

The Ambiguity of The Feminine

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PUBLIC NOTE

Drawing on feminist and existential theory by Simone de Beauvoir, the author describes how current and historical structures have informed an experience which is unique to the female and which has strong potential to steer behaviour. Using the antagonistic concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, the author argues that the contrast between how a person experiences their subjectivity and how society views them as an object is nowhere as stark as for the woman. Whereas the female views herself as a fully responsible individual, society views her not as a human being, but as a woman. Historically, this means that she is deemed an incomplete man; a view which, as this paper describes, still finds expression in a discourse of inferiority surrounding feminine traits. The situation that flows from this discrepancy, termed “the ambiguity of the feminine”, has generated a reality in which women must either accept the social limitations that come with the stigmatisation of femininity, or learn to resent the very thing which has made the world deem her as inferior: her femininity.

Lessons for Practice

- Women are steered in their behaviour as a result of a persistent (internalised) discourse of feminine inferiority.
- Women and society as a whole are conditioned to believe that public success and femininity are irreconcilable concepts.
- Women are hindered in their quest for professional success, as they are either deemed too feminine or receive social backlash for not being feminine enough.

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Growing up I never felt like I was limited in my future prospects. Sure, I knew I would never become a doctor, but that was purely due to my disdain for anything natural science related. I was confident that the only one who could determine my future was me. Me and my physical and cognitive abilities. As I got older, however, I realised that life is more complex. Yes, I am indeed a subject with a will. I can employ my subjective experience to assert my influence over the world, meaning I can act on my desires and be held personally accountable. Nevertheless, to reduce my existence and my place in the world to my exclusive subjective experience would be naïve. After all, as an individual I cannot escape the fact that my actions only have meaning within a social system, governed by well-defined parameters. My actions are defined by how other people, who are also subjects of their own, perceive them. In this process of being “perceived”, I am no longer an individual who is actively asserting their influence (De Beauvoir, 2015, pp. 5-6). No, in that moment, when other subjects are projecting their views and biases onto the world, and thus onto me, I am reduced to passive, imminent matter. Consequently, I am both a subject and an object. My future thus not only depends on how I choose to employ my subjectivity, but also by how the world defines me as an object. The logical implication is that social constructs, the expectations others have of me, and how they consequently act on them, constrain me just as much in my freedom as my own physical limits (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004, pp. 37-38). The tension between our subjective and objective existence is what Simone de Beauvoir famously termed “the ambiguity of existence” (2018, p. 6). De Beauvoir believed that the irreconcilability of the two opposing, yet equally true experiences, is bound to make any person uncomfortable. Nonetheless, the ambiguity of existence is for no one as agonising as for the world’s second-class citizen; the woman. This is because the contrast between how a person experiences their subjectivity and how society views them as an object is nowhere as stark as for the woman. Every day she needs to reconcile the fact that she subjectively is a human being, with the fact that society views her not as a human being, but as a woman. Historically this means that she is not defined as a person in her own right, like men are, but only exists in relation to him (De Beauvoir, 2015, pp. 6-8). Drawing on these concepts, I attempt to describe how the stark contrast between subjective and objective existence has informed a unique experience, which I call “the ambiguity of the feminine”. Further, I will outline how this discrepancy has found its expression in an inferiority discourse which has strong potential to steer behaviour.

Of course, even as a child, I was aware of the fact that me being a girl, or rather, not being a boy, impacted my life to some extent. However, I thought that impact was limited to the teacher asking “strong boys” to carry the atlases to another classroom. For example, I did not grasp the significance of my mother being the only woman I knew who worked full-time and made enough to be financially independent. When my sister was about 6 years old, a boy at school would constantly harass her in order to get her attention. It got to the point where he would cut her hair “by accident” with scissors and even push her off her bike, only to ask her to be his girlfriend seconds later. Despite my parents having discussed these issues with the teacher, my sister would constantly be forced to sit next to this boy. The argument was that she, as a “good example”, would turn him into a more well-behaved person. When my sister was about 9 years old, she moved a parked bike that was blocking access to her own bike in front of her school. The owner of the bike, a boy in her class, saw that she had touched his bike and got infuriated. As he would later say, his father had told him to “let no one touch” his bike. The boy then started to hit my 9-year-old sister, resulting in her best friend trying to get him off of her by hitting him with the small rubber duck at the end of her keychain. The next day in school, the teacher made my sister publicly apologise for moving his bike. Even before a girl has entered adulthood, she is taught that her desires are worth less than that of her male peers. The subjectivity of the male is superimposed on her, while all she is allowed to be is a passive object.

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What I have previously described are examples of a more blatant sexism, but it was only recently that I realised that my existence is also defined by a more latent superimposition of male subjectivity. A few months ago, one of my friends stumbled upon a friend group account on Tinder. The group, consisting of solely guys, had asked her if she wanted to bring her friend group and attend a party at their place. After having discussed exit strategies and emergency plans in case anything went wrong, we decided to go. Although I was highly skeptical, I was pleasantly surprised by their kindness and we spend the whole night talking about big life questions. After having discussed our political preferences and philosophical beliefs, one guy looked at me with an open mouth and exclaimed: “You guys are so adult! So different from all the other women we’ve met.”

