Sex and love in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*

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An English version of Sergio Cremaschi, "Il concetto di eros in *Le deuxième sexe* di Simone de Beauvoir", in V. Melchiorre (ed.), *Amore e matrimonio nel pensiero filosofico e teologico moderno*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1976, pp. 296-318.

1. Feminist literature – though partisan literature not too concerned with academic standards – should be credited with seeing the proverbial tree in the wood until then unnoticed by academics. The obvious thing everyone had overlooked precisely because it was too huge to focus on was that the description of the woman *as she is* could hardly tell us anything about the feminine *nature* because the present state of being is the result of a process that cannot be trusted to have revealed, instead of distorted, a fathom *"*nature*"* of woman. This point had been left in the shade both by those who had studied sex and love in various social and cultural contexts and by those that had ventured into a philosophical discussion of the subject.

Feminism in general, and Beauvoir in particular – not unlike Brecht's Me-Ti – have taught us to doubt not so much what we cannot see with our own eyes, but rather what we do see. For example, she taught us to question the fact that *a woman is a woman* for the obvious reason that she is something which results from a process that made her that way. This questioning invokes others: what is genuinely natural about the distinction between male and female; whether what is *"*natural*"* necessarily has a cultural significance; whether it is desirable for biological differences to be reduced to irrelevance or eliminated thanks to the possibilities offered by technology; whether everything that

is *"culture"* should be thrown into the dustbin of history, thus leaving "nature" alone. These are all responses that have been attempted in the history of feminism. But the question that interests us most here is that, if we must distrust everything that empirical study certifies about the nature of women because the given nature of women is a distorted one, the given nature of the other pole, the male, will also be a distorted one. And the nature of the most typical relationship between the two poles, the erotic relationship, will also be distorted. Thus, in an egalitarian society, the woman will no longer be a woman, the man will no longer be a man, and heterosexual love will no longer be love. This is why an examination of *The Second Sex* – commonly considered the most important among the classics of feminism – may highlight one of the knots of contemporary discourse on sex and love. The work conducts at once a discussion of the historically given forms of the male-female relationship and some speculation into the conditions of possibility of this relationship, with all the dangers such interweaving harbours, indeed Beauvoir's interweaving is suspicious because of the assumption she shares with the whole Sartrean school that in the *"*human sciences*"* the distinction between science and philosophy is irrelevant. On the other hand, Beauvoir's connection with Sartre's philosophy is also relevant. Whatever we may think of Sartre's philosophy, it is a significant document of the malaise of modernity.

What should interest us in this work is the influence of the categories employed in reaching the answers Beauvoir gives on the nature of man and woman and the erotic relationship. In addition to this investigation into the work's epistemological assumptions, it will be useful to examine the "ideological" assumptions possibly hidden behind the questions asked in the work to trace a pre-comprehension of the nature of the human couple and of love – since here, as elsewhere, the questions raised by critics arise within a framework of common sense and cultural legacies the succeed or fail in overcoming.

One word is in order about the choice to discuss the idea of eros, of sex and love, in this work since, unlike Marcuse and others, Beauvoir does not take it as the official topic of her book. In the following pages, we will highlight how the question of the nature of love unavoidably arises at various points and Beauvoir's answer, or non-answer, to this question conditions her conclusion of the feminine

condition. It will be well advised yet to dispel the suspicion that the discourse on love may be found, in *Second Sex*, only at the most trivial and almost journalist-like level, whereby feminism, by placing on the agenda a conflict between male and female cannot but affect the relationship between both, including (heterosexual) love. What we will try to show is how, by asking the question of the existence, either natural or historical, of *"*femininity*"*, Beauvoir is bound to explore the possibility of the existence of the human couple as a unity of two different things where they establish a non-alienating relationship with each other. Moreover, Beauvoir's book is – precisely because it has highlighted the mentioned knot – no less profitable for philosophers than other more speculative works: on the contrary, we will discover how many ideas, and sometimes the ability to overcome the weight of dubious theoretical inheritances, are stimulated in this work by its attention to society, social movements, and historical change.

In more detail, it seems appropriate to examine the epistemological framework of the work, in that since the relationship between human subjects of both sexes is the book's focus, the main topic is the relationship between subject and object and subject and subject. This relationship is interpreted ambiguously, partly by resuming the legacy of the reflection on this theme in modern philosophy, particularly along the line from Hegel to Sartre. The epistemological assumptions of this tradition of thinking are challenged to a point, foreseeing that the emancipatory effect of the critique on a regional dimension will be reflected on a broader level in a challenge to the general ontology hitherto accepted, also a product of the alienation experienced on a regional level (among other things, in the relations between the two genders). Where the critique focuses not only on positive claims but also on epistemological assumptions it goes beyond the description of demands posed by the historical condition resorting to valuable ideas from philosophers who had touched on the same topics though starting with a different agenda: among contemporaries Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

We can explore the book's *"*ideology*"* in two senses: in common parlance, as it contains a political program, as it points to a state of affairs to be considered desirable; in philosophical terminology, insofar as we might also detect here an uncritical view of gender roles that may be labelled "ideological" in the Marxian sense, that is, first, a side-effect of an alienated condition, secondly, a

sediment of modern epistemology, or of the Cartesian dualist epistemology which is both an effect and a cause of our inability to understand the relationship between human individuals and between the two genres, and hence heterosexual love, in terms different from those of a conflictive relationship. We will see that the *"*ideology*"* in a positive sense – in case such a positive sense existed – or better, the constructive program or the utopia that the work seems to point to in passages where it is explicitly formulated, does not go as far as we may glimpse in pages where Beauvoir meets Merleau-Ponty's rediscovery of the bodily dimension.

