

# De Beauvoir's Hegelianism

## Rethinking *The Second Sex*

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*The Ethics of Ambiguity* is well known as de Beauvoir's attempt to formulate an existentialist ethics; that is to say, an ethics premised on the account of the lack at the heart of any human existence ('the being whose being is not to be') given by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>1</sup> The 'ambiguity' of the title refers to the dualities constitutive of what it means to be human: being and existence; nature and freedom; subject and object; existent and other; individual and social; life and death. Key existentialist premisses of de Beauvoir's argument are: the radically separate nature of each human being; the inescapability of choice and responsibility; the importance of 'situation' for freedom; and human existence defined as 'becoming' – that is, as a striving towards, but perpetual inability to attain, a settled end or fixed essence. Like Sartre, de Beauvoir insists on the impossibility of an *a priori* determination of the meaning or value of action – there are no recipes for right action and all action is risk and failure.<sup>2</sup> The implications of existentialism for ethics are worked through in relation to standard charges of solipsism and nihilism made against existentialism and in relation to the weaknesses of alternative ethical approaches: Christian, utilitarian or communist.<sup>3</sup>

### Three echoes

Two emphases stand out in de Beauvoir's analysis, emphases which, some have argued, distance her position from Sartre's. First, de Beauvoir is insistent that freedom be seen as not only concretely situated but also affected or limited by situation in a way which has implications for both action and judgement; second, de Beauvoir insists that the freedom of any individual is dependent on the freedom of others.<sup>4</sup> Thus de Beauvoir argues that the freedom available to slaves or to the woman in a harem is affected by the limitations of that situation and can be judged only in terms of that situation. However genuine and perfect the assertion of

freedom within such a context, it is not to be compared with the freedom which is enabled when challenging that situation becomes a concrete possibility (this at least suggests the possibility of qualitative distinctions between different sorts of freedom, something which is difficult to square with the Sartrean ontology of *Being and Nothingness*). Similarly, although de Beauvoir accepts the existentialist view of the radical separateness of human individuals and the challenge posed by each individual's projects to those of each other, she is nevertheless insistent that encounters with others confirm the indissoluble interconnection between one's own freedom and that of others, so that to will one's freedom is to will the other's also. Within her argument de Beauvoir is as critical of an ethic of pure transcendence as she is of any ethic premised on a determinist account of human nature or progress.

Very close to the beginning of the text, de Beauvoir introduces Hegelian thought as the 'other' of existentialism, a systematic philosophy entailing an ethics in which the tragic ambiguity of the human condition for each individual is sublated in the unambiguous triumph of the collective (world spirit) in history.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the text she invokes Hegel again with a more personalized reference. She recounts how she found Hegel's systematic philosophy tremendously comforting in 1940, but that what it offered, in fact, were the 'consolations of death' under the guise of the 'infinite'.<sup>6</sup> De Beauvoir draws the contrast between Hegelian absolutism – in which each individual becomes simply an instrument of a larger plan – and existentialism, in which the finitude of the human condition is recognized without evasion. De Beauvoir is particularly anxious to distance herself from what she terms Hegelian 'rationalistic optimism' in which the concrete and particular gains meaning only in the light of the larger agenda of world history. She locates the significance of any action instead in the meaning it has for the specific, concrete individuals engaging in it:

In order for this world to have any importance, in order for our undertaking to have a meaning and to be worthy of sacrifices, we must affirm the concrete and particular thickness of this world and the individual reality of our projects and ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

This defining contrast between Hegelianism and an ethics of ambiguity is accompanied throughout the text by de Beauvoir's utilization of Hegelian categories and references in her accounts of relations between individual and collective, subject and object, self and other and their implications for ethics.<sup>8</sup> In the context of a discussion of the temporality of human existence (a passage of particular interest), de Beauvoir illustrates these distinctions through the example of festival:

the ethics of being is the ethics of saving: by storing up, one aims at the stationary plenitude of the in-itself, existence, on the contrary, is consumption; it makes itself only by destroying; the festival carries out this negative movement in order to indicate its independence in relationship to the thing: one eats, drinks, lights fires, breaks things and spends time and money; one spends them for nothing. The spending is also a matter of establishing a communication of the existents, for it is by the movement of recognition which goes from one to the other that existence is confirmed; in songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and complicity with other men.<sup>9</sup>

De Beauvoir goes on to point out how the experience of the pure affirmation of existence in the festival is illusory (because the absolute assertion of existence is an impossibility, a denial of the undeniability of death): 'the joy becomes exhausted, drunkenness subsides into fatigue'.

The use of the example of the festival as an illustration of the temporality of existence provides a clear contrast with Hegel's famous invocation of festival at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here Hegel claims: 'The True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose'.<sup>10</sup> In de Beauvoir's use of the festival metaphor, as in Hegel's, the reader is told a great deal, first, about the author's conception of the relation between individual and collective identities and ends; second, about the author's conception of the relation of individual existents to external nature; and third, about the author's conception of the relations between existents. Hegel claims that the 'revel' continues even as individuals drop out exhausted, and argues that its true meaning lies in the recollection of the whole of the movement.

