



THE NOTION OF THE BODY AND SEX IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

In her masterpiece *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir depicts the atrocities of a typical patriarchal society. The author assumes that every human being should have the opportunity to experience feelings of a conquest and of being conquered to fully appreciate freedom. The body, the essential condition of human existence, is equally an object and a subject. Unfortunately, as Beauvoir reveals, this ontological rule is not respected in a society dominated by men. Patriarchy juxtaposes a male body, the subject, with a female body, the object. The main purpose of the present article is to answer the question, which many interpreters of Beauvoir's text have posed themselves: does Beauvoir really blame only patriarchy for such an injustice or is she rather willing to admit that female biology also contributes to such a biased situation. Researchers have never been unanimous on this issue. However, deeper analysis of *The Second Sex* as presented in this article finds that Beauvoir does not explain the social situation of women as a result of their biology at any point. According to Beauvoir, the discrimination of women in society is totally undeserved. This article also illustrates the originality of Beauvoir's thoughts in relations to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. In her times, Beauvoir was mainly known as a novelist and the publication of *The Second Sex* was, misleadingly, not regarded by critics as a philosophical work. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir presents her own theory of interpersonal relationship, different from the one created in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

Key words: existentialism, human body, sex, patriarchy

Western culture has shown its mistrust towards the body from almost as far back as antiquity. The metaphysical dualist characteristic of the philosophical thought developed in this part of the world held carnal desires in contempt and regarded them with suspicion.

Platonic axiological dualism, inspired by Orphic beliefs, evidently raised the status of spiritual reality and simultaneously isolated it from the bodily dimension [cf. 1, p. 94]. In his dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato gave the human soul the task of freeing itself from the "bonds" by which the body constrained it. The human being is perceived here as a soul, i.e. as Good and Existence, while the qualities of Evil and Non-Existence are attributed to the body. "And does purification not turn out to be what we mentioned in our argument some time ago, namely, to separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself as far as it can both now and in the future, freed, as it were, from the bonds of the body?" [2, p. 58].

The problem of the soul and body is conceived quite differently in methodological dualism, whose most distinguished representative is René Descartes [cf. 1, p. 97]. In *Discourse on Method*, he argues that thinking is a characteristic of spiritual reality, while the bodily dimension is best characterised by extension. *Res extensa* is conceived here as a machine at the service of *res cogitans*, which for its part always remains independent from the needs of the body.

Dualist solutions thus depict the body as either a non-existence or as an ordinary material object, like, for example, a table, a chair or a book, whose presence is an inseparable element of a being-in-the-world human being. Phenomenology departs from the tradition of a dualist mind-body division.

The experience of two world wars left their mark on the lives of intellectuals active in the first half of the 20th century, their way of perceiving the world was affected and redefined their relations to their surroundings. In France during this period a new current of thought arose, known as existential phenomenology, whose main creators were Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. In this philosophy, the notion of experience underscoring the separateness of subject and object was replaced by the notion of situation expressing their interaction. Reality, which empiricism and rationalism had tried, each in their own way, to split from each other, now gained a new image, one of an indivisible whole representing a process of continual intermingling and interaction between subjective and objective elements. Both the external world and consciousness were regarded as real and, most fundamentally, neither of these held a superior role over the other [cf. 3, p. 24].

The recognition that the subjective and objective spheres were interdependent changed the negative attitude towards the human body. In 1945, in her review of M. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,

Simone de Beauvoir claimed that phenomenology returned to humans their property in the form of their own bodies [cf. 3, p. 25].

One of the fundamental theses of phenomenological deliberations on the human body is the assumption that it entails an element of subjectivity and objectivity. Full human embodiment is an essential condition for existence and is simultaneously an object and a subject. So human beings have the right to feelings of possession and being possessed.

Referring to the phenomenological conception of embodiment, Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* regarded the asymmetry of relations between the sexes as a breaking of an ontological principle. In a patriarchal society the objectification of a woman's body, *la chair*, is in opposition to the activity of the male body, the living body, *le corps*. The body of a man is a subject, while a woman's body is an object.

