

## **An Existential State of ‘Being’: Gender Crisis, Conflict, and Struggles.**

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Much of the debate within the philosophy of gender puts forward the premise that the biological differences between males and females are straightforward, whereas the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman are much more complicated. (see Butler, 1990; El Saadawi in Shaw, 2017; Greer, 1971; Irigaray, 1987/1993) Through a Sartrean philosophical lens, I will highlight questions into the nature of our being, regardless of sex, gender, race, religion and culture, which are at the very heart of every philosophy of gender debate. The article presents an existential theoretical perspective on the notion of conflict and struggle. It aims to show how existentialism, as a twenty-first century philosophy, and perhaps as a view of life, transcends our contemporary understanding of gender and identity. The article posits that at the very heart of every investigation into the ontology of our being is the question of the nature of our struggles, first and foremost, with our being, and secondly, with our surroundings. To present some of the key principles, I will use narrative to bring to life Jean Paul Sartre’s theoretical explorations underpinning his existential philosophy. In doing so, I will also highlight its relevance for exploring gender in embodied examples through one’s life cycle.

The humble beginning: In *Being and Nothingness*, (1943/2006) one of the best-known existential texts, we encounter Sartre’s first investigation of the consciousness of being; or, in other words, the phenomenological ontology of our existence. Our world, Sartre contends, is a series of finite appearances that surround us, and we, from humble beginnings, start to learn about them as part of our existence. To highlight the dynamic nature of our existence in relation to our surroundings, one could say that from the moment of announcing “we are having a baby”, expectations begin to form, and the questions begin; I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl. It is a thrill; the excitement of adding a boy to the

family brings to the parents an unspoken pride of carrying the family’s name as the legacy lives on and, if it is a girl, anticipation of the joys she brings into the house and the children she will bear. As the scan to determine the baby’s sex takes place, the parents’ expectations manifest in how they construct the early months of the child’s life; the chosen décor and colour scheme of the room, the clothes, the toys, the pram and, with this, the growing expectations which often extend to predicting what he or she will be like. Then, a child is born, and we hear a cry of joy; “it is a girl!” or “it is a boy!” It is announced. Suddenly, everything surrounding the child’s existence falls into place and the parents

begin a journey that they believe they have constructed well. Sartre saw the scenario of being brought into this world as an intricate process that triggers a series of unfolding conflicts and struggles. His description of the ontological modes of being in his work (p.98), distinguishes being -in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and being- for-itself (*être-pour-soi*).

Being- in-itself, as a mode of existence, also described by Sartre as material entities, bodies in the world. (see Husserl in Gusman, 2018) Sartre presents this as a mode of all non-conscious bodies which are concrete and lack the ability to change; like a tree or a table for example, their “being is what it is” (*Being and Nothingness*, p.98). On the other hand, being-for-itself, is consciousness and, yet it is lacking in a definite nature and lacking in self-identity. Sartre writes, “the law of being of the for-itself, as the ontological foundation of consciousness, is to be itself in the form of *presence* to itself.” (p.101) This undefined, non-determined nature is what makes, according to Sartre, understanding the nature of our being and existence in the world so complex. To simplify, when a human is born, he is a being in-itself, a human body, an object. This body can create and re-create itself in the world, becoming something else, actuating its own being as an object for-itself. “The self cannot be a property of being-in-itself...The self refers, but it refers precisely to the *subject*. It indicates a relation between the subject and himself, and this relation is precisely a duality, but a particular duality since it requires particular verbal symbols.” (p.100) The development

of one’s being as a being for it-self can be best understood by how a child begins to grow and sees more of the world and expresses it’s being in a manner that aligns with the expectations, so well-constructed. The social expectation is often that the growing child gravitates towards their birth-assigned gender; either all that is feminine, fulfilling the construct of social female beauty, or all that is masculine. Sartre explains that being for-itself can adapt an attitude towards itself by being separated by a *nothingness* and, thus, never identical to itself; it can never encounter its own subjectivity. (Stevens, 2008) This-namely that ‘consciousness is to exist *at a distance from itself* as presence to itself’ (*Being and Nothingness*, p.102)- is the cause for human anguish and despair. Sartre saw that the human reality present to being in-itself and engaged in the world reveal an empty distance where ‘being’ carries also *nothingness*. For example, when a child grows into a man or a woman, it develops and adapts in the process of forming an identity, the social and parental expectations which become fulfilled and yet, the child is never fulfilled themselves.

