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Immanence, Transcendence and the Female Experience: Simone de Beauvoir on Motherhood and Women’s Role in Society

From the day the Homo Sapien emerged on this planet, he was never satisfied with his place in the natural hierarchy. He sought to distinguish himself from all others by going beyond the limits set for him by nature. Even after rising to the top of the food chain and consolidating power within his species, he still remains unsatisfied today. Conquering both his own nature and the nature around him are a constant exercise that continue to push him to seek unattainable excellence. Humans have never been a simple natural species. They do not seek to solely survive as a species. Their project is not stagnation – they constantly seek to surpass themselves. Hence, all societal structures and hierarchies we see around us today have been built on this human need to transcend his natural limits, including the globally pervasive patriarchy.

Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir deals with these crucial issues in her well-known treatise *The Second Sex* which has served as a key stepping stone in the ever-evolving feminist movement. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir seeks to understand the woman - what defines her, what differentiates her, and why her identity and position in society is subject to man. She determines that understanding immanence and transcendence is key to understanding the patriarchal structure of society and the value ascribed to women in such a society, and uses history, myths, biology and psychology to aid her line of argument. She expresses some strong views on the role of immanence in women’s oppression and the role of transcendence in uplifting men in the quest for human excellence. While there is much to be questioned in her definition of what constitutes as immanence and transcendence, there is also a debate to be had about the inherent value of immanence and the work of preservation and sustenance which is predominantly carried out by women. In an attempt to work through some of these complex ideas, the research question I would like to address is: Is Simone de Beauvoir accurate in her understanding of how immanence and transcendence shape the role of women in human society, specifically through the lens of motherhood? Does her view fail to consider certain social realities linked to the complementary nature of immanence and transcendence?

To answer this question, I will be analyzing excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir’s famous feminist philosophical treatise *The Second Sex*. Specifically, I will be analyzing excerpts from the chapters titled Introduction (pg. 3-17), Biological data (pg. 44-48), History (pg. 71-75), Myths (pg. 159-187), The Mother (p. 524-43, 566-70), and Conclusion (p. 753-66).

In the process of trying to answer this question, I will be grappling with a few key ideas – understanding Beauvoir’s definition of immanence and transcendence, women’s oppression as linked to immanence and motherhood, and finally whether immanence and transcendence are competing or cooperative structures.

*DEFINING IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE*

Adopting a perspective of moral existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir posits immanence and transcendence as the ideas at the core of women’s oppression in society. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir highlights that we live in a world where a woman’s position is always relative to that of the man. Man is considered ‘the One’ and woman is ‘the Other’. Men are defined by their activity which extends into the world beyond them and into the future, while women are defined by their passivity which is set within domestic confines, making them keepers of the home and family. Men create while women maintain. This binary division of roles between men and women also helps us understand the concepts of transcendence and immanence as presented by Beauvoir. She defines transcendence as active, creative, centered on innovation and projecting into the future, and immanence as passive, internal, and centered on the maintenance of the species. Transcendence is the action of expanding one’s natural boundaries and overcoming limits while immanence is defined as an act of repetition which sustains the nature that already persists. Social norms grant men transcendence and place women in positions of constant immanence based on their actions and roles in society.

Presenting a broad philosophical view on transcendence, Beauvoir states, “Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Her words here clearly show that she places transcendence at the core of human excellence and our need as a species to achieve the ultimate liberation. She also states, “Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects…. There is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an infinitely open future.”[[2]](#footnote-3) According to her, transcendence is the only goal that justifies the human experiment, and can be considered the only constant in the perpetually evolving human nature. Yet, while transcendence remains a broad term, with any number of actions constituting transcendence, Beauvoir seeks to definitively exclude the primarily women-centric actions of reproduction and motherhood from the ambit of transcendence.

*MOTHERHOOD, IMMANENCE AND FEMALE OPPRESSION*

The creation of human life has long been considered one of the most wondrous abilities of women, with many societies and cultures even considering it sacred. While science and technology has been able to replace human labour in most fields of work, pregnancy and motherhood is something that has not been totally replicated yet. Even Beauvoir recognizes that there is an inherent transcendence to the creation of life. She states, “What is unique about the pregnant women is that at the very moment her body transcends itself, it is grasped as immanent…it no longer exists for itself alone and then becomes bigger than it has ever been.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Yet, she reverts to referencing pregnancy as an animalistic endeavour, going so far as to say that women make a trade-off between motherhood and their liberties. She states, “These ‘breeders’ rather than mothers eagerly seek the possibility of alienating their liberty to the benefit of their flesh: their existence appears to them to be tranquility justified by the passive fertility of their body.”[[4]](#footnote-5) She expresses here that women who choose to have multiple children are resigning themselves to a life of passivity and immanence. Calling such women ‘breeders’ shows that she sees them and their activities only as a biological tool, clearly indicating that reproduction and motherhood are the reason for women’s inferiority.