When analysing *The Second Sex's* content, the reader is faced with the following questions: In Beauvoir's view, is the object role which society ascribes to a woman's body a consequence of adopting the patriarchal perspective? Or maybe she leans more toward the view that a woman's own bodily condition has condemned her to passivity and caused man's predominance in society? The opinions of academics researching Beauvoir's thought are divided. Some accuse her of misogyny and of criticising female biology, while others think that in her view blame for the objectification of the female body is carried out by society alone.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is an attempt to take up a polemic with certain interpretations of *The Second Sex*. What mechanisms govern a patriarchy? What is the relation between society and the female body? How is its sexuality perceived? These are the issues, which must be raised before the fundamental problem can be resolved of whether Beauvoir is condemning female biology or society alone.

Man made woman the "Other"¹, i.e. an exact negation of what he himself would desire to become. Beauvoir argues that in the patriarchal myths of Mother Earth, Mother Nature, as well as in the alliance between Woman and Death, the ontological unity of body-for-oneself and body-for-the-other is broken up. Myths identify the body of woman with matter, passivity and immanence, while ascribing transcendence and activeness to the male body. Patriarchy thus makes it possible for a man to ignore the fact that his own body is

an object, as well as a subject. Thanks to this, he believes that his body, *le corps*, is completely free of any of those aspects of the physical human condition which would attest to its passivity.

Simone de Beauvoir thinks that the stereotypes laid down in myths have an overwhelming influence on the relations between the sexes. It is believed of a woman growing up in a patriarchal society that her destiny is neither to take an active stance towards the world nor engage in activity through which she would be able to realise her individuality. In consequence, her own body becomes an object of conflict between the desires she fosters as an independent individual and the interests of the human species. Ultimately, in the aftermath of intensifying processes of socialisation, a woman is reduced to a purely biological role. Her *corps* is transformed into flesh, *chair*. Yet is it really de Beauvoir's view that social conditions bear the sole responsibility for this situation so harmful to women? Or does she perceive biological data as an integrated contribution to the phenomenon of the "feminine"? A reading of *The Second Sex* induces some academics to claim that, according to the author, biology also condemns woman to the fate of an objectified *chair*.

In the article *Un rapport ambigu au corps et à la conscience des femmes* Laurence Aphéceix argues that the disdain with which Beauvoir describes the female body proves that she was seeking the cause of discrimination against women in biology [cf. 4, p. 44].

"[...] The feminine sex organ is mysterious even to the woman herself, concealed, mucous, and humid, as it is; it bleeds each month, it is often sullied with body fluids, it has a secret and perilous life of its own. Woman does not recognize herself in it, and this explains in large part why she does not recognize its desires as hers. These manifest themselves in an embarrassing manner. Man «gets stiff», but woman «gets wet»; [...] to eject a fluid, urine or semen, does not humiliate: it is an active operation; but it is humiliating if the liquid flows out passively, for then the body is no longer an organism with muscles, nerves, sphincters, under control of the brain and expressive of a conscious subject, but is rather a vessel, a container, composed of inert matter and but the plaything of capricious forces. If the body leaks – as an ancient wall or a dead body may leak – it seems to liquefy rather than to eject fluid: a horrid decomposition" [5, p. 386].

Beauvoir emphasises the asymmetry between the body of a man and a woman. He, privileged by nature, possesses physical strength, thanks to which he can open himself to the world. She, endowed with a capricious body, is stuck in a state of immanence. Ultimately, asks Aphéceix, is it not these physical differences that lead to men-women relations not being dialectic in character? [cf. 4, p. 44].

In the part entitled *Destiny*, Simone de Beauvoir remarks that the body is a kind of instrument through

¹ In *The Second Sex*, the word "Other" – written with a capital letter refers exclusively to a woman. She is always the Other (the Absolute Other) in relation to man. However, in the text, we also come across the word "other" – written with a small letter. It can be only applied to a person who acquired this status in a dialectic, and not in an absolute, way. This distinction is crucial to fully understand Beauvoir's philosophy.

which a human being receives and acquaints him/herself with the world. In her view, biological construction has an overwhelming significance for the way in which the world is perceived, and the manner of being-in-the-world as well. Aphéceix maintains that, since Beauvoir devalues the female body, by the same token she employs biological data to explain woman's inferiority to man. In other words: the passivity of the female body is not only a product of society, but also of biology. And following on from this, patriarchal society is not just something inflicted on woman as something co-created by her biological circumstances.

