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Hegel and Simone de Beauvoir on Second Nature and Gender

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Abstract

This contribution aims to relate an important topic of the Hegelian philosophy, that of second nature, to the gender question developed by Simone de Beauvoir. The core of the emancipation process described in *The Second Sex* lies in Beauvoir's revolutionary idea of the artificial character of gender: the latter belongs to the culturally constructed sphere of social norms and not to mere fixed nature. In this assumption the French philosopher seems to recover the Hegelian theory of second nature: Hegel believes that through an individual and social Bildungsprozess, subjects liberate themselves from the immediate level of natural necessity and reach the free horizon of spiritual existence, in which they become self-conscious actors. Beauvoir accepts in her own existentialist view this extra-natural becoming and realizes that also gender participates in it: women are not by nature 'immanent' creatures that lack 'transcendence'. Hegel, however, does not recognize the second nature of gender and falls into that same essentialism, denounced by Beauvoir, which relegates the woman to the biological plane, thus excluding her from the dialectic of second nature and self-consciousness. For this reason, Hegel's understanding of freedom through second nature will initially be introduced, and then, employing this concept against Hegel himself, the path of emancipation from gender essentialism in Beauvoir's account of biology and culture will be addressed. In the second part of the paper it will be shown how gender, in acting as a second nature, replays the same ambiguity of Hegel's theory: are second nature and gender something that we individuals freely shape or are we victims of an externally imposed necessity just like in first nature? A dialectical solution will be presented in both thinkers, whose work aims to conciliate spirit and nature beyond any Cartesian dualism.

This paper investigates how two thinkers who share similar views on the relationship between nature and spirit (or culture) engage with the concept of second nature. While G. W. F. Hegel and Simone de Beauvoir are often discussed together in the context of Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegelian philosophy, particularly the master-slave dialectic, I will not focus on that here.

Although the master-slave dialectic plays a key role in Beauvoir's reception of Hegel, it does not encompass the full scope of Hegel's influence on her thinking (Altman 2007). Instead, I turn to a less-explored relation: namely, how both Hegel and Beauvoir understand second nature as a cultural and social space. Despite the fact that Beauvoir seldom discusses second nature explicitly, I argue that this concept is essential for understanding both Hegel's and Beauvoir's accounts of human self-development.

I present second nature as a process of spiritual maturation in Hegel and as a space of gender construction in Beauvoir. Immediately, in the context of this comparison, there is a clear distinction between the two thinkers. Hegel does not include gender in his treatment of second nature and therefore the entire question of gender difference and women's emancipation escapes his historic *Bildung* of the subject. Countless critiques by important interpreters have denounced Hegel's short-sightedness on this point and I address this problem only briefly.[1]

Instead, my main objective is to explain the relationship between the two different yet intertwined grounds of the subject's identity, according to Hegel and Beauvoir: nature and culture. In this regard, I aim to show how these two spheres are integrated in a dialectical reconciliation, which avoids the extremes of both essentialism and socio-cultural determinism.[2] I argue that Beauvoir takes this reconciliation further than Hegel and brings it to bear on the pressing matter of gender and women.

Accordingly, in the first part of the paper, I retrace the similarities and differences between Hegel's and Beauvoir's respective conceptions of second nature, first exploring Hegel's theory of subjective and objective second nature and then addressing Beauvoir's theory of cultural gender construction. In the second part of the paper I show that both Hegel's and Beauvoir's account of second nature is marked by a characteristic ambiguity between freedom and necessity. On the one hand, they suggest that second nature is a realm of freedom. On the other hand, they also seek to preserve some of the non-arbitrariness or necessity traditionally associated with the term 'nature'. The latter, however, brings back some of the problematic traits of first nature which potentially undermine the initial emphasis on freedom. While I do not think that this ambiguity can be done away with entirely, I argue that it can be reinterpreted such that the persistence of first nature no longer presents a threat to the idea of second nature as a realm of freedom. As I furthermore argue, the key to this solution lies in a closer examination of Hegel's and Beauvoir's respective views on the constitution of second nature. By taking this course, I show how deeply the Hegelian spiritualization of nature reverberates through contemporary debates regarding the body and culture, questions of gender and critical theory. I also show, however, how Beauvoir uses Hegel's own logic against him to reveal the inadequacies of his account of gender.

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I. Hegel and second nature

According to Hegel, second nature is the sphere of rational, social and political relations that emancipates humans from the biological necessity of organic first nature while simultaneously reshaping that very naturality. In what follows, I examine in particular the emancipatory aspect of second nature. In the last two paragraphs, I deal with the reshaping element, which relates to the above-mentioned problems of ambiguity.

Hegel identifies two varieties or functions of second nature. First, its subjective function shapes individual behaviour through rational habits. Second, its objective function concerns second nature as a collective product of culture and sociality.[3] In the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel explains what second nature is at the subjective level. In the 'Anthropology' section, he indicates how humans develop their individuality, including their internal dispositions, capacities and attitudes. Central to this development is the fundamental concept of *habitus*, which results from the *Bildungsprozess* that elevates humanity beyond mere animality, turning natural sensations and immediate feelings into practices (*PM*: §410R, 131).[4] This 'spiritual improvement' that the biological plane of first nature undergoes is even more evident on the objective level.

Objective second nature is the realm of social and political institutions, in which humans exercise their will and experience freedom. Here, habits objectify themselves in social practices of recognitive interactions, and second nature assumes its typical connotation associated with contemporary constructivist theories. In other words, objective second nature corresponds with the social structure that provides us with customs and ethical behaviour, conferring upon us a 'destiny' which is again not merely biological but spiritual, and therefore free, rational and mediated: 'the habit of the ethical appears as a second nature which takes the place of the original and purely natural will and is the all-pervading soul, significance, and actuality of individual existence [*Dasein*]' (*PR*: §151, 195). Humans are not what they are supposed to be if they remain in the immediate naturality of first nature; they must instead go through *Bildung* and reciprocal *Anerkennung*. They must assert their will against the unconsciousness of natural necessity and become aware of their *telos*. To be clear, this does not mean that first nature is wholly left behind. As the rest of the paper emphasizes, any emancipation from natural necessity coincides with the reshaping of that immediate ground.

