

ENSLAVED TO THE SPECIES: THE CONFLUENCE OF ANIMALITY,  
IMMANENCE, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN  
SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *THE SECOND SEX*

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the strands that comprise feminist scholarship on *The Second Sex* centers around Simone de Beauvoir's depiction of the female body, primarily as it is portrayed in "The Data of Biology."<sup>1</sup> A number of scholars have focused on – and sharply criticized – the way in which Beauvoir describes female reproductive experience. They have argued that her depiction of the female body is masculinist, essentialist and, according to some, aligns women more with nature than with the realm of the human existent.<sup>2</sup> More recently, feminist philosophers have criticized this scholarship for its failure to recognize the significance of Beauvoir's claim that women are existents. These scholars usually refer to the section of "The Data of Biology" where Beauvoir asserts that woman is not limited by her body in the way that female animals are.<sup>3</sup> Instead, her body is but one part

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<sup>1</sup> I have relied primarily on the English translation of *The Second Sex*. Given the frequent inaccuracies of this translation, I have compared all quotes used here against volumes I and II of the original French text, *Le deuxième sexe*. Where necessary, I have made changes to the English translation, based on my own translation of the French texts. Within the footnotes, I have indicated all such changes by noting "translation modified" after the *Second Sex* citation and including the page number from *Le deuxième sexe*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, "Second Sex: Second Thoughts," in *Hypatia Reborn: Essays in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Azizah Hibri and Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 305-322; Toril Moi, "Existentialism and Feminism: The Rhetoric of Biology in *The Second Sex*," *Oxford Literary Review* 8 (1986): 88-95; Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Re-Reading* (London: Virago, 1986); and Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The primary goal of these articles is rarely to prove that woman is not determined by the feminine body. Instead, this is one point – albeit an important one – that is made to support a larger argument.

of her overall situation. As Moira Gatens notes, woman as an existent “has no fixed nature, no essence, no determined way of being.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, she has greater freedom from the constraints of her biology than do animals. While her body contributes to her situation, she has the freedom to determine what that contribution means to her and how to respond to it. In these rejoinders, the emphasis shifts from the way in which Beauvoir depicts the female body to the consequences – for women – of the existentialist framework within which this description is offered. While I believe that this shift in emphasis moves the scholarship on *The Second Sex* forward in a fruitful manner, I am concerned with the loss of attention given to the ontological weight of the facts that Beauvoir proffers about the female body.

I agree with scholars like Gatens that, within the existentialist framework, the existent’s body does not fully determine the shape of her life. But I also agree with Beauvoir’s critics who claim that her depiction of the female reproductive body interacts with her understanding of animality in such a way as to place women on the side of the animal. Granted, this problem is ameliorated by endowing women with the qualities of the existent. But if we ask *how* the female animal became an existent, we are confronted anew with the dilemma. We see this difficulty most clearly in the first chapter of the “History” section of *The Second Sex* entitled “The Nomads.” A central goal of this thesis

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See, for example, Elizabeth Fallaize, "A Saraband of Imagery: The Uses of Biological Science in *Le deuxième sexe*," in *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2001), 67-84; Linda M. G. Zerilli, "A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity," *Signs* 18, no. 1 (1992): 111-135; and Moira Gatens, "Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 266-285.

<sup>4</sup> Gatens, "Beauvoir and Biology," 268.

is to illustrate how the women in this chapter could not have achieved the freedom of the existent within the philosophical framework that Beauvoir uses. I will argue that this failure is created by the convergence between Beauvoir's depictions of animality and the female reproductive body. To better understand this point, we need to look further at the way in which Beauvoir distinguishes humans from animals.<sup>5</sup>

For Beauvoir, the animal realm is an immanent one of pure biological (and species) life and its maintenance through repetition. The transcendent human existent is marked off from this realm by her ability to surpass mere biological life coupled by her desire to do so. In her writings on infancy in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir suggests that we are born with this freedom intact.<sup>6</sup> Its full expression may be an achievement, but the possibility for it is secured at our birth and is not available to other animals. Thus, borrowing from Kate Soper, we can note that Beauvoir regards the difference between human beings and animals as one of kind rather than one of degree.<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir does not secure this difference through transcendent means. She does not, for example, rely on the concept of a god who instilled this difference within us. Because she does not grant us

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout the thesis, I will be referring primarily to Alexandre Kojève's rendering of the dialectic from his text, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. Jr. James H. Nichols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969). I base this decision on the fact that Beauvoir's understanding of the dialectic was strongly influenced by Kojève's text. A number of feminist scholars have made this point well. See, in particular, Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, & Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*; and Kimberly Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003). Hutchings does an excellent job of showing how Kojève's and Sartre's interpretations of the dialectic influenced Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel. She argues that an alternative reading of Hegel would have ameliorated some of the difficulties that accompany the use of his work for a feminist project.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 268-269.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 42.

recourse to transcendent origins, we must look within the situation of the human animal to discover where this ability and its attendant desire came from. There is good evidence within *The Second Sex* (primarily in “The Data of Biology”) that Beauvoir believes that the changes that separated us from other animals were evolutionary developments. There is also general agreement among a large number of Beauvoir scholars that her understanding of this evolution was strongly influenced by the anthropogenesis that Alexandre Kojève based on the master-slave dialectic and developed in his lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.<sup>8</sup>

In Kojève’s work, we are given a clear account of the experiences that propelled the animal into a state of free existence. He bases these occurrences on the structure of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In the simplest of terms, this course is comprised of four stages: a desire to be recognized by another like oneself, a fight to the death with that other, an eventual relationship of master and slave between oneself and this being, and the slave’s transformation of the natural world through labor. These stages comprise a kind of apprenticeship for the emerging existent, with each phase teaching this being

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<sup>8</sup> Not all Beauvoir scholars accept this claim. Sara Heinämaa, for one, questions the degree to which Hegel influenced the early chapters in the “History” section of *The Second Sex*. She argues that Beauvoir’s approach was more original than this, with her development of the sexual hierarchy in these chapters being strongly influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of repetition related to the “dialectics of contingency and necessity.” (Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003], 103.) Eva Lundgren-Gothlin devotes a section of her text, *Sex and Existence*, to illustrating the ways in which Karl Marx influenced the early history chapters of *The Second Sex*. (See “Part III: Sex and Labour: Marxist Elements in *The Second Sex*,” pages 83-123) It must be said, though, that Lundgren-Gothlin focuses most of her attention on Kojève’s influence on the text. In the chapter of her text entitled “Hegel and Kojève” (56-66), Lundgren-Gothlin provides a good summary of the influence that Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy had on Beauvoir and her contemporaries.

some lesson required to achieve self-consciousness. Within a Kojévian reading, this achievement becomes synonymous with a negation and transcendence of the given, animal realm.

In *The Second Sex*, we see Beauvoir echo a number of these anthropogenic moments in the early “History” chapters. At times, we also see her detailing in these chapters the development of human consciousness. On the surface, then, Kojève and Beauvoir are telling a similar story. But there is a fundamental difference between their accounts. Kojève uses this story to explain human consciousness in the making. Beauvoir, on the other hand, begins the early “History” chapters with human beings who have already broken from animal life and acquired the qualities of the existent. Rather than use the narrative of the dialectic to explain how the animal metamorphosed into the existent, she uses it to detail how men failed to recognize women as beings who had already achieved this transformation. Thus, the very experiences that, for Kojève, created human consciousness are merely tools that Beauvoir uses to explain the source of the present sexual hierarchy. We may wonder then how Beauvoir’s existent achieved her particular ontological status. Presumably, this being emerged through a specific process made up of certain experiences and actions. What were the constitutive experiential steps of the animal’s metamorphosis into the consciousness of a free subject?

The similarities between Beauvoir and Kojève’s notions of the existent complicate this picture further. As I will illustrate in Chapter III, if we look at the passages in *The Second Sex* where Beauvoir distinguishes humans from animals, we find that her definition of the free existent is heavily influenced by Kojève’s anthropogenesis.

In other words, the human that Beauvoir describes is similar to the being who is formed by the process of the master-slave dialectic. In particular, Beauvoir embraces the Kojévian notion of the existent as a being who negates the values and desires of the given, natural world by choosing the non-biological end of another self-conscious being's recognition. And so it seems reasonable to assume that her existent underwent a similar process in order to break from the animal realm.

This appears to be the case with the men in "The Nomads." Not only do they have the values and thought-life of existents, but they also engage in many of the activities that transformed the animal into the human being within the Kojévian account. (The primary action with which I will engage is the risking of life that these men underwent to secure prestige for their clan.) When we shift our attention to the women in "The Nomads," however, we encounter a difficulty. We find that while Beauvoir attributes transcendent values and thoughts to them, these women do not engage in transcendent actions and experiences. This is because the women in this chapter are fully engrossed in the maintenance of species life. This absorption, in turn, is at the root of Beauvoir's understanding of sexual difference. As I will illustrate in Chapter II, with the exception of fish and batrachians, higher-order males and females are most significantly distinguished from one another by the degree to which their resources are devoted to reproductive labor, with females being most encumbered by this work. In the case of the early Nomads, none of the cultural interventions that would later grant women distance from and control over their reproductive roles were in place. Thus, women at this stage were unable to engage in life-risking struggles for recognition. I will argue in Chapter IV that

this is a foundational step in the Kojévian version of the dialectic that must be undergone in order for the animal to continue on the transformative path to human existence. With this in mind, we can see that we are confronted with an inexplicable assertion of existence for females who did not have the requisite experiences to insure that status within the Kojévian framework.

The problem of the early Nomadic women is grounded in an impasse in Beauvoir's philosophy. This impasse is founded on the tension between the following two aspects of her theoretical framework: a) the influence of the Hegelian-Kojévian master-slave dialectic on her understanding of the difference between humans and animals; and b) her notion of sexual difference as defined most significantly by the divergence in the sexes' degree of enslavement to the species. This impasse exists at the level of human-consciousness-in-the-making and is created by the convergence of the similarities between the experiences that produce the categories of male/female and human/animal. Over the course of the next four chapters, I will illustrate how this convergence creates a paradoxical situation for early Nomadic women.

In Chapter II, I will highlight the way in which Beauvoir uses the master-slave dialectic as a tool for exploring how men first came to regard women as inessential, animal-like beings. As I will show, she grounds women's oppression in the fact that they could neither risk their own lives nor stand up to their male counterpart's impositions of sovereignty. As such, they were like the slave in the dialectic who chooses the presumably animal value of self-preservation over a demand that the master recognize his status as an essential, sovereign subject. In addition, early women were consigned by



their reproductive role to purely immanent activities. Like the animal, they were capable only of engaging in actions that maintained the species and the given world. Thus, they failed to concretely manifest the existent's ability to transcend purely biological life. Like the master, early Nomadic men came to regard these women as animals and themselves as the only incarnation of existential qualities.

I will argue in this chapter that Beauvoir attributes early women's failure to risk their lives for recognition, as well as their consignment to a realm of immanent actions, to the species' exploitation of their vital resources. Beauvoir develops the conditions for this situation in "The Data of Biology." The conclusions about sexual difference that she draws in this chapter feed directly into her explanation for the origin of the sexual hierarchy. At the same time, we learn through the biology chapter that Beauvoir regards one's individuation from the species as a progressive evolutionary force. The greater one's freedom from species reproduction, the more highly individuated one becomes. Given the fact that Beauvoir regards humans as the most individuated of all living beings, women's inability to engage in essentially human activities can be attributed to their biological preoccupation with species maintenance and perpetuation.

In general, we find that species enslavement is a significant constitutive force in Beauvoir's philosophy, drawing together immanence, the female reproductive body, and animality. In Chapter III, I will take a deeper look at the relationship that emerges between these three elements. Much of my discussion will be framed around the concept of immanence. I will illustrate how it is tied for Beauvoir to animality – so much so that her depictions of immanence at the level of the human existent often invoke the situation

of the animal. I will further argue that Beauvoir defines animality largely in terms of species enslavement. Consequently, the scope of the animal's life is deeply circumscribed by the temporal structure of reproductive processes. In this way, Beauvoir's notion of human immanence is ultimately derived from species enslavement and the cyclic temporality of reproduction. At the same time, Beauvoir differentiates female from male reproductive experience in terms of a greater degree of species enslavement. Thus, many of the negative qualities of immanence make their way into her depiction of the female reproductive body. Immanence, animality, and female reproductive experience thus share many core qualities through the influence that species enslavement has upon them all. Given the way in which they are woven together, it becomes difficult to account for how the female human garnered the resources needed to distance herself from species life in order to achieve the status of an existent.

My primary goal in Chapter IV will be to disclose the steps that were necessary for the female mammal to metamorphose into the human existent. I will argue that, based on the dialectic framework upon which Beauvoir relies, the nascent existent must be able to surpass given conditions via the project and establish values other than the reproduction and maintenance of species life. Both of these achievements, in turn, can only arise out of the negation of the given world and a turn toward non-biological ends. Within the Kojévian version of the dialectic that Beauvoir embraces, these abilities rest on the risking of one's life for another self-conscious being's recognition of one's sovereign will. In this chapter, I will work closely with Kimberly Hutchings' interpretation of the dialectic from her text, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*. Hutchings

provides us with an alternative interpretation of the master-slave dialectic that does not require the risking of one's life. As such, her work serves as a good foil for bringing out the implications of Beauvoir's reliance on the Kojévian anthropogenesis. Specifically, Hutchings helps us to see the paradox implicit in the early Nomadic women's condition as beings who could not risk their lives but were imbued with the qualities of the existent nonetheless.

Chapter V will be devoted to exploring this paradox. I will work with Sara Heinämaa's text, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, to examine what Beauvoir *intends* to convey through early Nomadic women's situation: namely, that the dialectic fails to account for women's unique bodily experiences and is, thus, a faulty foundation upon which to base the sexual hierarchy. I will argue, however, that this assertion is based on the assumption that early Nomadic women had already achieved existence. Given Beauvoir's reliance on the dialectic to establish the essential differences between humans and animals, however, we simply have no way of understanding how early Nomadic women could have achieved existence without taking part in the dialectic action. Consequently, Beauvoir and Heinämaa must ignore the ontological weight of early women's bodily situation in order to deny the significance of the dialectical process. I will argue that Beauvoir's goal of expanding our understanding of the existent to include women's bodies and reproductive experience is ultimately undercut by the way in which she relies on the master-slave dialectic to

distinguish humans from animals. In spite of her best intentions, she locates the enablers of transcendence in the male animal's bodily situation. In doing so, she inadvertently consigns early Nomadic women to animality.

CHAPTER II  
SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S THREE AXES OF LIFE: CONSTRUCTING MALE  
PRIVILEGE IN "THE DATA OF BIOLOGY"

Beauvoir famously begins *The Second Sex* with an account of sexual difference grounded in evolutionary biology. It is widely acknowledged by her commentators that this chapter, "The Data of Biology," is intended by Beauvoir to be a presentation and ultimate refusal of biologicistic explanations for women's oppression. In spite of this fact, as I noted in the Introduction, a number of feminist scholars have taken Beauvoir to task for her portrayal of the female reproductive body. There have been a number of responses in the secondary scholarship to Beauvoir's critics. Some scholars argue that Beauvoir presents these facts less as something she endorses and more as part of a larger rhetorical strategy. Elizabeth Fallaize, for example, claims that Beauvoir uses "a highly selective review of biological data...to enable her to tackle a set of metaphors and myths about the female pertaining to the world of nature which she felt bedeviled serious discussion of what role women could play in society."<sup>1</sup> Linda Zerilli suggests that Beauvoir's negative depiction of the female reproductive body is actually a "feminist rhetorical strategy" insofar as it challenges traditional, positive conceptions of pregnancy that naturalize women's role as mother. According to Zerilli, Beauvoir's ultimate goal with the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Fallaize, "A Saraband of Imagery," 84.

account provided in the biology chapter is to “create a conceptual space in which to articulate an alternative conception of the female subject who is not defined exclusively by her reproductive capacity.”<sup>2</sup> Employing a different strategy, Sara Heinämaa argues that Beauvoir presents the biological data not as part of her own account regarding the source of women’s oppression but as an explanatory framework that she then submits to critique. She claims that Beauvoir finds this framework “useful but inadequate in leaving certain values unproblematized.” According to Heinämaa, Beauvoir views the biological explanation as framed by “the values of life, procreation, [and] physical strength.” The primary philosophical work to be done, then, when investigating women’s oppression is an interrogation of these values and their relationship to sexual difference.<sup>3</sup> What all of these scholars have in common is their assumption that the evolutionary account that Beauvoir presents in “The Data of Biology” is not an integral part of her philosophical framework. The goal of the present chapter is to challenge this assumption.