*“The separation which separates belief from itself cannot be grasped or even conceived in isolation. If we seek to reveal it, it vanishes. We find belief once more as pure immanence. But if, on the other hand, we wish to apprehend belief as such, then the fissure is there, appearing when we do not wish to see it, disappearing as soon as we seek to*

*contemplate it. This fissure then is the pure negative.*" (Sartre, 2003, p.102)

As Sartre eloquently reveals, we suffer as we strive in life to become a "being- in-itself-for-itself" (*être-en-soi- pour soi*); tormented by the longing to be *both*; the subject and object of our being. This, Sartre says, is the 'existential fundamental project' that he and his intellectual partner, Simone de Beauvoir, advocated. He, to clarify, writes that "distance, laps of time, psychological difference can be apprehended in themselves and include as such elements of positivity; they have a simple negative *function*. But the fissure within consciousness is a nothing except by what it denies, and it can have 'being' only as we do not see it. This negative- which is the nothingness of being and the nihilating power- both together, is *nothingness*." (p.102) At a stage in life, a key turning point, a young woman or a young man, begin to express their identity in a different manner, one that conflicts with the social norms and traditions, where conflicts and struggles emerge. This new identity, for a female, for example, may mean pleading for parity with men, politically, economically and socially. What seemed like a perfectly well constructed upbringing suddenly becomes a detraction from '*being*' and, perhaps also, from being young. In Sartrean terms, anguish and despair surface when "it is the obligation for the for-itself never to exist except in the form of an elsewhere in relation to itself, to exist as a being which perpetually effects in itself a weakness of being." (102) For example, every choice becomes calculated with the

fear that culture, society or religion frowns upon it. Individual preferences become struggles; these choices are not simply liking dark colours, intellectual conversation, cigarettes or even replacing a wardrobe of dresses with suits, shoes with high-heeled boots or vice versa. They are moments of crisis, of self-awareness and, more importantly, perhaps, of self-expression. For Sartre, the encounter with the Other, and the struggles that the two modes of existence bring, creates a scope for new possibilities. He writes:

*"Here the appearance of the Other is indispensable not to the constitution of the world and of my empirical "Ego" but to the very existence of my consciousness as self-consciousness. In fact, as self-consciousness, the Self itself apprehends itself. The equation "Myself=myself" or "I am I" is precisely the expression of this fact. At first this self-consciousness is pure self-identity, pure existence for itself. It has certitude of itself, but this certitude still lacks truth. In fact, this certitude would be true only to the extent that its own existence for itself appeared to it as an independent object. Thus, self-consciousness is first a syncretic relation without truth between a subject and an object, an object, which is not yet objectified, and which is this subject himself..."*

Sartre then concludes: "*the mediator is the Other. The Other appears along with myself since*

*self-consciousness is identical with itself by means of the exclusion of every Other.” (ibid, p.260)*

In one of Sartre’s most well-known existential narratives, *Nausea* (1938, 2000). The novel presents how relationships fail and spiral into self-defeating attitudes towards the Other. We see a character, Antoine Roquentin, who is afraid of the burden of freedom, choices and decisions. Sartre presents an interplay, a trilogy, between our states of being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others (*être-pour-autrui*). The narrative shows the complexity of attempting to make sense of our human nature and at the same time to *be* in the world. For Sartre, we are all protagonists in our own narratives, longing for reassurances in life and craving for control over what we believe to be our destiny, as well as our conception of an absolute identity (which often is the source of conflict with Others). He writes, “I am the mode of not being what I am and of being what I am *not*” (*Being and Nothingness*, p.297). The crisis, he believes, is in realising that life has passed by in a flash and the realisation that one has made poor choices or never truly lived is what becomes difficult to comprehend or even accept. Furthermore, at the same time, we struggle to accept, or come to terms with, the daily realisation of the futility of life; described as “uneasiness, a lived wrenching away from the ekstastic unity of the for-itself, a limit which I cannot reach and which yet I am.” (ibid, p.299)

In Sartre’s novel, the two female figures present the expectations put upon the

protagonist, Roquentin. The first is Anny who is Roquentin’s previous lover; she seeks his company and acts as a constant reminder of the person who he used to be. The second is Françoise, who is Roquentin’s present lover and a Barmaid at a local café. The conflict between the past and present is signified by both relationships, which haunt and pressure Roquentin to react and behave in certain ways. The past relationship is often re-lived in the present when Anny reminds Roquentin of the ‘perfect moments’ and yet, she refuses to be part of his present. Françoise, on the other hand, signified the moments he confronted the bare existence of objects in life and realised that ‘existence precedes essence’; Sartre’s fundamental declaration. Roquentin’s horror upon realising that objects and people mask the *nothingness* of our existence, the futility of our being, caused his nausea. Once he accepts this realisation, the meaninglessness of his being and that of others and of his surroundings, he embraces his existence fully. For Sartre, Roquentin is not identical to his past or his future. He is no longer what he was, and he is not yet what he will: through time, he never coincides with himself. Sartre describes the past as the ‘facticity of human life’, we cannot choose what is already spent. The future, however, presents ample opportunities for freedom of the being- for-itself. As freedom and facticity form an inconsistency within the being- for-itself, generating instability, this inconsistency is the being for-itself’s most important task to form

projects to better understand the human being.