2. *The Second Sex* was written in 1948-49. These years correspond to a particular cultural mood in France: a combination of existentialism, its dialogue and conflict with Marxism, the first contributions from Levi-Strauss. It also means a specific historical context, which implies that the most significant feminist work was an isolated achievement[1]. These were the post-war years, during which women in The United States were expulsed from the labour market and confined again to the domestic ghetto. These changes found overhead coverage in a massive ideological bombing aimed at reviving the feminine mystique[2]. Whatever one may think about the limits of the early feminist movement which took place between the end of the 19th century and the First World War, its memory was being erased after several of its achievements had been eliminated, in some European countries with the Fascist regimes, in North America with the McCarthyistic reaction of the Fifties[3].

It is a solo work that resents the limits of its isolation in a certain lack of historical perspective and a deficiency of *"*strategic*"* indications. And so, given the scant results regarding women's liberation of those she believed had been socialist revolutions, Beauvoir indicates women's emancipation as a task parallel to other forms of liberation. This liberation seems to require women's awareness to be

[1] See Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography, particularly the two volumes concerning this period: *La force de l'âge*, Gallimard, Paris 1954; *La force des choses*, Gallimard, Paris 1965.

[2] See B. Friedan, *The feminine Mystique*, Norton, New York: 1963, ch. 2.

[3] Appraisals of early feminism are discordant. Among today's feminists are those, like Friedan, who see it as a movement with great potential, later repressed and reabsorbed, and those, like Greer, who see it as incurably submissive and reformist from the outset. See G. Greer, *The female Eunuch*, Paladin, London 1971, pp. 11-15.

understood as an alternative life project to escape the alienated condition in which they live. Perhaps Beauvoir's naïve conviction that, being a woman *"*fulfilled*"* according to male canons, she already lived in an unalienated condition, conducting a work of enlightenment in favour of less favoured women also derives from this lack of historical awareness.

The work began being genuinely understood at the emergence of new feminism in the 1960s. Feminism theorists acknowledged her as the first to question the concept of femininity qua *"*metaphysical*"* essence. However, they criticised her association with existential ontology and the resulting lack of historical awareness. Thanks to their more vital link with women's movements that hardly existed in 1949, to intellectual developments in neo-Marxism and the social sciences, the new feminists resorted to more historical and empirical surveys[4]. In a few cases, they attempted a discourse on the nature of love and sexuality based on feminist critique, which Beauvoir had developed only fragmentarily[5].

3. The first part of *The Second Sex* is an enquiry into the origin of the idea of femininity. What is a woman? The theory of the eternal feminine and a nominalist stance that would deny the question's legitimacy are both narrow-minded. The fact is that *there are* women. And being a woman is a singular situation, asymmetrical to being a man: to define herself, a woman thinks of herself first as a woman. A man does not think of himself as a male: this is obvious. The fact is that the masculine stands for both the positive and the neutral. In the same way that there was the absolute vertical for the ancients, starting with which the oblique was defined, there is absolute humankind: the male, starting with which the female is defined. The only perspective that can account for women's odd situation is the existentialist perspective, which views femininity as a *"*situation*"*. For existentialism, every subject exists through his *"*project*"*: what distinguishes the female situation is that, although

[4] See J. Mitchell, *"*Women - the longest Revolution*"*, *New Left Review.*, vol. 40, Nov-Dec 1966, pp. 11–37.

[5] Particularly Sh. Firestone, *The dialectic of Sex*, Jonathan Cape, London 1971, p. 142: *"*A book on radical feminism that did not talk about love would be a political failure. Because love, perhaps even more than procreation, is the pivot of women's oppression today. I am well aware that this has frightening implications: do we want to get rid of love?*"*. The topic is also developed extensively by Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, pp. 139-245.

she is, like every human being, autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world in which men force her to consider herself *"*the Other*"*. For women, their biological nature dictates features that have weighed and continue to weigh on their overall condition. But, Beauvoir notes, one cannot argue that what has hitherto been the destiny of femininity is an unavoidable consequence of biological traits. Similarly, according to her, the contributions that psychoanalysis and Marxism have brought to studying the feminine condition are relevant but do not reach far. Freud had the merit of highlighting the importance of sexuality. Still, when it comes to women, his theory cannot say anything sensible, anchored as it is to the preconception of the male as the typical human being. On the other hand, the Marxist contributions concerning the role and nature of the family as a social institution are undoubtedly relevant. Still, they fail to account for the origin of the asymmetrical relationship between the two genders. The commonplace strategic indication of women's emancipation through access to the labour market has also proved limited.