De Beauvoir, on the other hand, insists that the revel cannot be sustained as each existent moves beyond the moment towards death, disrupting any transitory, spontaneous collective and any attempt to capture the present or the past in terms of a 'mythical Historical end' or totalized, intelligible historical process.

However, a less opposed position can be discerned in the second and third ways in which de Beauvoir echoes Hegel's thought, with both of these referring us back to the story of the emergence of self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.<sup>11</sup> This short section was crucial to the French revival of interest in Hegel's thought in the 1930s and 1940s and figures centrally in both Sartre's and Kojève's readings.

As Butler has argued, what was crucial to both Kojève's and Sartre's interpretations of Hegel in these passages is the understanding of the role of self-consciousness as a principle of negativity.<sup>12</sup> Self-consciousness is understood as that which identifies itself through encountering and distinguishing itself from that which it is not. In Kojève's version this becomes a two-stage process: first, one in which human desire distinguishes itself from animal desire, finding itself dissatisfied with the confirmation of its existence to be derived from following instinctual drives to consume or sexually possess natural externality (since this is an infinite process of enslavement to the species); second, one in which dissatisfied self-consciousness attempts to satisfy its craving for self-certainty through recognition by another self-consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The process of encounter and distinction of one self-consciousness with and from another is first manifested as a mutual negation, in which self-consciousnesses confirm their self-certainty through their capacity to return the other to external nature through killing them (the life and death struggle). But this turns out to be an unsatisfactory outcome, returning self-consciousness to the situation of animal desire in which the other is simply a natural object. This is followed by a different resolution in which the combatants in the life and death struggle recognize their dependence on organic life, both their own and that of the other, as a condition for self-conscious being and a different outcome follows. This involves a winner and a loser. From this a pattern of recognition is established on the unequal basis of lordship (independent self-consciousness) and serfdom (dependent self-consciousness). Within this relationship the position of the two self-consciousnesses is gradually reversed as the serf gains independence from, and is educated by, the experience of productive work, in which he reshapes the world in the service of the lord, while the lord remains fixed

in the stance of the life–death struggle, depending for his self-certainty on recognition by a thing-like other. Drawing on Marxism, Kojève argues that the ‘master–slave’ dialectic presents the key to historical development, which is teleologically determined not simply by self-consciousness’s capacity to reshape the world but by the willed goal of mutual recognition, in which the freedom of each other is confirmed in the mutual recognition of each other as free.

Sartre’s reading of these passages has some things in common with Kojève but is far less positive. Whereas Kojève makes a clear distinction between the relation to otherness involved in both animal desire and work on the one hand, and the relation to other self-consciousnesses on the other, Sartre denies the possibility of the simultaneous mutual recognition of self-conscious being by self-conscious being.<sup>14</sup> For Sartre the relation to otherness is always a relation to an object; this follows essentially from the existentialist premiss of the radical underdetermination but necessary intentionality of all consciousness. Thus, Sartre takes from Hegel’s story the notion of relations to otherness (organic nature; other consciousnesses) as the situation within and against which consciousness strives to define itself. But he sees the relation with other consciousnesses as inevitably a subject–object relation. For Sartre, the most significant point in Hegel’s analysis is the life and death struggle, which, he argues, captures the inherent separation and conflict of consciousnesses.

Returning to de Beauvoir’s account of the festival, it is evident that in her equation of existence with destruction/consumption, she follows a Kojévian and Sartrean version of Hegel’s account of the emergence of self-consciousness from life in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is clear from this excerpt, as from other passages in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that in her interpretation of the distinction between being and existence de Beauvoir reads the Hegelian story as the demonstration of nature (life) as a condition of, but as radically distinct from, existence (self-conscious being). It is a condition of existence in two senses: first, because existence is always embodied and thereby mortal (temporal); second, because it provides the raw material of the situation which existence is defined as oriented to negate and transcend. In her account of the relation of existents to each other in the festival, however, de Beauvoir follows Kojève with

her emphasis on the centrality of mutual recognition to existence. Although de Beauvoir soon moves on to describe this moment of mutual recognition as illusory, her account fits in with her own emphasis on intersubjectivity throughout *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and offers a way of grasping that mutual dependence of freedoms which she continually stresses.

It is clear that de Beauvoir’s analysis is explicitly linked to a critical engagement with Hegelian ideas, albeit mediated through existentialist interpretations: the impossibility of subsuming individual subjectivity under some collective identity or meaning; the distinction and relation between being (nature, object) and existence (spirit, subject); the dependence of existence (spirit, subject) on relations of recognition between individuals. Of these three dualities, the first



and second operate relatively unproblematically in de Beauvoir’s analysis. The distinction between individual and collective is consistently presented in terms of the irreducibility of the former to the latter. This is described as essential to the possibility of individual choice which is the ground of ethics – even if an individual embraces a collective end or identity, that end or identity did not choose him but was chosen, and must continue to be chosen, by him.<sup>15</sup> To identify the individual with the collective or with a transcendent end is to attempt to subsume existence under being. For de Beauvoir this is to misunderstand the fact that being is the unreachable aim of existence, which is always marked by negativity. The being-in-itself of the given situation, the facticity of ‘things’, impedes but also confirms the freedom at the heart of existence; it is a crucial, enabling alienation.<sup>16</sup>