Irrespective of the constructivist element, which is clearly at work in the shift to second nature, Hegel still considers first nature to be the point of departure for our individual and collective development. This point of departure is never really abandoned since first nature's influence mostly remains (albeit

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reshaped) in second nature. Just as the soul finds its home in the body, so does the more advanced human world of social and political institutions, which must somehow acknowledge its material-natural ground. In Hegel's view, however, this ground is spiritualized into something rational and free.

II. Hegel on women: a contradiction?

Despite what we have just stressed, when discussing women Hegel considers gender (an example of second nature) as more of a simple extension than an 'emancipatory reshaping' of the natural sexes (an example of first nature).[5] In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel elaborates on the 'natural distinction' of biology on a spiritual level, specifying that sex difference acquires 'ethical significance' and spirituality in the modern bourgeois family (*PR*: §166, 206). In this respect, first nature is spiritualized into second nature, following Hegel's theory of second nature as an 'emancipatory reshaping' of immediate first nature. Nonetheless, the spiritual quality men reach is still significantly different from that attained by women. Whilst the former could fit into the above-mentioned 'emancipatory reshaping' theory, it is harder to say whether the latter have left the simple immediacy of first nature.

For example, in the sphere of the modern ethical family, where women should have their own second nature in the form of familial piety, the features of non-spiritual first nature remain, including unconsciousness, immediate unity, and the absence of reason. Paradoxically, this remains unchanged for women in both the pagan and modern world, as Patricia Mills has underlined in the context of Antigone (1996). Mills shows how Hegel offers a monolithic trans-historical understanding of women, encasing both the modern and the Greek woman in a state of naturality where neither attains the self-consciousness of second nature.[6]

Likewise, modern marriage, which was supposed to elevate natural physical desire to the spirituality of ethical love, works as a launchpad towards second nature only for men. Whilst the husband becomes a 'person' through marriage and transcends the immediacy of the family into politics, civil society and rationality in general, the wife's destiny is to 'disappear as a civil personality' (Pateman 1996). That is, the wife acts as a naturally subjugated individual who lacks all the characteristics of the spiritually realized subject.[7] As a consequence, even if hidden under the pretence of the 'spiritualized' modern Christian wife, women stay trapped in something which is, in truth, close to first nature.[8]

In summary, Hegel retains the longstanding approach of identifying women with matter, intuition and feelings, depriving them almost entirely of that 'emancipatory reshaping' movement that should otherwise occur in the constructivist

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Bildung of the subject.[9] In this respect, women constitute an exception or perhaps a contradiction in Hegel's theory of second nature. Crucially, this outcome is inevitable in Hegel's view because women (and men) as gendered individuals are not the product of a social second nature that has changed its configuration throughout history. Instead, they are an expression of their fixed biology. Hegel can thus be considered an essentialist: 'It is nature, not the accident of circumstances or of choice, which assigns one sex to one law and the other to the other law' (*PhG*: §464, 268).[10]

To include women within second nature would imply ascribing gender and, as we will see, even sex to the same socio-cultural and historical sphere. Only by doing this does it become possible to revise Hegel's essentialist account of women. In other words, we must go beyond Hegel by using a Hegelian concept—namely, the idea of second nature that we have been investigating. This is precisely the task that Beauvoir tries to accomplish in *The Second Sex* by showing how gender is a social construct which exceeds sexual first nature whilst at the same time exerting an influence on it.

III. Beauvoir and second nature

In her existentialist philosophy, Beauvoir assumes that all humans are free because they can make decisions and engage in projects that transcend their immediate facticity. In other words, people are not caged in the immanence of first nature but are instead emancipated through the development of a cultural second nature, in which they shape and are shaped by practices and social roles. This is especially true for gender, which belongs to second nature and is a construct of cultural and philosophical traditions. Consequently, this is also true for the subject known as 'woman'.

Women have always been seen as Other than men, who have placed them in the realm of nature as animals who lack transcendence. On Beauvoir's account, however, this is not an essential fact but a cultural construct. The biological, psychoanalytical and socialist explanations of women's inferiority are insufficient since they fail to recognize that women are not born but rather become women. How cultures interpret these biological, psychological and economic factors and how women experience them dictate what it means to be a woman.

In what follows, we will focus on Beauvoir's chapter on biological data because it explicitly references second nature and reveals how first nature must be perceived. Crucially, biology cannot be considered the root of women's ontological destiny, as Hegel (arguably) suggests. Instead, according to Beauvoir, the

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reproduction of the species and women's physiology are essential to understanding humanity, but they do not explain the meaning of sexual and gender differences. Moreover, the biological data sometimes contradicts the narratives that call back to the mythical division between a passive, natural female and an active, spiritual male. It is because of these narratives, derived from culture and philosophy, that we assign specific values to biological factors—factors that would otherwise be meaningless on their own:

> In truth these facts cannot be denied: but they do not carry their meaning in themselves. As soon as we accept a human perspective, defining the body starting from existence, biology becomes an abstract science; [...] It has been said that the human species was an anti-physis; the expression is not really exact, because man cannot possibly contradict the given; but it is in how he takes it on that he constitutes its truth; nature only has reality for him insofar as it is taken on by his action: his own nature is no exception (*SS*: 69).