A similar interpretation of *The Second Sex* is presented by Eve Gothlin in her book *Sexe et existence. La philosophie de Simone de Beauvoir*. She remarks that Beauvoir's thinking is marked by a certain vacillation. On the one hand, the author of *The Second Sex* presents the feminine as a product of society, while on the other she is not able to rid herself of the conviction that to a certain extent woman's fate is dependent on her biology [cf. 6, p. 254].

Beauvoir postulates that woman should possess her own living body – the *corps*, protest against her objectification, take action and open herself out “to the world”, but at the same time her own vision of the female body makes it difficult to realise these plans. In Gothlin's opinion, although the philosophy of sex created by Beauvoir is a polemic against the sexist thought of Sartre and Hegel, it still remains under the overwhelming influence of this philosophical tradition. The desiring subject (*sujet désirant*) is in Beauvoir's text of the male sex, as in Sartre's being-for-oneself and Hegel's master and slave [cf. 6, p. 263]. According to Gothlin, there is no case in which the causes of this qualification should be sought out in the social situation alone.

The accusation of biologism levelled at Beauvoir is refuted by Fredricka Scarth in her book *The Other Within. Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*. She claims that the description of female corporeality contained in *The Second Sex* really is full of contempt, but it does not express Beauvoir's own attitude to the female body. This repugnant image should be interpreted within the context of patriarchal society. The author of *The Second Sex* is showing the male point of view and not identifying herself with it [cf. 7, pp. 117–118].

Scarth very clearly emphasises that Beauvoir is purposefully using phallogentric language, as she wants to unmask its atrocity. The dramatic nature of her description of the female body and the glorification of masculinity reveal how unjust patriarchal mythology really is.

In an interview given in 1982, Beauvoir, on refuting the accusation of biologism, sought justification in language. She explained that the brutality of the description of the female sex organs presented in *The Second Sex* is the result of her employing the language of men. This is hardly surprising, however, since phal-

locentric discourse has dominated phallogentric society and become completely binding. “[...] we all speak in the language of men. It is they [men] who have given us our verbs and pronouns, and we [women] who must do the best we can with them” [8, p. 384].

Beauvoir was aware that the language of *The Second Sex* presented the sphere of female sexual experiences in a harmful manner. Despite this, she made no attempt to create a language free of sexist influence. No words of criticism are spared by Martha Noel Evans in her article entitled “Murdering L'Invitée: Gender and Fictional Narrative”, which takes Beauvoir to task for not using her own language in her literature. Evan claims that, by adopting a “male style” of writing, Beauvoir is reproducing the stereotypes of a patriarchal culture. In consequence, *The Second Sex* enters a tradition dominated by men and does not break away from it, as its author seems to have intended [cf. 9, pp. 50–51]. However, Evans does not take the pains to find the reason for which Beauvoir could not definitively reject a male way of thinking.

Phallogentric language founded on the dichotomous divisions of patriarchal society renders the character of the social situations of the “feminine” and the “masculine”. By employing it, Beauvoir can present both man and woman “in their generalities”. If the author of *The Second Sex* had decided to reject “masculine” language and create her own, allowing her to describe the typical situation of men and women, she would have had to appeal to extra-societal traits common to each of the sexes. By doing this, she would be adopting essentialism which would be in opposition to the assumptions of existentialist philosophy.

We ought not therefore to succumb to this illusion and accuse Beauvoir of biologism on the basis of her descriptions of the female body. Fredricka Scarth would appear to be right when she maintains that the author of *The Second Sex* is not expressing her own attitude on the female body through these descriptions. But do they in fact impart the male point of view? Is ascribing such ruthless traits to men not a manifestation of sexism? Discrimination against women in a patriarchal society, discrimination relying on the prevention of their gaining an education or work in profession, is a historical fact which cannot be challenged. Yet is difficult to accept that a man looking at a woman's body saw it as a “container composed of inert matter” from which effluence “leaks – as a dead body leaks” [5, p. 386].

It would appear that Beauvoir employed such a shocking description of female corporeality to focus the attention of public opinion on the scale of the problem of discrimination. By shocking her audience, the author of *The Second Sex* brought about popular discourse on the subject and this was undoubtedly her intention. If it weren't for its naturalistic descriptions of the body and female sexuality, her work would certainly not have had such far-reaching repercussions.

Moreover, Beauvoir defends herself successfully from the charge of biologism in *The Second Sex*. She underlies repeatedly the rebellion aroused in a woman against her status in patriarchal society. In the text, it is clearly stressed that women demand power of recognition and freedom for the subjective dimension of their body, *le corps*. It is a fundamental issue, to which interpreters of Beauvoir's thinking appear to have not attached the appropriate weight to.