However, if de Beauvoir's account of the distinction between individual and collective, being and existence, is clear, her account of the existent–other distinction and the mutual dependence of existents is more complex and obscure. De Beauvoir explains and illustrates the mutual dependence of existents at different points in the text, most clearly in the chapter 'Personal Freedom and Others'. This chapter presents fundamentally instrumentalist arguments. De Beauvoir argues that other people are like things in that their projects constitute the facticity through which my freedom is simultaneously denied and affirmed (or, rather, in which being denied is affirmed). In addition she argues that the impossibility of meaningful projection in a world in which there were no other existents to pursue your ends beyond your death puts those who will their own freedom but not that of others in an absurd or contradictory position: 'I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me–others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject–object relationship.'<sup>17</sup>

However, this instrumental acknowledgement of human interdependence, which mirrors de Beauvoir's acknowledgement of the importance of facticity in the assertion of freedom, is very different from the relation between individuals suggested in her account of the festival. Here the relation between individuals has a radically different character from their relation to things; here existence is confirmed in destruction of things and in complicity with others. The instrumental view of the mutual dependence of subjectivity remains close to Sartre's analysis in assuming the likely oppositional nature of the relation between existent and other and presents the existent–other relation in a subject and object form. However, not only in the example of the festival but in many of her examples of ethical action and the significance of each individual's freedom for the other, de Beauvoir suggests, with Kojève, that the mutual dependence of existents is not simply strategic but also *ontological*, a sharing which is more than a mirroring of identical and potentially conflictual predicaments. It is clear that any such interpretation cuts against de Beauvoir's own insistence on the radical separateness of individuals as the basis of any shared projects. Nevertheless, there is a tension between de Beauvoir's existentialist premisses and the ethic of identification with the freedom of others which emerge in the text as exemplary. Answering the question of how intersubjectivity is to be understood threatens to unravel the key existentialist assumptions of her argument. This is something de Beauvoir acknowledged in her

later assessment of the argument of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>18</sup>

## How has 'woman' come to be?

The three dualities which shape de Beauvoir's analysis of the meaning of festival in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* continue to play a role in her very different project in *The Second Sex*; within the latter, however, the stability of these constitutive dualities becomes more clearly uncertain. At the outset of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir states explicitly that her argument is premised on Sartrean existentialism. At the same time, however, she draws on the work of a range of other thinkers amongst whom Hegel is particularly prominent. Within the text, however, the usage of Hegel departs from the pattern of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Rather than the systematic Hegel foregrounded in opposition to de Beauvoir's own analysis there, the Hegelian account of sexual difference in nature and the Hegelian story of the struggle for recognition and its outcome are explicitly used in *The Second Sex* as resources for understanding what it means to be/become a woman. In particular, de Beauvoir's attempt to think what it means to be/become a woman relies on framing her (woman's) situation in terms of Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* and a particular interpretation of the relation between nature (being) and spirit (existence), self and other, individual and social within this account. Nevertheless, as in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir's Hegel remains very much poised between the readings of the significance of these dualities given by Sartre and Kojève. Self-consciousness is conditioned by but clearly distinguished from organic life and material objects; and relations between existents shift uneasily between the necessarily oppositional and the mutually sustaining.

A key point to emerge from de Beauvoir's analysis of sex and reproduction in the early part of *The Second Sex* is the argument for the inbuilt alienation between the female animal as an individual and her reproductive functions determined by the biologically programmed drive to perpetuate the species. The female mammal is always 'other than herself', in that she is both an individuated physical being and the vessel of the species. De Beauvoir does not see the male mammal as transcending the species, but argues that he does not live the alienation between individual and species existence in the immediate way that the female does in pregnancy and lactation. In this respect, de Beauvoir follows Hegel's analysis of sexual difference in his *Philosophy of Nature*, in



which male sexual and reproductive roles are associated with a principle of activity and individuation and female sexual and reproductive roles with passivity and species identification. Moreover, de Beauvoir argues that this individual/species alienation is carried over into the lives of women as an experienced reality, in so far as all women are female mammals: 'From puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned.'<sup>19</sup> The certainty that individuals are mortal and species survive is physiologically ingrained in woman, who is both individual and species at the same time (in an exaggerated sense, according to de Beauvoir's account of human female physiology). For de Beauvoir, however, this experience of the 'other' within, which might in existentialist terms have been represented as an evolutionary advantage, actually represents an asymmetrical reversal of what we know to be the meaning of human existence. Physiologically, for the female, what is infinite and undifferentiated dominates over what is finite and individuated rather than vice versa. Interestingly, the literal 'other' within during pregnancy does not figure as an individual being in de Beauvoir's analysis of biology; instead, it is understood as a sign of the species – a continuous chain of reproduction which is exhausting to contemplate, literally devouring or using up the female's body.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of her negative characterization of the 'facts' of female biology, de Beauvoir rejects (and in doing so is explicitly critical of Hegel) the idea that biology can account for how woman has come to be independent of the 'ontological, economic, social, and psychological context'.<sup>21</sup> She argues that this is true whether one understands the body as pure facticity (a thing) or in phenomenological terms (her own position) as 'the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the body situates the self and its striving for transcendence, but *how* it does so depends on how non-biological factors also figure as situation. This does not mean that biology has no importance at all; de Beauvoir returns repeatedly in her analysis to woman's bodily situation as a key aspect of her peculiar evolution as an existent, particularly within undeveloped primitive societies.<sup>23</sup> However, this is always of less importance than the fact that female humans are not only animals; they are existents and therefore cannot be reduced to biological terms – 'Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined.'<sup>24</sup>

