

Simone de Beauvoir's Transcendence and Immanence in the Twenty First century: The Tension between Career and Motherhood

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Novelist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote her magnum opus, *The Second Sex*, in 1947. Her work marked a major shift in women's consciousness at the time. It analyzed the situation of women from biological, historical, mythological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Beauvoir shows how women's position in the world is created by society, and that women can choose their destiny. It was arguably the first book to take a philosophical look at the oppression of woman and it laid the groundwork for the Second Wave of feminism. Although women's lives in the west have changed dramatically since *The Second Sex* was published, its central argument and guiding philosophy remain relevant today.

This paper looks at how Beauvoir's concepts of transcendence and immanence in *The Second Sex* help explain why women feel the tension between parenting and career more than do men (although this dynamic is changing). I follow Beauvoir's lead and use a variety of sources from business leaders, political professors, philosophers, and

literary and feminist theorists to show how deeply the effects of transcendence and immanence are embedded in our society.

The Second Sex demonstrated that the world women live in is defined by and centered on men. Man is Subject, Woman is Object and Other. Man is essential, Woman is inessential. Men are active, extending out into the world and into the future, while women are passive, inward, keepers of the home and family. Men create, women maintain. Beauvoir discusses these oppositions through the concepts of transcendence and immanence. She defines transcendence as active, creative, projecting forward into the future and immanence as passive, internal, and centered on the maintenance of the species. Social norms grant men transcendence and place women in positions of constant immanence. However, both transcendence and immanence are necessary for every human being. Beauvoir says, "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" (443).

Today in the western world, although women are subjects in their own right, they are still very much Other or Object. This is clearly demonstrated in the "sex sells" philosophy and the portrayal of women as sex objects in popular culture. Women are able to be creative and

project themselves into the world, as seen in the predominance of women in higher education and their relatively equal numbers in the workforce. Despite their newfound place in the public world, the private world, the world of the home, remains in their purview. When both members in a heterosexual partnership work outside the home, the woman still does the majority of the housework. When a couple has a child, it is usually the woman who takes leave from work. While this dynamic is slowly changing, men are usually able to focus on their active life outside the home, whereas women must focus on both. Beauvoir's argument is still valid today - men remain transcendent, and women are caught between transcendence and immanence.

Business, money and unlimited growth are dominant interests in our society. In 2013 Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and the sixth most powerful woman in the world (according to online business magazine Forbes), wrote the best-selling book called *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. It sold 150,000 copies in its first week. In it she explores why young women cut back their career ambitions and what they need to do to succeed, that is, attain positions of leadership and power. Sandberg says that rather than taking chances and pushing forward in their careers, women tend to 'lean back' because of the potential conflict between work and family. While acknowledging the structural problems in women's quest for equality in the workplace, Sandberg's premise is that women

need to look internally, and change themselves to fit into a male-centered workforce in order to achieve success. Women must 'lean in' to their work; they must push forward regardless of whether they are pregnant or may get pregnant in the future.

Sandberg demonstrates, both through her description of men and women in corporate culture, and through the neo-liberal lens in which she writes, how transcendence and immanence, the drive for success and fulfillment and who has access to it, permeate western culture. The corporate world values progress and all the attributes historically attributed to men: ambition, confidence, outspokenness, aggressiveness, and risk taking. These are the traits necessary for success. Sandberg advises women to take on these characteristics. If she does not, and instead displays traits perceived as appropriately feminine and imminent - friendliness, communal mindedness, accommodation - she is looked down upon.

Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, Anne-Marie Slaughter, takes a political and social perspective. In 2012, as contributing editor at *The Atlantic* (a foreign affairs, politics, economic and cultural trends magazine) she wrote an article entitled "Why Women Still Can't Have it All." One million people read it online. Her article outlines the structural obstacles to women's full and balanced participation in

society. She says that in a workplace designed for men and in a home life designed for women, twenty-first century women are hard pressed to do well in both. Rather than women shaping their personalities to fit into a male-centered workplace Slaughter suggests the workplace must be shaped to women's needs as well as men's. These suggestions focus on valuing family more than work.

Sandberg and Slaughter both address the current economic and social atmosphere in which both men and women find themselves. They have reignited the debate over the choices that western (and often privileged) women must make in their lives concerning work and family. They show that despite all the progress that women have made in the workplace, there are still structural practices and societal beliefs that make it difficult for them to fully succeed in and out of the workplace. Their writings also show that men do not face the same challenges.