"But at puberty the species reasserts its claim. [...] Not without resistance does the body of woman permit the species to take over; and this struggle is weakening and dangerous" [5, pp. 26–27]. "[...] woman is of all mammalian females at once the one who is most profoundly alienated (her individuality the prey of outside forces), and the one who most violently resists this alienation; in no other is enslavement of the organism to reproduction more imperious or more unwillingly accepted. It would seem that her lot is heavier than just of other females in just about the same degree that she goes beyond other females in the assertion of her individuality" [5, p. 32].

When growing up, a girl is made to believe that her biology condemns her to the immanence of repetitions, and simultaneously deprives her of creative transcendence. As a result, a young woman begins to understand that motherhood will be the only role which she is supposed to play in society. In Beauvoir's opinion, this arouses principled opposition in her. A woman does not want to become a submissive tool in the hands of society as this does not accord with her destiny as a free human being.

Let's take note: if Beauvoir had really ascribed the reasons for woman's bodily passivity to female biology, then she would not have categorised society's imposition of a reproductive role on her as rape of the woman-individual. She would have regarded it as something naturally flowing from female nature.

In any case, would a woman rebel against the *chair*, if her body were in fact only a body-for-the-other? A woman wages war because society degrades her body to the role of a mere object and she wants to retain its subjectivity.

The *chair* is not the body imposed on her by biology. It is a socialised body which a woman accepts as a member of a patriarchy. Why? Paradoxically, in the ensuing social situation the yoke of the passive body she has come to hate represents the only opportunity for her to demonstrate her independence. "[...] a woman assures her most delicious triumphs by first falling into the depths of abjection; [...]" [5, p. 291]. It is thanks to the *chair* that a woman can please a man and therefore take possession of him.

The stance of the author of *The Second Sex* appears to be clear: the tragic situation of women relies on society's interference with her body. The forces exerted by social mechanisms cause female corporeality to be

wrested from one of its ontological dimensions, body-for-oneself, and become passive flesh, *chair*. This passivity is not, however, something natural to her, i.e. something flowing from female physical conditions. "I deny that biological facts establish for [a woman] a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever" [5, pp. 32–33].

Is there a way of liberating the female body from socially imposed immanence? Can a woman's body become an expression of her humanity? Suggestions appear among those who study Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy that in her view the path to humanity has already been staked out by men. Issue is taken with this judgment on the author of *The Second Sex* by, for example, Dorothy Kaufmann in her essay entitled *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex and Jean-Paul Sartre*. In her opinion, Beauvoir, by identifying the masculine ability to bear risks as a trait characteristic of humans while identifying the giving of life with animality, perceives in the imitation of man a way of liberating the female body [cf. 9, p. 55].

Généviève Lloyd interprets *The Second Sex* in a similar spirit in her study entitled *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* [cf. 10, p. 251]. She thinks that Beauvoir adopted male transcendence as an ideal for which women should strive. The existential alternative, to look and act or be looked at and acted upon, became a trap for Beauvoir. For if woman does not want to be the "Other" any longer, she must become the "Self", i.e. man.

"His [boy's – AT] apprenticeship for life consists in free movement toward the outside world; he contends in hardihood and independence with other boys, he scorns girls. Climbing trees, fighting with his companions, facing them in rough games, he feels his body as a means for dominating nature and as a weapon for fighting; he takes pride in his muscles as in his sex; in games, spots, fights, challenges, trials of strength, he finds a balanced exercise of his powers; at the same time he absorbs the severe lessons of violence; he learns from the early age to take blows, to scorn pain, to keep back the tears. He undertakes, he invents, he dares. [...] In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous experience and her objective self, her «being-the-other»; [...]. She is treated like a doll and is refused liberty. Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. If she were encouraged in it, she could display the same lively exuberance, the same curiosity, the same initiative, the same hardihood, as a boy. This does happen occasionally, when the girl is given a boyish bringing up; in this case she is spared many problems" [5, p. 280].