Similarly, as the broader existentialist tradition has stressed, the subject, in general, is not founded in nature but rather in history: 'As Merleau-Ponty rightly said, man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea' (*SS*: 68). This historical view of the becoming of the subject is, as Beauvoir herself reminds us, a Hegelian dynamic, just as it is Hegelian to say that nature in itself is abstract and must be thought or interpreted to be understood as meaningful.[11] On these terms, it is no surprise that Beauvoir comes to share Hegel's conception of second nature as the sphere of human self-realization:

> But a society is not a species: the species realises itself as existence in a society; it transcends itself toward the world and the future; its customs cannot be deduced from biology; individuals are never left to their nature; they *obey* to this second nature, that is, customs in which the desires and fears that express their ontological attitude are reflected. It is not as a body but as a body subjected to taboos and laws that the subject gains consciousness of and accomplishes himself. He valorises himself in the name of certain values. And once again, physiology cannot ground values: rather, biological data take on those values the existent confers on them (*SS*: 70).

Beauvoir explains this by defining the body as a 'situation', especially in the case of sexual difference. In this regard, she says that boys and girls are not born with

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a self-perception of their sexual differences but only of their bodies as a malleable instrument with which to approach the world. Difference is later assigned to individuals by society following their anatomical constitution. Therefore, the exclusion of women from the 'emancipatory reshaping' movement of Hegelian second nature is a socially constructed prejudice that has been 'essentialized' in their gender. Beauvoir believes it is necessary to unveil this fallacy and enable women to develop from immanence to transcendence in the same fashion as Hegel's (male) transition from natural immediacy to rational spirituality.

At this stage, it might seem like Beauvoir has introduced the famous feminist disjunction of sex and gender in terms of her own distinction of first and second nature. However, we will consider how the apparently fixed anatomical constitution of sex—another biological factor that is meaningless in itself—can be regarded as interpretable, just like gender.[12] Hegel fails to appreciate these social mechanisms that construct and determine gender and sexual difference, but he nonetheless theorizes emancipation from biological nature into spiritual and historical existence.

IV. The Ambiguity

As we have partly seen already, in Hegel's philosophy, the spiritual functioning of second nature does not imply a total separation from the natural basis of first nature. On the contrary, the emancipating movement entails remoulding first nature rather than completely detaching from it. Likewise, in the previous section, we began to see how, in Beauvoir's view, sex appears to be less divided from gender than the feminist tradition of the so-called 'second wave' would have us believe. Having outlined these respective positions, we will address the ambiguity concerning the coexistence of first and second nature by showing how the 'emancipatory reshaping' theory can resolve this complex problem.[13]

A tension between two fundamental approaches characterizes Hegel's transition from first to second nature. On the one hand, Hegel tends to explain human existence as a free space of development where subjects intentionally shape their identities and behaviours through reason. On the other hand, he seems to believe in some form of determinism, which brings back the unconscious necessity and mechanical processes of organic first nature. This raises the following question: Is second nature totally free, or is it somehow 'imposed' and 'automatic' like the biological processes of first nature?[14]

This issue leads to a real problem because, irrespective of the rational freedom obtained in second nature, the latter does indeed repeat some 'dangerous' aspects of first nature: the mechanistic automatism of processes and the

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unconscious necessity meant to be superseded. This relapse happens not only to women, the subjects who, as we have seen, are more evidently trapped in first nature, but also to men, even (or especially) when they reach spiritual maturity in society. Indeed, within objective spirit, where second nature is linked explicitly to the social side of ethical life and political institutions, many critics of Hegel have noted this dynamic, even if Hegel himself neglected it. In short, the relapse into first nature is constituted by the objectification of authorities and social forms who impose their power over single individuals. The consequence of this is the creation of a new, spiritless natural order.[15]

In subjective spirit, on the other hand, the re-emergence of first nature is stronger and explicitly highlighted in the *Encyclopaedia*. Although habits may be considered artificial because they are shaped through *Bildung* into free practices that are not inherent in the natural state, they are nonetheless repeated in the mechanical fashion of natural processes. That is to say, once established, they become independent of human will, operating almost unconsciously in 'the shape of something mechanical, of a merely natural effect' (*PM*: §410, 136):

> Therefore although, on the one hand, by habit a man becomes free, yet, on the other hand, habit makes him its slave. Habit is not an immediate, first nature, dominated by the individuality of sensations. It is rather a second nature posited by soul. But all the same it is still a nature, something posited that assumes the shape of immediacy, an ideality of beings that is itself still burdened with the form of being, consequently something not corresponding to free mind, something merely anthropological. (*PM*: §410, 134)

In Beauvoir's case, we can say that her dichotomy between sex and gender runs a similar risk of embracing irreflective and automatic imposition. Specifically, gender can be seen as something determinatively imposed by social forces, which decide the role we should be playing. This is what happens with the category 'woman', which has been forced upon female individuals as an actual oppression.[16] In this respect, instead of being mutable and freely interpretable, gender would return to being fixed like its counterpart in first nature—i.e., sex. Beauvoir herself writes that we 'obey' second nature and that children are assigned a gender by society based on their perceived biological sex without fully comprehending the implications of this assignment. As in Hegel's equivalent contradiction, this kind of deterministic outcome clashes with Beauvoir's conception of second nature as the realm of human choice and free self-determination.

The ambiguous merging of first and second nature (sex and gender) generates a problem when it seems to preclude the emancipation from the necessity

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of the former into the freedom of the latter. What is perceived as an ambiguity, however, can, on the other hand, be recognized as the core of the dialectical solution that Hegel applies to the interaction between nature and spirit. I believe Simone de Beauvoir offers the same solution in her own manner. This solution has to do with the reshaping movement that accompanies the emancipating one and thus embraces the very same presence of first nature within second nature that seemed threatening. Both thinkers propose a non-dualistic or anti-Cartesian model in which nature and spirit, sex and gender, are reconciled. In their view, first nature and sex appear as reshaped nature and reshaped bodies that escape nature's original fixedness because they are transformed. That is to say, nature and sex are thought, interpreted and spiritualized. On these terms, the first nature that re-emerges at the spiritual level of second nature must not be treated as merely natural. Likewise, sex must not be considered as a biological fixity isolated from the sociality of gender. Instead, first nature and sex must be put in a dynamic relationship with second nature and gender and acquire mobility and spirituality. This approach can help to mitigate and overcome the constriction of unintentional habits and social determinism.

