

# A Comparative Analysis of Hegel's and Beauvoir's Relational Model of Self

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist engagement with Hegel's philosophy has taken two main approaches: appropriating Hegelian insights selectively to serve feminist purposes, as exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir, and rejecting Hegel's work as incompatible with feminist philosophy, as seen in Luce Irigaray's deconstruction of Hegel's claim to universality. These approaches have opened interpretive possibilities in Hegel's scholarship, particularly by focusing on passages within Hegel's texts and by analyzing Hegel's phenomenology and logic as modes of philosophical inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Keeping this in mind, this research paper aims to reinterpret and compare the relational model of selfhood expounded by Hegel and Simone de Beauvoir. This paper is divided into three sections: (a.) introduction, (b.) analysis, and (c.) conclusion. The analysis covers the largest portion of this paper, it is divided into two sections (i.) this section begins with a discussion on Hege's Phenomenology of Spirit and traces the development of consciousness to the Absolute. Further, it discusses his master-slave dialectic and its importance in gaining the Absolute knowledge. (ii.) this section discusses the importance of this dialectic in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex and how using this dialectic she has developed her argument on the historical and societal position of the "Other" (women).

**Keywords:** Phenomenology of Spirit, Master-Slave Dialectic, Second Sex, Other, Relational Self

## INTRODUCTION

Hegel describes Phenomenology as "the science of the experience which consciousness goes through". This science attempts to give an account of the progressive development of the mind as it is realized in history. It begins with ordinary "natural" consciousness and advances dialectically upwards until it reaches the stage of consciousness in which truth is achieved as absolute knowledge. Consciousness, in the Phenomenology of Spirit, is shown first in what appears as a simple, unmediated sensation or "sense-certainty"; it then develops through perception and understanding to culminate in reason as the absolute mind. The successive stages of consciousness are said to be the unfolding of Spirit or Geist, defined as self-thinking thought or the self-knowledge of the universe, i.e., self-consciousness. In each stage of consciousness, the same dialectical logic of becoming is at work in which a contradictory "moment" or negation emerges through Spirit's self-alienation or externalization; a profound struggle between the two moments of opposition then takes place, from which emerges a third moment of "reconciliation" that simultaneously maintains, negates, and transcends the earlier moments. Consequently, at the stage of reason, a higher unity or identity of concepts emerges that fuses concepts without cancelling out their differences: reason can apprehend the concepts as an identity of identity and

non-identity (identity-in-difference). Through this conceptualization of identity theory, Phenomenology of Spirit challenges binary oppositions: the dualisms of mind and matter, universal and particular, history and nature, subject and object, self and Other, man and woman.<sup>1</sup> For Hegel, these dualities are not separate and distinct but the different parts of the same reality. It is through the development of reason, the most sophisticated form of consciousness, that one can reach the Absolute. Richard Schacht in his commentary on the Phenomenology of Spirit tries to explain this with the help of an analogy, “Imagine a seed. The seed contains the essence of a tree within it, but it is not yet a tree. To become a tree, the seed must unfold itself and develop according to its inner logic. This process of unfolding is driven by an impulse towards self-actualization. The tree is the actualization of the essence that was contained in the seeds”. He asserts that in the same way, the Absolute is the actualization of the essence of reality.<sup>2</sup>

## ANALYSIS

The Absolute which is the fundamental principle of reality is essentially a Spirit. This is because the spirit is both a substance and a subject, and it is in constant strife to become complete. The absolute is not simply an object but a subject that is self-conscious and self-determining in nature. Hegel argues that this self-awareness is only possible through encounters with others. In other words, self-consciousness is triggered when it encounters other self-consciousness, leading to the realization that they are objects for others and that recognition by others is essential for establishing a stable sense of self. Hegel in The Phenomenology of Spirit through the master-slave dialectic presents the relational model of the self: the self is not self-contained but deeply influenced by relationships and external interactions. According to Hegel, the experience of the life-and-death struggle leads to the "dissolution of that simple unity" resulting in life being preserved as something distinct from self-consciousness. This separation gives rise to two forms of consciousness: a self-contained, independent self-consciousness known as the master or lord, and a more object-like, dependent consciousness known as the slave or bondsman. In his discussion of the master-slave dialectic, Hegel introduces the bold claim that the self becomes aware of itself only through the presence of the Other. He states that self-consciousness is incited when it encounters another self-consciousness. The first two implications of this mutual encounter are that consciousness discovers that it can be an object for the Other, and secondly, it sees the Other as a source of recognition. Hegel introduces an intersubjective component to the notion of selfhood: each self-consciousness plays a mediating role for the other by constituting that through which each comes to know itself. To possess a stable self-conception of its own autonomy, self-consciousness strives to turn its “subjective certainty” into an “objective reality.” The latter is an existence that is affirmed by free others. While self-consciousness at first views the Other as a means to an end, it comes to understand that a viable sense of self requires realizing that the Other is an autonomous equal (not merely an object “for it”).<sup>3</sup> This perspective of relational selfhood challenged the then-prevalent Western narrative of autonomous selfhood.