In this perspective, Beauvoir tries to go deeper, by investigating the origins of the present female condition in primitive societies and antiquity. She suggests that a combination of physical and economic factors led to a differentiation of roles, which gave origin to both the idea and the reality of femininity. Men's superior economic and social role made women want to please them. As a result, the woman eventually knows and chooses herself, not as she exists for herself, but as men define her. This explains the myths of femininity that men have created, and since these myths are assumed as the woman's actual situation, they become real. And they also account for the contradictory nature of the feminine situation. In the impossible effort to be all that the myth contradictorily demands, the woman bars the road to self-fulfilment and happiness for herself. In the end, the woman is ambiguous and disappointing: she is all that the man requires and all that he cannot obtain, she is

the intermediate point between bountiful nature and man, and she is the temptation of untamed Nature contrary to all wisdom. She embodies all moral values from good to evil and their opposite; she is the substance of and the obstacle to

action, man's hold on the world and the failure of this hold. Since she is everything, she never succeeds in being one thing; she is perpetual disillusionment, the very disillusionment of existence[6].

This historical process of the constitution of the female "situation" is repeated in the formation process of each woman: childhood, adolescence and youth are stages through which the female individual chooses herself as a woman, interiorising the destiny of femininity. This comes at enormous human costs, in that it means not only – as cultural anthropology would note – the constriction of an individual into a cultural role not made for her, but also forcing an individual into a *"*project*"* both unworkable and contradictory: that of not designing her life but living her life as designed by others. Thus – as explained in the second part of the work – the costs involved even nowadays by the daily condition of women are enormous. But the road to liberation – given that the women's issue is correctly posed only by starting with the female condition understood as *"*situation*"* in the existentialist sense of the term – does not call so much for social reforms or even a socialist transformation of society. On the contrary, the indispensable condition is an independent life project and an autonomous liberation program with or without these processes. *"*This – Beauvoir concludes – will not mean enmity between men and women; on the contrary, it will be the necessary condition (even if the relationship between men and women will change in the future in unforeseeable ways) for the affirmation of true fraternity between women and men*"*.

The discourse conducted in the book, especially in its crucial point, namely the explanation of the possibility of a human individual being understood, and understanding himself, as a *"*female*"*, makes extensive use of the existential anthropology of *Being and Nothingness*, where the concept of the existential *"*situation*"* is formulated. In this work, Sartre had described man as "project": absolute freedom to give meaning to both things and oneself, freedom exercised over external reality, supposedly existing only as a passive and indeed hostile field of action. Relations between human

[6] S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (1949-50), Gallimard, Paris 1990-91, vol. I, p. 250 (hereafter DS I, p. 250); all references are to this edition; translations are by the author of present paper; for an English version see *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (ed.), Pan books, London 1988.

subjects occur within each individual's original project, constituting the reality surrounding him – in which other individuals are also included – as his field of action and thus the subject matter of a project.

It may be interesting then, at this point, to compare *The Second Sex* also with another work by Sartre, who, ten years later, attempted a fairly close enterprise: establishing a critique of a specific region of reality starting with the existential ontology of *Being and Nothing*. *The Second Sex* was published ten years before the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Nevertheless, it is an anticipation, even if the authors did not realise the similarity of their works. Both are intended to be a critique, an attempt to unveil a specific region of reality going back to the first evidence that the object under investigation presents and destroying incrustations of false evidence that conceal things in themselves. The difference consists fundamentally in implementing this project on different fields: the theme of the *Critique* is the various forms of human aggregates, and in *The Second Sex* it is the division of humankind into two genres. The circumstance that the *Critique* is presented as something more ambitious does not touch upon its real aim. Both works claim to uncover a fundamental and original reality overlooked by previous enquiries (particularly Marxist ones). That *The Second Sex* advances this claim more modestly still says nothing about the radicality of the attempt. It is worth noting that the *Critique* bluntly ignores the *Second Sex*'s lesson in that the subject matter of Sartre's investigation is a collection of male individuals.

Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, like Sartre's *Critique*, takes from Marx, Hegel and Husserl the theoretical tools for debunking ideological certainties. Marx's legacy appears in Beauvoir's attempt to apply and radicalise his interpretative scheme of history as the history of class struggle, uncovering an even more radical form of oppression whereby the oppressed man also becomes the woman's oppressor[7]. Her take on Hegel concerns the view of the human world as a world of conflicting freedoms mutually negating each other[8]. Her indebtedness to Husserl implies a view of theoretical work as a critique of

[7] DS I, pp. 73 ff.; cf. Firestone, *The dialectic of Sex*, pp. 5-6.

[8] DS I, p. 18

ideology unveiling things hidden by an *Ideenkleid*, a "clothing of ideas*"*[9]. She looks at Hegel and Marx through a peculiar lens, existential ontology. Two items from Husserl's legacy coexist n Beauvoir: on the one hand, the critical attitude, which wants to reach phenomena as they are, going beyond the mentioned "clothing of ideas*"*; on the other hand, this region is not read with *"*innocent*"* eyes, but data are interpreted instead by conceptual weaponry moulded by a peculiar ontology deriving from Husserl but ending with conclusions Husserl could have hardly accepted. Thus, when in her exploration of the feminine condition, Beauvoir discovers the presence of the *"*individual*"*, the *"*project*"*, and the *"*other", far from mirroring a ready-made field of phenomena, she is inserting phenomena in the grid of Sartrean ontology[10].