At the heart of de Beauvoir's argument as to the nature of woman's 'possibilities' (with which the rest of the book as a whole is concerned) is the notion of woman as 'other'. De Beauvoir argues that there are two conceptions of 'other' which play a part in understanding how woman in the modern age has come to be, both of them echoing stages of Hegel's story of the development of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. The first conception is of woman as 'Other' with a capital 'O', what de Beauvoir refers to as the 'absolute other' of existence: defined as essence, pure in-itself, organic life. When 'Other' is understood in this sense, the relation between man and woman is subsumed under the relation between subject and object, between which there is a fundamental and intractable alienation. As such, woman becomes simultaneously the object of consumption by existence and the mystical representation of its limit. In the former sense, woman is the target of pure negativity, to be possessed, shaped and controlled. In the latter sense, woman becomes an object of fear and awe, associated both with that which sustains and that which takes us beyond the finite, whether understood as fecundity or death. De Beauvoir locates this mode of thinking woman in early agricultural societies, with the worship of woman as Earth Goddess and with the myth of matriarchy. She is insistent that even where woman is attributed magical powers and status, this categorization of woman as Other sets the scene for the subordination of women.<sup>25</sup> In the Hegelian account of the emergence of self-consciousness, this conception of woman traps her within nature and the relationship between life and self-conscious being as necessary but alien to man's existence. For de Beauvoir, the sources of this early (primitive) way of thinking have to do with woman's role in reproduction and her inability in technologically limited societies to assert herself beyond her bodily situation of biological enslavement to the species. Even though, for de Beauvoir, it is axiomatic that humans are always already existents, she suggests that woman's situation within primitive society lends itself to the denial of her existence and her acquiescence in this denial.

In the Hegelian story, it is first the detachment of the individual from a purely species-oriented existence and then the capacities of individuals to fight and to work which mark the transitions to self-conscious being. The second conception of woman as 'other' in de Beauvoir's account brings woman into the play of intersubjectivity and the struggle for recognition in a part analogous to (but not the same as) that of the loser and serf in Hegel's story, defined as dependent

existence, recognized as complementing and servicing the needs of the master.<sup>26</sup> According to de Beauvoir, the analogy between the serf and woman is clear not only in terms of their consignment to service roles, but more importantly in the way in which they are necessary to the lord. The lord cannot be satisfied with relations to mere life and external objects; he needs an 'other' subject to confirm his existence as something more than life. For this reason the lord spares the life of the serf and man is unable to consign woman wholly to the status of absolute 'Other'. However, when 'other' is understood in this sense, according to Hegel, there are two pathways open towards confirmation of self-conscious being: fighting and productive work. For de Beauvoir woman's position is never quite that of Hegel's serf to the extent that those pathways have been closed to her. She is particularly insistent that the fact that women have not voluntarily and non-naturally risked their lives has fundamentally affected the likelihood of their recognition as equals to their male oppressors. Even when understood in terms of 'becoming' rather than 'being', therefore, de Beauvoir argues consistently that woman is cast (by men and by herself) as a very particular kind of other, one faced with different sorts of barriers to those blocking the path to full recognition of serfs.<sup>27</sup>

On de Beauvoir's account, woman is positioned from the earliest times as neither being nor existence, or as simultaneously being and existence in a way which disrupts thinking 'under the sign of duality', which is itself the mark of existence as opposed to being. This positioning, whilst in complete contradiction to the nature of women as existents, is not inexplicable in the light of the physical, social and economic context of primitive agricultural societies and the forms of legal, social and economic organization that have succeeded them. De Beauvoir transposes Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness from life on to a historical stage and her analysis becomes in effect the tracing of the possibilities of asserting women's being as existence in different historical eras, from the ancient world to modernity. She attempts to rewrite the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from the perspective of woman:

Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – only in order to lock women therein. But it is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence – the very submission of women is proof of that statement. What they demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality.<sup>28</sup>

De Beauvoir argues that the key to changing women's concrete situation is the shift from defining woman as 'Other' to defining women as 'others'. But this has to be a shift beyond the servile 'other' analogous to Hegel's serf, towards a mutual recognition between men and women as equal freedoms. There is no road to proper recognition for women in de Beauvoir's view, which can go via the identification with 'woman' as 'Other', since all the characteristics of this position involve her identification with 'being' rather than existence. At the same time, however, the road to recognition from women's position as 'other' is also fraught with difficulty. Women must also resist the dominant identification of her as 'other' to man, as this identification has been constructed by men seeking to confirm their own transcendence through confining woman to a realm of immanence. In de Beauvoir's analysis the key to changing women's situation is to change the way in which she is thought by men and thinks of herself through masculine eyes.<sup>29</sup>