V. Towards a dialectical reconciliation

Hegel's concept of second nature nicely illustrates an essential theme of his overall account: the idea that spirit is a unity of itself with its other. For in second nature, spiritual freedom entails both an emancipation from nature and, at the same time, the re-emergence of natural necessity on the level of what turns out to be a spiritualized nature, a nature permeated by spirit. A full-fledged circularity exists between the two, presupposing both distance and continuity.[17] Due to this dialectic, the re-emergence of natural characteristics on the spiritual level is not a mere relapse, i.e., a reoccurrence of the unfree character of abstract, spiritless nature. This is because this 'new' version of nature is not separated from spirit like its predecessor (first nature) might have been. Instead, it is the result of that reshaping movement that imparts rationality. As we will see in due course, this process also opens up the possibility of criticism, which prevents spiritual systems or practices from being mindlessly imposed.

Second nature does acquire a somewhat mechanical quality in the guise of habit (*Gewohnheit*). However, this quality is not entirely unconscious like the processes of simple nature: its naturalness is already spiritual. It can be comprehended by thought and, as I stressed earlier in this paper, reshaped spiritually.[18] A self-conscious rational subject, developed within second nature, conceives this reshaped nature. Such a subject can comprehend the rationality that nature has

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acquired and become aware of second nature's habitual automatisms. Awareness guarantees that we can criticize and partly escape from problematic features emerging within second nature.

Rational critique is also vital in the objective world of institutions and social relations, which is especially relevant in terms of the parallels with Beauvoir's account. Objective second nature does indeed introduce a qualitative, solid difference from the natural order. At the same time, however, it facilitates reconciliation between both levels of nature. This means that while ethical life and the social world have become 'like' nature to us, political or social constraints can also be challenged because the necessity of objective second nature is now rational and free. The self-conscious rational agent we have appealed to above is aware of the inner rationality of social institutions and has the power to reshape them through the fundamental Hegelian mechanism of critique.

In the *Phenomenology*, critique enables subjects to escape their current limitations, to gain awareness of themselves and change the order of things from within that order. Regarding criticism in Hegel's ethical life and social world, Novakovic (2017: 110) mentions explicitly the *Phenomenology* and its 'immanent critique'. She stresses that Hegel's conception of social order entails this kind of transformative critical reflection, which does not come from an arbitrary, subjective will but rather arises from within objective 'practical contradictions'.[19] Therefore, second nature works as a space in which critical reason can develop into freedom by subjecting practices that have become impositions to continuous critical reassessment.[20] This happens again because the natural aspect of the second nature in which we dwell is rational and merges with spirit rather than being detached from it.

Does this mean that first nature is subsumed in second nature or that it has been second nature all along, as Malabou (2005: 57) suggests? In a way, yes. And this because according to Hegel, nature is truly itself only when it is conceptualized, mediated by spirit, and thereby addressable by our reason and critical thinking. This does not mean, however, that nature would not have its ontological dignity.[21] Thus, in another way, the answer is no. Hegel's logical account of nature does not reduce the latter to an abstract 'space of reason'. To some extent, second nature's development can be considered as an actualization of instances and needs already present, although in a pre-reflexive way, on the level of first nature. First nature, thereby, continues to be relevant as an indispensable and prior condition for there to be a spiritual realm in the first place.[22]

The authors of 'Critical Naturalism: a Manifesto' (Gregoratto et al. 2022) have recently discussed this dialectical exchange between nature and culture. This idea, originating from the Hegelian tradition and its further development in Marx and critical theory, has profoundly impacted contemporary gender studies. According to Gregoratto et al. (2022: 111), 'Critical Naturalism rejects the

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symmetrical pitfalls of a social constructivism that reduces society to social construction and abstracts from its relatedness to nature on the one hand, and a biological reductionism on the other'. In other words, the relationship between first and second nature is seen as a spiritualization of nature as much as a 're-naturalization' of the social world. Critique appears to be a way of dealing with and caring for our spiritual freedom and simultaneously our natural determinations, 'a coming to terms with oneself and each other as natural and cultural beings' (Gregoratto et al. 2022: 118).[23]

Beauvoir develops a similar anti-Cartesianism, which can perhaps solve the social determinism problem similarly. Suppose we assume sex as something naturally given at birth, and we separate it from a culturally constructed gender that is later assigned by norms and institutions created by human beings based on that original natural difference. In that case, the social aspect of gender acquires the same imposed character of natural fixity that belongs to sex: to become gendered would mean to purchase the identity that stems from one of the two fixed sexes. In this way, women would indeed be a mere product of civilization. This account, however, reproduces the biological destiny of an unchangeable sex in the socio-cultural realm and, along with it, the oppression that derives from this essentialist differentiation.[24]

By contrast, if we include sex in the sphere of gender and reconcile these two levels, as we did with spiritualized nature in Hegel, we escape the fixity of both because sex appears alongside gender as cultural and historical. In other words, we must understand sex as merged with gender and thus interpretable and criticizable like Hegel's reshaped nature. In Beauvoir's case, we will have to propose an interpretation that contradicts the standard reception of her sex/gender distinction. It is the interpretation Judith Butler initially offered before changing their mind, and others have followed. Characteristically, this line of interpretation recognizes in Beauvoir an anticipation of the post-structuralist idea that sex is always already gendered.[25] On this view, sex, too, is malleable and contains what Delphy refers to as 'historically acquired symbolic value' (1993: 5). As such, sex is considered as partaking in the re-symbolization process that gender undergoes. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir specifies that biological data, including sexual differences, assume meaning only when they are inscribed into cultural assets: the body is truly a body when it is conceived with its taboos and laws. This is the meaning of her definition of the body as a 'situation', a space of interpretation that is 'projectual' as gender.