4. The feminist literature after Beauvoir has recognised the importance of her contribution. However, its best representatives have not failed to note the close link between Beauvoir's argument and Sartrean categories. Shulamith Firestone, for example, observes that, despite being *"*the most profound and most far-reaching" among feminist theorists, "bridging feminism with the best ideas of our culture"[11], Beauvoir has gone off the mark yet because of her rigidly existentialist interpretation of feminism. Beauvoir sinned in uncritically adopting a dualistic worldview without allowing herself the suspicion that dualism, far from an innate attitude dictated by *Geist* which creates a second sex, may be instead a projection of the observation of a duality of sexes in the human and animal biology

[9] DS I, pp. 12-13.

[10] On the idea of the individual and freedom, see DS I, p. 34: *"*The perspective we adopt is that of existentialist morality. Every subject poses itself concretely through projects as a transcendence: it accomplishes its freedom only through its perpetual overcoming towards other freedoms... Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into *"*in itself*"*, of freedom into facticity. Now, what is peculiar in the woman's situation is that, since she is, like every human being, an autonomous freedom she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men impose on her to assume herself as the Other. On the idea of the *"*other*"*, see DS I, p. 18: *"*the category of the Other is as original as consciousness itself... These phenomena cannot be understood if human reality were exclusively a *Mitsein* based on solidarity and friendship. On the contrary, it becomes more apparent if, following Hegel, we discover in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards all other consciousness; the subject poses itself only by opposing itself: it claims to be essential and to constitute the other as inessential, as an object". See also DS I, pp. 187 ss., and DS II, pp. 502 ss.

[11] Sh. Firestone, *The dialectic of Sex*, pp. 7.

in the heaven of ideology. If we accept these remarks, we may think that, despite its unmasking false evidence at a regional level, the *Second Sex* is still weighted by a general *"*ideological*"* assumption: Sartre's dualistic ontology. Starting with Firestone's suggestion, we might here analyse the role that categories dictated by this ontology the *Second Sex* and discuss how they influence its conclusions. We will try to detect the epistemological weaponry that allowed Beauvoir – sometimes under the stimulus of Sartre's categories and sometimes struggling to get rid of them and seek new ones drawing inspiration from a Marxist or phenomenological approach – to start a feminist *"*critique*"*, a break analogous to the one allegedly introduced by *"*scientific*"* socialism with *"*utopian*"* socialism. We will see the ambiguous relationship of Beauvoir's work with Sartre's ontology, as her epistemological framework is taken up from Hegel, Husserl and Marx but filtered through Sartre. We will then try to see what kind of *"*sexual ideology*"* may be detected in the book, firstly because of the extent to which her critique, leaving its link with existential ontology unquestioned, sometimes becomes weighed down by this ballast to the point of becoming itself "ideology". This may be an example of the link between a distorted *"*regional ontology*"*, the ideology of sexuality dominant before feminism (and before other things such as psychoanalysis), and a distorted *"*general ontology*"*, the mind-matter or soul-body dualistic ontology prevailing in Western thought and endorsed by Sartre himself. However, we may also attempt to detect the emergence of a positive perspective in the book since, in every critique of existing states of affairs, a glimpse may be caught of a better state of affairs; in other words, to detect the *Second Sex*'s *"*utopia*"*.

5. The first item of Sartrean ontology whose presence may be detected in the *Second Sex* is the conception of the individual and individual freedom as "project". In this connection, it is worth summarising the fundamental point of *Being and Nothingness*:in Merleau-Ponty's words, the reduction of the world to «men and things», a plurality of isolated and active individuals facing passive and opaque matter. It is a plurality where consciousness is always individual, an implication of rejecting an original *Mitsein*, besides the refutation without argument of solipsism. Sartre believes he can assert as evident the existence of a multiplicity of individual consciousnesses originally in

conflict with each other precisely because he assumes communication not to be an original datum. Every consciousness would therefore tend to pose herself as a subject in front of an objective world to which other individuals also belong. Consciousness is thus identified with freedom since the individual's existence consists of creating meanings imposed on the surrounding objective world arbitrarily from the point of view of every individual's *"*project*"*, which is what «gives names to things». For this reason, freedom, absolute and creative freedom, is at once also total impotence: the surrounding objective world is impenetrable and unreachable passivity, and the individual, superimposing on it arbitrary meanings that are lost in the magma of things, has the meagre satisfaction of keeping the freedom to choose ends, not that to achieve them[12].

Beauvoir explicitly declares that she adheres to Sartre's *"*existentialist ethics*"*[13]. She puts his conception of the plurality of consciousnesses at work in her interpretation of historical events. *"*Humankind – she writes – is not just a natural species: it does not merely seek to preserve itself as a species; its project is not stagnation: humankind aims to surpass itself*"*[14]. Besides *"*project*"* and creative activity, freedom is *"*freedom of indifference*"*, which amounts to freedom from conditioning from outside. Moreover, since it is the freedom of a plurality of consciousnesses, it is authentic only as far as, in the relationships between individuals, consciousnesses meet and confront each other directly without going through things.

What happens to friendship happens to physical love: to be authentic, it must first be free. Freedom does not mean whim: a feeling is a commitment that surpasses the instant... a feeling is free when it does not depend on any imposition from outside and is experienced in a state of safety, unencumbered by fears[15].

