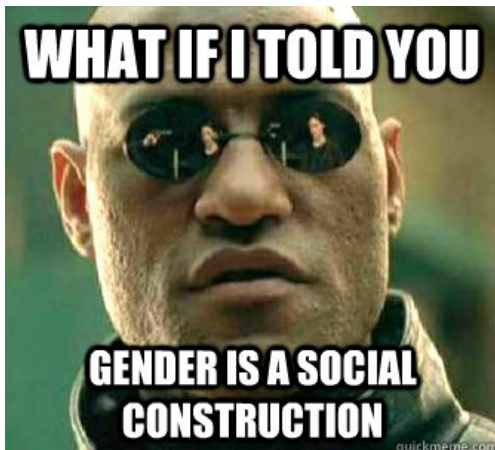
- **de Beauvoir famously wrote** (in another chapter of *The Second Sex*) that:
 - » ***"One is not born, but becomes a woman"***
 - Womanhood is a status females *acquire* by conforming to gender expectations.

What are masculinity & femininity?

- **A collection of attributes characteristic of men/women,**
 - commonly expressed through “clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, & occupations” (1)
- **...not a metaphysical essence.**
 - “The biological & social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities [i.e., essences] that determine given characteristics”

» **...nor a product of biology.**

- Having male/female anatomy & hormones is not sufficient for masculinity/femininity.



- Instead, **they are social constructs,**
 - i.e., **phenomena created by society, not by nature.**
 - They develop as a consequence of how males & females are raised & treated by their communities.

de Beauvoir explains:

- “...woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilization.
 - The intervention of others in her destiny is fundamental:
 - if this action took a different direction, it would produce a quite different result.
- **Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts,**
 - but by the manner in which her body & her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself.” (11)



de Beauvoir is pointing out that

- **the social construction of gender especially limits a woman's freedom** to choose what kind of person she becomes.
- It interferes with her autonomy to determine the course & meaning of her own life.





de Beauvoir observes that:

– “if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say ‘I am a woman’: on this truth must be based all further discussion.”

- *In contrast*, “a man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex;
- it goes without saying that he is a man.” (2)

- What she’s saying is that a **woman’s gender constrains her freedom to define who she is**,
 - by imposing her womanhood as her most definitive feature,
 - with which all her other attributes are supposed to cohere.
- **A man’s gender imposes fewer restrictions on his individual identity.**
 - Gender does not define a man’s possibilities as strictly as it defines what a woman can do.

» ***Or does it?: video:*** bit.ly/1pRct99 (10:46-13:56)

de Beauvoir explains that

- women's identities are typically shaped by their relationship to men.
 - “...man represents both the positive and the neutral [state of humankind],”
 - [as is indicated by the use of 'man' to designate human beings in general]
 - “...whereas woman represents only the *negative*,” i.e., *not* man. (2)



- “Thus humanity is male, and **man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him;**
 - she is ***not* regarded as an autonomous being,**” but rather as somebody's wife, mother, daughter, etc. (2)
- Moreover, the frequent objectification of women contributes to their treatment as less-than-complete human beings.
 - “...**she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being**” – *not* a rational, sensitive one (2).
 - Focus is placed on women's appearance & bodily capacities (like childbearing),
 - and not on their mental characteristics.



All of these factors lead to treatment of women

- *not as autonomous subjects and fully-fledged contributors to society,*
 - but rather as “**the Other**”.



What does it mean to be ‘the Other’?

» “*Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.*” (3)

- When we confront people who are unlike ourselves, we instinctively adopt an *us vs. them* mentality.

- **All individuals and groups define their identities** (as ‘I’ or ‘us’) **by contrasting themselves with people or groups they determine to be different** from themselves (‘them’).

» Those people/groups we define as *different from ourselves* are ‘the Other’

- de Beauvoir writes, “*The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One.*” (3)

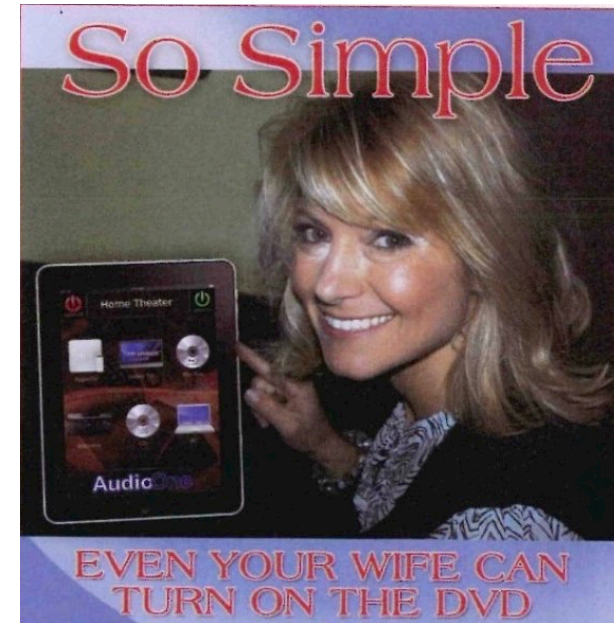
- Women, as ‘the Other’ in human society, are posed as such by men when men define themselves as the dominant, default state of humanity.