In seeing the lord–serf dialectic as central to understanding how women have come to be as they are, de Beauvoir, like Kojève, puts intersubjective recognitive relations at the heart of both oppression and liberation. In de Beauvoir's case, however, work does not function in the same way to give the serf a clear independent route to freedom. De Beauvoir does see lack of access to productive work as an important part of women's historical inability to define themselves in terms of transcendent projects, arguing that the times during the course of history when women have worked outside of the domestic context have raised the status of women.<sup>30</sup> But whereas the serf is wholly engaged in productive work, women have not generally been placed in this position. Even in contexts where women do work independent of the household, they retain their reproductive physiology and role and their domestic responsibilities to maintain/sustain the material being of others. These latter tasks cannot lead to women's confirmation of their own existence as becoming rather than being because these tasks are 'species' tasks, not just metaphorically but actually confined to the realm of immanence. In this sense, de Beauvoir endorses the dominant (masculinist) assessment of what it means to be a woman, and suggests that women therefore depend on men to recognize their freedom in spite of their (women's) inevitably different situation. At the same time, however, it is clear that in so far as the pattern of recognition changes, what it means for women to be confirmed as independent existents is to be recognized as what man already is, constantly defining himself in transcendence of nature



and facticity. Mutual recognition between women as women has only limited liberatory potential outside of the conversion of the male perspective which defines how women see themselves and each other. Thus de Beauvoir's accounts of both oppression and liberation depend on the masculine point of view, which is also the point of view of the genuine existent, and on her initial account of women's biological disadvantage. 'Man's true victory whether he is liberator or conqueror lies just in this: that woman freely recognises him as her destiny.'<sup>31</sup> This is true both in the 'bad faith' identification of woman with man's view of her, and in the authentic embracing by women of their own destiny as free existents.

Clear-cut distinctions between existence and being, between different existents, and between individual and collective existence are inconsistently sustained within the explanations and accounts of women's subordination and possible liberation in *The Second Sex*. The outcome of de Beauvoir's use of the paradigm of the 'struggle for recognition' has profoundly uncomfortable consequences for feminism in that it seems to leave us with a choice between the impossibility of women's transcendence and liberation construed as becoming man. This has led many feminist commentators to see reliance on Hegel as key to the weaknesses of de Beauvoir's argument. A more satisfactory critical response, however, is to argue that de Beauvoir's use of Hegelian ideas in fact reflects tensions between Kojévian and Sartrean accounts of human existence and their implications. These tensions are apparent in the question of how the gap first between the life and death struggle and the lord-serf dialectic, and

then the lord-serf dialectic and mutual recognition of self-consciousnesses, can be bridged. In each case, for women, de Beauvoir's argument seems to be, on Sartrean premisses, that the transition is via the lord's permission, initially in wanting woman as 'other' for sustaining his own existence, and second because he somehow recognizes that his own self-conscious being will be enhanced by the recognition of woman as other but equal. But it is not at all clear why on Sartrean premisses the latter step, at any rate, should be taken. De Beauvoir herself makes woman's bodily situation, her organic being, in itself a temptation to embrace immanence and evade transcendence, which although an option not open to an animal keeps woman positioned primarily in relation to species rather than individuated existence. There is a persistent tendency towards confusion about woman's being evident in de Beauvoir's own thinking of

women not only in terms of their transcendent possibilities but also in terms of their immanence: woman as 'other to herself', as the slave of the species is never fully exorcized from the individual who demands to be recognized as an existent. Yet the constitutive dualities of de Beauvoir's analysis make it difficult to think this subject-object as anything other than a defective subject. In addition, the blurring of the subject-object (existent-life) distinction which yet cannot be thought is accompanied by the blurring of the existent-other distinction in the relation between any individual woman and women as a group. Women identify each other as well as being identified by men as partaking in essentiality, common and undifferentiated rather than unique and individuated. I would argue, then, that the crucial tension in de Beauvoir's analysis is that between the thinking which keeps subject and object radically distinct and the thinking, defined by Sartre as Hegel's most fundamental error, which conceives subject as simultaneously object and vice versa.