This inherent connection of biology and immanence is one of significance here. This is made evident as Beauvoir states, “If flesh is pure inertia, it cannot embody transcendence, even in a degraded form.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Being relegated to the matters of the flesh has long been considered confining, even in the quest for spiritual transcendence where distancing oneself from the unending cycle of the material world and the pleasures of the flesh are key to achieving enlightenment. A similar idea is presented by Beauvoir here as she expresses the intimate connection between women’s biology or ‘activities of the flesh’ and their immanence.

The very act of reproduction itself is an expression of the immanence of humans, providing a stark representation of the mortality of humans, irrespective of any innovation or progress made by them. Beauvoir quotes Hegel in her book to present this idea by stating, “The birth of children is the death of parents”[[6]](#footnote-7). Women, as the carriers of this progeny, further reinforce their position of immanence in society, often even creating fear among men by representing the temporality of human life and destroying their fantasies of transcendence.

While trying to succinctly present Beauvoir’s views on the primarily female endeavours of pregnancy and motherhood, I keep returning to the word ‘animalistic’. She equates pregnancy and motherhood to an uncontrolled biological force which is centered in women’s passivity and must be overcome just as humans have overcome all other biological constraints placed by nature. Beauvoir writes, “Humanity has always tried to escape from its species’ destiny – with the invention of tool, maintenance of life became activity and project for man, while motherhood left woman riveted to her body like the animal”[[7]](#footnote-8). Immanence has always been associated with the animalistic side of humanity, and is considered a wastage of human potential which can only be maximized by constantly striving for transcendence. Her writing shows that, through no fault of their own, the female reproductive ability leaves women in shackles. Women and their contribution to society, historically characterized by reproduction and domestic labour, are considered inferior solely on the basis of their relation to immanence.

Among humans, the word ‘animalistic’ is never used with a positive connotation. Beyond her opinions, the negative vocabulary Beauvoir uses is also very telling of her views on this issue. Using phrases like “freeze her as an object”, “doom her to immanence” and “degradation of existence” when referring to immanence relays the idea that immanence is an undesirable state from which one must constantly try to break free. She even terms the fall from transcendence to immanence as “an absolute evil”[[8]](#footnote-9).

When she presents the view of an ideal world, she uses the example of the vision for the Soviet Union, where women are not bound by motherhood and are expected to contribute to society just as any man, and receive support from the government and society in child-rearing and care work.[[9]](#footnote-10) While this does echo the ideals of equality feminism, there is an inherent value judgement of the female biology here. A woman choosing to be a full-time mother is seen to be of no value, and her work is dismissed as that of immanence, whereas the work of man, no matter how repetitive or mundane, is valued as transcendental. Even the basis for our globally accepted economic theories and structures emerge from this principle. Women’s work in domestic labour, childcare, etc. are not recognized or counted in the GDP of countries which leads us to ask – Is the extensive unpaid work regularly done by them not worth anything? This question actually plays a role in undermining Beauvoir’s argument as it indicates that the patriarchal structure of society is not just centered around acts of immanence and transcendence as performed by men and women, but may have many more ingrained issues which cannot be resolved just by women deciding to pursue transcendental endeavours.

This discussion also leads us to another observation. Beauvoir aims for every human to pursue the path to transcendence and encourages women to not limit themselves by pursuing motherhood or care-work as long-term goals. Yet, even if a woman chooses to continue working after she becomes a mother, she pays to replace herself with another woman with lower financial means in the same systems of immanence. Is the transcendence of one woman at the cost of immanence for another the answer to women’s problems? Hence, there is some value in viewing this issue intersectionally and recognizing that factors beyond gender like race, class, etc. also determine your ability to transcend in life. Beauvoir also recognizes this as she states that women live dispersed among their oppressors and are “tied by homes, work, economic interests and social conditions to certain men more closely than other women.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Finally we can understand that by equating motherhood and pregnancy with immanence, Beauvoir immediately relegates a majority of women with a womb, and a wish to be mothers, to immanence in life with no hopes for transcendence simply because of their biological construct - something which is a defining element of their existence, and should not need to be alienated in the quest for transcendence.

*IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE: COMPETING OR COOPERATING FORCES?*

To understand the relationship between immanence and transcendence, one has to first examine how it manifests itself in society through the gender roles assigned to men and women. Some of the important questions we examine in this process are - Are men and women competing entities or two parts of a whole? What does the structure of society reveal about this? Further, is transcendence truly the realm of men, or the realm of a few, unconfined by gender?

Beauvoir believes that transcendence is achieved from innovating and breaking nature’s limits, which men have apparently recognized and used to set themselves apart from women who remain stuck in an endless cycle of repetitive work through the centuries. She writes, “Women’s inferiority, as we have seen, originally came from the fact that she was restricted to repeating life, while man invented reasons for living, in his eyes more essential than the pure facticity of existence.”[[11]](#footnote-12) While historically male inventors and discoverers may outnumber their female counterparts, she seems to be making a grand generalization in the role of men in transcendence. Most men in history have spent their life not pursuing transcendence but occupations which maintain the immanence of society. This can include working as a labourer, factory worker, farmer or any number of professions which maintain society without advancing its boundaries. Even today, most humans of all genders during their lifetime do not contribute significantly to the transcendence of the human race. Most people are quite content maintaining the status quo, even actively opposing advancement of the human quest in innovation and the sciences.