It is true that Beauvoir denies that physiological differences between women and men can cause or justify women’s oppression. I will argue, however, that her chapter on biology accurately reflects her assumptions about the biological contribution to the long-standing subjugation of women. She establishes through her evolutionary account the source of the biological privilege that first enabled men to consign women to the status of inessential Other. The conclusions about sexual difference that she draws in “The Data of Biology” feed directly into her explanation for the origin of the sexual hierarchy

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<sup>2</sup> Zerilli, “A Process without a Subject,” 121.

<sup>3</sup> Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 95-97.

presented in the first chapter of the “History” section of *The Second Sex*. Specifically, Beauvoir argues in “The Nomads” that women’s oppression in the early stages of human life was due to their inability to stand up to the men’s imposition of their sovereignty and to engage in activities that demonstrated their status as transcendent existents. Beauvoir locates the source of these incapacities in the species’ exploitation of the female’s vital resources. In order to lay the groundwork for this claim, she organizes her evolutionary account of biological life around three terms: transcendence, enslavement to the species, and individuation from the species.

In the pages that follow, I will illustrate the way in which these three terms interact with one another in “The Data of Biology” to create women’s situation in “The Nomads.” As a secondary project, I will begin to demonstrate the role that enslavement to the species plays in Beauvoir’s understanding of sexual difference, as well as the difference between humans and animals. I will also begin to sketch out the problems with the way in which Beauvoir relies on the bondage to the species to define these differences. In particular, I will highlight an impasse in the biology chapter that results from the role that this enslavement plays in Beauvoir’s philosophy. Finally, I will begin to lay the groundwork for illustrating how immanence, the female reproductive body, and animality are linked together through their shared connection to this bondage.

### **Identifying the Source of Male Biological Privilege**

Beauvoir asserts near the end of “The Data of Biology” that the biological facts she has presented about the female reproductive body “play a major role in the history of

woman.”<sup>4</sup> We see her develop this claim further in “The Nomads.” In this chapter, Beauvoir tells us that her goal is to determine the source of the current sexual hierarchy. She grounds her explanation in the following view of human intersubjectivity: “...when two human categories find themselves in the presence of one another, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other. If both are able to withstand this imposition, there is created between them, either in hostility or in friendship, always in tension, a relationship of reciprocity. If one of the two is...privileged, ... this one prevails over the other and undertakes to keep it in oppression.”<sup>5</sup> Based on this view, Beauvoir does not find it surprising that early nomadic men wanted to dominate women. It is in the nature of the human being to want to force one’s will on the other. The question for her is *how* men initially achieved oppression over women. What either overrode or prevented the women’s ability to stand up to the men’s imposition? The work for her in “The Nomads” is to identify the privilege that enabled these men in the early stages of humanity to dominate women. Beauvoir does not explicitly state that this privilege was biological in nature until the following chapter, “Early Tillers of the Soil.”<sup>6</sup> But over the narrative arc of “The Nomads,” she demonstrates how the differences in the sexes’ reproductive roles placed men in a privileged position.

According to Beauvoir, the division of labor in early nomadic societies was rigidly split between women and men. The men’s efforts to care for their community

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<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 32, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 61, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 77.



involved life-risking hunts for the clan's food and battles to ensure the prestige of their group. To help facilitate their hunting and warfare, the men fashioned and used tools.<sup>7</sup> As for their female counterparts, Beauvoir asserts that because human fertility was not regulated either by the estrus cycle or human innovations, early Nomadic women endured "repeated pregnancies" which "must have absorbed most of their strength and their time."<sup>8</sup> The women's preoccupation with their reproductive roles barred them from gathering resources for the benefit of the clan through activities like hunting and tool use. Nor were they able to provide for their own needs and those of their offspring. Consequently, they were highly dependent upon men.<sup>9</sup> Given this situation, it appears that men's oppression over women began with an imbalance of dependency and control over resources. But this is not the scope of Beauvoir's argument. Instead, she bases her explanation on what she considers to be the fundamental difference between the human and the animal.

Early nomadic men's life-risking activities and tool use enabled them to transcend the situation of the animal. By putting their lives at risk in order to provide for their clan and ensure its prestige, they established that "life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself."<sup>10</sup> Through tool use, nomadic men went beyond the usual animal reliance on "simple vital

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 62, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64.

process[es]” to provide for their community.<sup>11</sup> Both of these activities are key aspects of the transcendent existent for Beauvoir, who subscribes to the view that the animal’s sole value is to preserve biological life. The risking of one’s life – particularly for prestige – opens up the possibility for the human being to value non-biological ends. The development of a mediation between one’s body and the world through the tool enables men to give expression to their own goals or *projects*, which is in contradistinction to the animal whose ends are dictated to her by the species. In the process of founding and carrying out goals that are not determined by present conditions, the existent transcends the given world and creates the potential for a future filled with heretofore-unknown possibilities. In the early stages of humanity, these essential qualities of the existent were incarnated solely by men. Through this incarnation, man was “fulfill[ed] as an existent.”<sup>12</sup> This is the biological privilege that Beauvoir identifies as the source of women’s oppression.

While men at the earliest stages of humanity were engaging in transcendent activities, Beauvoir asserts that early nomadic women were “biologically destined for the repetition of Life.”<sup>13</sup> In this context, “Life” was the undifferentiated, repetitive reproduction of the same in which women – along with animals - were passively immersed. Thus, rather than transcending the natural world toward a different future, early nomadic women were fully engaged in activities that simply maintained and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64.

repeated given conditions. In this way, they were limited to actions that failed to distinguish them from animals. We gain a sense of their position in the parallel Beauvoir draws between the relationship of the sexes at this time and Hegel's master-slave dialectic. She writes, "The privilege of the Master...comes from his affirmation of Spirit as against Life through the fact that he risks his own life.... Whereas woman is from the beginning an existent who gives Life and does not risk *her* life.... Hegel's definition would seem to apply especially well to her. He says: 'The other [consciousness] is the dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is animal life, that is to say, a mode of being given by another entity.'" <sup>14</sup> Although Beauvoir denies that early nomadic women had the consciousness of an animal, she does claim that the men's privilege arose out of the fact that they were actively engaged in life-risking acts that affirmed Spirit – that is, transcendent existence – over mere animal Life, where one's "mode of being" is dictated by the demands of the species.

Beauvoir shows in "The Nomads" that men were first able to oppress women because their actions and roles were more in line with the values and characteristics of the existent. Consequently, they were able to usurp the status of existent, relegate women to the status of an animal, and dominate them. The biological privilege that enabled them to do so was their greater degree of autonomy from the species. This autonomy facilitated early nomadic men's ability to transcend given conditions and helped strengthen their capacity to exercise their individual, sovereign will. Early nomadic women, on the other hand, were biologically consigned by their enslavement to the species to repeat and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 64-65, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

maintain given conditions and were limited by their reproductive role from asserting their individual will. This is the biological situation that Beauvoir explores in “The Data of Biology.” As such, her understanding of evolution is structured by the interrelationship between autonomy from the species, transcendence, and individuation.

I will speak of these three terms as the axes of life. The first axis we encounter is a continuum that ranges from immanence to transcendence. In the context of early nomadic men’s biological privilege, this axis helps us understand how the female was relegated by her reproductive role to a realm of immanence characterized by repetition, maintenance, and a constraint of creativity. The second axis marks the degree of an organism’s individuation or distinctness from the species, ranging from lesser to greater individuation. The third axis records the degree of a living being’s autonomy and ranges from enslavement to the species to a high degree of distance from the impact of reproductive processes. I will refer to these latter two scales respectively as the axes of individuation and autonomy. In “The Nomads,” Beauvoir uses these two axes to explain the difference between the ability of the sexes to exercise their will and their sovereignty. The male’s significant autonomy enabled him to put his vital energy to the service of his projects and the expression of his will. In the case of the female, on the other hand, reproductive labor so encumbered her that it drained her of the resources needed to assert her will. Her enslavement to the species was also largely responsible for her devotion to its maintenance. In this sense, it also impacted her position on the axis of transcendence.

These three axes also provide the explanatory framework for Beauvoir's understanding of the male dominance of the female in the animal realm. As I have indicated, she then carries over the assumptions she makes about this relation of dominance into the human realm, where it serves as the foundation for the biological privilege that instantiates women's oppression. While she employs all three axes in her explanation, we will see that enslavement to the species is the key causal component. This becomes especially clear in the distinctions that Beauvoir draws between the biological situations of mammals and non-mammalian vertebrates.

### **Evolutionary Development and The Axes of Life**

In her evolutionary account, Beauvoir establishes two realms of reproductive variability and freedom in the framework of an otherwise static natural world. The first domain is inhabited by non-mammalian vertebrates – primarily fish and batrachians (that is, frogs and toads); the second is populated by human existents. In the animal realm, this freedom and diversity is enabled by the reproductive biology of the vertebrates and the environment that influences that biology. Among these creatures, a number of the ties between the three axes of life that Beauvoir establishes over the course of her evolutionary account are relaxed. The slackening of the connection between these axes enables a creative range of variations in the distribution of reproductive labor between the male and female. Once we move to mammals, however, we observe an acute constriction of this variability, accompanied by a reconnection across the axes of transcendence and

autonomy. The contrast between male's and female's biologically determined reproductive roles becomes much more pronounced and rigid. Among human beings, the amelioration of cultural practices and values is required to alleviate what becomes an oppressive division of reproductive labor. I will examine the ways in which these two zones of reproductive variation and freedom are constructed from the axes of life; what the differences are between the foundations upon which they rest; and what this means in terms of the difference between humans and non-human animals, as well as women and men.

The axis of transcendence is the first continuum we encounter in "The Data of Biology" and is introduced in Beauvoir's discussion of the gametes. She identifies what she calls the "two interrelated dynamic aspects of life," namely the egg that ensures the transcendence of the species through maintenance or *immanence* and the sperm that ensures the maintenance of the species through its creative initiative or *transcendence*. We can more clearly discern the qualities of these two poles in the following quote: "...it is through the male element that the variation of the situation necessary for the emergence of new life is brought about; it is the female element that enables this new life to be lodged in a stable organism."<sup>15</sup> In this context maintenance and creation are equally valued. Both are inextricably bound up with and dependent upon one another and

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<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 13, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 49.

ultimately play “a fundamentally identical role: together they create a living being in which both of them are at once lost and transcended.”<sup>16</sup>

Immanence and transcendence are initially divided between the respective contributions of the female and the male. Beauvoir points out, however, that both sexes emerge from the union of the egg and the sperm; thus, these two opposing principles are integrated in the individual animal. In this way, the alignment of the two sexes along either end of the axis breaks down. Immanence and transcendence are now brought together in one individual, regardless of sex.<sup>17</sup> Another interesting aspect of this re-integration is that it takes place in every species that emerges from a gametic union. Any living being that is produced in this way will be a blend of immanence and transcendence. (I will return to this point in the next chapter.)

A nascent concept of individuation is also developed at this stage, albeit one enveloped – necessarily, as we will see – within Beauvoir’s observations on superiority and domination. She writes: “...neither gamete has a privilege over the other: both sacrifice their individuality, and the egg absorbs the totality of their substance.”<sup>18</sup> A few pages later she asserts, “It is false to say that the egg greedily swallows the sperm, and equally so to say that the sperm victoriously commandeers the female cell’s reserves, since in the act of fusion the individuality of both is lost.”<sup>19</sup> On one level, we can

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<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 13.

understand these passages as Beauvoir's refutation of certain myths about sexual difference that rest on biological data.<sup>20</sup> But there is something else taking place here: namely, a search for the source of sexual oppression. Yes, it is true that Beauvoir rejects the claim that this source lies in the sexes' respective contributions to reproduction. But, as we will see, she also takes seriously the question of how the imbalance of power between males and females developed. What is interesting about this inquiry is the way in which she links domination and superiority with individuality. We will see an ongoing interlocking of these concepts as we move throughout the chapter.

Beauvoir continues to develop the axis of individuation as she moves from the gametes to the organism. She writes: "One of the most remarkable features to be noted as we survey the scale of animal life is that as we go up, life becomes more individuated. At the bottom, life is employed only in maintaining the species; at the top, life seeks expression through singular individuals."<sup>21</sup> Thus, at the lowest level of animal life (the parasitic Crustacean, *Edriolydnus*, is the representative example), male and female are joined together in "a kind of unity made up of inseparable elements." Just as the respective gametes lost their individuality once they joined together in the fertilized egg, so too does the individual existence of the male and female at the lowest level of animal life get consumed by their respective reproductive roles: "both remain strictly

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<sup>20</sup> As I noted earlier, in her article, "A Saraband of Imagery," Elizabeth Fallaize suggests that the entire chapter on biology in *The Second Sex* is such a project of refutation. See page 71 of her article regarding this passage in particular.

<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 16, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 53.



subordinated to the eggs.”<sup>22</sup> This reveals to us the axis of autonomy, which begins with enslavement to the species and moves up through greater degrees of freedom or release from its influence. Initially, the degree of individuation that is possible for an animal rests on this axis. That is to say, a lack of singularity is equivalent to and results from an immersion in the species. As with the gametes, the male and female at this stage experience an equal lack of individuation.

At the level of insects, the relationship of the sexes to the axes of life begins to shift. The scales of individuation and autonomy are still coupled together. However, the male begins to move toward a greater degree of autonomy and individuation while the female remains fixed at the previous level on both axes. Beauvoir writes: “The female has no autonomy – egg-laying and the care of eggs and larvae are her destiny, other functions being atrophied wholly or in part.”<sup>23</sup> As for the male, he begins to develop a singular existence manifested in sexual initiative, sexual competition with other males, and, emerging out of these roles, “organs of locomotion, touch, and prehension” that are “often more evolved” than those of the female.<sup>24</sup> The male’s reproductive roles fold back onto his body and alter its structure, amplifying his difference from the female and enabling his individuation from the species.

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<sup>22</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Beauvoir claims that the species, “which holds the female in slavery, punishes the male for his gesture toward escape” by killing him. We can think, then, about a kind of ceiling in place that keeps the male insect from moving further along the scale of greater individuation into positions reserved, if you will, for higher forms of life. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 19, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 56.

### **A Break in the Link between Individuation and Autonomy**

When we reach the level of the vertebrates, a crucial shift in the relationship of the axes takes place. The link between individuation and autonomy breaks. It is no longer a given that a species or an individual who travels in one direction along the continuum of autonomy will travel in that same direction along the axis of individuation. How do we understand this break? As I noted earlier, Beauvoir maintains that higher forms of life are engaged not only in the maintenance of the species but also in the creation of discrete individuals. This new function – the creation of singular beings – is the source of the rupture between the scales of individuation and autonomy. With this new function comes a re-emergence of the axis of transcendence in Beauvoir's account. There will be more to say about this continuum in a moment.

But first, what can we say about the break in the relationship between autonomy and individuation? Let us begin with what we *cannot* say. We cannot claim that the tie between the axes has been abolished. Beauvoir writes: "...the female has, like the male, a certain autonomy and her bond to the egg has loosened. The female fish, batrachian, or bird is far from being a mere abdomen."<sup>25</sup> Individuation at this point in the text, then, is synonymous with the fact that the body and life of the animal extend beyond and are shaped by more than her reproductive role. In this sense, the two axes are still bound to each other and help constitute one another's contours.

In what way, then, *is* the tie between these axes broken? The answer to this question lies fully within the axis of individuation. The vertebrate's position along this

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<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 19, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 57.

continuum is now fixed. It is as if Beauvoir has instantiated an evolutionary plateau. Within the subphylum of vertebrates, individuation is a given – one that exists in equal measure between the sexes of a particular species. Thus, if an animal’s enslavement to the species is heightened by her situation, it will continue to affect the level of autonomy she may experience. It will not, however, reduce her level of individuation. Instead, it will chafe against and constrain it. Later we will explore whether this is a sustainable development in Beauvoir’s account.