### Thinking being as life, existence as spirit

Hegel's account of sexual difference in nature and society is usually read in terms of the constitutive dualities of the Western tradition, in which women are associated with nature, men with culture; women with determined and men with self-determining being, women with object and men with subject, and so on. In so far as de Beauvoir's analysis draws upon Hegel's account of these dualities in his *Philosophy of Nature* and in the section on self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, feminist critics have argued that de Beauvoir necessarily carries over aspects of the

androcentrism of Hegel's analysis in which women are associated with the inferior term of each duality. This criticism depends, however, on the identification of Hegel's account of the central relations and distinctions between what he calls 'nature' and 'spirit' and different self-conscious beings with that of his existentialist interpreters. This is not to argue that Hegel's philosophy does not have its androcentric aspects, but that the conceptual tools provided by Hegel for thinking about the question of 'how woman comes to be' are richer and more promising than those of existentialism. According to Hegel:

the transition from Nature to mind [*Geist*] is not a transition to an out-and-out Other, but is only a coming-to-itself of mind out of its externality in Nature. But equally the differentia of Nature and mind is not abolished by this transition, for mind does not proceed in a natural manner from Nature.<sup>32</sup>

Spirit emerges from nature, but it does not do so naturally. Hegel tells this story in one way in the *Encyclopaedia* texts, offering a philosophical account of the relations between nature, spirit and the ways in which they can be comprehended in thought. Within the *Philosophy of Nature* and *The Philosophy of Mind* [*Geist*] sexual relations (between male and female mammals rather than between men and women only) and reproduction figure at the point of transition between comprehending 'animate Nature' (living, organic, bodily existence) and comprehending 'spirit' (self-conscious existence). The significance of sexual intercourse is that within it, even if only at a given moment, 'the distinct existences in their mutual relationship are no longer external to each other but have the feeling of their unity'.<sup>33</sup> The significance of reproduction (as de Beauvoir rightly notes, citing Hegel's view that the birth of the child signifies the death of the parents) lies in the way in which it indicates the implication of individual animals (female or male) in a species which transcends and yet dominates their immediate individuated existence. In the relation between male and female, progenitor and offspring in nature, Hegel claims to discern a dynamic of mutual self-determination and of universality within particularity, which he argues is also crucial to comprehending the nature of spirit.

At the same time, however, Hegel is insistent that nature is distinct from spirit, since in nature these dynamics are experienced implicitly as a matter of feeling and instinct, whereas in the realm of spirit they are experienced explicitly as a matter for self-conscious reflection and determination – that is, as food for thought and action. In the *Encyclopaedia* texts

Hegel's claims as to the identity and non-identity of nature with spirit are made abstractly. The shift from nature to spirit is presented as a necessary progression of thought, and it is difficult to work out how spirit can both emerge from nature and do so non-naturally. Nevertheless, it is clear that Hegel sees the conception of a clear-cut ontological distinction between natural and spiritual being as difficult to sustain. In addition, the implication of the individual within the species, rather than being interpreted negatively in de Beauvoir's sense, is seen by Hegel as a presaging (but also as a transition towards) that which is crucial to spiritual existence. The story of the identity and non-identity of nature and spirit is taken up and expounded again in a different way in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In the first part of the *Phenomenology* Hegel traces the lessons of idealism, showing how, in the work of the understanding, the object of consciousness is not independent of consciousness but is itself consciousness. The realm of truth is therefore the realm of self-consciousness (of consciousness reflecting upon itself), and the task of the philosopher becomes that of comprehending the development of self-consciousness and the different modes of its self-understanding. Hegel begins his account of the development of self-consciousness by exploring the sameness and difference of spirit and nature, not abstractly and philosophically but phenomenologically through a reconstruction of the experience of this sameness and difference. The account begins not with self-consciousness but with life, the organic ongoing reproduction of the human genus – a story of the life cycle of sex, birth, sustenance and death.

Self-consciousness is introduced as 'genus on its own account', the simple essence which has itself as pure 'I' for object and which identifies itself as distinct from the ebb and flow of organic life as a whole. What does this mean? Here we find the key to the idea of the emergence of spirit non-naturally from nature. The human animal is peculiar, Hegel suggests, because it depends for its survival not simply on implicit, instinctually programmed mechanisms or habits (letting nature take its course) to ensure the survival of the species but on positing its survival as an explicit object both as species and as individual (hence the introduction of the idea of self-consciousness as desire). In the opening paragraphs of the section on 'Self-Consciousness', Hegel focuses on the ways in which this non-natural nature is manifested from different perspectives within the life cycle. From the point of view of parents, explicit commitment to



species survival is demonstrated in the need to work to maintain their offspring. From the point of view of the offspring, it survives as an individual only through feeding, and the insatiable desire to consume that which is external to it:

Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well.<sup>34</sup>

If self-consciousness is to survive as an individual or as a species it has to recognize that which is instrumental to its survival not only as external nature ('life') but also as other self-consciousnesses on which it depends for the possibility of its independence, its own becoming. In other words, it has to learn. Hegel goes on to suggest that this is true from the most elementary level at which an individual child learns to feed itself to the most complex levels of human development. Spirit distinguishes itself from nature as being dependent on the non-natural process of learning, from both nature and other self-consciousnesses, which yet is natural to it.