Simone de Beauvoir's description and treatment of transcendence as masculine, active, creative, public, forward looking and immanence as feminine, passive, internal, private gives current readers philosophical and sociological insight into Sandberg's and Slaughter's arguments and the societal structures and beliefs from which they stem. Today's society is built on the stereotype that women are naturally more geared towards nurturing and relationships (immanence), and men are naturally geared

towards action, individual fulfillment and the public world (transcendence). This belief shows itself in women's ability (or lack thereof) to progress into leadership positions, and the expectation that women will not be as dedicated to work because of their inclination or bias towards family.

Beauvoir asserts that an individual needs a balance of transcendence and immanence, yet she places greater value on transcendence: "there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future" (16). She continues with a negative portrayal of immanence: "Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into 'in-itself', of freedom into facticity" (16). Further, she writes that moving from transcendence to immanence is an "absolute evil" (16), whether it is self-inflicted or inflicted by society. We can see the roots of the torment women experience through Beauvoir's contradictory statements that transcendence and immanence are necessary, and at the same time giving transcendence superior value. Sandberg and Slaughter echo this tension. Women still cannot "have it all" because more value is placed on transcendence while at the same time women are assumed to be inherently immanent. Beauvoir shows how immanence is not an inherent female quality, but then degrades its meaning and elevates that of transcendence. Western society has not moved beyond this conflict. Beauvoir's approach to

transcendence and immanence both in its description and in her interpretation shed light on why women still can't have it all.

Feminist critics have engaged with Beauvoir from a variety of perspectives. Feminine difference theorists condemn Beauvoir for her clear preference for so-called "masculine" qualities. Another common criticism is that Beauvoir writes of women as though they are a monolithic group. Poet Audre Lorde, writing in 1984, says that white feminists ignore the idea of difference, although difference, especially as it relates to race, is an important part of a person's identity ("The Master's Tools").

Judith Butler, philosopher and gender theorist, writing in *Gender Trouble* (1990), takes Beauvoir's concept of socially constructed femininity even further, saying there is no specific female identity, either in sex or gender. She also asks the reader to be critical of the mind-masculine/body-feminine distinction, which she says Beauvoir maintains while at the same time tries to synthesize (16). By questioning the binary concepts of masculine and feminine, male and female, the reader can see transcendence and immanence apart from gender, which is necessary for true freedom.

Toril Moi, professor of Literature and Romance Studies, takes issue with Beauvoir's presentation of transcendence and immanence. In Beauvoir's description immanence will always be lesser than

transcendence. Moi says, "to launch concrete projects in the world becomes a case of 'throwing oneself forward' into the future; on this logic only linear projects count. Repetitive, circular, cyclical, erratic or random modes of activity, ranging from flirtation to housework, can never hope to be classified as authentically transcendent" (152).

Moi demonstrates that transcendence and immanence need not be described as they are. Transcendence need not be violent or phallic and immanence need not be all darkness and imprisonment. Immanence can equally be "rest, recollection and tranquility" (154). Or instead of the language of penetration and conquest, we could use the language of welcoming, enfolding, and hugging. Through her language Beauvoir restricts transcendence to certain kinds of activities and expands what is contained in immanence "beyond rational limits" (154).

The importance of transcendence and immanence goes beyond defining gender roles. By placing higher value on transcendence society supports actions of perpetual forward motion, unlimited growth, individual fulfillment, and the people that embody these values, namely, men. By devaluing immanence, society places less importance on the home, family, sustainable methods of growth, and on those people who are considered immanent, namely, women. This value system has affected our lives economically, environmentally, socially, and politically. It has

resulted in financial catastrophes, growing wealth gaps, environmental degradation, violence against women, and much more. New emphasis needs to be placed on immanence for a rebalancing to occur. It will require a major mental shift for both men and women. As Sheryl Sandberg and Simone de Beauvoir say, women must own their actions and not accept the role in which society has placed them. On the other hand, as Anne-Marie Slaughter – and Beauvoir – suggests, the structures of society must change before men and women are able to partake equally in work and family life. Once these changes occur, we will see even bigger changes in the functioning of the world.

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