The above passages, quoted from *The Second Sex*, when removed from their context, might lend support to Kaufmann and Lloyd's viewpoint. Nevertheless, their own interpretations do not appear to harmonise with Simone de Beauvoir's mode of thought. The anthropology of sex she proposed has, in this case, been oversimplified and twisted. "Woman, like a man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself" [5, p. 29, distinction made by SdB]. That is how the situation of men and women living in a patriarchal society is presented. If a woman casts aside the submissiveness, softness and physical weakness of her body, making it into a kind of tool that boldly and freely expresses her desires, she will then cross over to the "male side". But according to Beauvoir, the male *corps* is an artificial construct of society as well!

Men try to free their corporeality from its passive and finite aspects, but at the same time the *chair* becomes the object of their desires. Women's corporeality attracts them and at the same time fills them with awe. "[..]; man dives upon his prey like the eagle and the hawk; woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog, in which insects and children are swallowed up. She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous; [...]" [5, p. 386]. In "immersing himself" in woman, man senses his own flesh. He then understands that his subjectivity is a common illusion through which the patriarchy has him in its hold.

"Thus what man cherishes and detests first of all in woman, whether a loved one or mother, is the fixed image of his animal destiny; it is the life that is necessary for his existence but which condemns him to the finite and to death. From the day of his birth man begins to die: this is the truth incarnated in the Mother. In procreation he speaks for the species against himself: he learns this in his wife's embrace; in excitement and pleasure, even before he has engendered, he forgets his unique ego. Although he endeavours to distinguish mother and wife, he gets from both a witness to one thing only: his moral state. He wishes to venerate his mother and love his mistress; at the same time he rebels against them in disgust and fear" [5, pp. 165–166].

Simone de Beauvoir does not distinguish between the "dark" and "light" sides of social dichotomous divisions. It is not true that she complains about the passivity of the female body while simultaneously glorifying male physical activeness. The division of corporeality into two ontological dimensions: body-for-oneself, *corps*, and body-for-the-other, *chair*, is for her a symptom of "bad faith"². It is, in particular, this "bad faith" that defies a human being's destiny as a free individual

² In *The Second Sex*, the term "bad faith" has two different meanings. As in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, it describes a state of fear, which makes humans abandon their freedom and look for cancellation in deterministic solutions. Secondly, it refers to an unjust division of qualities between the sexes.

and tries to locate the essence of this destiny in either "consciousness" or "body", in "subjectivity" or "objectivity", or in "transcendence" or "immanence". So within the framework of Beauvoir's anthropology man cannot be identified with a liberated human, because being a pure Subject is, in her view, being imprisoned by conventions [cf. 9, p. 58].

The accusation that Beauvoir urged women towards the complete rejection of the "feminine" of their bodies in favour of the adoption of the traits characteristic of "masculine" would appear to be off the mark. In the text of *The Second Sex*, it would be difficult to find a supporting passage in which the author explains in what manner a transformation of this kind might be completed.

"Let her swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot an airplane, battle against the elements, take risks, go out for adventure, [...]" [5, p. 333]. In Beauvoir's view, a woman is a free human being who has the right to demonstrate the subjectivity of her body. Of course in a patriarchal society only man could indulge in such activities and in this sense we can acknowledge that woman is copying him. She is not doing this, however, in order to become a person modelled on him, but because she is a human being and has the right to. This is a fundamental distinction that Lloyd happens not to notice.

Beauvoir postulates that each of the sexes should be able to express the subjectivity of their bodies in their own chosen and convenient manner. Objective differences resulting from the physical construction of man and woman cannot become the basis for the introduction of a hierarchy of the sexes beneficial to men. Woman is weaker but this does not make her inferior. Biology does not explain *gender*.

"These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation. [But] They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever" [5, pp. 32–33].

A situation in which a portion of society is deprived of the right to freedom is morally reprehensible. The case of discrimination against women is so particular, however, that the oppressor himself has here become the oppressed. A free individual does not only have the obligation to establish him/herself as transcendental; he/she must also allow others to realise their freedom [cf. 11, p. 139].

For the author of *The Second Sex* an authentic human being is an independent individual expressing both the subjective and objective elements of his/her body. Let us take note that in Sartre's philosophy, the human body is also examined both in subjective and objective categories, although the accent falls here on the division of these two dimensions. Furthermore, the shame which, according to Sartre, a feeling of being objectified arouses

in humans, suggests the introduction of a hierarchisation of these two dimensions. Similarly to Hegel, Sartre clearly asserts that a human being wants to be a subject and does not consent to the objectification of his/her body. Beauvoir, on the contrary, thinks that human beings are able to derive satisfaction from the subjective activeness and objective passiveness of their bodies.