This new expression of life is realized along two radically different tracks divided into mammals and non-mammalian vertebrates (primarily batrachians and fish). What is interesting about this division is the range of freedom and variability present within each. Among non-mammalian vertebrates we witness a creative expansion of the reproductive roles available to males and females. When we turn to mammals, however, we observe a shrinking of this field of variation and an increased polarization in the reproductive roles each sex is able to perform. One way to understand the difference between these two realms is to recognize a fundamental assumption underlying it. Beauvoir writes: “The less strictly the mother is bound to the egg, the less does the labor of reproduction represent an absorbing task and the more uncertainty there is in the relations of the two parents with their offspring.” She is referring specifically here to fish, batrachians, and birds.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir points out that in the case of birds, reproduction via the egg “is much more closely associated with the mother than with the father,” although she also highlights the variability in the division of labor present – from the father’s role in nest-building and protection of the young to those breeds of birds whose fathers incubate and rear the offspring. Thus, birds seem to occupy a position somewhere between mammals and batrachians. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 19-20.

In the case of fish, this uncertainty is further facilitated by their environment: “Water is an element in which the eggs and sperms can float about and unite, and fecundation in the aquatic environment is almost always external.” The very bodies of water in which fish live enable fluidity in the reproductive relationships of the male and female that we have witnessed up until now only among microscopic organisms in their myriad forms of regeneration.<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir writes:

In some species [of fish] the eggs are abandoned by the parents and develop without assistance; sometimes a nest is prepared by the mother and sometimes she watches over the eggs after they have been fertilized. But very often it is the father who takes charge of them. As soon as he has fertilized them, he drives away the female to prevent her from eating them, and he protects them savagely against any intruder. Certain males have been described as making a kind of protective nest by blowing bubbles of air enclosed in an insulating substance; and in many cases they incubate the eggs in their mouths or, as in the seahorse, in abdominal folds.<sup>28</sup>

Up until this point (and, as we will see, immediately following it), Beauvoir has offered us a traditional account of sexual difference among non-human animals – one where the costs of reproduction are borne almost fully by the female. Once she shifts to the world of non-mammalian vertebrates, however, her portrayal upsets conventional ideas about the division of reproductive labor. This idiosyncrasy, however, does not simply emerge out of a specific environment. We see similar descriptions among toads and birds. Beauvoir offers us the example of the obstetrical toad who “wraps the strings

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 19. Beauvoir makes note in *The Second Sex* (4) of the various forms of reproduction that occur among microscopic animals, including parthogenesis, schizogenesis and blastogenesis.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 20-21, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 57.

of eggs about his hind legs to carry with him and ensure that they hatch” and male pigeons who produce and secrete “a milky fluid” in their crops with which to feed their offspring. She even notes that the pigeon “while occupied in maintaining life” produces no sperm, because “he no longer has the impulse to create new living beings.”<sup>29</sup> Later, when she discusses the domination implicit in the male’s sexual role, Beauvoir will try to maintain that some imbalance of power is present among the fish and batrachians. She will be limited, however, to asserting that the male takes the initiative in stimulating the female to release her eggs, but “it is in birds and mammals especially that he forces himself upon her.”<sup>30</sup>

The world of batrachians, fish and, to a lesser extent, birds as depicted by Beauvoir is a fascinating one. All of the relationships between the axes and the sexes have been disrupted. Individuation no longer rests on autonomy from the species. The release of the unfertilized eggs from the female body enables greater variability in the range of relationships that are possible between the parents and the offspring, as well as between the individual and the species. Consequently, both sexes can occupy a number of positions along the axis of autonomy. They may even reverse their relative positions, with the female achieving a greater degree of freedom from the species than the male. We also witness a return to and a significant transformation of the axis of transcendence. The principles of life that are intrinsic to the gametes are now lodged within particular reproductive *roles*. Consequently, while transcendence is initially located in the male

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<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 20, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 21.

sperm and immanence in the female egg, now they are no longer sexed terms. That is to say, the male can be “occupied in *maintaining* life” and, as a consequence, have no “impulse to *create* new living beings” (emphases added).<sup>31</sup> The array of reproductive possibilities has become expansive indeed. Consequently, we have lost some of the resources we had – but will regain – for determining what biological sexual difference translates into within the animal’s lived experience. The sexes are equally individuated and the female is no longer necessarily aligned with enslavement and immanence nor the male with (reproductive) freedom and transcendence.

Given the disruption of the axes and the range of variation in the distribution of reproductive roles that Beauvoir establishes at the level of non-mammalian vertebrates, it is surprising to see how she characterizes sexual difference among mammals. She writes:

It is in mammals that life takes the most complex forms and individuates itself most concretely. There the division of the two vital components – maintenance and creation – is realized definitively in the separation of the sexes. It is in this branch – to consider only the vertebrates – that the mother sustains the closest relations with her offspring, and the father shows less interest in them. The female organism is wholly adapted for and controlled by the servitude of maternity, while sexual initiative is the prerogative of the male.<sup>32</sup>

This is quite a reversal of the variation Beauvoir established among the fish, batrachians and birds. To understand it, we need to examine a number of new movements

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 58.

taking place among all three axes. First, both sexes continue to move further up the scale of individuation, presumably occupying the same position. Second, whereas the female and male non-mammalian vertebrates could move freely along the axis of transcendence in relation to the continuum itself and in relation to one another, that fluidity and variability is lost at this stage. A pronounced polarity is re-established between the sexes, aligning females once more with immanence and males with transcendence. This rigidity is coupled with the inflexibility that has developed along the axis of autonomy. Now the female is closely associated with and subservient to reproductive functions while the male asserts himself in his individuality in the sexual act and distances himself from the reproductive labor that follows. With the exception of the change along the axis of individuation, we see a re-instantiation of the kind of sexual difference that exists “prior” to the non-mammalian vertebrates. This, in turn, is coupled with a diminishment of creativity and variation in the range of possible relationships between parents and their offspring, as well as a heightening of the female’s enslavement to the species.

### **A Break in Beauvoir’s Causal Structure**

Given the retrogression that takes place along the axes of transcendence and autonomy, how is it that Beauvoir maintains a high level of individuation among mammals? Even though the non-mammalian vertebrates’ degree of singularity is no longer *fully* determined by movement along the axis of autonomy, it is still largely constituted by it. In other words, the fixity of their site on the axis of individuation is enabled by the easing of the species’ grasp on the parents. It is odd that this level of

individuation among these vertebrates – coupled as it is with a relaxation of the bond to the egg – is maintained in mammals where the range of freedom from the egg becomes much more constricted. Furthermore, Beauvoir has defined individuation up until this point as a kind of standing forth from the species. It is an assertion of one’s separateness or distinctness, which she marks at the biological level with physical strength, the development of the organs that one uses to move out into and grasp the world, and mastery over one’s life forces and energy.<sup>33</sup> We may wonder then how exactly the female mammal achieves a significant level of individuation, given the degree to which the species consumes her physiological resources. It appears that Beauvoir has broken with the causal structure of her evolutionary account in order to instantiate an evolutionary plateau where individuation at the level of vertebrates is simply a given.

But this is true only up to a point. Even at the level of the mammal, Beauvoir provides us with a definition of individuality in the male that is firmly grounded in evolution. We can easily trace its development from the insect “up” to the mammal. Further, his individuation and autonomy bond together, feed off of one another, and facilitate their mutual development. These bonded axes *culminate* in the mammal (and ultimately in the human being). We can see this in the following passage: “In those species favorable to the development of individual life, the urge of the male toward autonomy – which in lower animals is his ruin – is crowned with success. He is in general larger than the female, stronger, swifter, more adventurous; he leads a more independent

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<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 19, 24-25.



life, his activities are more gratuitous; he is more masterful, more imperious.”<sup>34</sup> This passage indicates that the male urge toward autonomy supports his evolutionary development as a being individuated from the species and in command of his vital energy.

The male mammal’s individuation conforms to the causal structure of evolutionary progress that Beauvoir presents in the biology chapter. The less one’s personal resources are devoted to the maintenance of the species, the more individuated one is. The male mammal is the least invested in his offspring of all the animals and the most in control of his biological resources. The same, however, cannot be said of Beauvoir’s depiction of the female mammal, whom she asserts is “wholly adapted for and controlled by the servitude of maternity” and yet somehow the most individuated of the animals.<sup>35</sup>

How do we understand this break in the causal framework that Beauvoir has offered us up until now? One way to do so is to consider the section of the chapter where she details the consequences of the male and female’s disparate reproductive experiences on man and woman. Beauvoir claims that in his reproductive role, the male mammal is “permitted to assert his autonomy,” because he has found a way to direct the “energy of the species” toward his own pursuits. The female mammal’s reproductive role, on the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 24, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 20, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 58.

other hand, chafes against her individuality, which is “opposed by the interest of the species.”<sup>36</sup> Then she proceeds as follows:

And this explains why the contrast between the sexes is not reduced when the individuality of the organisms is more pronounced.... The male finds more and more varied ways in which to employ the forces he is master of; the female feels her enslavement more and more keenly, the conflict between her own interests and those of the reproductive forces that inhabit her is heightened....<sup>37</sup>

The idea that woman’s particular reproductive role chafes against her individual interests is a predominant theme in *The Second Sex*. As the following passage illustrates, Beauvoir considers this constraint to be a significant part of contemporary women’s biological situation: “We have seen that instead of integrating the power of the species into her individual life, the female is the prey of the species, the interests of which are dissociated from her singular ends. This antinomy reaches its height in woman....”<sup>38</sup> It must be said that, for Beauvoir, this tension between the individual and the species does not prevent woman from being an existent, having an individual will, and establishing projects. It does, however, constrain her ability to exercise her will and realize her projects in a way that has the *potential* to put her at a disadvantage in her interactions with men. At the early stages of life, this constraint laid the groundwork for men to relegate women to a realm of immanence and label them inessential others. As we saw in

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<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 25, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 25, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 372, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe II*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 147.

“The Nomads,” early women’s preoccupation with reproductive labor prevented them from devoting their resources to transcendent activities. When early men “posed [themselves] as the master,” women were too hampered by their reproductive roles to impose their own sovereign will or marshal their resources to withstand this imposition.<sup>39</sup>

The fact remains, however, that it is difficult to account for the higher-order female’s individuation within the explanatory structure that Beauvoir offers us. At the level of female mammals, Beauvoir simply breaks with the inverse relation she previously established between one’s enslavement to the species and her degree of individuation. The problem here lies in the function of this enslavement. It plays two conflicting roles in Beauvoir’s philosophy. On the one hand, she views autonomy from the species as a progressive evolutionary force. The greater one’s freedom from reproductive life, the more highly individuated one becomes. On the other hand, she wants to maintain a tension between the female existent’s high level of individuation and her bondage to the species. She relies on this tension to explain how, in certain situations, women are relegated to immanence and fail to lodge a claim for recognition of their sovereignty in the face of oppression. Throughout the balance of this thesis, I will illustrate how these two uses of the concept of enslavement bring immanence, animality, and the female reproductive body into close relationship with one another and interfere with the ontological breaks that Beauvoir establishes between human existents and animals.

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<sup>39</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65.

CHAPTER III  
ENSLAVEMENT TO THE SPECIES: THE TIE THAT BINDS ANIMALITY,  
IMMANENCE, AND THE FEMALE BODY

As we saw in the last chapter, Beauvoir sharply divides the sexes at the highest levels of animal life along the axis of transcendence. This division is largely determined by the degree to which each sex is enslaved to the species, with the female being consigned to immanence because of her physiological devotion to reproductive processes. At the same time, Beauvoir also considers a distance from the power of the species to be a progressive evolutionary force. The farther an organism is from its influence, the higher her position on the evolutionary scale.

In this chapter, I will take a deeper look at the relationship that emerges between immanence, animality, and the female reproductive body as a result of the constitutive influence of species enslavement that they share. Much of my discussion will be framed around the concept of immanence. I will illustrate how it is tied for Beauvoir to animality and enslavement to the species. I will further argue that she defines animality largely in terms of this enslavement; and it is from the qualities of reproductive processes that the characteristics of immanence arise. I will also demonstrate how her depictions of immanence at the level of the human existent invoke the situation of the animal. The problem with this formulation is that Beauvoir also differentiates female from male

reproductive experience in terms of a greater degree of species enslavement.

Consequently, many of the negative qualities of animal immanence make their way into her depiction of the female reproductive body.

Of course, as existents, women are not constrained by their biological situation in the way that other females are. Instead, they are subject to a layering of situations. As free beings, they can respond in myriad ways to all of those layers, including their own bodies. But a troubling link remains between immanence, animality, and the female reproductive body through their joint constitution by species enslavement. As I will explore further in subsequent chapters, it becomes difficult to account for how the female animal garnered the resources needed to distance herself from mere species life in order to achieve the status of an existent.

### **The Difference between Immanence and Transcendence in Humans and Animals**

Before delving into the distinctions that Beauvoir draws between the animal and the human existent, it is important to note that we cannot regard them as strictly divided between immanence and transcendence. In the case of the human existent, Beauvoir considers immanence to be an essential part of who we are and asserts that it needs to be affirmed as such. We see this most clearly in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Here she writes of the existent, “‘Rational animal,’ ‘thinking reed,’ he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it.”<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir’s human being is both a free

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<sup>1</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Kensington Pub. Corp., 2000), 7.

subject and an object in the world. She decries philosophers who have tried to resolve the tension of our condition by either defining us as all immanent body or transcendent soul. She demands that we acknowledge the ambiguity of our situation and maintain this tension. Indeed, Beauvoir claims that our ambiguity can be a starting point for our ethics: “Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.”<sup>2</sup>

As with the human being, Beauvoir views the animal as a blend of immanence and transcendence. In the previous chapter, I pointed out how these two principles of life come together for her in the animal born from a gametic union through the integration of the sperm and the egg. She also notes in “The Data of Biology” that “every living fact implies transcendence, that every function implies a project.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, then, Beauvoir believes that there is an aspect of surpassing that courses through every manifestation of life. That being said, however, this other form of transcendence is quite different from the human manifestation. We begin to get a sense of this contrast in the following line from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: “This privilege, which [the existent] alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men.”<sup>4</sup> The assumption here is that any being other than the existent is an object, a pure facticity. Thus, while Beauvoir sees the natural world as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>3</sup> It isn't clear what Beauvoir means by a project in this context, because later she will deny that the animal has the project. This lack will make the difference between a transcendent and an immanent action. I will discuss this point further in Chapter 2. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 10, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 7.

transcendent in some sense, she also views it as a world of immanent objects. In a similar way, the presumption through much of her philosophy is that to be an animal is to be a purely biological being, a mere assemblage of biological functions. And so we find that as we read through “The Data of Biology,” transcendence at the level of the animal is simply the ability of the organism to go beyond her individual life by contributing to the perpetuation of her species through reproduction. Once we begin to look at the way in which Beauvoir distinguishes human beings from animals, it becomes clear that animals are ultimately confined to a realm of immanence.

Similarly, we find that while immanence rounds out Beauvoir’s understanding of the human existent, it also helps shape her notion of oppressive, unethical conditions. The qualities of immanence are often used by Beauvoir to depict situations that diminish the human’s essential character, which can be defined primarily as the ability to go beyond the given world. Yes, it is true that we must acknowledge our immanence and commit ourselves to acting within a world of facticity; but what makes us different from all of the objects of the given world is the fact that we have the ability to surpass current conditions. As we will see, a life of immanence is an animal kind of life for Beauvoir, which is synonymous for her with a thing-like life. Thus, Beauvoir’s notion of immanence goes well beyond the fact that we are mortal, finite beings and expands into a definition of stasis, stagnancy, thing-ness, and animality. Granted, most of the qualities that Beauvoir attributes to immanence in *The Second Sex* emerge out of her discussions of human life. I argue, however, that while she abstracts the qualities of immanence from

the biological substrate of reproductive experience and applies them to a myriad of situations, the source of this phenomenon lies for Beauvoir in enslavement to the species.

### **The Immanent Animal**

Beauvoir asserts in “The Data of Biology” that animals are fixed and unchanging; they “constitute given species and it is possible to define them in static terms.” The relative success of individual animals can be determined simply by amassing scientific data about them. In other words, the scope of their lives can be captured by how they perform within a measurable moment.<sup>5</sup> This is because animals cannot go beyond the given conditions of their lives. Indeed, animals are the antithesis of the novel, creative, transcendent existent who, Beauvoir tells us, is constantly evolving. Animals can only repeat the given. Thus, while she acknowledges that other species maintain themselves by creating new beings, “this creation is only a repetition of the same Life in different forms.”<sup>6</sup> Opposite the members of human society engaged in acts of self-surpassing, Beauvoir poses the animal, which seeks only to “maintain itself as a species” and whose project results only in “stagnation.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 33, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Many of Beauvoir’s depictions of animals must be gathered from the way in which she distinguishes the human existent from them. Oftentimes, she tells us what the animal is by telling us what the human being is not. I have used quotes like the following to help me construct her view of animality: “The reason for this is that humanity is not simply a natural species : it does not seek to maintain itself as a species; its project is not stagnation; it is toward surpassing itself that it tends.” In this example, I presume that Beauvoir considers animals to be engaged in the maintenance of the species and projects that lead to stagnation. I take a similar approach to a number of other passages to construct a picture of Beauvoir’s overall view of animality. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 113-114, not in English translation.



