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Social and Political Philosophy

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Final Reflection

The analysis of what justice means at its core by Plato, the philosophical influence of virtues and vices outlined by Aristotle, not to forget the exploration of economic and social inequality by Karl Marx, and the breaking down of the structures in society by Jean-Jacques Rousseau have all played an influential role in the development of my understanding of philosophy as it relates to society and politics. Every week, discovering a new piece of work from different philosophers throughout the centuries has undoubtedly shaped my ability to think critically on such complex subjects as discussed throughout the semester. However, it is the works published by Simone de Beauvoir and James Baldwin that I believe I will carry with me throughout the rest of my educational career and further into my adult life.

While there is much to be said about the contributions of philosophers whose publications have been passed down for centuries like those of Plato and Socrates and Aristotle, I cannot say their work has had too much of an impact on my perception of the world. Their writings have taught me to be vigilant of what I am told to believe by others, and where and when to question authority—which according to Socrates is everywhere,

always. But I have studied these writings in the past and have continued to be made aware of their influence in the philosophical world, but in my personal journey, they hold little impact. I can appreciate their contributions, but there is much greater, more complex work that fascinates me to my core. Those writings include the work of Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Maybe it is because I am a woman in the twenty-first century trying to understand what my place in the world is, but her work speaks to me at a level that is unmatched by any others that I have had the opportunity to read this semester. Although as a society we are growing out of the stereotypical gender roles enforced by the patriarchy that instill that a woman's job is to satisfy her husband and to care for her children and the home, we have not come very far. That is not to diminish the challenging feats that women have made and the hurdles they have overcome, it is simply an analysis of where we stand today. We still cannot command respect as a man does without being called derogative profanities. We cannot create a business that is uber-successful without being told that the contributions of a man got us there. We are constantly told we need to smile, make ourselves softer, and are constantly asked when we plan on settling down to marry and have children, as it is still our role to make ourselves fit into a world that revolves around male dominance. Our society pities an unwed, childless woman, rather than celebrating her as an unwed, childless man would. But DeBeauvoir doesn't subscribe to that style of life, nor does she believe that any woman should have to, which truly inspires me.

For a woman to be so outspoken about the harm that women have faced both physically and psychologically, especially in the twentieth century, was groundbreaking. To go further and assume that a woman could have a meaningful life outside of

marriage in the age of her publishing was absurd, but brave. That is one of the many attributes of Simone de Beauvoir. She teaches through her writings that a woman has no obligation to submit to the oppressions of an institution that she had no say in creating. Beyond that, she argues that a woman is not only allowed but entitled to the right to sexual pleasure, and claims sex is not just a service to exchange with a husband. To claim that sex should be an individualized experience for a woman, not just a generic routine intended for reproducing, is to give women power over their bodies. To reclaim sex as something empowering is dangerous to men because they were the ones who assumed they were obligated to receive it; the idea that a woman could refuse to subject herself to sex without pleasure was never considered. There are dozens more contributions that Simone DeBeauvoir has made to society, including the emphasis on the difference between sex and gender and her challenging femininity and masculinity, however, it is important that I do not only focus on her writings.

The writings of James Baldwin in “The Discovery of What It Means to Be American” sparked a similar level of enticement within me. The reason was that I had never challenged myself to consider what my American identity was. It seems like a simple thing to examine, however when discussing this with my peers I realized how complex it was to be American. There is no singular answer as to what makes the people living in the United States akin to one another. Even the very matter of the status of citizenship varies from person to person, which is why I was so intrigued by this essay. To come across a piece of literature that stopped me in my tracks and made me contemplate individual aspects of my character, my culture, and my lifestyle is something I am lucky to have experienced. The question Baldwin poses, while specific

to his experience as a black American who lived the life of an immigrant in Paris, is one that I wish everyone to come across. To really dissect what elements of your identity tie yourself to one label, and how others have entirely unrelated elements that tie them to the same label creates a level of introspection and self-analysis that I would not have been prompted to do had I not come across his work. It also forces you to understand the way others live their lives too, not just how you do; if the American identity is not tied to any individual experience, only focusing on what components of life make up your identity will only paint a fraction of the picture.

To have the ability to appreciate what makes the independent lives around you so similar to your own is an experience I am so appreciative of Baldwin for giving me. To understand that we are not confined to one singular definition of what it means to be an American, to understand the struggles others have overcome in order to validate their identity to themselves and to others, and to have the simultaneous shared but intimate experience with the American identity is vastly profound.

I am grateful for this course, for the lessons I have learned regarding critical thinking about justice and injustice, society and how it functions, and self-reflection. To have gained knowledge of *the Social Contract*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *the Theory of Justice*, and many other renowned pieces of literature that will shape my experience not only as a student but as an adult. Analyzing these vast elements of society, money, and politics will aid me as I continue to gain life experience and will hopefully guide me through making difficult decisions. Furthermore, the writings of Simone de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* and of James Baldwin in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American"

have given me the ability to appreciate my identity as a woman, and appreciate the identity of others, for it is a difficult thing to come to embrace.