[12] See J-P-Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, Gallimard, Paris 1943, notably: "L'existence d'autrui, Les relations concrètes avec autrui" (part III), "Être et faire: la liberté" (part IV) where the existentialist morality is sketched that should have been developed in the never written work *L'Homme*.

[13] DS I, p. 34.

[14] DS I, p. 82.

[15] DS II, p. 114.

Thus, she echoes Sartrean accents when describing the existence of the empirical individual as freedom-project: the man perceives himself as an individual in the domination of nature: *"*he has the audacity, in the face of divine resistance, to perceive himself as an autonomous activity, to fulfil himself in his singularity*"*[16]. It seems, therefore, that the *"*utopia*"* hinted at by the *Second Sex* is to *"*ensure individual happiness*"*[17]. The community between individuals is, to some extent, inauthentic: an authentic attitude is a recognition that only individuals exist.

The union of two human beings is doomed to failure if it is an effort to complete oneself by means of the other, which presupposes an original mutilation; marriage should consist in the union of two human beings, not a retreat, an annexation, an escape, a fallback solution. A couple would need not to see themselves as a community [Acceptable bonds would be those] founded on the recognition of two freedoms[18].

These considerations may suffice to highlight Sartre's ontology's weight on the picture that emerges from Beauvoir's argument and its practical implications. The ambiguity resulting from adopting categories from the existential ontology is sometimes particularly jarring. See this passage:

For men, the transition from infantile sexuality to adulthood is comparatively simple. There is an objectification of erotic pleasure which, instead of being realised in immanent presence, is intentioned on this transcendent being. Erection is the expression of this need; sex, hands, mouth, with his whole body, the man tends towards his partner, but he is at the heart of this activity, as, generally speaking, is the subject facing the objects he perceives and the instruments he manipulates; he projects himself towards the other without losing his autonomy; the female flesh is for him a prey, and he takes on her the qualities that his sensuality claims from every object. Undoubtedly, he fails in appropriating these qualities: at least, he has them in his grasp; the caress, the kiss, implies a half-check: but even this checkmate is something

[16] DS I, p. 72.

[17] DS II, p. 24.

[18] DS II, pp. 27-28.

stimulating and pleasurable... In each case, a definite act has been performed, and man finds himself with an intact body: his service to the species is confused with his pleasure[19].

Following the suggestions of new feminists, one may ask why Beauvoir spared Sartrean ontology from the fire of criticism. Like all products of an era of male dominance, Sartrean philosophy also should, in principle, be suspected as potential ideology produced in an alienated situation. In particular, the Sartrean individual might be seen as an ontologisation of the male individual that we know from our history. There is no reason why this conception of the individual should be spared and conceived as an unverifiable postulate rather than an ideological absolutisation of an alienated situation. What is apparent, in any case, is the ambiguity of the discourse on the female human as far as this individual is, and simultaneously is not, a "man as project". Thus, while she denounces the reduction of half of the individuals to a *"*thing*"*, a *"*prey*"*, and the positioning of the other half as *"*lords*"*, hunters who anyway need prey as a superable *historical* fact, at the same time she takes for granted that this is an *ontological* status, which – like matters ontological – it may be challenging to overcome.

6. In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre establishes a form of dialectics that echoes Hegelian dialectics but with a truncated character, dialectics as unresolved conflict. In some aspects, it could be likened to Fichte's. At the most abstract level, this dialectic is exhibited in the relationship of the in-itself with

[19] DS II, p. 434. See also Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*: *"*The caress is in no way distinguished from desire... to seize the other is to reveal to him his inertia and his passivity of transcendent transcendence*"*. It should be noted that this discourse on the caress - which is a well-known topic in Hegel and Sartre - would require clarification before starting the discourse on the different ways of perceiving sexual activity in the male and the female. The discourse that is made exclusively for the male is essentially the discourse Hegel and Sartre made for man in general (for the male and female human, but without awareness of the specificity of the female condition). In Hegel and Sartre, the caress is also understood within an ontology of conflict (far more radical in Sartre than in Hegel). One of the results of Marx's contribution, and then, to some extent, of feminist critique, is to show how this ontologisation of human life in terms of conflict is also a historical result, an ideological projection of a society of servants and lords. For Beauvoir, the assumption of these Sartrean categories to reconstruct the different attitudes of the male and the female (an attitude that is a historical result) seems to render it instead of explaining the genesis of this attitude an original condition.

the for-itself, where the for-itself is posited as the inessential, which depends on the in-itself and defines itself as related to the in-itself. However, the in-itself remains the essential element that does not need to relate to the for-itself to formulate a self-definition. From such a dialectic, the Sartrean category of the *"*other*"* arises, the non-reciprocal, the outcast. This category is essential in accounting for human conflict-based relations and helps explain social violence and class struggle in the *Critique*. In the *Second Sex*, this category is adopted in full:

When two human groups are confronted, each wants to impose its sovereignty on the other; if both can support this claim, a relationship of reciprocity is created between them, in hostility as in friendship, but always in tension; if one kind of relation is privileged, one group wins and tries to keep the other in oppression[20].

On this basis, the whole history of women's oppression is explained: women are always understood as the other.