"It is possible to rise above this conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner. But friendship and generosity, which alone permit in actuality this recognition of free beings, are not facile virtues; they are assuredly man's highest achievement, and through that achievement he is to be found in his true nature" [5, p. 140, distinction made by AT].

Human beings sense the autonomy of their egos. Freedom and subjectivity serve as proof of their isolation in the world. Becoming an object in the eyes of the "other"³ can conquer the fear which accompanies a feeling of loneliness. The glance of the other can give someone a sense of the permanence of being and confirms him/her as a being. As opposed to Jean-Paul, Beauvoir thinks that relations with "others" need not assume the character of a conflict, but can be based on feelings of friendship and love.

Sartre gives the term "Mitsein" to a multitude of subjects commonly describing themselves by the pronoun "we". The appearance of the "third party" (*le tiers*) makes an object of my "self – the other" relation. The "third party" by his/her glance simultaneously arouses in me and in the "other" a feeling of shame and alienation, allowing us to mutually sense the "we-object" phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Sartre notes, the surrounding world also allows us to both feel pleasure at the "we-subject" psychological experience [cf. 9, p. 42]. My "self" becomes a transcendence, which does not stand out from the "others", because I confirm its subjectivity by realising aims fixed by the interests of a community and not my own personal ones.

Notice that the "we-subject" in Sartre does not have an primordial character, but is simply grounded in the "self-other" relation. For the author of *Being and Nothingness*, "Mitsein" is just an illusion. In his view all human relations are affected by conflict.

The recognition that the subjective and objective sides of corporeality are equal led the author of *The Second Sex* to create her own theory of interpersonal relations. On the basis of her anthropology, it is possible for two individuals who are not entangled in *gender* to meet and "[...] establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given" [5, p. 732]. According to Beauvoir, the confirmation of one's subjectivity is not tied to the objectification of the "other",

if it proceeds on the principle of mutual recognition of the right to freedom. On the basis of the anthropology presented in *The Second Sex*, a human being can become a participant in a "Mitsein" which will not only be a psychological experience but also an ontologically grounded relationship.

Simone de Beauvoir believes in relationships between men and women based on freedom and equality. An individual of male sex and an individual of female sex are capable of living together, while simultaneously, as individuals, realising their humanity to the fullest. According to the author of *The Second Sex*, a meeting of two subjects who recognise the relativity of their existence with regard to each other can be fulfilled in the most perfect fashion during sexual intimacy. Desire and respect for the biological differences of one's partner and his/her sexuality become the basis of a happy relationship. You are an "other" to me, but you are not inferior as a result. On the contrary: I love you and myself in your and my "otherness".

"The dissimilarity that exists between the eroticism of the male and that of the female creates insoluble problems as long as there is a «battle of the sexes»; they can easily be solved when woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after her flesh while recognizing her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains free in the submission to which she consents. Under such conditions the lovers can enjoy a common pleasure, in the fashion suitable for each, the partners each feeling the pleasure as being his or her own but as having its source in the other. [...] Under a concrete and carnal form there is mutual recognition of the ego and of the other in the keenest awareness of the other and of the ego. [...], the relation of the *other* still exists; but the fact is that alterity has longer a hostile implication, and indeed this sense of the union of really separate bodies is what gives its emotional character to the sexual act; and it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together in passion deny and assert their boundaries, are similar and yet unlike. This unlikeness, which too often isolates them, becomes the source of their enchantment when they do unite" [5, pp. 401–402, distinction made by SdB].

Simone Beauvoir names this utopian vision of a relationship between a male subject and a female subject as "authentic love". In opposition to Sartre, who regarded love as an impossible feeling, she claims that two people who love each other will manage to recognise the subjectivity in each other, without erasing their own boundaries or "otherness". Unfortunately, in Simone de Beauvoir's opinion, patriarchy degrades the female body to the status of flesh, *chair*, which as a consequence leads to the meeting of the "Absolute Subject" – man, and the "Other" – woman.