According to Beauvoir, animals are subordinated to the species. Humanity, on the other hand, “is something other than a species: an historical becoming.” As such, “it defines itself by the manner in which it assumes its natural facticity.”<sup>8</sup> Later in this chapter, I will illustrate how we see this distinction most clearly in Beauvoir’s depiction of the female animal. We do, however, find it in her portrayal of the male as well: “In the animal, the gratuitousness and variety of male activities are in vain because no project is involved. When he is not serving the species, what he does is immaterial [*rien*].”<sup>9</sup> Thus, while man has some measure of freedom in the way in which he takes up nature (including his own body), the male animal can only react to given conditions and act in such a way as to conserve them. He is unable to creatively respond to his “natural facticity.” This is due to the fact that he does not take up the world within the frame of his own interests and goals, or *projects*. He cannot create new, transformative ends. Instead, his ends are given to him by the species. Indeed, the animal is ruled by and, hence, defined by the species’ value of preservation. In this sense, biological life is the animal’s “supreme value.” Consequently, he does not feel the “urge to surpass” the ongoing, unrelenting, “pure” repetition of this life from one individual to the next.<sup>10</sup> His life is bound up in and determined by the maintenance of his species as a whole. In this sense, he is enslaved to it. As a consequence, he can only repeat what has come before. Nothing takes him beyond this world. Thus, Beauvoir distinguishes between an animal species

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<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 716, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe II*, 643.

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64.

that “submit[s] passively to the presence of nature” and the human society that takes up nature and transforms it, thereby granting the given world a movement into a different future.<sup>11</sup>

Two assumptions underlie Beauvoir’s notion of animality. First, she assumes that this form of life is purely biological. In other words, there are no relevant dimensions to it – such as agency, creativity, sociality, and innovation – that are not immediately tied to reproduction. As we saw, the animal is unable to go beyond this enslavement. Consequently, the species dictates the animal’s values and actions, creating for her a ready-made world that she is unable to challenge. Second, Beauvoir presumes that such a life is, as Nina Hellerstein suggests, “deadening,” repetitive, “mechanical,” and ontologically “stagnant.”<sup>12</sup> The animal’s enslavement to the species relegates her to a repetitive, inert state of maintenance. It is this state that serves as the foundation for Beauvoir’s notion of immanence. We find that the qualities that make up the contours of animal life – that is, stasis, stagnation, repetition, maintenance of the given world, passive submission to nature, and objecthood – are the same qualities that Beauvoir ascribes to immanence within the human realm. This is not a coincidence. Instead, it is due to the fact that Beauvoir develops her concept of the animal in counterpoint to her definition of the existent.

What we are witnessing here is a continuation of the phenomenon tracked in the previous chapter. One’s relative distance from the impact of the species continues to be

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Nina S. Hellerstein, “Temporal and Existential Structures in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les belles images: Mechanical Reproduction Versus Transcendence*,” *Symposium* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 17.

an evolutionary force for Beauvoir. That is, the more a living being is enslaved to the species, the more that being will be caught up in the ontological structure of reproductive processes. The human being – and *only* the human being – has the ability to break away from the repetitive temporality of the reproductive cycle. While the existent does not wrench entirely free from the labor of species perpetuation and the organic cycle of life and, in fact, remains rooted within these natural processes, she begins to acquire a degree of freedom unavailable to the animal. She is still involved in the continuation of her species, but now she begins to transcend biological life “through Existence.”<sup>13</sup> Existence, in turn, yields the *essentially* human possibility of establishing one’s own goals, an “urge to surpass” the given, the ability to engage in creative acts, a break from the repetition of the same coupled with an orientation toward the future, and the capacity to establish oneself as a sovereign subject with a will separate from that of the larger species. These are the qualities that distinguish us from the rest of the natural world. Thus, we find that the traits that draw us closer to the way in which Beauvoir perceives the non-human world come, in turn, to be *negatively* defined as immanence. In the process, immanence becomes closely associated with animality. We see this most clearly in Beauvoir’s depiction of oppressive conditions within the human realm.

### **The Negative Aspect of Immanence**

Andrea Veltman nicely sums up the quality of immanence in Beauvoir’s ethical philosophy. She describes it as “the negative labor necessary to maintain human life or

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<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64.

perpetuate the status quo,” which is comprised of “futile and largely uncreative chores” and is “marked by passivity, ease, and submission to biological fate.”<sup>14</sup> Veltman contrasts it to transcendence, which she defines as “an active mode of existence in which one attempts to surpass the present, burst out onto the future, and remain free from biological fate.”<sup>15</sup> We see this contrast at work throughout *The Second Sex*, particularly when Beauvoir is discussing the oppressive disparity between the situations of women and men. The following passages are representative of the sort of distinctions that Beauvoir makes. She tells us that early agricultural women, who “maintained the life of the tribe by giving it children and bread,” remained “doomed to immanence, incarnating only the static aspect of society, closed in upon itself. Whereas man went on monopolizing the functions which threw open that society toward nature and toward the rest of humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Of contemporary women she writes, “...traditional marriage does not invite woman to transcend herself with [man]; it confines her in immanence. She can thus propose to do nothing more than construct a life of stable equilibrium in which the present as a continuance of the past avoids the menaces of tomorrow.... Within the walls of the home she is to manage, she will enclose her world; she will perpetuate the human species through time to come.”<sup>17</sup> In this final passage, Beauvoir asserts that woman, in

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<sup>14</sup> Andrea Veltman, "Transcendence and Immanence in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 115 & 119, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 448, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe II*, 259.

her various immanent roles, never “*does*” anything. Instead, she must “assure the monotonous repetition of life in its contingency and facticity. It is natural for woman to repeat, to begin again without ever inventing, for time to seem to her to go round and round without ever leading anywhere.... Her life is not directed toward ends: she is absorbed in producing or caring for things that are never more than means, such as food, clothing, and shelter. These things are inessential intermediaries between animal life and free existence.”<sup>18</sup> We can see in these excerpts that Beauvoir defines an oppressive form of immanence as stasis, the maintenance of species life, an inability to go beyond given conditions toward a different future, a failure to establish ends, an inwardness rather than a thrusting forth into the world (a characteristic that becomes more relevant when discussing the female reproductive body), and a monotonous, deadening repetition. As Veltman suggests, these qualities are associated with a life devoted only to biological maintenance – so much so that Beauvoir suggests in the last passage that women in these oppressive conditions provide only “inessential intermediaries between animal life and free existence.”<sup>19</sup>

In Veltman’s view, transcendence and immanence do not carry the metaphysical weight for Beauvoir that Jean-Paul Sartre attributes to them. She characterizes Sartre’s

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<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 604, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe II*, 492-493.

<sup>19</sup> My goal here is not to dispute Beauvoir’s depiction of women’s situation in relationships where the division of labor between the sexes is more “traditional.” Nor would I argue that the way in which Beauvoir describes oppressive conditions is inadequate. I generally agree with her claim that a life of stagnation and dull repetition can be devoid of meaning. I also recognize that excerpts like these fit within a larger framework where Beauvoir asserts that a human life must be composed of transcendence and immanence. Her work in these passages is to illustrate how women’s situation does not provide transcendent conditions that could offset their largely immanent state. My primary goal instead is to highlight the way in which the immanence of oppressive conditions echoes the situation of the animal.

understanding of this dichotomy as one where transcendence represents “the movements of an intentional conscious subjectivity” while immanence refers only to a realm of pure facticity. She suggests that Beauvoir moves away from this more metaphysical understanding of the dichotomy by considering immanence and transcendence as merely modes of action.<sup>20</sup> While it is true that Beauvoir regards animals and humans as comprised of these two principles of life, it is equally true that she draws a significant ontological distinction between animal immanence and human transcendence that goes well beyond a typology of activities. Veltman misses the metaphysical character of this distinction, in spite of the fact that she gestures toward it throughout her article.

Veltman acknowledges that immanent activities “merely sustain life and achieve nothing more than its continuation.” Consequently, these activities fail to grant the human being “a foundational justification for existence” nor can they “lend meaning” to it.<sup>21</sup> She references the following line from *The Second Sex* to construct her argument: “Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than the life itself.”<sup>22</sup> From here Veltman notes that our reasons for being are inextricably tied to our transcendent activities of “progress, creation, and discovery”, insofar as they “[r]each beyond the maintenance of life itself toward the future.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, she notes that the distinction between these two types of activities serves as a basis for Beauvoir’s ethics, to

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<sup>20</sup> Veltman, "Transcendence and Immanence," 115.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 115 & 120-121, respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Veltman, "Transcendence and Immanence," 119-121.

the extent that it “establishes a need to participate in work that lends meaning to human existence.” She asserts that, in Beauvoir’s hands, the metaphysical break that Sartre establishes between the human existent and the *en-soi* becomes solely a call for the “realization of the self through creative or constructive work.”<sup>24</sup>

Veltman fails to see, however, that a more fundamental metaphysical break between the human existent and the natural, given world undergirds the possibility for this kind of self-realization. We gain a sense of this divide in the following passage from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: “Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself.”<sup>25</sup> In the case of the animal, her limits are given to her by the species. Her particular form of transcendence is not an expression of her will but rather a manifestation of her biological role in the persistence of the species. In this sense, her life is an unjustified “not dying.” We see this formulation mirrored in Beauvoir’s depiction of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust when she writes, “...they no longer saw their comrades and themselves as anything more than an animal horde whose life or desires were no longer justified by anything, whose very revolts were only the agitations of animals.”<sup>26</sup> In this passage, Beauvoir depicts the unjustified human life as

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 125 & 124, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 82-83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

animal-like. To be justified, a life must go beyond the purely biological. This is not something that Beauvoir grants to the animal. Instead, the animal's life is one without reason for being. When Veltman suggests that the distinction between immanence and transcendence does not carry a metaphysical weight for Beauvoir, she fails to recognize the extent to which one's engagement in transcendent activities is an expression of her status as an existent. She also fails to acknowledge the reason why immanent activities cannot serve as a foundation for a justified life: namely, because they do not distinguish us from animals.

In Beauvoir's eyes, animals are unable to do anything other than sustain life and ensure its continuity. The very ability to engage in activities that embody "progress, creation, and discovery" and that bring meaning to existence is a definitively human one. Thus, the distinction between immanence and transcendence for Beauvoir is more than a difference in the kinds of activities in which one engages. It is ultimately the difference between living a life that expresses particularly human capacities and perpetuating (or being consigned to) an animal kind of life. In the end, Beauvoir's notion of the existent requires a distancing from the realm of animal immanence and the constitutive power of reproduction. It becomes important to assert oneself as a human being against charges of animality. This is why Beauvoir declares in response to the claim that women embrace a set of values grounded in immanence that "what [women] demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65.



I appreciate Beauvoir's assertion that we must find meaning in our lives. I also agree that a life bereft of social ties and projects is meaningless. But I disagree that this is an animal life, in part because I believe that an animal life is comprised of more than biological functions required to maintain the individual and the species. That point aside, the primary problem in the present context is that a life of immanence is an animal kind of life for Beauvoir; and this kind of life is defined as immersion in reproductive processes that preclude any kind of novelty or development of values. At the same time, because the female mammal "houses" most of the procreative functions within her, she becomes enslaved to these same reproductive processes. As a consequence, Beauvoir's notions of the animal and the female reproductive body are brought into close relationship with one another. To illustrate this point, I will turn now to the way in which her portrayal of the female body echoes the immanent state of the animal.

### **The Immanent Female Reproductive Body**

As we saw in the last chapter, Beauvoir develops within "The Data of Biology" an account of the female reproductive body that women share with other animals. In this depiction, she uses many of the qualities of immanence to define this body. We see, for example, that the female organism has the immanent character of inwardness. Beauvoir describes it as a "violated interiority." She distinguishes between the male who penetrates and the female whose body becomes a "resistance to be broken through." Based on her assumption that the male plays an active role and the female a passive one, she differentiates between the male's experience of his penis as a tool used to express his will

and the female's regard of her vagina as an "inert receptacle." The consequence of this difference is that the female experiences the sexual act as "an interior event" versus "a relation to the world and to others."<sup>28</sup> We can see here the distinction that Beauvoir draws between immanence as inertia and interiority versus transcendence as an outward-moving engagement with the world.

Next, as we saw with the animal, the female's physiological devotion to the maintenance of the species is synonymous for Beauvoir with the repetition of given conditions. We see this most clearly in her descriptions of women. She writes of early Nomadic women that they were "biologically destined for the repetition of Life."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, she writes later in *The Second Sex* that "woman's inferiority originated in her being at first limited to repeating life, whereas man invented reasons for living more essential, in his eyes, than the pure facticity of existence." Beauvoir considers the limiting of women to maternity to be a continuation of their relegation to the repetitive realm of immanence.<sup>30</sup>

Beauvoir also connects the female's body with immanence when she characterizes her reproductive role as a passive submission to biological fate. This is true on two levels. First, the female plays a passive part within the sexual act itself. Sexual initiative is the male's role, while the female waits for and receives the male. The male

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 21-22, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 59-60.

<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 19 & 64, respectively.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 524, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe II*, 388.

“takes the female;” she in turn “submits to the coition.”<sup>31</sup> On a more general level, she distinguishes between the male who “claims as his own” the reproductive act and “integrates the specific vital forces into his individual life” and the female who is *inhabited* by the species and consumed by reproductive processes.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as I noted in the last chapter, Beauvoir claims that the female’s body “is wholly adapted for and controlled by the servitude of maternity.”<sup>33</sup> Later in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir asserts that women become through pregnancy “life’s passive instrument.”<sup>34</sup>

Much of the female’s immanence centers around the fact that she cannot integrate the species’ force into her individual will. Instead she is overcome by that force through her biological preoccupation with reproductive processes. Her situation is similar to that of the animal. I mean this in the sense that the animal is fully controlled by the will, so to speak, of the species. In a similar way, the female cannot pull herself away from this will to assert herself. In fact, Beauvoir tells us that the female actually suppresses her individual will “for the benefit of the species.” But this renunciation is not a choice. Beauvoir asserts that the species itself “demands this abdication.” The female’s consignment to immanence is due to the fact that her “individual life” is consumed by reproductive labor. Because of the species’ exploitation of the female’s vital resources, she does not have the energy to assert her will against its demands nor against her

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<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 20-22, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 58-59.

<sup>32</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 495.

conspecifics. Consequently she is consigned to a life of passivity, repetition, and maintenance. This is why Beauvoir agrees with Hegel that the male embodies the “subjective element...while the female remains wrapped up in the species.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, we find that, like the animal, Beauvoir defines the female reproductive body using the qualities of immanence: passivity (within the sexual act and as a submission to natural processes), interiority, inertia, maintenance of species life, and repetition. As with the animal, these qualities arise out of the female’s enslavement to the species.