If man's original relationship with his fellow man were exclusively one of friendship, we would not be able to account for any subjugation: this phenomenon is a consequence of the imperialism of human consciousness that seeks to maintain its sovereignty. Suppose this consciousness was not marked by the primal category of the "other" and a claim to the domination of the other. In that case, the discovery of the bronze instrument would not have carried the subjugation of woman[21].

Since the woman is understood as the other and is oppressed to the point of ending with understanding herself as the other[22], reciprocity appears to be the mark of a genuinely human condition.

[20] DS I, p. 79; see also p. 18.

[21] DS I, p. 74.

[22] DS I, p. 184.

The asymmetry of male and female eroticism creates insoluble problems as long as there is a struggle between the sexes; these problems can be easily overcome when the woman perceives in the man both desire and respect; if he wants her physically while respecting her freedom, she finds herself as essential at the moment in which she makes herself an object, she remains free in the submission to which she consents… Under a concrete and physical form, the mutual recognition of the self and the other is accomplished in the most vivid consciousness of the other and the self… the dimension of the other remains, but what is essential is that otherness no longer retains a character of hostility[23].

Significantly, the reciprocity brought about preserves conflict though kept in check, and thus limits itself to juxtaposing two individuals. Admittedly, there is a possibility to eliminate conflict radically: the chance that one of the two subjects chooses to become the other's thing. But the new condition suggested does not change the situation, in the sense that the essential and the inessential become two different things, each necessary to the other and defining itself by its relationship with the other – but it is a condition in which the servant has also become lord, in which two (male) individuals face each other. It would be a similar process, a *pour soi* becoming an *en soi*, standing alongside the original *en soi*. The simultaneous presence of more than one *en soi* would be a paradox. Still, it is worth noting that the paradox already arises with Sartre's claim of an immediately experienced coexistence of individuals backed by his exclusion of both solipsism and the originality of *Mitsein*.

Beauvoir notes that Hegelian dialectics, though taking conflict as the starting point, does not lead to such a dead end[24]. The Hegelian dialectic is also originally a dialectic of conflict but, unlike Sartre, it does not make conflict absolute by proclaiming the impossibility of a synthesis between subject and object. Furthermore, alongside the synthesis as a third mediating moment, Hegel also admits a relationship between consciousnesses where *Mitsein*, the *"*we*"*, is the starting point, a search for communication, a plurality and unity of subjects are already given, and the individual subject is given as coexistent with other subjects. Sartre understands the plurality of individuals as a plurality of conflicting elements: as Egos, each seeking to place himself as subject and all the others as *"*non-

[23] DS I, pp. 467-477; see also DS II, p. 503.

[24] DS I, p. 18.

subject*"* (unless another of the Egos succeeds in rendering him the non-subject). Note that Beauvoir follows him faithfully on this point. If based on checked and yet unsettled conflict, *Mitsein* becomes impossible. At best, *Mitmachen*, acting together, can be achieved.

In case we interpreted the dialectic of sex without starting with a dialectic of two terms described as the essential and the inessential, we could figure out a liberated humankind where the male human is no longer the absolute human but is also only defined by the other term, the female human.

7. It is well known that one of the main lines of Sartre's discourse is the limitation of dialectics to the human world or the rejection of the Engelsian "dialectic of nature". In what sense is this a leading line? Sartre's thesis that only the human world is comprehensible by dialectical reason stems from the idea that the human is the only region of reality where the negative appears. Nature is inertia and passivity, opaque positivity. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's world is made of men and things. As we know, this dualistic conception is justified by the phenomenological ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. And, as we have already recalled, the subject that results from Sartre's ontology is subjective individuality, which excludes from itself all otherness, including the otherness of the subjects that this phenomenological ontology condemns to a never-ending project of reification of oneself or the other selves.

We should consider the *Second Sex* from this perspective, especially when discussing its interpretation of the woman's identification with nature practised by several cultures. Beauvoir reviews this identification against the background of the existentialist approach: turning the woman into a divinity, like the Earth, is a way of not recognising her as reciprocal: *"*She was not a similar being for man; it was beyond the human realm that her power was asserted: she was therefore outside this realm*"*[25]. The consequences seem to be weighed down by Beauvoir's interpretation of this identification giving Sartre's idea of nature for granted. Women and nature are the non-ego[26], and

[25] DS I, p. 91.

[26] DS I, p. 233.

following the Sartrean scheme of objectification-alienation, man is lost in the woman as he is in nature.

From the origins of humanity, their biological privilege has allowed males to assert themselves as sovereign subjects; they have never renounced this privilege; they have partly alienated their existence in Nature and Woman but then regained it[27].

It should also be noted, however, that alongside the passages where the Sartrean concept of nature plays its part, in other pages, Husserl's lesson and that of Marx in the *Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology* provide felicitous insights. Thus *"*nature*"* is perceived at some pints as no less in flux than history. *"*Nature, no more than historical reality, is not immutable: if the woman discovers herself as the inessential that never reaches out to the essential, it is because she does not bring about this change herself*"*[28]. Thus, Beauvoir ends up speaking of the historicity of nature. And at some points, she seems to discover the extreme closeness of the human body and natural things. She writes:

Psychoanalysts consider that man's first truth is his relationship with his own body and the body of his fellow human beings within society. Still, man carries a primordial interest in the substance of the natural world that surrounds him and tries to discover in work, in play, in all the experiences of dynamic imagination[29].