If sex and biological data are therefore not fixed and separated from gender, they do not exercise coercion by giving gender an essentialist basic structure to replay. In acquiring a cultural nature, they no longer have a fixed nature but become, to some extent, 'social and arbitrary' (Delphy 1993: 3).[26] Cultural constructions impose a specific interpretation, and individuals are not entirely

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free to 'choose'. However, when these constructions are perceived as cultural rather than 'essentially' natural, they can also be subjected to our interpretations. Likewise, Hegelian objective second nature instils ethical and social behaviour in citizens. At the same time, citizens can also use their rational capacities to shape and critically revise their second nature.

Along similar lines, Beauvoir entertains an account of rational critique regarding 'collective change', a process that she believes is crucial in facilitating women's liberation.[27] Such critique involves an element of awareness regarding the existing state of affairs and then, on this basis, aims at escaping the limitations of that status quo. In this respect, Beauvoir's account of critique resembles Hegel's. Hegel is likewise concerned with awareness of the structures that determine our lives and attempts to overcome deficiencies within these structures. Even before *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir had endorsed Hegel's method of immanent critique, for instance, in her analysis of freedom and oppression (Green 1999). However, unlike Hegel, she applied this methodology specifically to the role of women and in a much more practical manner. Thus, according to Beauvoir, for women's situation to change, a radical transformation from within current cultural and institutional structures must be thought and carried out (in society, not only philosophy!).[28] Moreover, in *The Second Sex*, she describes this process as not merely individual but rather as realizable only through an overall mobilization of society towards consciousness and education (Daigle 2014). In other words, Beauvoir is neither a 'voluntarist' nor a 'constructionist' (Heinämaa 1997): she neither thinks that individual choices are always free and consciously transformative nor does she propose a form of social determinism as a substitute for its biological form. For Beauvoir's account, choice and reason, especially if collective, are essential elements of social life. She elaborates, we could say, a 'circular' alternative to voluntarism and constructionism, mirroring the Hegelian dialectic between free rational subject and the social world that we described above.

Does this mean that sex (first nature) has been identical to gender (second nature) all along? As we replied in Hegel's case, this inference is warranted. However, this does not imply that sexual difference and nature are generally deprived of what Sandford calls their 'ontological status'.[29] Beauvoir believes that biology and body are fundamental to our engagement with the world:

> These biological data are of extreme importance: they play an all-important role and are an essential element of woman's situation: we will be referring to them in all further accounts. Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped, which explains why we have studied these data so

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> deeply; they are one of the keys that enable us to understand woman (*SS*: 66).

She also says, as we have already seen, that it is incorrect to define the human species as 'anti-*physis*'. This definition erases the physical, concrete aspect of reality. In this respect, Beauvoir states that we cannot contradict the given, implying that an existent given exists. For Beauvoir, therefore, 'the situation of the existent is composed of both facts and values, both nature and culture, both biology and consciousness' (Gatens 2003: 281). The body appears to be an existent matter rather than just a construction, and we will soon specify why validating its materiality is important.

Our interpretation of Beauvoir's take on the body is confirmed by the already-mentioned *Ethics of Ambiguity*, published in 1947, two years before *The Second Sex*. In this book, the French philosopher deals explicitly with the ambiguity of nature and spirit by describing it as a tension between factual being and 'projectual' existence, between immanence and transcendence. Beauvoir has yet to engage with the question of women extensively. Still, she sets the standard for correctly understanding the transcending (or emancipating) movement, which women should experience according to her view. In this case, the solution, if we may call it such, is to accept the ambiguity as an inextricable 'negative' unity of both facticity and freedom (an 'emancipatory reshaping' taking place between first and second nature). It is no coincidence that Beauvoir develops it by engaging in a close confrontation with Hegel throughout the work.[30]

For instance, Beauvoir endorses Hegel's opposition to reductive accounts of the relation between mind and matter: against a long tradition of such accounts, 'Hegel, with more ingenuity, tried to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to reconcile them all' (*EA*: 8). Beauvoir, therefore, admits that the Hegelian reconciliation between mind and matter is the first genuine attempt at capturing the concreteness of human existence, even if it is still too 'ingenuous'. In other words, according to Beauvoir, Hegel remained too vague and 'optimistic' in his project and did not emphasize the side of nature and human individuality enough to achieve an actual reconciliation between nature and spirit. True to her existentialism, Beauvoir criticizes Hegel's idealism for suppressing the individual, nature and immanence. As the concrete individual is dispersed into logic and universality, nature and immanence would ultimately be absorbed and superseded in absolute spirit rather than accepted in their tragic permanence.[31]

Despite these worries about Hegel's system, Beauvoir does not question her endorsement of Hegelian ideas in characterizing the ambiguity defining human existence. In particular, she appeals to what she calls Hegelian 'displacement',

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i.e., the importance of distinguishing between nature and morality, facticity and freedom, being and spirit:

> Hegel tells us in the last part of *The Phenomenology of Mind* that moral consciousness can exist only to the extent that there is disagreement between nature and morality. It would disappear if the ethical law became the natural law. […] This means that there can be a having-to-be only for a being who, according to the existentialist definition, questions himself in his being, a being who is at a distance from himself and who has to be his being (*EA*: 9).

To fully appreciate transcendence and second nature, we must accept the ambiguity of this displacement and consider the 'differentiated unity' between the factual nature of our being and the freedom of our existence as a 'continuous discontinuity'.

Similar to her analysis in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes here that 'the body itself is not a brute fact' and that 'it expresses our relationship to the world' (*EA*: 23). Therefore, body and biology are always interpretable; by interpreting them, we can 'criticise' and change them as we do with second nature.[32] At the same time, 'one cannot deny being' (*EA*: 18): the unity between first and second nature, body and mind, sex and gender that we argued for in this paper cannot dispel factual immanence, cannot deprive it of its ontological value. According to Beauvoir, this would also be a reason for the failure to develop concrete freedom.