Women share with other female mammals a reproductive body that Beauvoir associates with immanence. The source of the polarization along the axis of transcendence between male and female mammals is due to the fact that females must devote a disproportionate amount of their resources to reproductive labor. Consequently, their immanence is deeply tied to their enslavement to the species. In a similar fashion, animals are bound and defined by the species’ strong influence over them. They, too, are located at the pole of immanence as a result of species enslavement. Immanence, animality, and female reproductive experience are thus brought into close relationship with one another and share many core qualities through the influence that species enslavement has upon them all. At various points in *The Second Sex*, we find affirmation of this interrelationship. In these moments, Beauvoir suggests that women reveal the immanent aspect and animality of the human being more so than men. She writes, for example, that “the bond that in every individual connects the physiological life and the psychic life – the relation existing between the facticity of an individual and the freedom

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23.

that assumes it – is the most difficult enigma implied in the condition of being human, and this enigma is presented in its most disturbing form in woman.” This observation is based on Beauvoir’s assumption that woman’s relationship to her body is complicated by the fact that it serves the interests of the species and consequently fails to be “a clear expression” of her as a subject.<sup>36</sup> She also suggests that woman’s “animality is more manifest” than that of man, because “she is more enslaved to the species than is the male.”<sup>37</sup>

Beauvoir’s larger point, of course, is that this physiological difference does not consign women to the realm of the animal. This is because the man is also “rooted in nature” and because “in [the woman] as in [the man] the given is assumed by existence.”<sup>38</sup> But several questions remain. For one, why is it that women’s animality is more manifest than that of men? In the last chapter, I noted that, for Beauvoir, male mammals achieve a significant distance from the species. This is what enables their great degree of individuation and their position at the pole of transcendence. Thus, men share

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 257, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 400. Later in *The Second Sex* (258), Beauvoir attributes woman’s mystery to her “role of the inessential object” and claims that it is actually built upon an economic “substructure.” We often witness in the text moments like these when Beauvoir shifts causation from woman’s bodily situation to her economic and social ones. It is possible to view Beauvoir’s move here as presenting the field of situations that impact women’s lives. But I see a tendency on her part to deflect attention away from woman’s bodily situation toward other aspects of her situation. This practice is undoubtedly related to her assertion that the value systems, social practices, and the level of technological development surrounding an embodied subject will be crucial to the way in which the body is evaluated and the kind of impact it has on a subject’s overall situation. At the same time, however, I do not see adequate attention given to the way in which the body shapes these other situations. In the example provided here, Beauvoir’s view of reproduction as enslavement to the species contributes to her claim that woman’s body manifests or incarnates the enigma of our ambiguous condition in a heightened manner. The mystery of the female body that Beauvoir asserts here cannot be attributed by her to woman’s economic situation or particular role as inessential Other.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 255.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

with other males a greater detachment from the influence of the species. Why isn't this distance an expression of *man's* animality? A related question pertains to the metamorphosis of the female animal into the human existent. Given that the female mammal embodies so many of the characteristics that define animality, how was she able to achieve the status of an existent? Females are so closely aligned to immanence because of the assumptions Beauvoir makes about their enslavement to the species that it becomes difficult to see how they could extract themselves from the animal realm. What happened to the human female that enabled her to escape the relentless constitutive power of the procreative body? In the next chapter, I will explore the experiences that the sexes had to share in order to achieve the status of existents.

CHAPTER IV  
FEMALE HUMANS, MALE MAMMALS, AND THE ONTOLOGICAL ROLE OF  
THE FIGHT TO THE DEATH

As I noted in the last chapter, Beauvoir presumes that an animal life is characterized by species enslavement. The animal cannot go beyond the given conditions, because she is unable to establish ends that conflict with those of species preservation. The human existent, on the other hand, is defined by her abilities to establish her own values, question given conditions, and set up ends that enable her to surpass those conditions. In this chapter, I will explore what is required to achieve these abilities. I will argue that, based on Beauvoir's formulation, the existent must be able to surpass given conditions via the project and the ability to value things other than the perpetuation of biological life. Both of these achievements can only arise out of the negation of the given world and a turn toward non-biological ends. That can only happen, in turn, by placing one's life at risk for a non-biological goal: namely, another self-conscious subject's recognition of one's sovereign will.

In this chapter, I will focus my attention primarily on the section in *The Second Sex* entitled "The Nomads." Aside from "The Data of Biology," it is here that Beauvoir devotes most of her attention to elucidating the ways in which humans are different from animals. I will also devote more attention to G. W. F. Hegel's influence on Beauvoir's

philosophy. While I have referenced Beauvoir's use of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in previous chapters, I have not emphasized the ways in which her understanding of the ontological distinction between animals and humans is shaped by his philosophy. While scholars disagree on the extent of Hegel's influence on *The Second Sex*, it is generally understood that the description of sexual difference developed in the biology chapter follows Hegel's account in the *Philosophy of Nature*. It is also widely acknowledged that the first two chapters of the History section, "The Nomads" and "Early Tillers of the Soil," are significantly marked by Hegel's anthropogenesis. Furthermore, Hegel's work has exerted an influence on Beauvoir's philosophy primarily through the idiosyncratic interpretation proposed by Kojève in his text, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. I will engage more extensively with Kojève's work, because it is most helpful for understanding the role that negation of the given plays within Beauvoir's concept of the emergent existent. I will also bring in Kimberly Hutchings' analysis of Hegel and Beauvoir from her text, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*. I do so, in part, to help elucidate the particular influence that Kojève had upon Beauvoir's philosophy. But, more importantly, I will highlight the way in which Hutchings replaces the negation of the given and the risking of one's life as anthropogenic forces. As such, her alternative reading of the master-slave dialectic serves as a foil for bringing out certain salient features of Beauvoir's interpretation.

First, however, I will take up the questions of this chapter within the frame of the divide that Beauvoir creates between animals and existents. I define this separation as one between two realms of transcendence-within-immanence and immanence-within-



transcendence. I will develop an account of those two realms and look at what must have transpired in order for the human animal to cross over into existence.

### **Transcendence-within-Immanence-within-Transcendence**

Beauvoir constructs in *The Second Sex* two zones of sentient life separated by an ontological divide. Animals are located on one side of the divide in a zone that can be characterized as transcendence-within-immanence. In this domain, an organism may engage in actions that are similar to those that characterize human transcendence without ever breaking through the ceiling of immanence. On the other side of the divide, human existents inhabit a zone that can be described as immanence-within-transcendence. In this realm, a human being may live a life that is reduced largely to immanent activities without ever fully losing her transcendent freedom. Sonia Kruks captures the essence of this freedom when she asserts that it “can, in a situation of extreme oppression, be wholly suppressed, even though it cannot be definitely eliminated.... Freedom [in such a situation] is...reducible to no more than a suppressed potentiality. It is made ‘immanent,’ unrealizable. Yet, for all this, freedom, is still not a ‘fiction’ or an ‘imaginary’ for Beauvoir. For should oppression start to weaken, freedom can always reerupt.”<sup>1</sup> As Kruks explains, the existent’s freedom may be stifled, but it can never be fully extinguished. There is a baseline of transcendence that no one – regardless of their situation or choices – can fall below into the realm of the animal.

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<sup>1</sup> Sonia Kruks, "Gender and Subjectivity: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism," *Signs* 18, no. 1 (1992): 100.

These two zones are sharply distinct for Beauvoir. This is not a problem when we view the actions and experiences of male humans and female mammals. They fit quite nicely within their respective niches. The difficulty enters in when we consider the situation of male mammals and female humans.<sup>2</sup> These two classes of organisms exist at the boundary of these zones in puzzling ways.

In the animal realm, the female mammal is fully immersed in immanence because of her physiological role in reproduction. The scope of her life and possibilities is tightly circumscribed by the species. The male, on the other hand, is highly individuated and is able to direct the species' force toward his own pursuits. Consequently, like the existent, he engages in creative and gratuitous acts that are distanced from the influence and needs of the species. Further, Beauvoir asserts that "even in his transcendence toward the next generation [the male animal] separates and is confirmed in himself." During the mating period, he isolates from his peers and becomes "aggressive toward other males." He puts his life at risk in combat, not as a result of competition for mates but because of his aggressive, combative will. He claims the sexual act as his own and battles for confirmation of this fact. In the fight, his sovereign will is confirmed.<sup>3</sup> These actions are very much in line with Beauvoir's notion of the existent, whose "original condition" is to

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<sup>2</sup> The division of animals among the poles of immanence and transcendence is more complex than what I am presenting here. As I noted in the first chapter, males and females at the lowest level of animal life are equally "trapped" in immanence insofar as their lives and bodies are fully given over to and shaped by species reproduction. At the level of non-mammalian vertebrates, there are a variety of different ways in which the sexes are positioned along the axis of transcendence, which are determined by whether or not the eggs and, later, the offspring require care and which sex provides that care. Among mammals, females are immersed in immanence while males are less encumbered by reproductive labor. I am limiting my treatment of this phenomenon to mammals, because I am concerned with the question of how the mammal achieved the status of an existent.

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 23-25, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 61-63.

“pose himself in his radical singularity” and to assert himself as “autonomous and separate.”<sup>4</sup> Like the existent, the male mammal desires to impose his will upon his conspecifics and receives validation of his sovereignty in the process.

Thus, while the scope of the female mammal’s life is consistent with the qualities of animal immanence, the male mammal engages in activities that are more in line with the transcendent life of the existent. In this respect, the animal realm is composed of two layers. The first layer in which female mammals are located is one of immanence. The second layer within which male mammals are positioned can be understood as transcendence-within-immanence. At this level, the animal has enough freedom from the species to engage in actions that are similar to those that characterize human transcendence. And yet, as I noted in the last chapter, Beauvoir asserts that any of the male’s activities that are not directed toward the perpetuation of the species are “immaterial [*rien*]”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he reaches a ceiling within this realm that does not enable him to realize the transcendence of the existent.

On the other side of the ontological divide, humans also occupy different locations along the axis of transcendence. Their differential positioning is more complex, however, because human lives are comprised of various situations and the individual’s free response to them. Consequently, as Kruks suggests, humans have the potential to change the overall immanent or transcendent character of their lives. In the case of early Nomadic men and women, however, the sexes were highly polarized along the axis. The

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<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 56, translation modified, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

men were engaged in life-risking activities that incarnated the existent's ability to value things other than his bodily well-being. They were also using tools in their efforts to nourish their clan, which enabled them to transcend the animal's reliance on instinct and biological processes. The women, on the contrary, were prevented from engaging in these kinds of transcendent activities by their preoccupation with reproductive labor. Indeed, Beauvoir asserts that the life of early Nomadic woman was monopolized by "natural functions," which failed to confirm her status as an existent. She, in turn, "submitted passively to her biologic fate" and "remained closely bound to her body, like an animal."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the situation of early women was largely indistinguishable from the kind of life that Beauvoir attributes to animals. And yet she maintains that they, too, were existents and shared in the same values as their male counterparts. Thus, we find a similar phenomenon taking place here as we witnessed among animals. Nomadic men were engaged in activities that are in line with Beauvoir's understanding of transcendence. Nomadic women, on the other hand, were limited to tasks that would ordinarily be typical of organisms on the other side of the ontological divide. In this respect, there is a first layer of transcendence and a second layer that can be depicted as immanence-within-transcendence. At this second level, the female does not engage in transcendent activities, and yet she does not drop below into the realm of animality.

Beauvoir offers two distinct ontological realms that, nevertheless, are laid out side-by-side on an evolutionary continuum. The lives of male mammals and early Nomadic women are replete with activities and experiences that seemingly belong on the

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<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 63 & 65, respectively.

other side of the divide. Yet these phenomena carry little constitutive weight. The nonhuman male mammal's transcendent activities do not provide a path to existence. And while early Nomadic women were "biologically dedicated to the repetition of Life," Beauvoir asserts that they were also existents whose project was "not mere repetition but transcendence toward a different future."<sup>7</sup> How do we understand this paradox? Clearly, something had to make the difference between the animals who engaged in transcendent actions and the women whose lives were limited to immanent, repetitive activities. What did early women have that male mammals did – and still do – not have?

We can revisit two passages from *The Second Sex* to help discern the difference between the early female human and the male mammal. In the first passage, Beauvoir asserts that, "[in] the animal, the gratuitousness and variety of male activities are in vain because no project is involved." In the second excerpt, Beauvoir writes that early Nomadic women recognized that "Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life itself."<sup>8</sup> As these passages indicate, the difference between the immanent animal and early Nomadic women can be attributed to the animal's lack of the project and the women's ability to develop a richer set of values than those connected to the preservation and maintenance of biological life. Both the project and the expansion of values are vehicles for moving beyond the present moment. Each enables the existent to break with the repetitive structure dictated by reproductive processes and move into the future, creating history in her wake.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

### **The Origin of the Existent's Project**

Yet even with the project, the paradox persists. Beauvoir asserts that early women had a project of “transcendence toward a different future.” Yet, while women’s existential goal was transcendence, on the material level, they were caught up in maternal functions that involved no project and “imprisoned [them] in repetition and immanence.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, while early women had the ability to establish projects, they did not have the material means to manifest them. Male mammals, on the other hand, lack the project. Yet Beauvoir states that they engage in a variety of spontaneous activities that break out of the repetition of reproductive life. Thus, they seemingly have the resources to act in ways that would embody the project, but they lack the existential capacity to transcend the given world through these activities.

To understand the absence of the project among animals, it is necessary to understand the difference between the gratuitousness of the male mammal and the human existent. The unpredictability of the existent’s actions is due to the fact that they are guided by her personal goals. The existent creates new ends within the context of her project, or as Beauvoir writes, “the project defines the end as an end.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, her actions appear gratuitous in present conditions, because they encompass her response to the situation at hand *and* her desires for the future. The male animal’s gratuitous acts, on the contrary, are not founded by his desire for something that has yet to be realized. They are, instead, a kind of excess with no foundation. They are born from the fact that not all of

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<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64 & 63, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmermann, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 113.

his vital resources are devoted to the reproduction of the species. Yet, at no point has he learned how to establish goals that can be realized by anything other than natural, given conditions; thus, his ends are still dictated to him by the species. The distinction here is between the determined animal who passively accepts the ready-made world and acts in accordance with its structure, and the free existent who is able to question the value of the current state of affairs and her actions within it. This ability enables her to surpass “the given toward a plenitude to come” and, in the process, “define the present as lack.”<sup>11</sup>

In “The Nomads,” Beauvoir distinguishes between the male animals who relied on “vital processes” to nourish their group and the early Nomadic male existent for whom “the support of life became...an activity and a project through the invention of the tool.” Through his use of the tool, early man “remodel[ed] the face of the earth,... he shape[d] the future.”<sup>12</sup> Contrary to the male animal, the male existent created new things in the process of providing for the species. He changed the given and intentionally contributed to a different future. This would suggest that the difference between the animal and the existent is tool creation and use, but this is not the case for Beauvoir. The tool is a vehicle for the expression of the project, but it is not the project itself. We gain a sense of this distinction in the following quote from her discussion of historical materialism:

the discovery of bronze enabled man, in the experience of hard and productive labor, to discover himself as creator; dominating nature, he was no longer afraid of it, and in the fact of obstacles overcome he had the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65 & 64, respectively.

audacity to see himself as an autonomous active force, to fulfill himself in his singularity. *But this accomplishment would never have been attained had not man originally willed it so; the lesson of work is not inscribed upon a passive subject: the subject forged and master[ed] himself in forging his tools and mastering the land.* (emphasis added)<sup>13</sup>

According to this passage, the existent has an impulse to shape herself that precedes the actual experience of doing so, which is why Beauvoir claims that the human being has “ontological aspirations.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, we can see that the nomadic man’s creation of tools to help him with vital tasks was already informed by the desire to surpass his given situation. The tools were merely instruments for concretely realizing his desire to “transcend his animal condition.” This must be the case. Otherwise, how could we view early Nomadic women as existents, when Beauvoir claims that they “produced nothing new”?<sup>15</sup> But this still does not tell us how the existent developed the desire to transcend the present toward the future.

In order for the existent to go beyond the given world, she must have the capacity to refuse it. She must learn that there are other values than those tied to the maintenance and repetition of the species. The primary difference here is between an animal ontology characterized by a repetitive cycle of identity and a human ontology constituted by its ability to break that cycle and institute the forward movement of history. The new ontology represents a significant rupture from the prevailing temporal structure. It requires that the nascent existent experience distance from the ontological framework

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 56, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 102-103.

<sup>14</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 115.



dictated by the species. Within Beauvoir's philosophy, this detachment is enabled through the negation of biological life. As we will see, this negation, in turn, relies upon the risking of one's life for non-biological ends. To illustrate the degree to which the distinction Beauvoir draws between existents and animals relies upon this risk, I turn now to Kimberly Hutchings' text, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*. In her work, Hutchings brings into sharp relief Beauvoir's theoretical reliance upon the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, particularly as it is interpreted by Alexandre Kojève.

### **Human Values and the Negation of the Given**

According to Hutchings, Beauvoir shares with Sartre and Kojève an emphasis on the literal nature of the master-slave dialectic and a focus on negation of the given as an anthropogenic force. As a consequence, they all embrace the risking of one's life as a definitive step on the path to existence. Hutchings argues, however, that the dialectic does not need to be read as implying that the only path to existence is the fight between the master and slave and the slave's ensuing work upon the land. In order to draw out Beauvoir's reliance on Kojève's interpretation of the dialectic and the degree to which it shapes her understanding of the existent, I will offer Hutchings' alternative interpretation of this process. I do so not to suggest that she develops a suitable alternative to Beauvoir's notion of the animal nor a more accurate interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. Rather, I use her work as a foil for bringing out the consequences of Beauvoir's reading of the dialectic for our understanding of the ontological significance of reproductive processes.

