

Oppression and Gender in Locke and de Beauvoir

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Difficulty Passage:

“But the husband and wife, though they have but one common concern, yet having different understandings, will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too. It therefore being necessary that the last determination (i.e., the rule) should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share as the abler and the stronger. But this, reaching but to the things of their common interest and property, leaves the wife in the full and true possession of what by contract is her peculiar right, and at least gives the husband no more power over her than she has over his life”¹

Engagement Passage:

“Now, woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage. Even when her rights are recognized abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs”²

¹ John Locke, 1632-1704. *The Second Treatise of Civil Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Oxford :B. Blackwell, 1948.

² Simone de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. New York: Vintage, 2011.

In paragraph 82 of John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, he addresses the relationships and power dynamics between men and women. I chose this as my difficulty passage because the writing is vague and subjective. Locke focuses on marriage in this passage: "the husband and wife, though they have but one common concern, yet having different understandings, will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too".³ Locke believes a husband and wife have "one common concern".⁴ The notion that a husband and wife have similar priorities seems simple enough; Locke believes the husband and wife prioritize the maintenance of their marriage. After stating this assumption, Locke acknowledges the spouses have "different understandings" and on occasion will have "different wills too".⁵ The syntax in these phrases is open ended, making it unclear what kind of disagreement Locke is referring to. The most basic meaning of these phrases is the spouses must think independently from one another. This will lead to disagreements, as one spouse may understand or handle a situation differently from the other.

To better understand Locke's writing in the rest of the passage, I turned to Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir discusses gender and contemporary sexism. This helped me to understand Locke's writing as it illuminated gendered issues beyond marriage, the primary focus of his passage. De Beauvoir writes frankly "Now, woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal".⁶ This opening sentence acknowledges that men hold intense power over women. Locke begins to discuss disagreements in marriage regarding the

³ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

⁶ de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

commonality of intent between a husband and a wife in marriage. However, the belief that men and women are on vastly different social footing calls into question the importance of this common goal. It is clear the husband's "goal" in a marriage will carry more weight than that of his wife as he has control over the outcome of the marriage and their property. If a woman has been made to be a man's subordinate as de Beauvoir says, be it as his slave or his vassal, then her will is going to be overridden.

Locke delves deeper into his discussion of marriage, determining how a couple might make a decision in a case of disagreement. Locke surmises "It therefore being necessary that the last determination (i.e., the rule) should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share as the abler and the stronger".⁷ This raises the question: is the wife's position regarding an issue important in Locke's mind? It is unclear as to whether the disparity in thought, or "different wills"⁸ Locke raises leads to an argument or exchange of ideas. The couple reaches an issue that concerns both of them, and has different ideas for the resolution of the issue. Locke asserts the man's say should be the "last determination",⁹ and "naturally falls" to him. Locke claims this is because the man is the "abler and stronger"¹⁰ in the couple. Upon reading this, I felt the word naturally was an intentional choice. I thought the words "abler and stronger"¹¹ in the context of defending this choice were flippant and unsupported by evidence. Locke personally feels men are abler and stronger than women. He has no basis for feeling this way, leading him to make a generalization about men and women without backing it up.

⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

¹⁰ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

¹¹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

These claims can be broken down by examining where they come from. De Beauvoir raises the point that “long-standing habit keeps [her rights] from being concretely manifested in customs”.¹² Locke has always lived in and benefitted from a system that has allowed him to believe that men are superior to women. Because this is all he has ever known, he can only imagine this is natural and there is no alternative. The term “concretely manifested in customs”¹³ is important in describing this phenomenon. Locke is writing to acknowledge that women have rights. However, he defines women’s inferiority to men and subsequently claims their word should be valued less in disagreements. De Beauvoir’s notion that this belief is a result of long-standing habit and not fact or evidence illuminates the bold assumptions made by Locke. Locke has given thought to women’s rights, or lack thereof, as it relates to marriage. However, he avoids the social history of gender inequity in making claims about the presence of gender in contemporary relationships.

Locke follows his claim regarding the settlement of disagreements by discussing more objective ideas: “But this, reaching but to the things of their common interest and property, leaves the wife in the full and true possession of what by contract is her peculiar right”.¹⁴ Locke believes a wife is in “full and true possession of what is her peculiar right”.¹⁵ However, Locke is careful to exclude “common interest and property”¹⁶ from what the wife has agency over. I recalled from the first sentence of the passage that common interest in this case refers to the continuity of the couples marriage. This exclusion of common interest is significant considering a couple’s marriage and property comprise a majority of their relationship. Locke promptly

¹² de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

¹³ de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

¹⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

¹⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

¹⁶ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

assigns the handling of both matters to the husband. Almost as an afterthought, women are granted by Locke possession of what is their peculiar right by contract. This has little meaning as Locke just claimed the husband controls seemingly the most important aspects of the marriage. Locke makes no effort to describe what a woman's peculiar right actually refers to. De Beauvoir's writing once again helped me understand the cognitive dissonance I experienced in reading this section of the passage. De Beauvoir is wary of discussing gender without considering history: "the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped".¹⁷ By considering the fact that sexism has always controlled relationships between men and women, de Beauvoir gives perspective to the specific issue of marriage. Locke's assignment of roles in a marriage functions as a microcosm of the idea that "the two sexes have never divided the world up equally".¹⁸ Locke makes a literal claim that the man has control over a couple's marriage and property. Locke asserts this assignment of roles "leaves the wife in the full and true possession of what by contract is her peculiar right".¹⁹ De Beauvoir believes that even with this power she has gained over time, "woman is heavily handicapped".²⁰ Locke writes women out of two matters of utmost importance in a marriage, and then says women have control over everything else. De Beauvoir's writing helped me to take a step back and understand that these claims perpetuate gender norms and have no basis in fact.

¹⁷ de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

¹⁸ de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

¹⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 139-140.

²⁰ de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 29.

Bibliography

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. New York: Vintage, 2011.

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