**Feminism and Motherhood**

**A talk delivered by Mary Kenny**

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Recently, I wrote a short piece in the Catholic Herald about a young person in the seaside town where I reside in Kent in England, Deal, near Dover. I had known the young person locally as Jess. She was a clever young woman with a degree in Arabic. And then we heard that Jess had transitioned from female to male, and become Fred. Subsequently, Fred had halted the transitional process temporarily to become pregnant, conceive a baby through sperm obtained via the Internet, and give birth to a son. Fred then resumed the transitioning from female to male, and sought, legally, to register herself as the baby’s father, not the baby’s mother, although, in a TV documentary Fred made for the BBC – “Seahorse”, shown last month – the baby is filmed emerging from Fred’s uterus and birth canal in the same birthing process that runs through every mammal species.

Interestingly, Sir Andrew McFarlane in the Supreme Court in Britain ruled, on 19 September, that Fred could not be legally described as the father of the child, because “men cannot give birth” - although Fred can continue to call himself a man. But we can be sure that this will soon be challenged, as part of ongoing gender rights. Because it is an absolute orthodoxy at the present time that “gender” and “sex” are “social constructs”: that is, not defined by biology, or what used to be called “nature”, but defined by “society”. An American “gender philosopher” called Judith Butler, who holds this view, has had enormous influence through academic networks: and that has become part of the accepted ideas of our culture.

“Equality” and “choice” are key mantras which have come to mean that men and women are defined by society, and “choice” has no boundaries in ethics or nature.

These ideologies have their seedbed in Simone de Beauvoir’s book “The Second Sex”, first published in 1949 – celebrating its 70th anniversary - and considered to be the Bible of second-wave feminism (that it, the feminism that began in the 1960s, the first-wave feminism having been focused on the vote, with the Suffragettes.) The most famous phrase associated with De Beauvoir’s canon is: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

That is to say, sex is not defined by the chromosomes or outward physical characteristics: it is defined by social constructs, by society “imposing” stereotypical values on women and men. We are now seeing a growing movement among parents to raise their children “gender-neutral”, allowing them “fluidity to choose”. In a recent case in Britain, the grandmother of a child only learned of its biological sex when she changed its nappy, at 11 months. The movement is known as “raising theybies” – from the gender-neutral form of address, “they”.

Simone de Beauvoir was certainly a monumental figure – the companion (though by no means the exclusive one) of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. And as a young au pair girl in Paris, I was fascinated by the Left-bank ambience in which these intellectuals lived, usually writing in cafés, and often lodging in cheap hotels, disdaining the acquisition of property. Existentialism, by the way, was also the seedbed for the prevailing value of “choice”, which has come to apply to everything from supermarket merchandising to – gender options.

De Beauvoir’s background is, in some ways aligned, with certain Irish experiences. Her mother was long-suffering and a devout Catholic: her father was a bit of a Jack-the-lad – clever, but feckless and irresponsible. There were just two daughters, Simone and her sister Helene. Born in 1908, Simone went to convent school, and received an excellent education, subsequently, at the Institut Catholique in Paris. She had a religious phase as a teenager, and she always retained a respect for the notion of “vocation”: even in later life compared herself to a Carmelite nun. As a young woman, she hoped to marry at one point, but she was intellectually ambitious and this took her into a world that made domesticity seems less and less congenial. She was never discriminated against, in terms of her intellectual ambitions: she often preferred the company of men because their world was one of power and ideas, and sometimes dismissed women “on account of their religion”, according to her most recent biographer, Kate Kirkpatrick.

She certainly rejected the idea of children from an early stage. She saw “nothing fruitful”, in an ironic phrase, about having children. She came to regard children as “a purposeless and unjustifiable increase in the world’s population”, and she spoke of pregnant women as “hosts to parasites”.

In her feminist “Bible”, she describe maternity as being in bondage: she repeatedly speaks of “the bondage of reproduction”, and that “maternity dooms woman”: motherhood was “servitude”, breast-feeding was “exhausting servitude”, and the entire cycle of fertility symbolised “woman’s enslavement to the species”.

She especially anathemises pregnancy as turning a woman into “the plaything of nature”. She deplores the way in which nature begins to introduce changes to a woman’s body which lessens or annuls her “autonomy”. Woman simply becomes a vessel, in De Beauvoir’s eyes, as she is “doomed to the continuity of the species”, to house the “parasite” within. The “painful burden of pregnancy” is the yoke from which woman must break free (as is the bourgeois oppression of marriage and the family). Marriage, she wrote is a survival of a “dead way of life”.