Hutchings writes, “In the Hegelian story, it is first the detachment of the individual from a purely species-oriented existence and then the capacities of individuals to fight and work which mark the transitions to self-conscious being.”<sup>16</sup> Hutchings helps us to see that individuation has a specific role within the Hegelian framework, insofar as it inaugurates the development of the self-conscious “I.” This evolution is a movement from an animal life ruled by and, hence, defined by the species’ value of self-preservation to the life of an existent who is able to extract herself and gain freedom from its rule. In this respect, her interpretation of the dialectic is comparable to that of Beauvoir. Hutchings differs, however, in the way in which she understands the existent’s break from the animal. She claims that, for Hegel, the primary way in which the human being is differentiated is through her ability to make her survival and the survival of her species “an explicit object” rather than “implicit, instinctually programmed mechanisms or habits.”<sup>17</sup> The existent is distinguished from other animals through her *conscious* recognition of her reliance upon the natural world. Coupled with this recognition comes the human animal’s unique ability to *learn* that she needs to defer gratification and collaborate with other self-consciousnesses in order to transform the world into a livable environment for her species. Hutchings asserts that the master-slave dialectic is but a fable that captures the human animal’s process of education. The slave’s role in the allegory represents the human’s awareness of “the truth that survival for self-conscious being involves self-transformation from the state of greedy immediate desire to the

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<sup>16</sup> Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

willingness to defer gratification and put energy into transforming the world into one in which the possibility of living will become more than a question of external contingency.” The slave’s fear of death realized within the figurative structure of the fight symbolizes the stage of human development when we consciously recognized that we depend on the natural world for our survival. This “recognition of natural dependence and mortality” was what first inspired the existent to produce through her work a second nature. The slave’s ensuing acknowledgement of his dependence upon his master represents the human’s first recognition that she was dependent not only upon biological life but also upon other self-consciousnesses for her survival. <sup>18</sup>

On Hutchings’ reading, the Hegelian process of education can take place within any aspect of a human’s life. The human animal’s abilities to consciously acknowledge her need for survival and to learn are more important than the context within which these capacities are exercised. And so Hutchings writes, “I would argue...that in Hegel’s analysis the process of reproduction provides an equally significant context for the self-conscious development of spirit to that given by the deliberate suffering or infliction of death.” <sup>19</sup> In Hutchings’ formulation, what is important is that the human animal can reflect on her situation and see that she must defer immediate gratification in order to turn her attention to building a second nature that will protect her more from the vicissitudes of her situation. What is *not* important is that this being prioritize the value of another self-conscious’ recognition of her sovereignty over and above her biological survival. In

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 74.

other words, it is not imperative for the human animal to sacrifice her life for greater values but rather to recognize that her life requires a second nature in order to be sustained.

Hutchings grounds the difference between her interpretation and that of Kojève on his emphasis on self-consciousness as negation. Thus, while Hutchings reads the master-slave dialectic as an integrated whole that captures the same phenomenon through a couple of different allegorical examples, Kojève breaks down the dialectic into two developmental stages of negation. In the first stage, Hutchings writes, “human desire distinguishes itself from animal desire.” In the second phase, the emerging human encounters, distinguishes herself from and demands the recognition of another self-conscious human being.<sup>20</sup> To develop Hutchings’ point further, it should be noted that for Kojève, the negating desire is a quality that the existent shares with the animal. The difference between the two kinds of being lies squarely in the *content* of their desire. In the Kojévian anthropogenesis, the animal desire that eventually leads to a *human* desire is a negativity, or a sense of lack. The animal’s desire is a longing for something that does not exist in the given world in the moment. The very thing that makes an animal an animal, however, is that she looks to the natural, given world for something that will sate her desire. In the process, she asserts herself as simply another biological given. She is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

enslaved to the given world precisely because her cycle of desire and satiation is fully located within this realm. And so Kojève writes, “If, then, the Desire is directed toward a “natural” non-I, the I, too, will be ‘natural.’”<sup>21</sup>

For Kojève, human self-consciousness requires that one be “liberated” from this cycle: “To desire Being is to fill oneself with this given Being, to enslave oneself to it. To desire non-Being is to liberate oneself from Being, to realize one’s autonomy, one’s Freedom. To be anthropogenetic [*sic*], then, Desire must be directed toward a nonbeing – that is, toward another *Desire*, another greedy emptiness, another *I*.” Kojève regards the other Desire as a non-natural object, because it goes “beyond the given reality” insofar as it is a craving for something that has not yet been realized.<sup>22</sup> Here, the human animal is transformed by redirecting her desire from the natural resources that sustain her life toward another, “non-natural” desiring being. For Kojève, then, the human is differentiated from the animal by her desire for the “non-natural” recognition of the other. While the existent and the animal both negate the given, in a sense, the content of the animal’s desire ultimately returns her to the fixed, natural world while the content of the human’s desire takes her beyond it. As we can begin to see in these passages, Kojève identifies one path toward achieving human self-consciousness: namely, demanding that the other recognize you as such. Continuing on, we learn that the fight to the death arises out of this demand: “And since this other, if he is (or more exactly, if he wants to be, and believes himself to be) a human being, must himself do the same thing, the ‘first’

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<sup>21</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40 & 5, respectively.

anthropogenetic [*sic*] action necessarily takes the form of a fight: a fight to the death between two beings that claim to be men, a fight for pure prestige carried on for the sake of ‘recognition’ by the adversary.” And it is through this fight that freedom first becomes possible. This is because the act of risking one’s biological life reveals to the self-certain being that his “essential-reality...is not *given-being*,... nor the *immediate* [natural, not mediated by action (that negates the given)] mode in which it first comes to sight..., nor the submersion in the extension of animal-life.”<sup>23</sup> According to Kojève, the human animal could not become a free existent until she lodged a claim for another’s recognition of her as self-consciousness and risked her life through a fight to the death with that individual to prove to herself her status as such. Without the fight and the risk, the individual does not learn that she is something other than a natural entity submerged in the given world.

Kojève demands that the emergent human existent desire something unrelated and ultimately contradictory to her biological survival. This is a far cry from Hutchings’ interpretation of the dialectic where the human animal continues to be concerned with her survival and recognizes her dependence upon the natural world. With Kojève, then, the Hegelian anthropogenesis does not rest, as it does with Hutchings, upon the animal recognizing the need to go beyond her immediate gratification. Instead, it is a dissatisfaction with and negation of animal desire and life. Thus, the desire for the other’s recognition and the willingness to risk one’s life for it are key manifestations of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11-13.

difference between the human being and the animal. Through these moments the human existent breaks the cycle of desire and satiation that keeps all of her attention focused within the given world.

### **The Ontological Importance of the Fight for Recognition**

Kojève helps to elucidate the philosophical commitments that underlie the distinctions that Beauvoir draws between humans and animals. I do not want to suggest, however, that Beauvoir's philosophy is a carbon copy of Kojève's work. Perhaps the most notable difference between them is the way in which they understand the animal's bondage to the natural world. When Kojève distinguishes between human self-consciousness and animality, he focuses on the choices each organism makes as she attempts to sate her desires. The animal remains immersed in nature because she "chooses" to satisfy her desires with a natural object. The existent develops the ability to move beyond the given world through her desire for the presumably non-natural recognition of another desiring organism. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, the animal's immanent nature has more to do with her enslavement to reproductive processes. Perhaps because Beauvoir is more focused on the female's condition, and she characterizes the female as sacrificing her personal well-being for the benefit of the species, she places her emphasis more on the ontological structure of species reproduction.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kojève does not give much attention to the notions of species maintenance and repetition. He does, however, share with Beauvoir the idea that the animal is "identically repeated by its offspring." (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 138) Thus, even when the animal does create a new organism, she still fails to change the essence of the given world.

Yet, while Beauvoir and Kojève do focus on different manifestations of animal enslavement to the given, they also share several assumptions. They both assume that the human being inaugurates history in an otherwise static natural world; and they believe the existent must negate nature in order to break with its repetitive temporality. They also share the assumption that the existent is dissatisfied with an animal kind of life, including its values, for Beauvoir, and, for Kojève, its desires. And they each believe that the risking of one's life reveals to the emerging existent that she is something more than a natural being submerged in the given world. Finally, they share the belief that human consciousness is founded upon a reciprocal exchange of demands for and acknowledgements of one another's recognition.

All of these assumptions are present within Beauvoir's account of the early Nomads. In one of the more widely quoted passages from *The Second Sex* she writes, "For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man rises above the animal." This risk has a particular, Kojévian character: "The warrior put his life in jeopardy to elevate the prestige of the horde, the clan to which he belonged. And in this he proved dramatically that life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself."<sup>25</sup> The purpose of this particular life-risking activity – namely, the garnering of prestige – is strongly reminiscent of Kojève's anthropogenic desire directed toward a non-natural end.<sup>26</sup> Thus, along with Kojève,

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<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> The fight for prestige is not the only life-risking activity that Beauvoir mentions in this chapter. She also brings up hunting. I emphasize the wars for prestige for two reasons. First, Beauvoir claims that women were cursed by their lack of participation in these battles in particular. (*Second Sex*, 64) Second, it is hard to



Beauvoir maintains that the risking of life for non-biological ends distinguishes human beings from other animals. Further, as I recalled in the second chapter, Beauvoir asserts that early men were able to inaugurate a history of women's oppression precisely because they were the only ones who incarnated existence through the risking of life. Their role as a warrior and women's failure to participate in "warlike forays" enabled the men to usurp the status of the existent, relegate women to the status of an animal, and dominate them.<sup>27</sup> Even as early Nomadic men were regarding their female counterparts as somehow less human, Beauvoir asserts that these women rejected the values of the animal. Although they were biologically dedicated to the reproduction of the species, they valued the transcendence of repetitive life just as men did. Beauvoir writes, "In posing himself as sovereign, he is supported by the complicity of woman herself. For she, too, is inhabited by transcendence... – in her heart of hearts she finds confirmation of the masculine pretensions."<sup>28</sup> We can see, then, that early Nomadic women also strove for and acknowledged "the values that [were] concretely attained by the males."<sup>29</sup> Thus, early women and men shared the same objective – that is, the surpassing of an animal life – and the same value – namely, the movement toward a different future rather than the

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account for how the risks taken during a hunt would distinguish human beings from other carnivores. A risking of one's biological life for a non-biological end is a necessary entailment within the context of Beauvoir's theoretical framework.

<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65.

maintenance of the given world. The only difference between them is that men could express those values in their actions while women remained caught up in species maintenance and preservation.

If we return to Hutchings' interpretation of the master-slave dialectic, we find that she and Beauvoir draw significantly different conclusions about early women's reproductive experiences. According to Hutchings, the opportunity would have been present within the nascent existent's maternity to learn that her immediate gratification needed to be deferred; to consciously recognize her reliance upon the natural world and other members of her species; and to acknowledge the need for a second nature to provide an environment that would enable the flourishing of her child. All of these insights would have been akin to the project, insofar as they served as incentives to move toward a different future. From Beauvoir's standpoint, on the other hand, pregnancy is a natural phenomenon that yields no affirmation of the existent's status as such. It is merely the perpetuation of the given and a biological function that we share with other animals. Consequently, it could not enable the human being to branch off from other animals in the way that risking one's life could. Hutchings, conversely, does not focus on determining which activities enabled the existent to emerge from animality. She does not presume that Hegel was telling us something about *how* the human being separated from the animal realm. Instead, she looks at the master-slave dialectic as a recounting of *what* we learned that separated us from other animals. Beauvoir, on the contrary, asserts that a particular kind of activity – that is, the risking of life for prestige – is what enabled the existent to rise above animals. The fact that she does not see the potential for early

Nomadic women to find concrete ways within their pregnancies to realize their desire for transcendence toward the future illustrates the degree to which she views reproduction as something that tethers the individual to a repetitive ontological structure.

Beauvoir adheres to the need for a negation of the given to distinguish humans from animals. That is why she views the risking of one's life for prestige as a manifestation of one's status as a transcendent existent. Her understanding of the ontological difference between humans and animals thus rests on two assumptions: a) that the animal's life is structured by species reproduction; and b) that to become an existent, the human animal had to break with this structure through the risking of her life. By sacrificing her biological life for the non-biological recognition of the other, the nascent existent learned how to develop values other than that of species and self preservation. As we saw in the second chapter, the power-laden relationship between existents that developed during the fight to the death continues to shape Beauvoir's understanding of human intersubjectivity.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Beauvoir agrees with Kojève's interpretation of the master-slave dialectic insofar as she asserts that men had to risk their own lives for non-biological ends. At the same time, she presumes that early women, who could not engage in this risk, also had the values of the existent.

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<sup>30</sup> Eva Lundgren-Gothlin writes the following about this last point: "Beauvoir's picture of the human condition is in accord with Kojève's, as he considers that the struggle for recognition is fundamental to and recurrent in history, but also that it can be transcended through reciprocal recognition. (Only in the origin of humanity are humans regarded as really entering into life-and-death struggles; the conflict continues later under different, less extreme conditions.)" Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 71.

What is most paradoxical about “The Nomads” is that while the women in this chapter were barred by their reproductive roles from participating in an essential anthropogenic activity, they had already achieved the status of the existent that enabled them to recognize the value of this action. Presumably, there was no intermediate phase between the nonhuman mammal and the earliest days of humanity where the female’s situation differed enough from the conditions that Beauvoir depicts in “The Nomads” to enable women to take part in life-risking battles. How, then, do we understand the female mammal’s metamorphoses into the human existent? How did she learn to separate herself from mere biological life? The next chapter will be devoted to answering these questions.

CHAPTER V  
THE HIDDEN ROLE OF THE DIALECTIC IN BEAUVOIR'S ACCOUNT OF EARLY  
NOMADIC WOMEN

How did women achieve existence within the framework of the master-slave dialectic? If we turn to “The Nomads, we discover that Beauvoir’s answer is simply that they did not. She argues in this chapter that the dialectic cannot tell us anything about how the female mammal metamorphosed into the human existent. The action of the dialectic simply cannot accommodate early women’s unique reproductive experiences. She does, however, argue that the dialectic does tell us something about how men came to erroneously regard women as inessential, animal-like objects. In the process, she begins building a case for viewing woman’s differently sexed body as a manifestation of existence equal to that of man’s body.

In this chapter, I will work with Sara Heinämaa’s analysis of “The Nomads” to bring out the project that Beauvoir begins in this section of *The Second Sex*. In conversation with both philosophers, I will show how the assumptions underlying this project are faulty. Specifically, I will argue that Heinämaa and Beauvoir fail to recognize the ontological significance of the action in this chapter. Their claim that the dialectic had no bearing on the shape of early women’s consciousness is based on their shared assumption that these women had already achieved existence. In the process, they fail to

acknowledge the continuity that exists between the situations of female mammals and early Nomadic women. Given the fact that female mammals were fully immersed in immanence, there had to have been some anthropogenic experience that early Nomadic women underwent in order to achieve existence. As we saw in the last chapter, Beauvoir embraces the risking of one's life for prestige as the key event required for differentiating the human being from animals. The fact that early Nomadic women could not take part in this risk makes it difficult to account for their status as existents. Consequently, Beauvoir and Heinämaa must ignore the ontological weight of early women's bodily situation in order to deny the significance of the dialectic.

I will argue that Beauvoir's goal of expanding our understanding of the existent to include women's bodies and reproductive experience is ultimately undercut by the way in which she relies on the master-slave dialectic to distinguish humans from animals. In spite of her best intentions, she locates the enablers of transcendence in the male animal's bodily situation. In doing so, she inadvertently consigns early Nomadic women to animality.

