

3. Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

The topic that Simone de Beauvoir’s quotation raises joins the philosophic field of questions about the understanding of terms such as *sex* and *gender*, about the difficulties and varieties of distinction between terms such as *male*, *female* or *transgender*. It ultimately questions our way of self-perception and the usefulness of these terms. In order to discuss de Beauvoir’s words, we shall have a closer look at the quotation and divide it into two parts, so we can clarify important terms and eventually get to an understanding of the far-reaching consequences.

In de Beauvoir’s admittedly short sentence there can still be found two different points to discuss, so I consider it useful to divide it into two separate statements, which we shall have a look at in different paragraphs. Whereas the first half concentrates on excluding something from the definition of a woman and shall be used to clarify important terms, the second focuses on the process of this definition, which de Beauvoir considers more important.

(1) One is not born a woman.

(2) But one becomes a woman.

Simone de Beauvoir criticizes our understanding of the word *woman*. In sentence (1) she wants to exclude a certain point, that she thinks is falsely held for the one defining characteristic of the expression. By saying that one – a human being – is not born a woman, she tells us that it is not important with what kind of genitals we come into this world. In other words, *sex*, meaning our biologically decided way of looking and of possessing a special type of genitals, should not be a criteria for the expression. This first sentence gets increasingly important as we realize that there is not just two types of sex, commonly named *male* and *female*, but that the boundary is blurred.

The second sentence (2) puts forward another aspect, namely the aspect of process. It is not a biological equipment that defines someone as a woman, but something different, which is characterized by a procedural and changeable idea of *becoming: gender identity*. Society and our cultural environment are constantly attributing to a human being certain qualities and descriptions, which are thought – by the same society - to be typical for either a woman or a man. In other words, our social environment, which is indeed very different depending on where you live, continually creates roles and stereotypes which go with them. It is essential to realize that the perception of roles and their corresponding attributes are dependant on culture and on the time you live in. The perception of women and the character traits they were expected to have, for instant, have changed drastically over the last century. The same differences in expectations towards women can be seen in comparison of different cultures: whereas in some places women are thought and expected to stay in the role of a housewife and in charge of upbringing her children, there are other cultures, more matriarchal cultures for example, where the women are expected to be decision-makers and leaders. Simone de Beauvoir states with her sentence that it is this process of defining and redefining certain roles and attributes which is decisive, certainly not biologically fixed genitals. The sentence is also critics of a lacking reflection of society, of an inability to realize that roles and character traits attributed to male and female are not fixed, but changeable.

As we do not know the context in which de Beauvoir expressed this statement, it is difficult to judge if she approved or disapproved of this approach of gender. Still, we can make some remarks on the usefulness of the terms of sex and gender, whose distinction does not exist in every language.

Firstly, the concept of the process bans the idea that we are male or female just according to how we were born. It removes the static image of a clear distinction, which, in fact, is just an illusion as there are other sexes as just male and female.

That understood, we can, secondly, replace this illusion by the less static approach of gender generated by society. De Beauvoir, who expressed this statement in 1949, criticizes the way society perceives roles and “typical male/female behaviour” as given and unchangeable. In the detachment from the static model and in the understanding of influence of cultural environment lie the far-reaching consequences of the statement. A person who is able to see

that male and female are not just genetically programmed packs of “female/male behaviour and character” is able to reflect about his own stereotypes. This will eventually be the only way to more acceptance, especially for people not fitting the cultural stereotypes, and the only way to escape inequality. Another, third important aspect is that the concept enlarges the personal freedom as it removes society’s oppression. If I can choose freely how to behave, how to dress, what to do for a living, without fear of social isolation and contempt, this means that my personal freedom is hugely increased.

In conclusion, we can state that Simone de Beauvoir’s quote wants us to become aware of the influences of society on our way of perceiving terms such as male and female. This approach is linked with the detachment from a static model that could limit one’s personal freedom. So in the end, de Beauvoir’s quote is not just a question of definition, but also an appeal to everyone to question and reflect on our society.