De Beauvoir wanted women to be physically as free as men, and she indeed lived her own life in that way. But to be as physically free as men, the entire apparatus of “femininity” has to be discarded. And abortion was one of the main means, for women, of liberation from the servitude that had been placed upon them by nature, and endorsed by society.

At first, The Second Sex was considered shocking, and many distinguished writers like Albert Camus and François Mauriac, and quite interestingly, the Communist Party of France criticised her for seeking to impose bourgeois-Bohemian ideas on working-class families. (The French Communist Party was a bit ambivalent about contraception, too, as they thought it would lead to “hedonistic pleasure-seeking”, rather than high-minded proletarian pursuits.)

But twenty years later, De Beauvoir’s ideas informed the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s, and the books that poured off the presses during that decade, such as Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique”, Germaine Greer’s “The Female Eunuch”, Kate Millett’s “Sexual Politics”, Shulamith Firestone’s “The Dialectic of Sex”. Many of these tracts were considered radical at first, but within a decade or so, had fed into the mainstream of social thinking.

Let me be fair and honest here: I was of course involved in the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, and there were, undoubtedly, legal changes and social reforms which were overdue.

And some of us did feel, as De Beauvoir did, that our mothers, in previous generations, had not always had the opportunities that they should have had. The late Nuala Fennell, T.D., wrote a memoir “Political Woman” in which this portrait of her mother emerged very acutely: Nuala’s mother, back in the 1930s, had led a fulfilled, interesting and pleasant life as a single woman in Dublin – going to the theatre, playing tennis, free to do as she wished – but came to feel restricted and even lonely when married to the guard, as a housewife who had to move from place to place.

However, fast forward to the present time and we see a radical picture emerging which can be so distorting of truth, and ethics. In the campaign for repealing the 8th Amendment, these ideas really coined by Simone de Beauvoir were at the centre of the feminist polemic: Number One – the primacy of autonomy and “choice” – without any reference to the responsibility made by previous choices, or any contextual social or ethical considerations. Nature counts for nothing: women must have the same bodily rights as men, without any concession to the idea that men and women’s bodies are different. The notion that the foetus is a parasite also repeated appeared in these polemics. Above all, the humanity of the unborn must be denied, because that would imply that there wasn’t perfect “autonomy”.

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Do feminists hate motherhood? In truth, I think there is a huge amount of ambivalence. When women talk to one another honestly, and perhaps, as the Freemasons say, “in lodge” – that is, not to be quoted – many feminists are deeply, emotionally involved with their own experience of motherhood, and with their attachment and respect, too – increasing with age – for their own mothers. But the sense of attachment that developes often takes them by surprise.

Naomi Wolf, the American feminist wrote about going for an ultrasound scan during her first pregnancy: she approached it with her customary rational attitude, just as a routine medical procedure. She watched as the technician showed her the foetal image on the screen: she was shown a hand, a small forearm, a foot, a human shape, and then, she wrote, “As I saw that hand, and that foot, something irrational happened: a lifetime’s orientation toward maternal over foetal rights lurched out of kilter.

Some voice from the more primitive core of my brain…said: *You must protect that little hand at all costs: no harm can come to it or its owner. That little hand, that small human signature, is more important now than you are.* The message was unambivalent.”

So there remains a tension, a contradiction, between a continuing feminist affirmation in absolute “autonomy” and the Judith Butler principle that “gender” is just a “social construct” – with the evidence that re-affirms itself that pregnancy, birth and motherhood are positive and rewarding experiences, which, yes, do compromise autonomy, as in Naomi Wolf’s instinctive feeling towards this small creature.

And, as in the case of Fred McConnell, the young person in our town who transitioned from female to male, and then halted the transition to become a mother, we can also see the law challenged and some confusion ensuing from the notion that we can make any choice we like when it comes to gender politics.

Let me end on a positive note. One of the possible candidates for the next Governor of the Bank of England is a remarkable woman called Dame Helena Morrissey. Helena Morrissey has built a successful career as a financier in the City of London: she is also the mother of nine children! (After the family began to grow, her husband Richard became a stay-at-home Dad – and a Buddhist priest!) Dame Helena has a chirpy, can-do attitude to Brexit: when you have nine children, she’s remarked, you learn to sort out the chaos. If she gets the appointment, no doubt she will have reason to meet with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. Frau von der Leyen is the mother of seven children.

Simone de Beauvoir affirmed that women “sacrificed” their autonomy and their capacity for intellectual and career development by becoming mothers. It is satisfying to point to Helena Morrissey and Ursula von der Leyen as evidence to the contrary.

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