In *The Second Sex* two kinds of oppression which appear in interpersonal relations were detailed: the

³ The change of orthography is not hazardous here. We are referring to a dialectic relationship.

first of these has its source in the master-slave conflict and can only be felt by one man in confrontation with another man, while the second exclusively involves woman oppressed by man. It should be stressed very clearly at this juncture that Beauvoir, when invoking the Hegelian conflict between master and slave, did not ascribe the role of slave to woman. On the contrary, by grounding her argument in this conflict, she wanted to reveal the specificity and uniqueness of the oppression experienced by woman. Although for woman, man is a master, an independent consciousness, woman is not his slave, because the relations between them are fashioned in an absolute, rather than dialectic, manner [cf. 6, p. 54].

The law of dialectics removed from Hegel's slave the burden of dependent self-consciousness and imposed it on the master, who was only allowed to enjoy the certainty of being-for-oneself for a short time. This way the conflict between them, although it appeared to have been obviated, flared up again and at the same time there was a reversion to the originally established roles. The conception of human nature presented by Hegel, by emphasising the hostility of one consciousness to an "other", explained by all manner of actions dictated by dislike of the "other", such as in the phenomenon of social injustice, class division or war. Nevertheless, the pressure felt by the weaker and defeated parties as a result of these circumstances is different in character to that which is experienced by woman.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, none of those participating in the master-slave conflict are of the female sex. In a patriarchal society, woman is not someone possessed with self-knowledge who might seek the recognition of someone else possessed with self-knowledge. It is unethically assumed that only men desire this. By creating a dialectic tension among themselves, they mutually ascribe to each other the role of master, or slave. The presence of woman gives man the confidence to "being-for-oneself" without struggle and is all the more comfortable for him, because it does not require his reciprocation.

Looking, defining and acting are activities which the Absolute Subject ascribes to himself in relation with the "Other", a party he observes and defines and who remains in a state of eternal expectation. "Being watched" is the role which society assigns to woman. Woman has never gained the opportunity to describe man and as a result, she has never created a myth reflecting male "nature".

The concepts of "the masculine" and "the feminine" in Beauvoir's anthropology do not allude to ontological structures which determine human beings in a top-down fashion. They are merely descriptions of social constructs under whose carapace are hidden individuals desiring to demonstrate the fullness of their humanity.

"Now, what peculiarity signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential" [5, p. XXXV].

It should be clearly emphasised that the answer formulated by Beauvoir to the question "what is a woman?" [5, p. xix] is not a duplication of the myth of "the eternal feminine", which she firmly rejected. The term "feminine", as employed by Beauvoir, refers to a set of experiences common to all women and not to the archetype determining women's fate. The "feminine" describes the state of affairs that arose in patriarchal society, where the general situation of men is still markedly more privileged than that of women.

The view that Simone de Beauvoir formulated her own existentialist theory [cf. 12, pp. 130–138] would appear to be accurate. It is true that in her reflections, an echo sounds of Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence." However, in contrast to the author of *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir very clearly emphasises the influence of the general social situation in which the individual is entangled due to his/her sex. Beauvoir broke away from Sartre's naïve conviction about human beings' absolute freedom, while at the same time steering clear of essentialist statements. She managed to reconcile that which is common to the experiences of individual women with the uniqueness of these experiences. The female condition does not rule out either the diversity of women's experiences or the individuality of each of these. These two perspectives in her account are not in competition with regard to each other but are locked in a dialectic tension [cf. 12, pp. 130–138]. Experiences continue to be unique, even when similarities appear between them. On the basis of Beauvoir's philosophy, the constant features of experiences do not create essence. They simply provide a kind of structural framework which confers form and coherence on variable qualities. A bi-lateral relation appears among the unique moments in a given experience and its permanent components. Through this particular bond, they mutually determine and define each other. There is no mention here of any absolutely independent elements which would indicate the existence of a meta-structure homogenising all the experiences [cf. 12, pp. 130–138].

If a certain situation moulds me, it must also have a similar impact on the other individuals involved in it. A clear example of a situation of this kind is "the femi-

nine." Every woman possesses her own life experiences, but the schemata of oppression, exclusion and "Otherness" which affect all women in society also appear in her own personal situation. This state need not however – as Beauvoir underlines – continue to endure.

The main idea in *The Second Sex* is an abrupt departure from the vision of woman as a simple object grounded in the patriarchal myth of the "eternal feminine." The recognition of the "feminine" as a social construct rather than a derivative of female "nature" opened up for Beauvoir a vista of potential changes. A "liberated woman" is not a phantom, a chimera or a wish timidly emerging from certain imaginary hopes, but an authentic human being.

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