And elsewhere, she adds:

Crumbling the earth or digging holes are just as original activities as intercourse and coitus: one is mistaken in seeing them merely as sexual symbols; the hollow, the sticky, hardness, and integrity are primal realities; the interest man takes in them is not dictated by libido, but instead, the libido will be coloured by the way they are revealed to him[30].

[27] DS I, p. 200; see also p. 94.

[28] DS I, p. 20.

[29] DS I, pp. 61-62.

[30] DS I, p. 51.

Is there, then, an ambiguity in Beauvoir's discourse? On closer inspection, an ambiguity was already there in Sartre on the same topics: in *Being and Nothingness*, the body is both the *"*lived body*"* of phenomenologists, the world's way of giving itself and besides an item of nature – a sample of opacity with no negativity – that afflicts the human world and alienates it. Beauvoir oscillates under this twofold inheritance. We find original hints, compared to Sartre, which seem to preserve the best of the phenomenological legacy, placing sexuality in a broader relationship with the world. The discourse on the body as the lived body and the original relationship between the body and nature within which sexual activity also lies draws on Husserl's *Ideen II*. Beauvoir takes up these themes from Merleau-Ponty, to whom she was considerably closer than Sartre. It is precisely this suggestion that makes her perceive, at some point, how the value of the different (the woman as opposed to the man) might be preserved independently of its subordination: the woman has a different relationship to the world (and is therefore endowed with something that the male individual lacks) *"*because, since the body is the medium by which we relate to the world, the world presents itself differently according to whether it is present in one way or another*"*[31]. Thus sexuality, as an interest in one's own body and the body of others, is sometimes reintegrated by Beauvoir among other activities. This discovery of the libidinal character of the relationship with the world and the cognitive dimension of sexual activity anticipates Marcuse's *Eros and civilisation*. It is also noteworthy that Marcuse's contribution is more complex and yet less rich in insight due to less familiarity with phenomenology. Marcuse tends to reduce his overall intuition to a *"*mechanistic*"* perspective on sexuality that empties it: the eroticisation of work as a reactivation of the erogenous zones of the body instead of a rediscovery of the symbolic dimension of every human activity in so far as it also is a meaning-conferring activity (and of its erotic aspect only insofar as it has a symbolic aspect), be it sex, play or work.

Alongside these hints – it deserves emphasising – we may find the worst of the Sartrean legacy in other pages, namely a view of the body as alienation. Beauvoir intermittently falls back to this inheritance: sometimes, starting with the diversity of the male and female condition, she tends to

[31] DS I, p. 447.

historicise this negative view of the body and see it as a fact not dependent on a metaphysical doom. However, this mitigation does not go all the way.

> Men and women all know the shame of their flesh; in its simple motionless presence, its unjustified immanence, the flesh exists under the gaze of others as the absurd contingency of facticity, and yet it is ourselves. We want to prevent it from living for others: we want to deny it. Some men say they cannot bear to show themselves naked to a woman unless in erection; through erection, the flesh becomes activity and power, and the male sex is no longer an inert object but is, like the hand or the face, the imperious expression of subjectivity[32].

On the male's side, the lived body is perceived as inert passivity and as something negative when it is not *"*active*"*; the possession of one's own body and the body of others is understood as *"*doing*"* (and a *"*doing violence*"*), and not as a *"*having*"* where what is received is obtained gratuitously, as a gift. Correspondingly, being possessed is experienced as being raped on the woman's side. However, what seems to be somewhat obscure in these passages is whether Beauvoir is merely describing how, in the current state of the world, these attitudes are lived and how the dominant ideology turns them into natural and meta-historical attitudes or instead, due to her acceptance of the Sartrean ontology of conflict, Beauvoir unwittingly reverts to consecrating these attitudes as immutable. In these passages, the misunderstanding inherent in the Sartrean legacy is most noticeable, a misunderstanding yielding a picture of human society as made of serfs and lords, where the *"*male*"* is the owner of serfs, of women and nature itself. It is worth recalling that the opposition of *"*doing*"* and *"*owning*"* suggested by Beauvoir had already been formulated by Marx in the *Manuscripts*, anticipating the anti-dualist revolution invoked by Husserl. Though seeking to draw inspiration from Husserl in his existential ontology (and in a later phase also Marx), Sartre goes in the opposite direction. When, against orthodox psychoanalysis, Beauvoir discovers that sexuality is not an original datum, that the relationship between the lived body and another body is closely linked to the relationship between the lived body and external nature, she discovers and conceals in one step that the man-world dualism

[32] DS I, p. 448.

is mistaken, that it is only valid as a description of the world as it appears in the experience of the male human who has so far considered matter as an object of violence.

> Work, war, play, and art define ways of being in the world that cannot be reduced to any other: they discover qualities that interfere with those revealed by sexuality; it is simultaneously through sexuality and through these "erotic" experiences that the individual chooses himself. But only an ontological point of view makes it possible to reconstruct the unity of this choice[33].