That is when it hit me; their image of “the female” was different from mine. The fact that he, a respectful and well-educated man, considered my speaking, which I simply saw as a form of self-expression, as “adult”, gave away that he considers the average female to be somewhat childish. De Beauvoir was right when she wrote: “Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male” (1952, p. 49). For a split second, this guy was surprised by the realisation that the female subjectivity is equal to his own. It is from interactions like these that I realised my existence is not only determined by the schism between a female’s subjectivity and objectivity, but also by a more indiscreet misperception of the woman. I would argue that this misperception is almost more problematic, as it often goes unnoticed by both the male and the female. As she gets older, the woman is faced with the ambiguity of the fact that she must employ her subjectivity in a world that still implicitly assumes her to be an object.

Just like anyone else being confronted with the ambiguity of their existence, the female will tend to reduce herself to her objectivity or her subjectivity (de Beauvoir, 2018, p. 5-8). In this regard, there is no winning. If she defines herself by her objectivity, she is bound to live a one-dimensional existence. This is the result of women’s achievements being banished to the private sphere through legal arrangements and cultural systems of value ever since the inception of civilisation. It was thought that the woman could make herself most useful here, as her weaker nature would not be able to cope and function in the ruggedness of the public sphere (Hansson, 2007, p. 20). We still experience the remnants of these socially produced structures today, as the highest-paid professional fields are still dominated by men (Narwan & Watts, 2020). What is even more fascinating: there is a negative relation between salary levels, or salary growth, and the extent to which a field is increasingly dominated by women, such as education and healthcare (Taalman, 2021). This relates to a sad, almost debilitating, truth: “categories of work are less likely to be paid by the expertise they require – or even by the importance to the community or to the often-mythical free market – than by the sex, race and class of most of their workers” (Steinem, 2012). If work is valued less as soon as it starts being associated with femininity, would it be wrong to assume that the same is true for most other things?

Furthermore, ever since childhood, subliminal messaging in popular culture indicates that one cannot be successful and feminine at the same time (Clark, 2016, pp. 6-7). Most females have been through a not-like-other-girls phase, whereby they have desperately tried to distance themselves from anything even remotely pink and feminine-like (Landa, 2020). How surprising is that really if we consider that the female protagonist in many coming-of-age movies or books is the least “like other girls”? The character the audience is supposed to look up to cannot be bothered by the mundane, one-dimensional things other girls worry about. She commonly has very few female friends, is neither interested in boys nor shopping, and unlike other girls, she actually reads. Yes, these protagonists can level with men, but only at the expense of their femininity. Examples that come to mind are Kat in the movie “10 Things I Hate About You” or Maeve from the popular Netflix show “Sex Education”. Personally, the discourse of inferiority surrounding traditionally female traits has steered me in my process of choosing what I was going to study at university (Schippers, 2007, pp. 91-92). I am sure the reader agrees with me that a decision like that, if not influenced by economic security considerations, should be a pure expression of authenticity. Nevertheless, I rejected certain studies by virtue of them being female-dominated, afraid of being seen as “just another girl”. I wanted to be respected and, as I had learned, anything associated with femininity would not attract such sentiments. I cannot help but wonder how many men have let their decision making be influenced by this embarrassing fear of seeming like other men. Of course, it goes without saying that men are also negatively influenced by gender expectations, as they are afraid to be associated with anything sub-masculine. This fear, however, also stems from the stigmatization of the feminine as inferior (Schippers, 2007, p. 96).

If the woman seeks to free herself of the superimposed role of object and employ her subjectivity, she must rid herself of her femininity. Subjectivity is equal to the masculine, that much can be derived from the fact that feminine features are traditionally confined to the domestic sphere, whereas the masculine is publicly praised (Rosicki, 2012, pp. 16-19). Could it perhaps be true that traditionally masculine traits are valued more because they are simply more useful in society? A feature that comes to mind is assertiveness, something generally said to lack in women (Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977, pp. 217-219). Apart from the fact that this supposed lack has been exposed as a myth, instead of being rewarded for displaying the traits that are recognised as being masculine and which are societally valued, women are punished for exhibiting them (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010, p. 265; Cooper, 2013). As studies show, successful women have a lower likeability rate than successful men due to the fact that they receive social backlash as a result of internalised

expectations of how women should behave. Another example of this double standard is the fact that anger expression increases influence for men during group deliberation, but decreases influence for women (Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2015, pp. 581-582). Consequently, a woman is punished for either being too feminine, or not feminine enough. Women thus grow up in a world in which it seems like they cannot employ their subjectivity and be feminine at the same time. If they remain loyal to their feminine traits, they are doomed to live a one-dimensional existence as a passive object (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 30).

In this essay I have described experiences which I believe are unique to the experience of the female, which I call the “ambiguity of the feminine”, as they shed a light on society’s tendency to reduce her to object and superimpose the subjectivity of the male onto her. I argue that the discourse of inferiority which surrounds femininity has strong potential to guide behaviour. If she chooses to live by how the world defines her as an object, she accepts the feminine and the societal limitations that come with being perceived as such. On the other hand, if she desires to live an existence as subject, she necessarily has to resent what has made the world deem her as inferior: her femininity. This too is a less than ideal outcome. By doing so, she does not only reject what is inherently part of her, but she also receives social backlash for not adhering to internalised expectations of how women should behave. Consequently, the female is trapped in an ambiguous existence in which she can never truly transcend to what it means to be herself.

A note from the author

Emma Huijgen is a beginning author in the final year of her bachelor’s degree in Politics, Psychology, Law & Economics at the University of Amsterdam. She does not really have anything to her name, except for an inexplicable love for existentialist philosophy, feminist theory, staying inside when it rains and when it doesn’t, and adding comma’s to sentences to make them longer than they need to be. Currently, she is considering pursuing a career in law, but who knows.



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