ALTERITY

“Now, *what peculiarly sign[ifies] the situation of woman* is that

- **she – a free and autonomous being** like all human creatures –
- **nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other.”** (8)
 - She often finds herself *mocked, sexualized, not taken seriously, only valued for her looks...*



Relations between the One & the Other can be harmonious & reciprocal.

- e.g., relationships between neighboring tribes, or between countries that engage peacefully in mutual trade.



➤ ...but somehow, “this reciprocity has not been recognized between the sexes” (3):

- the relationship between men & women has been (and still is) *not* equal, but rather hierarchical.

de Beauvoir asks,

➤ “*Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?*”

» She insists that **it is *not* a consequence of male/female nature.**

- While there may be differences between the sexes, these cannot explain why men & women have not been treated as equals.

» **It is a consequence of *social customs***
(and hence, a form of *structural oppression*)

- ...but it’s so entrenched in human history that *it is often mistaken as a product of intrinsic, natural differences between the sexes.*



Throughout history,

- **there have been many “cases in which a certain category has been able to dominate another completely for a time.**
 - Very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers
 - – the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it.” (3)
- But **gender inequality is unusual,**
 - because unlike other historically subordinated groups (usually racial or religious),
 - “...**women are not a minority;**
 - ...there are as many women as men on earth”

de Beauvoir wants to answer:

- *How did half of the human population become subordinated to the other half in the first place?*
 - (She suspects it has a lot to do with the inequitable distribution of labor.)



Why don't women rise up to gain equal status?

- de Beauvoir offers that **women are such a large & diverse population that they cannot band together as easily as other subordinated groups.**
 - Hence, they tend to identify more strongly with their race or socioeconomic class than with their gender.
- Also, **women's lives are also intertwined with that of men in a way that makes it very difficult for them to challenge the status quo.**
 - “They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women.” (4)
- Lastly, **women cannot isolate themselves from men:** separatism won't work.

» “Here is to be found **the basic trait of woman:**

- *she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.*

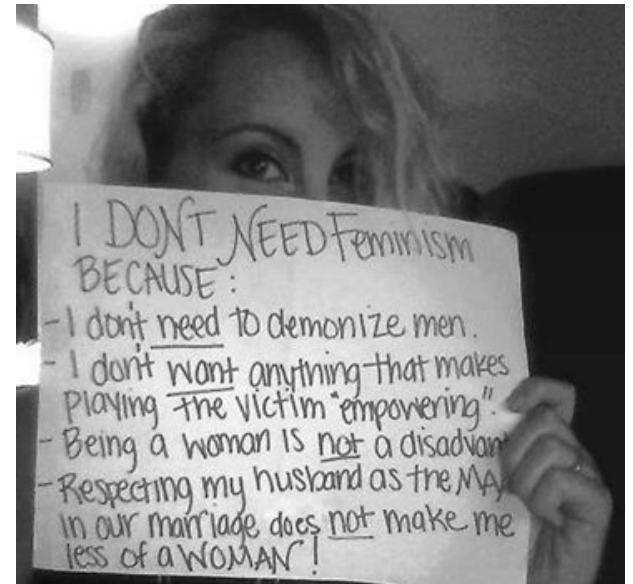
- “...[division] of society along the line of sex is impossible.” (and probably not desirable)
- “The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other.” (4)



Challenging the status quo isn't easy, & often seems risky or disadvantageous.

- “To decline to be the *Other*, to refuse to be a party to the deal –
 - *this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste.*” (3)
 - **Some women become complicit in their subordination, because they find that they benefit from present conditions.**

- It's also often *easier to follow a route that society has already prescribed for one's gender, rather than choosing for oneself.*
 - In other words, **there is a “temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing”** (3)
 - – to accept objectification & a narrowly-prescribed social role.