Another example from narrative which posits that conflict is the original-mode of being-for-others, is Sartre's play, *Huis Clos* (2000). Conflict was one of the themes that was presented strongly in the play. This is reiterated in de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex* (1949/2011) where she questions the dynamics of male-female relationships and posits the premise that it is the notion of struggle and conflict that contributes to our ability to overcome some of our self-defeating anxieties towards the Other. Looking more closely, de Beauvoir and Sartre's relationship as lovers, intellectual partners and life-companions is one where being-for-others is explored. Their relationship has been without a doubt the subject of controversial debates within philosophy and the philosophy of gender. Recording Sartre's proposal, de Beauvoir wrote about the pact they forged in 1929, "we were two of a kind, and our relationship would endure as long as we did: but it could not make up entirely for the fleeting riches to be had from encounters with different people." (Appignanesi, 2005) They met at such a young age at the Sorbonne. Two very bright students, unaware of the force that brought them together to become one of the most famous literary couples. Together, they put forward existentialism, as a philosophy, and a way of life. Their writings on being-for-others, the struggles in life, the dichotomy of chance and choice, describing the joy and the pain of a state of being that is often in conflict with the very essence of its existence, led

to the popularity of existentialism as a trend. It attracted an academic and non-academic audience as a philosophy (and a lense through which to view life) over the years. Sartre and de Beauvoir's relationship as a model of an examination into our state of being has contributed to their resistance and lack of conformity to every traditional mode of social-commitment.

*"From early on, Notre-Dame-de-Sartre, as the wits dubbed her, organises the comings and goings of Sartre's "contingent" women; she encourages, consoles, manipulates, and continues to do so until the very end for that loose grouping of friends and exes they called their "family"."* (Appignanesi, 2005)

In *All Said and Done* (1977), in her autobiography, de Beauvoir puts forward, in what seems to be a stream of consciousness, a reflection on her past, present and future. She writes that despite our very humble existence that leaves us perplexed about the nature of our lives, the chances we take and choices that shape our experiences are often believed to be experiences well-planned; constructs of our desires and needs. Thus, they are considered 'non-accidental'.

*"The penetration of that particular ovum by that particular spermatozoon, with its implications of the meeting of my parents and before that of their birth and the births of all their forebears, had not one chance in hundreds of millions of coming about. And it was chance, a chance quite*

*unpredictable in the present state of science, that caused me to be born a woman. From that point on, it seems to me that a thousand different futures might have stemmed from every single movement of my past: I might have fallen ill and broken off my studies; I might not have met Sartre; anything at all might have happened. Tossed into this world, I have been subjected to its laws and its contingencies, ruled by wills other than my own, by circumstances, by history: it is therefore reasonable to for me to suggest that I am myself contingent.... I have to take the fact that I do exist as my starting point.” (Plummer, xii)*

Sartre and de Beauvoir magnified in their existential philosophy several lenses of examining the ontology of our being. But it is the ‘what if’ concept that is a common thread in the writings of both intellectuals and which underlies many of Sartre’s literary narratives. The question of “what if” keeps us, throughout our lives, puzzled about incidents and choices that we make. What if we took a different path, made a different friend, took a risk? Will our choices make us who we are and lead us all the same to the persons we are meant to be *regardless* of the routes that we take? In a key section of her autobiography, Beauvoir magnifies our rise and fall as beings in-this-world; she uses a female figure, a friend of Sartre, Camille, who was referenced in her earlier works. Camille’s story is used symbolically to show the horrors and fragility of life and the expectations that we set ourselves and consider to be our

destiny. From the description of Camille’s state, the message seems to be that as human beings we quickly realise, with time and age, how far our expectations of ourselves are from our control. The young Camille was someone who de Beauvoir looked up to and had so much admiration for. Described in de Beauvoir’s earlier writings as an intelligent and charismatic lady who aspired to be a writer, but whose life took a different turn with excessive drinking, Camille becomes a shadow of her previous self in de Beauvoir’s description. On human biology, de Beauvoir writes; “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world (*être-en-soi*) and a point of view towards this world (*être-pour-soi*); but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure”. (*The Second Sex*, 1949, p.38) The narrative concludes with Camille’s deteriorated health, her body frail and her spirit faded as she passes away. As a couple, Sartre and de Beauvoir cared for and admired Camille. There were many visits to Camille before and after she was admitted to the hospital by de Beauvoir.

It is perhaps in de Beauvoir’s depiction of the hospital that a tone of disappointment in life, a sense of betrayal that it could declare victory over Camille becomes apparent; we see an emphasis on the ‘tragedy of being’. Camille was helpless, presented as defeated by life and in a demeaning state. For both Sartre and de Beauvoir, the dichotomy of life and death, the struggle of being and conflicts with others and, perhaps most of all, the submission to one’s destiny at the face of life’s futility, are key elements in all

intellectual endeavors within the philosophy of gender. Through an existentialist lense, gender struggle and conflict become a feature of the fundamental project where progress of life through time creates an infinite past and a future that is full of possibilities. The pact between two intellectuals, Sartre and de Beauvoir, was about acknowledging the lack of grounding to our being; this is the reason we often feel incomplete or experience a sense of meaninglessness in our lives. We are in conflict, not with anyone else, but with *ourselves*.

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