In de Beauvoir's analysis, following both Sartre and Kojève, the 'life and death struggle' which Hegel describes following his account of the peculiar nature of self-conscious being holds a particular significance. In de Beauvoir's case this is not only because the risking of life is the epitome of a project of transcendence, of what it means to exist as opposed simply to be, but also because it contrasts with the purely biological function of giving birth. I would argue, however, that in Hegel's analysis giving birth provides an equally significant context for the self-conscious development of spirit (and one which is far less fundamentally stupid) to that given by the deliberate suffering or infliction of death. The life and death struggle is a fable used by Hegel to demonstrate the inadequacy of any account of self-consciousness as independent either of nature (life) or other self-consciousnesses. From the point of view of any given 'I', my death is an ultimate proof of my identity with nature, which, frustratingly, I can never learn about through dying; and the death of the other is a deprivation in that it takes away a source of my own self-conscious being/becoming. Hegel emphasizes the point by staging the fable in a world of only two self-conscious existents, itself a less complex world than that of species life, of parents and children, with which his analysis was initially concerned. The

participants in the life and death struggle are presented initially as heroic figures, but Hegel is clear that what they seek to prove turns to dust:

Their act is an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives in its own supersession.<sup>35</sup>

The fable of the life and death struggle confirms the identity and mutual dependence of spirit with nature, and self-consciousness with other self-consciousnesses. In the following passages, the infamous 'lord-serf' dialectic, Hegel goes further in examining and explaining the nature of this identity and mutual dependence. Within this section nature figures both as organic life, which is the natural, indispensable condition of spirit and has been explicitly recognized as such, and as the substantial object upon which self-consciousness (in the form of the serf) works. The position of the serf forces a more sophisticated recognition of the truth already evident to the infant as it is weaned. That is, survival for self-conscious being involves self-transformation from the state of greedy immediate desire to the willingness to defer gratification and put energy into transforming the world into one in which the possibility of living will become more than a question of external contingency. 'The fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom', because the fear of death (the recognition of natural dependence/finitude) propels the serf into the production of a 'second nature', without which, for human beings, there is no life. The position of the lord is untenable because in refusing to recognize his dependence on either life or the serf he is incapable of learning: his position is eternally infantilized.

The argument of the *Phenomenology* takes a second decisive turn when Hegel moves from the paradigm of self-consciousness in the form of individuated encounters with others and the world to the exploration of the realm of 'spirit'. Although we have already been introduced to spirit as the mutual dependence of self-consciousnesses – “‘ I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I”” – throughout the sections on 'Self-Consciousness' and 'Reason' self-consciousness is presented as abstract and decontextualized. What is missing from the analysis is spirit in the sense of the 'second nature' which is presaged in the work of the serf and the distinctive forms that it takes. Without this element, Hegel argues, no sense can be made either ontologically or epistemologically of what it means to be self-conscious being. At this point Hegel moves his analysis onto an explicitly historical stage and starts the discussion of

Greek ethical life. It is also at this point that the deep distinction between the existentialist understanding of the dualities framing human existence and the Hegelian picture become particularly obvious. The sense in which spirit is understood as self-changing being in Hegel's account includes an irreducible natural, collective and institutional dimension. The notion of individual abstraction from this dimension, whether in a Hobbesian or existentialist mode, is a fantasy expressed both in the life–death struggle fable and also in the historical experience of the French revolutionary terror. This is not simply because there is no escape from the limitations of external facticity but because we *are* the limitations of our external facticity; we are what we do and do not learn and what we have and have not learned – which is also why particular 'I's' and 'We's' are always products of complex contingencies.

In de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex*, two ideas provide the key to her analysis: first, the Sartrean view of the clear-cut distinction between existence and being or subject and object positions; second, Hegel's lord–serf dialectic, read through Kojévian eyes. She then analyses the position of women in specific historical eras, with reference to these models. In doing this, she produces a new phenomenology of spirit, mapping the possibilities for women at each historical stage. However, for Hegel the abstraction and application of one model of self-consciousness's relation to organic and inorganic nature, on the one hand, and to other self-consciousnesses, on the other, is a fundamental mistake. There is no place outside of history for the formation of conceptual tools which can then be used to understand these relations. This is evident in the way in which de Beauvoir's own analysis strains against her conceptual approach, both ontologically and normatively. Her own phenomenological insights frequently undercut the distinctions on which she relies, and both her insights into the grounds of women's oppression (in which women figure actually in an impossible subject–object position) and her utopian goal of 'mutual recognition' between men and women are difficult to explain within the terms in which she is arguing.

The distinctions and relations between existence and being (whether in the sense of life or material objects – 'Other'), between different existents, and between individual and collective which de Beauvoir uses to frame her analysis have been central to the feminist reception of her argument in *The Second Sex*. What is frequently shared by the various feminist interpre-

tations of and responses to de Beauvoir is a claim that it is her reliance on the androcentric philosophies of Hegel and Sartre which underpins her interpretation of biological and historical empirical evidence, and the philosophical inadequacies and political weaknesses of her ideas. This claim is sometimes linked to misogynistic attitudes or evaluations which are seen to be carried over into de Beauvoir's own work, in particular in relation to her attitude to women's reproductive and domestic work. Sometimes, however, the claim goes much deeper, arguing for the inherent misogyny of the ontology and politics implicit in Hegel's and Sartre's accounts of existence and intersubjective relations.