- But de Beauvoir insists that **we shouldn't give into that temptation.**
 - When we refuse to make choices for ourselves, we are acting in *bad faith*:
 - failing to make use of our freedom and not taking responsibility for our own identity. (**video**: bit.ly/1viGr6Z)

de Beauvoir points out a number of

- **similarities between gender inequality & racial inequality.**
 - Both genders and races are **often segregated into different domains that are meant to be “separate but equal,”**
 - ...but *de facto* are not equal at all.
- **Both women & racial minorities are:**
 - **often forced to ‘stay in their place’**
 - e.g., the home, motherhood, particular jobs, particular neighborhoods...
 - **often forced into inferior positions, and then told that they cannot advance *because* they are inferior.**

women should
women should **stay at home**
women should **be slaves**
women should **be in the kitchen**
women should **not speak in church**

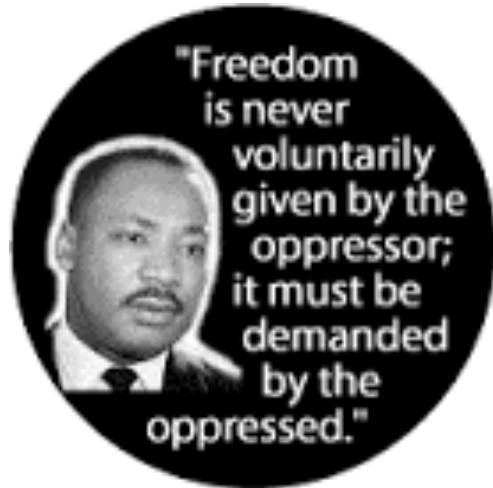
“As George Bernard Shaw puts it...

- “The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy;
- ...and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes.” (6)



“If a caste is kept in a state of inferiority, no doubt it remains inferior;

- but liberty can break the circle.
 - Let the Negroes vote and they become worthy of having the vote;
 - let woman be given responsibilities and she is able to assume them.



» The fact is that **oppressors cannot be expected to make a move of gratuitous generosity;**

- but at one time the revolt of the oppressed, at another time even the very evolution of the privileged caste itself, creates new situations;

...men have been led...to give partial emancipation to women:

- **it remains only for women to continue their ascent, & the successes they are obtaining are an encouragement for them to do so.**
 - It seems almost certain that sooner or later they will arrive at complete economic and social equality,
 - which will bring about an inner metamorphosis." (12)

de Beauvoir asks,

- “...is it enough to change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, & the whole social context, for men and women to become truly equal?”

» *‘Women will always be women,’ say the skeptics.*” (11)

- e.g., some people think that women’s biological burdens, like child-bearing & hormone-driven mood swings, will always prevent them from exercising all the freedom that men have.

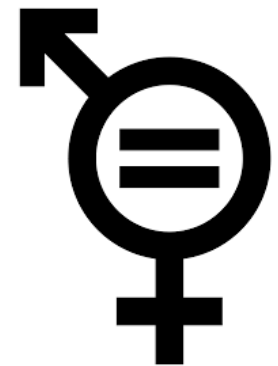
➤ **de Beauvoir disagrees:**

- she thinks these things can be overcome by modifying social customs like imbalanced parenting duties.



She thinks a **gender revolution must not only address:**

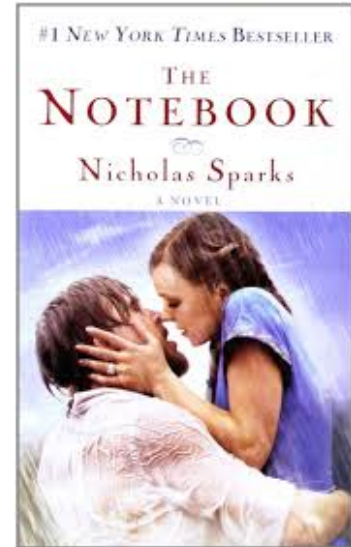
- **the *material conditions* that keep women subordinated,**
 - i.e., facts about how resources (like money, jobs, property) are distributed in a society,
- **...but also *the way members of each gender see and think about each other & their own social roles.***



In response to those who think that gender equality will threaten romance & sensuality, de Beauvoir writes:



- **“It is *nonsense* to assert that revelry, vice, ecstasy, passion, would become impossible if man & woman were equal in concrete matters.” (13)**
 - “To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her;
 - let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject”. (13)
 - “The reciprocity of their relations will *not* do away with the miracles – desire, possession, love, dream, adventure – worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories;
 - and the words that move us – *giving, conquering, uniting* – will not lose their meaning.” (13)



- **“...when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity,
 - » ...then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance & the human couple will find its true form.” (13)**