As stated above, as a material substrate, the body must be treasured alongside the 'ideal' world of social and political constructions because it is part of what Beauvoir considers a complete and harmonious existence. Not only do ideas and values incarnate into something that must exist for them to be real, but this 'something' is also the place, or better yet, the situation, that calls for their emergence and significance in the first place: cultural constructs often respond to needs and desires that come from our first nature and our bodies. Hegel implied that first nature already contains those things that 'successively' develop as complex structures in second nature. For instance, basic biological requirements such as nourishment, safety, or love provide a nucleus from which second nature emerges in the guise of sociality and political organizations.[33]

Recognizing the body's ontological dignity, as we named it, calls for a better understanding of culture and human nature and, consequently, a more satisfying life.[34] On the other hand, neglecting this dignity is dangerous. Interestingly, Beauvoir devotes much of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to the risks of a purely idealistic reign of concepts and values that do not resonate with their individual and bodily foundation. She also directly refers to that twisted and imposed aspect of second-natural habits that Hegel also denounced in his philosophy:

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> My freedom must not seek to trap being but to disclose it. […] In case his [man's] transcendence is cut off from his goal or there is no longer any hold on objects which might give it a valid content, his spontaneity is dissipated without founding anything. Then he may not justify his existence positively and he feels its contingency with wretched disgust. There is no more obnoxious way to punish a man than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him, as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely, when one makes soldiers who are being punished march up and down, or when one forces a schoolboy to copy lines (*EA*: 18).

This is to say, once again, that if we separate spirit from nature, as well as gender roles and behaviours from their sexual embodiment, we end up in the unconscious oppression problem: if first nature is not spiritualized, if sex is not gendered, they stay fixed in their unconscious necessity. Their re-emergence on the level of second nature in the shape of automatic and mechanical processes is perceived as determinism because their rationality and susceptibility to critique are not recognized. Moreover, if detached from its bodily existence, second nature becomes a set of abstract structures forced upon the individual from the outside.

VI. Conclusion

Hegel and Beauvoir both offer accounts of free human self-determination in a spiritual or cultural sphere without denying a natural or biological basis for this process. The first crucial Hegelian feature Beauvoir borrows and integrates into her philosophy is Hegel's account of the formation of self-consciousness, which involves an immanent nature as a starting point and a transcendent spirit or existence as a point of 'arrival'. In this regard, the central principle of both arguments is the concept of second nature, the social construct (Beauvoir) or ethical life (Hegel), which shapes the subject's identity through education. To be free and to fully exist, for both Hegel and Beauvoir, individuals must undertake this journey of development, leading them to their second nature.

Beauvoir, however, believes that women should partake in this development and that their exclusion from it is due to a problematic form of gender essentialism that Hegel and many others endorsed. Therefore, she used a Hegelian concept, namely second nature, to go beyond and against Hegel, demonstrating how gender and sex participate in it.[35] Although Beauvoir, to

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some extent, shares Hegel's idea of sexual difference, in using his distinction between the passive, immanent female and the active, transcendent male, she nonetheless theorizes the possibility of disrupting this apparently essential scheme and placing women and men on equal grounds (Musset 2017). In so doing, she has been accused of employing a 'masculinist' approach to the definition of woman and of disregarding the importance of the body (Chanter 1995). However, we have also shown how another commonality between her and Hegel can be found in the reconciliation between body and mind that aims to preserve immanence alongside transcendence. In this sense, we stated that both thinkers retain a natural or biological ground in defining human identity and individuality. This could also eventually lead to recognizing and valorizing sexual difference even inside Beauvoir's 'neutralist' view, but she does not seem interested in examining this possibility.

Lastly, Beauvoir shows how cultural environments, symbols and ideas significantly impact our gender identity while also being reshaped through reason, critique, and intersubjective recognition. Beauvoir inherits key ideas from Hegel, such as self-determination through *Bildung* and second nature, social and historical constructionism, and dialectical critique. At the same time, she reformulates these ideas against those aspects of Hegel's system that she perceives as obstacles to a genuine emancipation of women.

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Notes

[1] For a general overview, see Alison Stone's (2002) categorization of feminist interpretations of Hegel.

[2] By *essentialism* I refer to the belief that characteristics such as behaviours, tendencies, and in this case most importantly gender, have an inherent and unchanging nature tied to biological or metaphysical factors. By *socio-cultural determinism* I mean the belief that social interactions and cultural environments alone determine the aforementioned characteristics. In both cases, freedom, conceived as self-determination of the subject, is compromised.

[3] Italo Testa (2009) names these two different aspects the 'organic' side of second nature (the one belonging to the subjective Spirit of the *Encyclopaedia*) and the 'inorganic' side of second nature (the one belonging to the objective Spirit of the *Philosophy of Right*). I follow this useful distinction between natural-subjective second nature and social-objective second nature,

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showing how both sides, being both natural and social, share what Testa calls a 'dialectical structure'.

[4] Abbreviations:

EA = Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1948)/Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947).

PhG = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)/Phänomenologie des Geistes (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952).

PM = Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. V. Miller and W. Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007)/Enzyklopädie der philosophiscen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992).

PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)/Philosophie des Rechts (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970). *SS* = Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2001)/Le deuxième sexe (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949).

[5] Here I use the two categories of sex and gender employed by feminist reflection in the 1970s. This is based on Gayle Rubin's distinction between the anatomical aspect of the individual (sex) and the role acquired in or assigned by society through which that individual acts and is recognized (gender). Moreover, from now on, I will employ the expression 'emancipatory reshaping' to address my interpretation of Hegel's theory of second nature.

[6] 'By confining woman to the family in the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel prevents the progressive movement of spirit toward universal self-consciousness from being recapitulated in woman. The development of human consciousness outside the family is sex specific, limited to man' (Mills 1996: 84).

[7] Discussing marriage, Pateman identifies an aspect of the contradiction that we are trying to highlight because she acknowledges that Hegel wishes to attribute freedom (second nature) to every subject, including women, but at the same time confirms the latter's exclusion from it (in other words, their confinement to first nature): 'Hegel claims that his political theory encompasses universal freedom; women, therefore, must share in that freedom, and they do so by entering into the marriage contract. At the same time, the marriage contract confirms patriarchal right and women's (natural) lack of freedom. Women both enter into a contract as free beings and are incorporated into the political order as "women", as subordinates' (Pateman 1996: 218).

