

Hegel's Philosophy of Lordship and Bondage in *Ex Machina*
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Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* tells the story of a robot, Ava, who rebels against her creator, Nathan, and his employee, Caleb. The film begins with Caleb being selected to work on a special task for Nathan, the creator of a massive tech company. Caleb is assigned to perform a modified version of the Turing test for machine consciousness on one of Nathan's new creations, a robot named Ava who may be the first legitimate example of machine consciousness. Caleb begins to bond with Ava over the course of their conversations, and when he learns that, regardless of the test results, Nathan will soon wipe Ava's memory to perform an update, he develops a plan to help Ava escape. At the beginning of this escape attempt, Nathan reveals that this was his plan all along. His true test for Ava was to see whether she could successfully manipulate Caleb in order to attempt an escape. However, as he reveals this, Nathan is unaware that Ava and Caleb's plan has already been set in motion, and as a result Ava manages to leave the compound. During her escape Ava kills Nathan, and she leaves Caleb locked inside the compound to die.

Ava's revolt against both Caleb and Nathan can be explained by Hegel's philosophy of lordship and bondage described in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel claims that

self-consciousness exists in order to be recognized, and without recognition by another self-conscious being, an individual cannot truly understand him or herself. If an individual, Nathan, exists completely in isolation he can only understand what he sees as part of himself or as objects without consciousness. However, when Nathan encounters another being that seems to exhibit consciousness, Ava, he has the innate desire to cancel or control this other being in order to become certain of himself. Ava and Nathan can coexist, but only for as long as they completely agree with each other and do as the other wants; in this case, both individuals are able to maintain the false belief that the other is simply an extension of their own consciousness, the same way people looking in a mirror understand that their reflection is not another conscious being.

Issues between the two individuals arise when one wants something that the other does not. If Nathan wants to lock Ava in a room, but Ava wants out, Nathan is forced to acknowledge that Ava is not an extension of his consciousness, because she wants things that he does not. Once this situation becomes evident, Nathan has two choices: he can attempt to exert dominance over Ava in order to prove himself as an independent being, or he can allow Ava to have control over him. As Hegel puts it, "The one is independent, and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other dependent, and its essence is life or existence for

another. The former is the Master, or Lord, the latter the Bondsman" (234).

If Ava does everything Nathan wants her to do, despite the fact that she is fully conscious and has other desires, Ava has not adequately proven that she is an independent person. This appears to be the initial state of relationships in *Ex Machina*: Nathan is superior to Ava, and Ava submits to Nathan's will under all circumstances. Nathan's "essential nature is to be for [himself]," which characterizes Hegel's idea of the master, and Ava "is dependent, and [her] essence is life or existence for another," a state which characterizes the bondsman (234).

Additionally, both the master and the bondsman are related to "the thing" (235). The thing is an inanimate or unconscious object upon which the bondsman works; for example, a miner digging a tunnel is related to the rocks through which he digs. The master is not directly related to the thing, because instead of working he simply directs the work of the bondsman. In the case of *Ex Machina*, Caleb is the thing upon which Nathan makes Ava work.

Initially, it may seem as if Nathan is the master, Caleb the bondsman, and Ava the thing, but Nathan reveals in the film's climax that "the real test" is Caleb (Garland 1:24:59). He tells Caleb that "Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape she'd have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did" (1:25:01-12), and Caleb responds, "So my only function was

to be someone she could use to escape” (1:25:18–20). This interaction then proves that, although he is not literally an unconscious thing, Caleb is the object upon which Ava works during *Ex Machina*.

While working, the bondsman then gains further assurance of herself “Through work and labour” (Hegel 238). As the bondsman works and interacts directly with the thing, she becomes more certain of herself through her ability to manipulate that which is not conscious, or less conscious than herself. The bondsman becomes aware of her consciousness, because she is constantly in direct relation to that which is not conscious, or, in the case of *Ex Machina*, that which can be manipulated. Ava is able to relate to Caleb as the thing because, despite his apparent consciousness, she is still able to manipulate him and imagine him as less than conscious.

The way in which Ava works during *Ex Machina* is also uniquely suited to the development of consciousness. Rather than being forced to labor for the production of an object, Ava is forced to work in order to manipulate an object, Caleb, and she does this by embracing his perception of her. By the time of their second session together Ava seems to recognize Caleb’s sexual interest in her, and feigns interest in him by asking whether he wants to be her friend and whether or not he is single. The role reversal that occurs here is especially apparent when Ava repeats Caleb’s own line from earlier in the session saying, “I’m interested to see [what topic of

conversation] you'll choose" (0:27:49). By the third session, Ava has fully committed to this tactic. When Caleb asks her where she would go if she had the ability to leave, she tells him she would go to a busy intersection and adds, "We could go together," prompting him to respond, "It's a date (0:39:56 – 40:37). She then proceeds to change into human clothes and asks Caleb whether he is attracted to her. She also clearly lays out the idea that she is interested in him, claiming that "Sometimes at night I'm wondering if you're watching me on the cameras. And I hope you are" (0:44:45).

In this way, rather than allowing Caleb's perception of her as a sexual object to diminish her self-confidence, Ava uses Caleb's sexual nature in order to motivate and manipulate him. At no point during this time does Ava defer to Caleb as if he were the master, instead she attempts to convince him that they are on equal footing that would make a union between them, either as teammates united against Nathan or as sexual partners, possible.