Hegel’s master-slave dialectic has been critiqued by many feminist scholars concerning gender relations, power dynamics, and recognition. They have analyzed gender inequality using the dialectical analysis of power and self-consciousness (despite its historical context). Further, he is also criticized for

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<sup>1</sup> Mills, P. J. (Ed.). (2010). *Feminist interpretations of GWF Hegel*. Penn State Press.

<sup>2</sup> Schacht, R. (1972). A Commentary on the Preface to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit'. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 23(1/2), 1-31.

<sup>3</sup> Grosz, E. M. (2014). *The vulnerability of the relational self: GWF Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nishida Kitaro meet Patty Hearst* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon).

his sexist marks in his discussions of family and Antigone. Yet there are many feminist scholarships for his work to counter the historical gender biases in the canon of philosophy; Charlotte Witt writes these scholarships can work *"as confirmation that a feminist perspective or problem is securely rooted in our philosophical culture"*.<sup>4</sup> Alison Stone argues that gendered opposition within Hegel's philosophy is not merely confined to his discussion of the family; rather, gendered opposition is deeply embedded in Hegel's system, in his very understanding of nature, and the relationship of concept and matter. Since Hegel associates form or concept with the male and matter with the female, in common with most of the Western philosophical tradition, his identification of matter as the "being-outside-itself of the concept" means Hegel "implicitly understands the female as the being-outside-itself of the male—as an inverted and inferior form of the male, rather than as a sexual identity in its own right." Thus, Hegel's account of the process of nature, where the concept shapes matter more and more in conformity with it, "amounts to a progressive mastery of the female by the male".<sup>5</sup> Despite her critical analysis, Stone continues to think that feminist philosophers can benefit from Hegel's master-slave dialectic, his work on recognition, and his dialectical logic which exhibits "how one concept, when isolated or separated from its antithesis, tends to collapse back into or become invaded by its antithesis". She further writes that Hegel's philosophy can be used, but in doing so "we need simultaneously to reconstruct and reinterpret that philosophy, or the parts of it that we are using, in a more gender-egalitarian form".

Simone de Beauvoir is one of the 20th-century philosophers who propagated the relational model of selfhood; she established her works from Hegel's notion of recognition. She focuses on the concrete aspects of self-other relations, utilizing a first-person narrative in her book *Second Sex* and autobiographies. She delves into how the existing social norms structure the pursuit of recognition from others and the impact of gender differences on self-identity. She integrates descriptive and prescriptive elements in the societal structures emphasizing the importance of authenticity, freedom, challenging oppression, and so on. Despite her professed disenchantment with the Hegelian system after her initially positive reception of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Beauvoir's moral period is marked by a recurrent engagement with Hegel. She writes,

*"I'm living not exactly cocooned in philosophical optimism – for my ideas aren't clear enough – but at least on a philosophical plane such that optimism is possible. I so wish we could make a comparison between your ideas on nothingness, the in-itself, and the for-itself, and the ideas of Hegel. For there are many analogies – although Hegel turns into joy that which for you is instead gloomy and despairing. It seems to me that both are true, and I'd like to find a point of equilibrium."*<sup>6</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical perspective is deeply rooted in the recognition of human existence's duality and complexity. She argues that individuals exist as both subjects and objects, encompassing both materiality and consciousness, while simultaneously being unique within the context of a collective society. Many of the central tenets of Beauvoir's philosophy emerge from these opening lines: her rejection of reductionist thinking and embrace of ambiguity, her rejection of ethics as a form of calculation and her call for an ethics that reflects the complexity of human existence, her simultaneous

<sup>4</sup> Dryden, J. (2013). Hegel, feminist philosophy, and disability: Rereading our history. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 33(4).

<sup>5</sup> Dryden, J. (2013). Hegel, feminist philosophy, and disability: Rereading our history. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 33(4).

<sup>6</sup> Sims, C. (2009). *Otherness Matters: Beauvoir, Hegel and the ethics of recognition* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch).

acknowledgment of Hegel's attempt to overcome duality and rejection of his attempt at synthesis.<sup>7</sup> The complex bond between the individual and others discussed in Hegel's master-slave dialectic also forms a paramount in Simone de Beauvoir's reinterpretation of the dialectic of recognition with one crucial difference: the bond takes on an entirely different aspect when the individual is a woman. Beauvoir introduces the theme of subjectivity in terms of the self's relationship with the other. She proposes that a subject can be posited only by distinguishing itself from an "other". Of the categorization of "the Other", Beauvoir writes that it is "as primordial as consciousness itself" and that "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought." Furthermore, she links the process of othering to the experience of oppression. For this task, she again used Hegel's concept of Otherness. She explicates that consciousness is essentially hostile to other consciousness because each consciousness sees itself as the essential subject and the other as the inessential object. This hostility leads to a reciprocal claim between consciousness, which forces individuals and groups to realize the reciprocity of their relations. She gives the following examples to further prove her point: "If three travellers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the antisemite, Negroes [sic] are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class's for the privileged...."<sup>8</sup> For Beauvoir, a more fundamental question emerges from the discourse on women, namely, the question of otherness. In a letter to Satre, she writes,