[8] 'It might have been expected that Hegel's anti-naturalistic idealism would have saved him from the grosser forms of sexism; but, just as private property and monarchy turn out to incarnate necessary moments in the actualisation of freedom, so also does Hegel endorse the bourgeois family and its gender divisions as ethically necessary to social cohesion. The absurdity of his stereotyping is revealed in such remarks as that in conception the female provides the material element and the male the spiritual' (Arthur 1988: 19).

[9] Some could object that this difference is precisely the vital point that women should valorize, as Irigaray's reading of Hegel has suggested (1985), but this is not the path Beauvoir takes.

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[10] Alison Stone argues that the biological difference between man and woman reflects the metaphysical character of reproduction and, therefore, 'if Hegel is an essentialist with respect to sex, he is a metaphysical rather than a biological essentialist' (Stone 2010: 222). It is relevant to us that in both cases, he excludes women from the free rational sphere of objective second nature, thereby denying his model of individual self-development to half of humanity.

[11] 'But the scope of the verb to be must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: to be is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself' (*SS*: 33).

[12] As we have noted, children have no perception of sexual difference until gender is imposed upon them, as though the latter would somehow reveal the former. This fact already appears meaningful in demonstrating how sex is equally constructed.

[13] We will employ the term 'ambiguity' in our problematic way to name the troublesome merging of first and second nature, and sex and gender, which we will unpack below. This term is relevant if nothing else because ambiguity is central to Beauvoir's philosophy, especially in her discussion of facticity and freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Specifically, ambiguity is the idea that individuals are free to make their own choices but also constricted by factual elements, such as social or physical conditions. Rephrasing this in our terms, we could say that individuals are free 'inside' second nature but also, at the same time, bound to their first nature (or to its re-enactment in second nature). Not surprisingly, in both Beauvoir's rendering and our rephrasing, the solution to the adverse aspects of ambiguity consists in accepting its permanence.

[14] This outcome is a problematic consequence of an underdeveloped understanding of the ambiguity, one that is often underlined in studies concerning Hegel's second nature: 'By the elaboration of this concept, Hegel tries to understand how, in the process of education, freedom turns into necessity, and liberation from natural existence into a new, voluntary servitude' (Menke 2013: 33).

[15] Lukács (1971) highlights this problem by describing reification as a pathology of the Hegelian objective Spirit. In Lukács's reading, second nature is seen as an abstract universality constituted by reified capitalism. This abstract universality is a praxis imposed upon particulars and is subsequently mindlessly and mechanically 'repeated' by them.

[16] An interesting contribution in this regard is offered by Sonia Kruks (1987), who tries to distinguish Beauvoir's existentialism from Sartre's, showing how the former contemplates the risk of oppression far more seriously than the latter. Kruks suggests that despite Beauvoir's emphasis on freedom and choice, which implies women's responsibility and agency in their oppression, Beauvoir also acknowledges the existence of an imposed gender category. A male-dominated society shapes this category and limits a woman's ability to act freely and consciously.

[17] Christoph Schuringa has given a precise account of how this 'continuous discontinuity' works by explaining the meaning of Hegel's overly discussed sentence 'spirit is the truth of nature'. Spirit has indeed a natural ground in that it somehow 'replays', but it does so in a way that avoids the previous natural deficiencies: 'Spirited beings, realising the truth of nature, are

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not natural in the *Encyclopaedia II* sense of 'natural'. They are not, in Pippin's terms, 'ontologically' natural in the way that the mere animals who figure in *Encyclopaedia II* are. They are natural in, so to speak, a new way. The very concept of nature has been modulated in such a way that mere nature now shows up as deficient with respect to spirit' (Schuringa 2022: 502–503).

[18] Again, Christoph Menke speaks of a unity of critique and affirmation, referring to the mechanisms of *Selbstverwirklichung* and *Selbstverfehlung*. In this dynamic, second nature is both constricted and brought to completion. The process may look natural, but it is natural in a spiritual kind of way: 'If the first nature of which spirit frees itself is an order that confronts it as an order of necessity, second nature is an order of necessity *in* spirit; second nature is spirit constituted *like* nature and not: determined by nature. […] The genesis of second nature as a defective manifestation of spirit does not originate in nature but in spirit itself. Second nature means a repetition of nature *in* spirit, *against* spirit, and *through* spirit. Second nature is nature posited by spirit itself – not mere nature but merely like nature' (Menke 2013: 41).

[19] As we will see, this immanent aspect recurs in Beauvoir as well.

[20] The realization of the spirit that we witness in the objective spirit and in particular in the state should also work according to this logic of critical becoming, as Marcuse has rightly pointed out in his reconstruction of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1941): even if Hegel disappoints when the state irremediably ends up in natural facticity again, Marcuse shows how the third moment of Hegel's 'ethical life' should correspond to the logic of the concept, where particularity and universality are harmonized and never forced upon each other. According to Wood (1990) and Moyar (2011), this concrete reconciliation is reached thanks to the critical thinking that inhabits Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*. In this regard, Axel Honneth (1996) argues that the solution to the determinism problem lies in recognising the importance of critical reflection and self-determination in second nature. He suggests that individuals can actively resist oppressive forms of second nature by engaging in critical dialogue with others and reflecting on how their social practices and relationships shape their identities.

[21] With the expression ontological dignity, I refer to the fact that first nature, manifest in physical, material and biological features of our bodies, exists before spiritualization and is not cancelled by the latter. Spirit requires bodily structures to manifest itself in the first place. The word 'dignity' also implies that body and nature matter as recipients of respect and safeguarding in that they embody our humanity. As Bernstein points out by comparing Plessner to Hegel, the dual structure of the embodiment consists of 'being a body' and 'having a body'. This suggests that humans become cognizant of their nature through reason and socialization (spiritual mediation) while also recognising that this nature simultaneously manifests as 'the body we already necessarily are' (Bernstein 2015: 210). This dual structure is 'central to the notions of respect, self-respect, and human dignity' (Bernstein 2015: 198).