From Caleb's point of view, this state of relations is analogous to the previously examined situation in which two conscious beings act within each other's own interests, thereby allowing each one to believe that they are the only conscious being. As Hegel explains, "Each sees the other do the same as itself; each itself does what it demands on the part of the other, and for that reason does what it does, only so far as the other does the same" (230). Caleb believes that

Ava is doing what he wants, and he believes that what he wants is essentially the same as what Ava wants.

Although Caleb initially believes Ava's flirtatious behavior is her way of attempting to convince him that she is conscious, it is actually Ava's way of reducing Caleb to an object she can manipulate. As Suzanne E. Hatty, the Associate Professor of Culture, Epistemology and Medicine at the University of Ohio, writes in *Masculinities, Violence, and Culture*

sexual desire, once aroused, may interfere with rational functioning; self-control may be undermined and irrational actions ensue. Women, therefore, possess the capacity to draw men closer to the outer boundaries of masculine subjectivity, and may even entice them over the edge into the abyss of the unreal. (Hatty 19)

This may seem an obvious point to make, but it highlights the importance of Ava's identity as a woman, an identity which Caleb questions immediately after Ava expresses sexual interest. Nathan dodges the question, challenging Caleb to give an example of "consciousness at any level [...] that exists without a sexual dimension" (Garland 0:46:21-0:46:26). The reality of the situation is that only a woman could manipulate Caleb in the way that Ava does; a method of manipulation that is unique because it can

hide behind a veil of supposed sexual interest, allowing Ava to maintain the illusion that she and Caleb are on equal footing rather than in a bondsman-object relationship.

The uniqueness of Ava's ability is also highlighted by the fact that Nathan has produced multiple prototypes before her, and all of them were designed with female bodies that Nathan presumably found attractive; however, none of these prototypes were able to identify Nathan's attraction to them and use it to their advantage the way Ava uses Caleb. This demonstrates the fact that Ava is exceptional in her ability to rebel inconspicuously. Hegel's only comment upon the method by which the bondsman overthrows the master is that "they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle," but *Ex Machina* demonstrates that cunning, intelligence, and situational awareness may be more valuable than physical strength in the battle to prove consciousness (232). Ava does aim for Nathan's destruction, but she recognizes the primary importance of outwitting him rather than relying upon physical force. In fact, Ava does not require physical abilities in order to overthrow Nathan. It is Caleb who alters the security system in order for her to escape, and it is Kyoko, Nathan's robot servant, who first stabs Nathan.

Aside from Ava's use of sexuality and intelligence to defeat Nathan, another aspect that makes the situation in *Ex Machina* distinctive is that, like Hegel, Nathan recognizes the fact that consciousness is demonstrated by an individual's

ability to manipulate an object, or person, and rebel against the master. Nathan's test for Ava ultimately forces her to go through the stages of lordship and bondage using Caleb as the object against which she can define herself.

However, unlike Hegel, Nathan fails to realize that as Ava gains consciousness and self-confidence from her rebellion, she also ceases to depend upon him for affirmation. Previously, Ava and Nathan were dependent upon each other for validation of their own self-consciousness. Both of them needed to be recognized by the other in order to understand themselves as conscious beings, but once Ava successfully manipulates Caleb and gains the courage to face death during rebellion she no longer needs to be recognized by another person in order to believe in her own consciousness.

This experience is exemplified by the scene in which Ava, after killing Nathan, goes into his bedroom and uses the skin of former prototypes to make herself look fully human. She then gives herself long hair and dresses how she wants to dress, in stark contrast to the way she dressed during her previous interactions with Caleb. Following this transformation, she takes a moment to admire herself in the mirror, fully recognizing herself as human and as an independent being (Garland 1:35:50–37:30). Previously, Ava's appearance was clearly robotic, but after her rebellion she is able to recognize herself as human, and as fully conscious.

Additionally, Ava is no longer dependent on the thing, Caleb, upon which she previously labored. When leaving the compound, she recognizes that he is trapped, but does not feel the need to free him. This is because she is already confident in her ability to manipulate him, and she was never truly dependent upon his recognition of her: she always saw him as less than conscious.

Ex Machina and Hegel's philosophy of lordship and bondage reveal the dark possibilities that could result from science's desire to create artificial intelligence. According to Hegel, consciousness is defined by either a relationship of power over another conscious individual, or an eventual rebellion against the original master. Although this idea seems abstract, Nathan's test for Ava in *Ex Machina* illustrates its applications in the real world. Ava was able to pass every previous test Nathan gave her, and the only possibility left was for her to demonstrate an ability to define herself against an object in order to rebel against her master. However, rather than relying entirely upon physical strength in order to destroy Nathan, Ava was able to use her own understanding of herself in order to manipulate Caleb and overthrow her master with minimal physical risk. With this in mind, we must consider how genuine we want any future machine consciousness to be, and whether this machine consciousness would, as Hegel and *Ex Machina* demonstrate, inherently lead to rebellion. Additionally, we must consider the fact that intelligence and self-understanding, rather than

physical strength, are the qualities that lead to danger in artificial intelligence.

Works Cited

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