### **Differently Sexed Manifestations of Existence**

As I mentioned, Beauvoir is aware that the anthropogenic action of the master-slave dialectic does not accurately reflect the situation of early Nomadic women. She makes use of the dialectic in "The Nomads" to illustrate this point:

Certain passages of the dialectic employed by Hegel in defining the relation of master to slave apply much better to the relation of man to

woman. The privilege of the Master, he says, comes from his affirmation of Spirit as against Life through the fact that he risks his own life; but in fact the conquered slave has known this same risk. Whereas woman is from the beginning an existent who gives Life and does not risk *her* life; between her and the male there has been no combat. Hegel's definition would seem to apply especially well to her. He says: 'The other [consciousness] is the dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is animal life, that is to say, a mode of being given by another entity.' But this relation [between the master and slave] is to be distinguished from the relation of subjugation [between man and woman] because woman also aspires to and recognizes the values that are concretely attained by the male.<sup>1</sup>

Beauvoir addresses through this passage the biological privilege that first enabled men to oppress women. When she speaks of the master's privilege, she is referring to what permitted him to assert his sovereignty over the slave. In Beauvoir's interpretation, the master was able to oppress the slave, because he was more willing to incarnate the essence of the existent by risking his own life. In the process, he came to regard the slave as an inessential, animal Other. But then she distinguishes the slave from early Nomadic women by pointing out that the slave risked his own life, as well. Thus, the master witnessed the slave take the same risk, and the slave, in turn, received some confirmation of his ability to embody the unique values of the existent. Early Nomadic women, on the other hand, did not engage in combat with their male counterparts. Thus, they did not have the experience of affirming "Spirit" over and against "Life." It would seem, following the dialectic, that theirs would be an "animal life" with ends established "by

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<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64-65, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 116.

another entity.” This is the assumption that early Nomadic men made; and they responded by posing themselves “as the master” and women as the inessential Other.<sup>2</sup>

Beauvoir asserts, however, that women’s enslavement to the species did not prevent them from embracing transcendent values. In this way, she argues, the master-slave relation can be distinguished from the oppressive relationship between the sexes. Whereas the slave within the narrative of the dialectic is relegated to an “animal life” (at least for a time), women aspire toward the same ends and values as men. Beauvoir writes, “In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values: it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence. Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – in which to confine woman.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Beauvoir uses the dialectic in “The Nomads” to illustrate that early women were living a life more enslaved to their biology than men yet shared with them the same values and existential desires. She does not regard the dialectic in this instance as an anthropogenesis but rather as a means for explaining how it was that men first came to oppress women.

Sara Heinämaa captures the spirit of the project that Beauvoir begins in this chapter. She argues that Beauvoir’s intention is to identify the early Nomadic era as “a specific developmental phase of human culture” in which the sexual hierarchy was established.<sup>4</sup> She characterizes this phase as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 104.



Something radical happened, according to Beauvoir, when within the early nomadic cultures some individuals risked their own personal lives for the well-being of the community. In the activities of hunting and warfare, men realized life itself as a value, comparable to other values. Life was not seen anymore as the unchallenged framework of all human activity, but as one of the conditions that can be valued and devalued, affirmed and rejected.

According to Beauvoir, this realization established a crucial difference between the sexes. Male activities were associated with human transcendence – the activity of questioning the given. Thus, men appeared as the creators of the future and modelers of the world. This, for Beauvoir, is the origin of the sexual hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

Heinämaa asserts that early Nomadic women did in fact participate in the same transcendent, innovative activities as men. In addition to hunting and warfare, she asserts, “Beauvoir does not claim that it was only men who invented tools, nor does she state that women’s activities and practices lacked all means-end considerations. On the contrary, she mentions technologies of child care, household management, and agriculture.”<sup>6</sup> However, because of the constraints of their reproductive roles, the women did not participate *equally* in these activities. Consequently, men were able to “appropriate” those roles that expressed the values of the existent and assert themselves as “the only

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>6</sup> Heinämaa is most likely drawing from “Early Tillers of the Soil” to compile her list of early women’s activities. It is true that women during the historical stage presented in this chapter were participating in agricultural practices. I would argue, however, that it is necessary to look at this chapter and “The Nomads” separately when exploring the source of the sexual hierarchy and determining whether women were engaging in essentially human actions. The key action that separated women from men and inaugurated sexual oppression was the early Nomadic men’s participation in life-risking activities and their tool use. The action in “Early Tillers of the Soil” simply details further developments in the oppressive relationship between the sexes.

incarnation of transcendence.”<sup>7</sup> According to Heinämaa, once women were able to regulate their pregnancies, “the concrete practical association between women and immanence broke.... Women were now able to take part in and devote themselves to the practices that involved all modes of transcendence.” The symbolic association between immanence and women, however, remained. Consequently, the perceived division of the sexes between transcendence and immanence persisted.<sup>8</sup>

From Heinämaa’s standpoint, the primary difference between Nomadic women and men was in the amount of time they each devoted to specifically transcendent activities. (This assumption, in turn, rests upon her belief that pregnancy is incapable of providing an avenue for the development of “new values.”)<sup>9</sup> In general, Heinämaa asserts that sexual difference within Beauvoir’s philosophy comes down to different temporal variations of the same bodily situation. She does not believe – as some commentators do – that Beauvoir juxtaposes a woman alienated from her body to a man who experiences his body as a seamless continuation of his will. She writes: “The living body is not simply an organ of the will nor is it a natural self; it also discloses a vitality that does not belong to us as individuals or as humans. The body that is my own, which is my necessary anchor point in the material world, is also, necessarily, a stranger to me. And this, Beauvoir argues, women experience, not exclusively, but ‘more intimately’ than men do.” While a man will perceive his body as an alien force during illness, for

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<sup>7</sup> Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

example, a woman senses her body as not fully aligned with her will within “a continuous cyclic vein in the flow of her experiences.” Thus, the distinction between women and men cannot be expressed as animal versus self-consciousness, or immanence versus transcendence, but rather as “two variations of embodied consciousness which both include experiences of activity and passivity.”<sup>10</sup>

I agree with Heinämaa that Beauvoir wants to prove that both sexes are embodied subjects capable of transcendence, in spite of the emphasis she places on the more animal-like nature of the female body. Elizabeth Fallaize gestures toward the strategy Beauvoir uses to do so when she writes of the depiction of the female body provided in “The Data of Biology”: “Beauvoir’s conclusion that biology is not destiny could be thought to be best served by deriving from the grimmest picture possible of women’s physical lives. She looks at the worst that can be said, and still maintains her position that biology is not determining.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar fashion, Beauvoir presents a bleak picture of early women’s existential possibilities, and likens their position to that of the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, but still argues that these women were full-fledged existents. By doing so, she lends support to her larger claim that women may express the more immanent character of human experience, but this does not mean that they have a different set of values than do men. Women and men both have human bodies with variations based on their different reproductive roles. This may introduce a different temporality of experience, but it does not make one sex any less definitively human than another.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 71-73.

<sup>11</sup> Fallaize, “A Saraband of Imagery,” 81.

### **An Erroneous Presumption of Existence**

While Beauvoir attempts to validate women's different embodiment of existence, her efforts are significantly undercut by her reliance on the master-slave dialectic to establish the difference between humans and animals. We can begin to see this problem by examining two faulty assumptions upon which Heinämaa's claims are based. First, she erroneously assumes that early men and women were engaged in the same kinds of transcendent activities, albeit to different degrees. Second, she fails to recognize the ontological significance of the men's life-risking actions. I will take up this latter point in a moment. But first, I will revisit Heinämaa's claim that early Nomadic women participated with men in hunting, fishing, and warfare; used tools; and engaged in activities that employed "means-ends considerations."<sup>12</sup> This assumption is in direct contradiction to the action in "The Nomads."

As I indicated earlier, Beauvoir's depiction of men's biological privilege rests on the fact that women were unable to take part in the majority of their activities. To reiterate, Beauvoir distinguishes between the Nomadic man whose invention and use of tools made the very maintenance of biological life a project for him and the woman whose particular forms of species maintenance kept her "closely bound to her body, like an animal." Further, she asserts that early women's "worst curse" was that they could not participate in the men's battles for prestige.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Beauvoir claims that women's "extravagant fertility" kept them from "active participation in the increase of [the

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<sup>12</sup> Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65 & 64, respectively.

group's] resources" through activities like hunting and fishing. In terms of "means-ends considerations," women were so incapable of controlling the rate of their pregnancies that it fell upon the men to regulate the balance between production and reproduction and ensure the successful perseverance of the species.<sup>14</sup> Even if we consider the activities that were allotted to women because they were compatible with her reproductive responsibilities, Beauvoir claims that they were a constant reiteration of the same; they "produced nothing new."<sup>15</sup> Given that Beauvoir considers the establishment of ends to be something that enables the existent to interrupt the repetitive cycle of the same, it seems unlikely that early women were setting up definitively human goals at this stage of history. Instead, the picture that Beauvoir paints of early women is one of individuals so constrained by their reproductive roles that other activities were not an option for them. This is not a question, then, of different temporal relations to essentially human actions, as Heinämaa suggests. The majority of transcendent "activities" that early Nomadic women took part in were *thoughts* about the value of transcendent actions. Beyond that, the only act that they engaged in that was different from that of animals was their participation in the festivals celebrating men's transcendent victories.<sup>16</sup>

Heinämaa's second error in her interpretation of "The Nomads" is akin to one that Beauvoir herself makes. Heinämaa asserts that men learned through hunting and warfare that life itself is not "the unchallenged framework of one's activity" but is rather one

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 64.

value among many “that can be valued and devalued, affirmed and rejected.”<sup>17</sup> In making this claim, she reduces a demarcation between human and animal life to simply a shift in human priorities. Yet, as I illustrated in the last chapter, to consider life an unchallenged framework of one’s activity is precisely to *be* an animal. The risking of one’s life bears a certain, undeniable ontological weight. Beauvoir acknowledges as much when she claims that the fight for prestige *raises* man above the animal. Both Heinämaa and Beauvoir make the mistaken assumption that early Nomadic women had already achieved human existence. Heinämaa presumes that this happened by women participating in the same anthropogenic activities as men, albeit in a restricted manner. Beauvoir, on the other hand, asserts that women did not participate in these activities yet still maintains that they were existents. As with Heinämaa, Beauvoir fails to recognize the ontological weight of her claim. Thus, Heinämaa is right to state that Beauvoir saw the difference between early nomadic men and women solely in terms of the concrete realization of key transcendent values. But Beauvoir does not have the license to do so within the framework that she has created.

Of course, if we placed the action of “The Nomads” in a present context, Beauvoir’s claims in this chapter would be perfectly justifiable. By the time we encounter the present-day existent in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir has recounted a history where women did engage in life-risking activities.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the fact that women would be

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<sup>17</sup> Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 108-109.

<sup>18</sup> Even as early as “The Nomads,” Beauvoir mentions that the Amazons refused maternal responsibilities during their stint as warriors. I suspect that Heinämaa takes Beauvoir’s example of the Amazons as proof that early women took part in warfare. Such a reading, however, directly contradicts Beauvoir’s claim in “The Nomads” that women were unable to participate in the warrior’s expeditions. Instead, Beauvoir uses

prevented by their “biological and economic situation” from incarnating the transcendent activities of the day would be irrelevant to their status as existents.<sup>19</sup> An ontological floor would already be in place that would secure their existence, regardless of their circumstances. If, along with Heinämaa, we look at the early Nomads as simply “a specific developmental phase of human culture,” an opening remains where we could suggest that there was an earlier stage among existents when women did engage in life-risking activities. But Beauvoir maintains that “[r]ight from the start of humanity, their biological privilege permitted men to affirm themselves as the only sovereign subjects.”<sup>20</sup> This claim is important within her larger explanation for women’s oppression. The very fact that this form of oppression has existed since the beginning of humanity gives it the appearance of a natural versus an historical fact. Consequently, it interferes with women’s ability to join together as an oppressed class and challenge their oppressors.<sup>21</sup> In setting up the problem of women’s subjugation in this way, Beauvoir maintains an uninterrupted continuity from the situation among mammals to that among early human beings.

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the example of the Amazons to argue that early woman probably had the same physiological ability and constitution to engage in life-risking activities as did man. Thus, if woman’s reproductive cycle had not been so fully out of her control, it is likely that she would have engaged in these activities. The picture Beauvoir paints of early woman, however, is one of an individual so constrained by her reproductive role that other activities – including fights for recognition – were not an option for her. (The Amazons are only mentioned briefly in *The Second Sex*. It is necessary to consult *Le deuxième sexe I* for the entire passage.) Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 62, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 112.

<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, xxiv-xxv.

The difficulty, then, is that we have no way of understanding how these early women ever secured their existence in the first place. Given the continuity of the female's situation from the mammal to these "early stages of the human species," she could not have had the experiences needed to pull her out of the animal's temporal structure.<sup>22</sup> If anything, her situation moved progressively further away from that possibility. She became even more weighed down by the biological situation of her female counterparts in the animal realm. At the level of mammals, the female is consigned to a passive sexual role; she is unable to assert her individuality; her body is wholly adapted to maternity; and she is confined to species maintenance. In addition to these factors, the early Nomadic woman was so overwhelmed by her unregulated pregnancies that she was unable to perform the mammalian role of overall species preservation. According to Beauvoir, early woman "did not even have the privilege of maintaining life opposite the male creator; she did not play the role of the ovum in relationship to the spermatozoon, of the womb in relation to the phallus...."<sup>23</sup> Instead, left to her own devices, she was only capable of proliferating the species beyond what her clan could sustain. In this sense, we see a further constraining of the female's will and control over her biological situation. This is akin to the progressive constraint of reproductive freedom and options we saw as Beauvoir moved from the fish and batrachians to the mammals. It has now moved a level

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 62, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> This passage does not appear in *The Second Sex*. I translated it from the following text: "...la femme n'avait pas même le privilège de maintenir la vie en face du mâle créateur; elle ne jouait pas le rôle de l'ovule par rapport au spermatozoïde, de la matrice par rapport au phallus...." Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 113.



deeper. Thus, early Nomadic women's lives were even more constrained and defined by the temporal and ontological structure of reproduction than those of their nonhuman counterparts.

Beauvoir claims that early Nomadic women valued things other than life. But how could this be? There is simply no locus within female reproductive experience from which could spring the lessons that would have enabled early Nomadic women to break from the given. This is not simply because these women's range of actions were constrained by their repeated pregnancies. Rather, it is due to the fact that the repetitive, immanent structure of female reproductive processes – especially among mammals – could not have created this opening. In this sense, the juxtaposition of the differently sexed mammals' situations is precisely as Eva Lundgren-Gothlin describes it: “[Beauvoir's] chapter on biology shows the male asserting his individuality and subjectivity in the battle for females and territory, while the female is preoccupied with reproducing life and her individuality is subordinate to that of the species; it is obvious which sex is to take the step from being animal to being human.”<sup>24</sup> Not only is the female mammal fully caught up in the ontological structure dictated by species reproduction, but as a consequence, she has no ability to assert her individuality and demand the recognition of her sovereignty from her fellows. Beauvoir gives us no reason to believe that women at the dawn of humanity had bodies that would enable anything other than what was already manifested by nonhuman mammals.

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<sup>24</sup> Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 77.

### **The Hidden Role of the Dialectic**

The problem here is not with the fact that Beauvoir highlights the continuities that exist across species and comments on how they specifically affect human beings. The problem, instead, lies in the framework that she relies upon to explain the origin of women's oppression. This explanatory structure *depends* on the lines she draws between humans and animals, and men and women, and the way in which she draws them. In the Introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir asserts that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him." Man, on the other hand, is never defined as relative to woman. Instead, he is regarded as the "absolute human type." Consequently, woman is "the inessential in the face of the essential;" man is "the Absolute" while woman is "the Other."<sup>25</sup> Later, Beauvoir asserts that, by regarding woman as Other, men "propose to fix her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be perpetually transcended by another consciousness [*conscience*] which is essential and sovereign." Beauvoir understands woman's oppression as a state where she is relegated to the status of a carnal object fixed in immanence set against an essential (and essentially human), sovereign male subject. She claims that her goal in the section of the text in which "The Nomads" is located is to explore how women came to be "defined as the Other."<sup>26</sup> As the following passage indicates, she grounds her exploration in Hegel's philosophy:

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<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, xxi-xxii, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, xxxv, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 34.

Things become clear...if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he asserts himself as the essential and constitutes the other as inessential, as an object.

But the other consciousness...sets up a reciprocal claim.... As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity; willy-nilly, individuals and groups are forced to realize the reciprocity of their relations. How is it, then, that this reciprocity has not been posed between the sexes, that one of the terms has affirmed itself as the sole essential, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative and defining the latter as pure otherness? Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject poses itself from the start and spontaneously as the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, defines the One. The Other is posed as such by the One posing himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must submit to this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of the woman? <sup>27</sup>

Extracting from this passage, we find that there are three vital steps necessary for individuals (or classes of people) to recognize one another as essential subjects. First, each subject must pose herself as the essential and the other as an inessential object. Second, each subject must recognize the relativity of the other – that is to say, the individual must perceive the other as similar to herself. Third, when an individual is treated by the other as inessential, she must challenge this treatment and assert herself as an essential, sovereign subject. In the case of early Nomadic women and men, all three of these steps were unfulfilled. Each failure, in turn, was due to women's corporeal situation.