I have argued that in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir's analysis is caught between Sartrean and Hegelian accounts of fundamental distinctions and relations between existence and being (spirit and nature), between existents, and between individual and collective existence. On the whole, de Beauvoir stays closer to Sartre in her argument, largely because her reading of Hegel remains mediated by Sartre's focus on the life–death struggle and because the Kojévian element in her argument, the possibility of mutual recognition, is understood in Sartrean terms as a matter of choice which appears arbitrary, the product of wishful thinking. I have also suggested, however, that there are elements in de Beauvoir's argument which display affinities with a different reading of Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness, and that a more substantial turn to Hegel might have furnished de Beauvoir with a rather less fixed and negative view of women's bodily situation and a rather more robust and optimistic account of the actualities and possibilities of collective existence.

## Notes

This article draws on material from my forthcoming *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (Polity).

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* [1948], trans. B. Frechtman, Carol Publishing Group, Secaucus NJ, 1997; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1943], trans. H.E. Barnes, Methuen, London, 1958.
2. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 7–34.
3. A useful recent collection of feminist responses to de Beauvoir is Margaret Simons, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, Pennsylvania University Press, University Park PA, 1995. For accounts of de Beauvoir's thought in relation to both mainstream and feminist philosophical approaches, see also: Julien S. Murphy, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA, 1999; Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, Athlone, London, 1996; Toril Moi, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1994; Toril

- Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999; Karen Green, *The Woman of Reason*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 130–48; Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, pp. 47–79; Michelle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1989; Andrea Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, Croom Helm, Beckenham, 1988, pp. 73–114; Judith Butler, 'Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution', in A. Garry and M. Pearsall, eds, *Women, Knowledge and Reality*, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1989.
4. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 38, 73.
  5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
  8. In later life de Beauvoir commented on the peculiarity of the quasi-Hegelianism of this text and its lack of fit with the strongly existentialist premisses of her argument (see the quotation from *Force of Circumstance* in Karen Green, 'Sartre and de Beauvoir on Freedom and Oppression', in Murphy, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 180). Several feminist commentators have noted the tension between the Hegelian and Sartrean elements in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* (Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*; Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*; Sutton Morris, 'Sartre on Objectification: A Feminist Perspective', in Murphy, ed., *Feminist Interpretations*; Green, 'Sartre and de Beauvoir on Freedom and Oppression'; Le Doeuff, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into (Ambiguous) Line', in Simons, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*).
  9. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 126.
  10. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 27.
  11. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–19.
  12. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987 (reprinted with new Preface, 1999).
  13. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1980, p. 6; pp. 11–30; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 104–19.
  14. For Sartre, the notion of mutual recognition sums up the false epistemological and ontological optimism implicit in the idea of absolute knowledge. Sartre's rejection of this idea is central to his own philosophical position in *Being and Nothingness*, which is premised on the radical impossibility of either thinking or being an entity which is simultaneously subject and object (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 241).
  15. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 22–3; 112–13.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
  18. Green, 'Sartre and de Beauvoir on Freedom and Oppression', p. 180.
  19. Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London, 1953, pp. 52, 55.
  20. It has been suggested by Spivak that, read against the grain, de Beauvoir's account of women's biology, specifically in relation to reproduction, is in fact more affirmative of the ontological and ethical significance of the figure of the Mother than it is normally taken to be (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics', in J. Butler and J.W. Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 60–63). A different point is made by Battersby, who argues for a reconceptualization of bodily materiality in terms other than those provided by de Beauvoir whilst nevertheless arguing for the centrality of embodiment to subject position. Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 35–7.
  21. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 35–6.
  22. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
  23. De Beauvoir's account of the history of human civilization is thoroughly modernist. It is premised on the idea that there is a development from simplicity to complexity in human society and owes a great deal to Marxist arguments as to the material driving forces of historical change. Many critics of *The Second Sex* have argued that it relies on highly questionable and outdated anthropological material, which is used to underpin false contrasts between 'primitive' and 'developed' cultures.
  24. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 61.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–8.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
  27. It is worth noting that de Beauvoir is ambiguous in her references to the barrier to women's development as existents posed by their lack of participation in 'life risking' practices. As Chanter has pointed out, within the discussion of historical development in *The Second Sex*, it is not women's lack of participation in fighting but in hunting which is referred to as disadvantaging them (Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, p. 61). In de Beauvoir's account, it is women's lack of opportunity to fight men within a struggle for recognition which is seen as the problem, a reference which leads Lundgren-Gothlin to argue that de Beauvoir sees women as unable to participate in the struggle for recognition at all and therefore necessarily confined to the position of absolute other (Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, p. 72). It seems clear in any case that there is something peculiar about the position of women.
  29. Cf. Green, 'Sartre and de Beauvoir on Freedom and Oppression', pp. 175–9.
  30. It is clear from de Beauvoir's autobiographical writing, as well as from *The Second Sex*, that she put enormous value on independent, non-domestic work as a manifestation of free existence. She habitually distinguished herself from the standard positioning of 'woman' because of her lack of domestic responsibilities and her work as a writer.
  31. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 199.
  32. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p. 14.
  33. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978, pp. 10–11.
  34. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 109.
  35. *Ibid.*, p. 115.