And while transcendence is not confined to men, it is true that the pursuit of transcendence cannot be furthered without the support of immanence. Beauvoir herself recognizes this idea when she states, “In truth, all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go beyond itself, it must maintain itself; to thrust itself toward the future, it must integrate the past into itself.”[[12]](#footnote-13) Yet she ultimately chooses to present transcendence as the ultimate goal of human life without giving due credit to the structures of immanence which allow one the freedom to pursue the cause of transcendence. Not only is there a dependence between them, there is an intimate synchronicity in the actions of immanence and transcendence. To aid this argument further, Beauvoir states, “There are two movements that come together in life, and life maintains itself only by surpassing itself. It does not surpass itself without maintaining itself; these two moments are always accomplished together.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

Human society itself is structured on this idea. Even today, those who pursue transcendental endeavours through innovation and research are highly dependent on a functioning immanent system to sustain their activities. To see a colloquial, microcosmic manifestation of this view, we can refer to the rather sexist, yet popular saying ‘Behind every successful man, there stands a woman.’ This saying is a nod to the immense amount of unrecognized activity based in immanence that is performed predominantly by women to sustain those seeking transcendental paths in life.

Before society and civilization, humans were mostly individual entities with time and effort focused only on their personal sustenance and maintenance. Humans then realized the futility of this, and developed societies and communal living. Work was divided based on efficiency where some people work to sustain and maintain the smooth functioning of society while others worked on transcending nature’s limits for man through science, philosophy, etc. Rationally, we must acknowledge the necessity of both these forces for a balanced society.

Women throughout history have fulfilled some truly crucial roles in society working to prove themselves both within and outside the home, and have shaped the lives of generations of individuals as mothers, caretakers, teachers and providers. Yet, we find that women always fall short of society’s expectations and demands of them because people have different views of what women should do for liberation. Beauvoir presents another such idea through the lens of immanence and transcendence. But ultimately, I believe that she falls into the trap of sexism by agreeing with patriarchal claims that highlight the innate subordination of immanence, and hence the subordination of females to males unless they choose to adopt the definition of ‘transcendence’ as set by the actions of men.

*CONCLUSION*

In this paper I have attempted to analyze Simone de Beauvoir’s views on immanence and transcendence as determinants of women’s role and station in society. While she does make some poignant observations about the role of biology, myth, history and the human quest for liberation in shaping women’s position in society, I believe that her arguments are flawed. Not only does she fail to consider the value of immanence in preserving and sustaining a balanced society, but she also classifies acts of immanence and transcendence in a flawed manner by excluding reproduction and motherhood from transcendental actions. By presenting the female biological construct as the reason for women’s immanence, she essentially makes transcendence unattainable for those women who want to embrace motherhood. Ultimately I feel like she falls prey to sexism wherein a woman’s worth is determined based on her contribution to the male-centric structures of society, and anything outside it is essentially considered worthless.

While she reimagines societal roles to provide equality for men and women, she focuses on women’s ability to perform ‘transcendental actions’. She fails to realize that transcendence has been the territory of very few in human history, and that most people irrespective of gender are stuck in occupations defined by immanence, with no hopes of pursuing transcendental endeavours. Interestingly, Beauvoir doesn’t consider whether men should share the burden of immanence to allow women to pursue transcendental endeavours since both immanence and transcendence are needed for a society to function effectively. Similarly, she doesn’t consider that someone needs to perform sustenance activities, and while we are moving towards technological automation for some of those activities, everyone cannot pursue transcendence alone as it will lead to societal collapse.

While this may appear to be a discussion restricted to the realm of philosophy, it has major implications in our society. When the human race as a whole values transcendence over immanence, it influences how we think about certain roles and occupations and what value we ascribe to them. When maintaining and caring for life is considered secondary to advancing technology and innovation in human society, it makes those who perform these secondary tasks inferior to others. Women, who are primarily tasked with these roles automatically find themselves disadvantaged in life. Ultimately, this leads to social inequities like the gender wage gap, unpaid and unrecognized domestic labour and childcare, and restriction of women’s rights and liberties in society. Understanding immanence and transcendence as presented by Beauvoir can also be key to understanding things outside the boundaries of gender. For example, issues like climate change are based on preservation and sustenance rather than transcendence, and people’s support for the preservation of nature can stem from the value they assign to immanence in life. While contemporary societies debate and discuss these issues, it might be useful to understand Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas of immanence and transcendence as key causes of such inequities to be able to create effective and lasting change in these areas, and reform and remedy unjust practices and mindsets among all humans.

References

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. London: Vintage Random House, 2011.

1. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. pg. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Beauvoir. pg. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Beauvoir. pg. 552 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Beauvoir. pg. 552 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Beauvoir. pg. 552 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Beauvoir. pg. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Beauvoir. pg.77 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Beauvoir. pg. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Beauvoir. pg. 776 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Beauvoir. pg. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Beauvoir. pg. 582 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Beauvoir. pg. 774 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Beauvoir. pg.29 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)