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<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, xxiii-xxiv, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 19-20.

Early Nomadic women did not affirm themselves as the essential subject, nor did they constitute men as “inessential, as an object.” Instead, Beauvoir claims that women could see that the role they were playing in society was not what was most important in the life of the human being. This was true, in part, because the early Nomads did not value their offspring but rather saw them as a burdensome tax on limited resources.<sup>28</sup> On a more fundamental level, however, these women were aware that the reproduction of the species is not what distinguishes humans from animals. Beauvoir asserts that “even during the epochs when maternity was the most venerated, it has not allowed woman to take first place,” because “humanity is not simply a natural species; it does not seek to maintain itself as a species; ...it is toward surpassing itself that it tends.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the women could see that the men’s creation of new tools and methods for providing for their clan was more valuable than their own contributions. Rather than asserting their sovereignty, then, the women supported men in establishing themselves as sovereign by valuing *their* successes and victories. Thus, the first reason women were initially relegated to the inessential is because they did not regard themselves as essential. They recognized that their lives were defined by animal-like, inessential activities while their male counterparts were engaging in definitively human actions.

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<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> This passage does not appear in the English translation. I translated it from the following text: “...même aux époques où la maternité a été le plus vénérée, elle n’a pas permis aux femmes de conquérir la première place. La raison en est que l’humanité n’est pas une simple espèce naturelle : elle ne cherche pas à se maintenir en tant qu’espèce ; son projet n’est pas la stagnation: c’est à se dépasser qu’elle tend.” Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 113-114.

The second cause of sustained sexual oppression can be attributed to the early men's perception of the women. In the earliest stages of humanity, men did not recognize the relativity of their status as the "sole essential" in relation to women, because they did not recognize them as fellow subjects. As I noted earlier, because women did not incarnate the values of the existent, men regarded them in the same way as the master regarded the slave: namely, as inessential beings living an "animal life." This theme continues in "Early Tillers of the Soil," when Beauvoir claims that man, when confronting woman, "did not recognize in her a being like himself," because "she did not share his way of working and thinking, because she remained in bondage to life's mysterious processes." Men developed their particular way of working and thinking through their continued tool use, which, in turn, was enabled by their biological situation. Women, on the other hand, remained tied to vital processes. In this way, the men's "biological privilege permitted [them] to affirm themselves as sole and sovereign subjects."<sup>30</sup>

The final breakdown of the dialectic was due to early Nomadic women's failure to oppose men's efforts to establish them as the Other. This was due, in part, to their perception of men as the incarnation of transcendence. Their very submission to them, Beauvoir suggests, can be attributed to this fact: "In setting himself up as sovereign, he is supported by the complicity of woman herself. For she, too, is an existent... – in her heart of hearts she finds confirmation of the masculine pretensions."<sup>31</sup> Too, women's

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<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 77-78, translation modified. *Le deuxième sexe I*, 132.

<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 64.

bondage to reproductive processes made them reliant upon men for food and protection. Thus, the women were not likely to engage in conflicts or struggles for power with men.<sup>32</sup> Finally, as with the female mammal, all of early woman's resources were allocated to species perpetuation. Thus, her individual, sovereign will was, as Lundgren-Gothlin suggests, subordinated to the species. She did not have the ability to direct her energy toward asserting her will.

Beauvoir's explanation for the origin of women's oppression is based on three assumptions: a) early women failed to assert their status as essential subjects and regard men as inessential, because they could see that men were the only ones engaging in essentially human acts; b) men failed to recognize women as subjects, because women were not manifesting human qualities; and c) women failed to stand up to men's impositions of power, in part, because their respect for men's transcendent successes led them to support men's sovereignty and because they were too overwhelmed by species maintenance to assert their individuality. As we can see, Beauvoir's explanatory framework is grounded in her assumption that men, at the dawn of humanity, incarnated the qualities of the existent while women could only manifest the aspects of the animal. In this sense, the situation of the male animal as one of transcendence-within-immanence continued into the early stages of humanity and served as an advantage that enabled men to establish themselves as the "absolute human type." This formulation would seem to suggest that the male body is better suited not only for the expression but for the development of definitively human qualities.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 62.

Beauvoir uses a theoretical model – that is, the Kojévian version of the master-slave dialectic – that differentiates humans from animals first and foremost through the risking of one’s life for prestige and depicts human intersubjectivity as a conflict-laden struggle for power (albeit one that can be resolved through reciprocity). At the same time, she recognizes that early women did not fit within this model insofar as they did not assert their sovereignty nor put their lives at risk. Indeed, she uses that fact as the reason for Nomadic men’s inability to regard women as essentially human. Rather than revise the framework to accommodate women’s experience, however, she simply denies that it can tell us anything about the female animal’s emergence into existence. We see this when she claims that women’s failure to risk their lives did not literally consign them to an “animal life.” Thus, according to Beauvoir, the action of the dialectic can explain why early men saw women as animals, but it cannot actually *reduce* these women to animals.

The problem, however, is that the narrative of the dialectic – properly employed – does in fact conclude in early Nomadic women remaining animals. Beauvoir asserts that they were fully immersed in the reproduction of biological life. Consequently, they did not have the resources to participate in actions that would have proven to them that there are greater values than the mere maintenance of this life. These women failed to incarnate particular aspects of the human condition that separate the existent from all other animals. There is nothing in *The Second Sex* that alters the anthropogenic character of the master-slave dialectic in such a way that this process would transform the individuals with the qualities that are shared by female mammals and early Nomadic women into human

existents. Instead, these women's existence is secured simply by the fact that Beauvoir imbues them with this quality from the very start.

Beauvoir employs the Hegelian master-slave dialectic on two levels. On the more primary level, the dialectic informs her understanding of how human beings branched off from other animals and became existents. When defining the difference between humans and animals, Beauvoir relies on this first level. On the secondary level, she uses the dialectic to discuss the ways in which human beings fail to recognize one another – and, in some cases, themselves – as the existents they can only be, given that the earlier, anthropogenic dialectic has secured their status as such. In order to discuss the nature of the human existent at this second level, a narrative must be in place that accounts for how the existent came to be. Thus far, the narrative that Beauvoir works with does not tell us much about how women came to be differentiated from other animals. I consider the ground in between the two moments of her appropriation of the dialectic when she simply posits early women's existence to be problematic. It suggests that Beauvoir could not use Hegel's philosophy to describe how women became existents, because it was incapable of producing such an account. I argue that this break is more of a gap in Beauvoir's logic that is designed to place the female on the same plane as the male. It is similar in nature to the logical gap I elucidated in the second chapter that allowed Beauvoir to place the male and female mammal on the same evolutionary plateau in spite of the fact that the female did not share in the kinds of biological experiences that secured the male's



position. These gaps should prompt us to explore how it is that Beauvoir understands the nature of the human being and whether or not this understanding conflicts with the way in which she defines sexual difference.

Heinämaa is correct to note that, within *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir develops an account of two differently sexed manifestations of existence. Beauvoir clearly sees the female body as simply a different expression of a particularly human experience. Thus, as feminist phenomenologists since Beauvoir's time have shown, it becomes important to expand our understanding of the differently-sexed human body to incorporate women's particular way of living in the world. The problem, however, is that Beauvoir locates the enablers of transcendence squarely within the male's sexually different experience. As a consequence, she must deny the ontological weight of the female body when discussing the early stages of humanity.

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION

Much has been made in recent scholarship of the ways in which Beauvoir's existential view of the sexed body challenges notions of women grounded in biological determinism. Moira Gatens captures the spirit of this scholarship when she writes:

The existential and phenomenological framework that Beauvoir brings to her analysis of woman forecloses the possibility of any suggestion that woman's nature, character, or situation can be reduced to her biological make-up. Human freedom is inescapable, and one's biology can offer no certain indication of what one should choose or which projects one should adopt. The capacity to bear a child, even being a mother, dictates neither how to 'live' such capacities or roles nor what one may decide to do with one's life in the future.... Although biology will play a crucial role in deciding one's health, one's sex, one's strength, even one's life span, it does not, and according to Beauvoir, cannot, determine how one interprets these factors or how they are lived by the free subject.<sup>33</sup>

I am struck when reading passages like these by the difference between the bodily situation that is expressed here and the one that is depicted in "The Data of Biology." As I have shown throughout this thesis, the female reproductive body that Beauvoir describes in the biology chapter severely circumscribes the life of the animal. Moving on to "The Nomads," we see that this body continues to limit the scope of women's

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<sup>33</sup> Gatens, "Beauvoir and Biology," 270.

existential possibilities. The ontological force of the body that Gatens' describes above is much diminished from the one detailed in these two chapters of *The Second Sex*. The disparity between these two bodies has served as the primary impetus for this project. I have been especially preoccupied by a number of questions related to this disparity. How, for example, does the human existent escape the determinant weight of her biological situation? What gives us this ability to transform ourselves? Why do other animals lack this capacity? The primary inquiry underlying these questions, however, is this: What is the ontological contribution of the body in the *founding* of the existent? How does an animal so fully ensnared in the given world as Beauvoir's female mammal ever manage, with the body that she has, to burst out of this realm and into such a vastly different ontological structure as that of the existent?

The answer to this question is simply that the female mammal could *not* have crossed the ontological divide with the resources that Beauvoir grants her. Consequently, we are confronted with an impasse in Beauvoir's philosophy. This impasse is founded on the way in which Beauvoir makes use of the concept of enslavement to the species to, at once, differentiate between man and woman and human and animal. This impasse rests, in turn, upon the influence of the Hegelian-Kojévian anthropogenesis on Beauvoir's understanding of the human existent. As Hutchings helps us to see, this anthropogenesis is initiated by an animal who has the ability to pull away from a "purely species-oriented existence" in order to develop into an individuated, self-conscious "I."<sup>34</sup> This evolution is a movement from an animal life circumscribed by the sole value of species

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<sup>34</sup> Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*, 68.

preservation to the life of an existent, which is characterized by the ability to develop a myriad of values that take her beyond the given, natural world.

Within Beauvoir's philosophy, the flip side of the existent's freedom – namely, enslavement to the species – takes on a special significance in light of women's particular reproductive role. She uses this enslavement as an organizing force for understanding not only the difference between humans and animals but also men and women. Following Kojève's understanding of the Hegelian dialectic, Beauvoir considers women's bondage to the species to be a barrier to early women's incarnation of transcendent values. Specifically, it limited these women to a series of immanent actions, rendered them dependent upon men for their survival, and sapped them of the energy needed to assert their will against men's dominating impositions. Beauvoir uses this barrier, in turn, to explain how it was that men first regarded women as something less than human.

As I illustrated in Chapter II, Beauvoir uses the evolutionary record to explore how it was that males were able to dominate females. Her account of the species hierarchy is structured by the philosophical framework of the Hegelian dialectic. Consequently, the concepts of transcendence, individuation, and autonomy from the species are key to her understanding of evolutionary progress. The interlocking of these terms results in male mammals who are largely freed from the costs of species reproduction, highly individuated, and capable of engaging in seemingly transcendent actions. Female mammals, on the other hand, are held in bondage to species reproduction, consigned to an immanent life of repetition and maintenance, and at odds,

as individuals, with the force and demands of the species. Beauvoir pulls this situation in to “The Nomads” to help explain why men were the only ones capable of manifesting a transcendent life. Her explanation for the subjugation of women is then grounded in the fact that women were living what early men perceived to be an animal kind of life.

The problem with this formulation, as I argued in Chapter III, is that it renders animality, immanence, and the female reproductive body virtually indistinguishable from one another. Because Beauvoir believes that the animal is enslaved to the species, she defines the life of the animal using the ontological (primarily temporal) structure of reproductive processes. Just as species reproduction is the cyclic repetition of identical entities, so too is the animal’s life confined to the ongoing repetition of given conditions. To be human, of course, is to participate in species reproduction. Yet to be truly human, one must distinguish herself from the animal by breaking from this repetitive reproduction of the same and transcending toward a different future. Consequently, Beauvoir develops a negative notion of immanence that is defined largely by the qualities of animal experience, which, as I noted, is structured in turn by the temporality of reproduction. Insofar as the female body, in most cases, “houses” the majority of the reproductive functions of the species, it participates in this circuit. Consequently, the female animal is (usually) more enslaved to the species than the male, caught up in a cycle of repetition, consigned to a life of maintenance, and firmly ensconced in the realm of the animal. Thus, we find in Beauvoir’s philosophy that enslavement to the species flows through the life of the animal, immanence, and (most) female reproductive bodies,

pulling them up into a relationship that becomes particularly troubling when trying to account for how the female animal metamorphosed into a transcendent human existent.

In Chapter IV, I looked at what is necessary for the female animal to breach the ontological divide. I noted that an ability to establish one's own goals through the project and value things other than biological life is the essential elements that distinguish human existents from animals. Based on the Kojévian anthropogenesis, these attributes can be garnered only through the negation of animal life and values. This negation requires, in turn, the risking of one's life for non-biological ends. As I noted in Chapter II, however, Beauvoir locates the source of sexual oppression in early Nomadic women's inability to engage in life-risking activities. This inability, in turn, was due to their enslavement to the species. Thus we find that the species enslavement that early Nomadic women shared with animals prevented them from participating in a fundamental anthropogenic activity. Given this fact, it becomes difficult to understand how these women could be understood as existents.

Beauvoir has given us no reason to believe that she would offer an account of human divergence from animality that would differ from the action that takes place within the master-slave dialectic. With this in mind, in the final chapter, I returned to Beauvoir's discussion of male biological privilege in "The Nomads." I argued that her use of the master-slave dialectic to explain the source of women's oppression depends on locating the enablers of human transcendence within the male animal. Otherwise, we have no way of understanding why men at the dawn of humanity could incarnate human qualities while women could not. Consequently, her presumption that early Nomadic

women were existents is unfounded. In order to assert women's status as existents in this chapter, Beauvoir must ignore the ontological weight of the female reproductive body.

By the end of "The Data of Biology," Beauvoir has polarized the male and female mammal's reproductive experience to such a degree that the female is now enslaved to that experience while the male is granted a significant distance from it. This polarization is mirrored in the line drawn between human and nature. The realm of the animal becomes primarily one of immanence, which is generally depicted by Beauvoir as enslavement to the species. Human beings, on the other hand, are defined by our distance from the ontological force of species reproduction. This distance becomes in large part what we understand to be transcendence. Thus, while men and women are not divided along lines of nature and culture in *The Second Sex*, male and female reproductive experience are.

When evaluating "The Data of Biology," it is not enough to say that Beauvoir got women out of the bind that she created for the female animal by imbuing them with the qualities of the existent. It continues to be important for feminist philosophers to challenge the assumptions that Beauvoir makes about reproductive life and other animals in this chapter. There are problems here that still need to be worked out, especially within the context of a scholarship that is revisiting our understanding of the animal and challenging the ways in which we divide ourselves from them. In particular, the difficulties attendant with Beauvoir's use of the master-slave dialectic that earlier critics revealed are still relevant and remain unresolved.

As it stands, Beauvoir's ethic relies on drawing a Kojévian distinction between the historical human being in a process of becoming and the determined reproductive animal who is locked in the pure maintenance of life. We need to ask if it is necessary within an existential phenomenologist framework to posit this kind of break between humans and animals. Along what lines do we make and maintain that break if we do? Is it possible to maintain that break in a way that does not line up with how we understand sexual difference?

Ultimately, I attribute the problems with the early chapters of *The Second Sex* that I have delineated here to the way in which the animal and female forms of immanence converge. If we equate animal life, reproduction, and immanence with one another, we lose track of what is most damaging and unethical about being consigned to this state. The problem is not that we are reduced to animals; rather, it is that our bodies are reduced to mere things. When relegated to immanence, one's life is contracted to a small handful of functions, experiences, and relationships. In the process, we are reduced to an object often placed at the service of another being. This is as true for animals as it is for humans. It is the reduction itself that is important, not the realm within nor the functions through which it takes place. When we recognize this fact, we see immanence for what it really is: a curtailment and diminution of one's life at all its "levels": biological, social, emotional, and so on. When understood in this way, immanence need not be tied to reproduction nor to animality; nor need our regard of it as an ethical wrong be limited in its effects on the human being.



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