The conclusion is ambiguous: the "nihilistic" outcome of Sartre's ontology apparently loses its absolute character and is downgraded to a "condition of possibility" of the alienated situation of women. On the other hand, this condition is bound to an ontological status at this stage, which risks making the critique of female alienation a vain enterprise. On the other hand, there often seems to emerge the proposal to eliminate differences due to sex (anatomical differences are related to functions that are little more than mechanical, with no particular meaning), to make women acquire a status that looks terribly like that of the "male lord" (but the lord is also alienated in the relationship with the serf) and perhaps negates any room to erotic activity. Beauvoir perhaps reaches the threshold of a return to the extreme asceticism of some gnostic currents: "Two human beings, which reach each other in the same movement of their transcendence through the world and their joint accomplishments, no longer need carnal union"[34].

In these passages where, starting with Sartrean premises, Beauvoir tends to devalue sex, making it an activity that concerns only a tiny part of the body and of the human being as a whole, we may see a reversion to more than orthodox Freudian views and perhaps some overtones of Cartesian dualism. Sexuality ceases being an activity with significance and cognitive content but is limited to satisfying undifferentiated (meaningless) libidinal drives. The outcome of such a dualist attitude may justify the search for sexual pleasure as something of minor importance, not affecting the rest of life. The remark

[33] DS I, p. 62; see also p. 434.

[34] DS II, p. 50.

is not out of place that even Gnosticism, on the shared basis of condemnation of matter as a dungeon of the spirit, was divided between an ultra-ascetic current and a current that promoted sexual promiscuity.

The *"*utopia*"* that Beauvoir seems to draw is also not entirely unambiguous. On the one hand, quoting Marx, she writes that the *"*immediate, natural, necessary relationship of man with man is the relationship of man with the woman" – she sees the possibility of achieving the ideal of the human couple only in a possible future when half of humankind, set free from oppression, will be able to unfold its full potential[35]. In this acceptance of such a plausible goal, at the end of a criticism that is not always equally plausible, she lapses into what many feminists might call a reformist surrender: *"*to achieve this final victory, it is necessary, among other things, that, men and women unequivocally affirm their fraternity beyond their natural differences*"*[36]. On the other hand, existential ontology's hypostatisation of the individual shows up also in the picture of this ideal state. We have seen that Beauvoir somewhere hints at the possibility that in the future, even the second half of humankind may be restored to its dignity of *homo faber* and that, at this stage, the sexual activity would no longer make sense. At the end of the work, she affirms her faith in the role sexuality will play for liberated humanity. Still, on the other hand, she affirms that the human couple can only survive based on the inessentiality of sexual characterisation, as this would undermine the individual's autonomy. The union of two human beings cannot be an attempt to complete each other, A couple should be founded on *"*the recognition of two freedoms*"*[37].

The utopia that underlies Beauvoir's feminism, which is at least minimally made explicit at the end of the *Second Sex,* is about a state of relations between individuals of both sexes developed on an egalitarian basis. It has heterosexual love as its object. What Beauvoir tells us in this regard is not so much: she reaffirms her faith that what is genuinely human will survive the destruction of the present alienated condition, though in not yet foreseeable forms. So, there is no reason to think that human

[35] DS I, p. 504.

[36] DS I, p. 504.

[37] DS II, pp. 127-8.

friendship and love relationships should be lost, and they have yet to show their full potential. Furthermore, she argues that a genuine human relationship between two persons will be possible based on their complete integrity and autonomy. Beauvoir here lays particular emphasis on the individual's absolute autonomy. However, even in feminist tendencies not inspired by existentialism with its cult of the individual, the need is felt to prefigure the relationship between the sexes as relationship between two autonomous humans who do not need each other to exist.

Another point among those affirmed by feminism as a whole, the most important perhaps, is the idea that any argument about the nature of love, of human relationships, of erotic relations, has to start with a historical-materialist unmasking of institutions as they have been historically given within the various cultural and social arrangements. We have glimpsed another aspect. This has been seen but not fully elaborated by Beauvoir, who was held back by the dualistic Sartrean inheritance. Other exponents of new feminism, for example, Germaine Greer, have elaborated on this idea: the kind of love that is possible to prefigure today, after the historical-materialist critique of its historical forms and their ideologies, requires a different epistemology as a condition of possibility, that, by overcoming dualism, makes conceivable the cognitive value of an activity such as love for a human individual. Greer names Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead. This non-dualistic attitude should translate, on a psychological level, into acceptance of narcissism:

> When Adam saw Eve in the Garden of Eden he loved her because she was of himself, bone of his bone, and more like him than any of the other animals created for his delectation. His movement of desire towards her was an act of love for his own kind. This kind of diffuse narcissism has always been accepted as a basis for love, except in the male-female relationship... The principle of the brotherhood of man is that narcissistic one, for the grounds for that love have always been the assumption that we ought to realise that we are the same the whole world over[38].

The last remarkable conclusion was hinted at by Beauvoir and other feminists after her: the need to consider accidents that were believed to be features of human nature from a historical point of view.

[38] Greer, *The female Eunuch*, p. 141.

The implication is that we still ignore what love between man and woman is. When we try to spell out the essence of some aspect of life, we cannot dare to formulate an ontology. Still, we should instead try, after having destroyed pseudo-essences, to sketch a tentative utopia. It would be rash, at this stage, to say more about the utopia hinted at by Beauvoir. However, when engaging in utopian discourse, it may be wise to know how much of the old is still preserved in the new.