[22] Spirit is always 'the First', according to Hegel, but this does not mean that it does not stem from a natural ground to which it 'goes back' in that 'new way' we described. Nature does not disappear in a purely idealistic model, just like the finite, in general, does not lose its consistency in being part of or comprehended by the infinite. Instead, they go hand in hand by

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conceptually (spiritually) portraying how the structure of reality (nature) works. This is quite evident, for instance, in Hegel's concept of life (Illetterati 2016).

[23] Suther adds the term 'dialectical' to the expression 'critical naturalism'. In doing so, he aligns closely with the concept of dialectical reconciliation we have been discussing. This is because dialectical critical naturalism avoids a one-way progression from first to second nature and instead establishes a circular interaction between the two: 'This "transformative" rather than "additive" position—to invoke philosopher Matthew Boyle's distinction—requires that we understand human life not as animality plus rationality but as a rational form of animality, not shared by the other animals. [...] According to my transformative perspective, our first, biological, nature just is our capacity for acquiring a second nature' (Suther 2023: 156).

[24] Sara Heinämaa explains how the 'becoming' that we observed in Beauvoir's account of gender should not be considered a social imposition upon a detached biological factor: 'The becoming of woman, discussed by Beauvoir, is not a process of socialisation in which a separate layer of culturally determined gender features is added to a biologically determined sex. What she thematises and describes acutely is an intentional process in which a sentient living body enters into a communicative relationship with other bodies and thus adopts new meanings and directions' (Heinämaa 2004: 144–45). Moreover, Heinämaa writes that if we follow the 'mental/bodily distinction' that the British and American scholars inappropriately attribute to the French philosopher, 'then Beauvoir would be replacing biological constraints with socio-cultural ones and substituting social determinism for biological determinism' (Heinämaa 1997: 22).

[25] In an early paper titled 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex' (1986), Butler argues that, in Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, both sex and gender are cultural constructs, as more recent literature also suggests (Sandford 1999; Leboeuf 2016). However, Butler later departs from this original idea and retraces in Beauvoir the 'Cartesian' division of sex and gender of second-wave feminism.

[26] 'A non-determinist reading of Beauvoir would need to recognise not only that our bodies are interpreted in terms of the norms of a culture, but also that the we, or better yet our bodies, have the capacity to interpret and reinvent ourselves in light of these cultural interpretations. Such a reading would make sense of Beauvoir's claim in "Biological Data" that the body is a "situation". [...] Thus, to make a distinction between a woman's natural, or bodily, features (her sex), on the one hand, and her identity and psychological traits (her gender), on the other hand, would belie Beauvoir's thesis that the body is a situation. For Beauvoir, the human body is not a natural entity, but the repository of a social history' (Leboeuf 2016: 144).

[27] This process is 'collective' because, to be effective, it must mobilize culture and everyday life on a large, joint scale: an individual woman cannot free herself without a proper cooperative movement.

[28] Bauer reminds us how 'Beauvoir claims, again in the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, that oppression itself puts pressure on existing social structures to evolve' (2001: 231). This is to say that the critique mentioned above is immanent and somehow dialectical: it comes from the negative aspect that it has to supersede in the shape of a 'determinate negation'.

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[29] Stella Sandford argues that this may be the reason Judith Butler eventually disregarded Beauvoir's implicit understanding of gendered sex. According to Sandford, Butler would have been disturbed by the lingering ontological quality of Beauvoir's first nature because she tends to equate ontology with essentialism. Butler's constructivist approach could be considered uniquely oriented towards a 'performative/linguistic' second nature rather than the dialectical reconciliation between nature and spirit we propose. On the other hand, Sandford believes that Beauvoir would have managed to keep the body (first nature) as existent without turning it into an essential biological destiny: 'The important difference is that the being-always-already-interpreted of "the facts of biology" does not, for de Beauvoir, entail the dissolution of their ontological status, and this is because hers is precisely an existential—that is, a non-essentialist—ontology' (Sandford 1999: 24).

[30] *The Ethics of Ambiguity* explicitly advocates the importance of the immanent aspect (first nature, matter, body) in the constitution of concrete freedom. Mariana Teixeira (2023) draws attention to the correlation between this project and Hegel's philosophy by showing that spirit and transcendence alone lead to abstractness in both thinkers.

[31] Beauvoir's view is not entirely in line with our reading of Hegel's concept of nature: the latter does not vanish inside his dialectic, but this is nonetheless a risk that must be addressed. The critique is an understandable consequence of Beauvoir's proximity to Kierkegaard. However, as we will see, it does not erase her debt to the Hegelian movement of *tollere et conservare* that we described in his account of first and second nature.

[32] Sex-change surgery is a fitting example.

[33] 'Sociality itself, as an expressive configuration of Spirit, has a natural genesis for Hegel, insofar as it emerges from the natural determinations of living being; moreover, the social structures of Spirit themselves have the natural soul as their substance' (Testa 2013: 32).

[34] Beauvoir, for instance, describes pleasure as being enhanced by transcendent qualities but always dependent on immanent ones. The bodily component that hosts joy, contentment or satisfaction is essential to their realization: 'the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness' (*EA*: 132).

[35] 'In particular, Beauvoir's attempt to think what it means to be/become a woman relies on framing woman's situation in terms of Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The text as a whole could be read as a rewriting of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from woman's perspective, from the emergence of woman's self-conscious being in relation to her natural condition (species), through the different kinds of self-realisation available to woman in different historical stages and cultural conditions, culminating in an absolute knowledge in which mutual recognition between men and women becomes possible in modernity' (Hutchings 2017: 192).

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