*"I have described how this book was first conceived: almost by chance. Wanting to talk about myself, I became aware that to do so I should first have to describe the condition of women in general; first I considered the myths that men have forged about her through all their cosmologies, religions, superstitions, ideologies, and literature."*<sup>9</sup>

Beauvoir's perspective on the relational self is grounded in her acknowledgment of how women have been historically and socially constructed as 'other'. In *Second Sex*, she contends that women have been primarily defined in relation to men, as their secondary sex. This societal construction of 'otherness' had (still has) a significant impact on women's self-identity. They are often treated as passive, defined in terms of their relationships with men and their domestic roles. Beauvoir writes,

*"Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. A woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied by the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and which in a patriarchal society are accorded the man".* Further, she writes, "because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be. The female person who enacts the existence of women in a patriarchal society must therefore live in a contradiction: as a human, she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sims, C. (2009). *Otherness Matters: Beauvoir, Hegel and the ethics of recognition* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch).

<sup>8</sup> Sims, C. (2009). *Otherness Matters: Beauvoir, Hegel and the ethics of recognition* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch).

<sup>9</sup> Grosz, E. M. (2014). *The vulnerability of the relational self: GWF Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nishida Kitaro meet Patty Hearst* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon).

<sup>10</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (2023). The second sex. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 346-354). Routledge.

This put ‘her’(women) in a state of ambiguity; just like when the subject’s consciousness of the not-I marks their mutual separation, e.g., I am not that tree; equally, that tree is not me then it creates a separation between them. Before this first movement of consciousness, there was no knowledge of a distinction between them, and if there was no knowledge, then such a distinction could exist only to those studying the movements of consciousness. Now that there has been consciousness of the tree as not-I, the subject has won its independence from the tree, but, of course, the tree has won its independence from the subject. Through consciousness’ negating action, the difference that had always existed between the subject and the tree is affirmed. Consciousness of the not-I takes away something that had never belonged to the subject and, at the same time, gives him the experience of that not-I in its newly affirmed independence. However, through separation anxiety, through disquiet, the subject might desire, either to forfeit his own independence, in other words, the subject might wish to become once again (at) one with the tree, which is, “the dream of an inhuman objectivity”, the dream of “wanting to be”; alternatively, the subject might refuse to acknowledge the independence of the tree, yet still insist upon his own.<sup>11</sup> This ambiguity makes the women both free and determined, both subject and object, both individual and social beings. Hence, she asserts to women,

” the *ambiguous nature of our situation is not something that we have the power to suppress; it is our very condition as human beings. We cannot escape it, but we can learn to live with it. We must choose to live in the ambiguity of our situation, rather than trying to flee it.*<sup>12</sup>

She urges women to live an authentic life; authenticity is not something that is given to us. It is something that we must create for ourselves. It is a choice that we make, and it is a choice that we must reaffirm every day. In *Second Sex*, she disarms fraternal power by constituting an ethics of friendship and generosity as the assumption of modesty, corporeality, passivity and vulnerability. In an interview Beauvoir suggests:

“*Precisely because they don’t generally have power, women don’t have the flaws that are linked to the possession of power. For example, they don’t demonstrate the self-importance, the fatuousness, the complacency, the spirit of emulation that you find in men. Women ... play fewer roles, wear fewer masks, and I think the kind of truthfulness you find in many women is there because, in a sense, they have to have it, and that’s a quality they should keep and should also transmit to men. There are also qualities of devotion. Devotion is very dangerous because it can become a way of life and can devour people sometimes, but it has its good sides; if it’s what we think of as altruism. There is often, in women, a kind of caring for others that is inculcated in them by education, and which should be eliminated when it takes the form of slavery. But caring about others, the ability to give to others, to give of your time, your intelligence – this is something women should keep, and something that men should learn to acquire.*”

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the analysis, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of Otherness resonates with the dynamic of recognition, power, and societal positioning between the dominant and the subordinate group. Just like in the Hegel’s dialectic, the master seeks recognition but is dependent on the acknowledgement of slave similarly in Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, men symbolize societal

<sup>11</sup> Grosz, E. M. (2014). *The vulnerability of the relational self: GWF Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nishida Kitaro meet Patty Hearst* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon).

<sup>12</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (2023). *The second sex*. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 346-354). Routledge.

masters who throughout the history have defined norms and rules to which women or “other” must conform. However, there is a point of divergence in their perspectives. Hegel's goal in the master-slave dialectic, is for the self to become certain of its autonomy while Beauvoir shifts the focus toward the inescapable need for validation in our interactions with others. Recognition, in her view, is not merely about obtaining an inner feeling of certainty from others regarding one's freedom. Instead, it involves the necessity of validation in our interactions with others.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, I would like to share the motivation behind this research paper as a closing statement. Women “*certainly have new things to say, unique things, and that they must say them,*” Beauvoir once declared in an interview with Susan J. Brison. She also said that women “*should write feminist books, books that reveal women's condition, that revolt against it and lead others to revolt.*”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Grosz, E. M. (2014). *The vulnerability of the relational self: GWF Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nishida Kitaro meet Patty Hearst* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon).

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