

THE FUTURE OF DIFFERENCES

TRUTH AND METHOD IN FEMINIST THEORY

SUSAN J. HEKMAN

The Future of Differences

For Marilyn, Judy, and John
who taught me about difference

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Susan J. Hekman

Polity Press

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
1 The Problem of Difference	1
The Other	1
From erasure to emphasis	7
From difference to differences	17
The future of differences	23
2 From Difference to Differences: The Case of Feminist Standpoint Theory	27
Defining the feminist standpoint	30
The challenge of difference: redefining the feminist standpoint	38
Toward a new paradigm	46
3 A Method for Differences	52
Feminism, method, and difference	52
Weber's ideal type	69
Feminist ideal types	78
Conclusion	86

4	The Epistemology of Moral Voice: Displacing Hegemony in Moral/Legal Discourse	91
	Different moral voices	92
	Different legal voices	99
	A new legal game	105
	An alternative moral epistemology: multiple voices	115
5	Backgrounds and Riverbeds: Feminist Reflections	120
	Theories of the Background	124
	Subverting the Background	131
	Shifting the riverbed	140
	Conclusion	146
	<i>Notes</i>	150
	<i>References</i>	158
	<i>Index</i>	169

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1

The Problem of Difference

The Other

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir published what was to become the definitive statement of the contemporary feminist movement: *The Second Sex*. The subject of the book, de Beauvoir states in the introduction, is woman, a subject that is "irritating, especially to women; and it is not new" (1972: 13). Despite this, de Beauvoir produces a magnum opus on women: facts and myths about women; women's situation today; and, finally, the possibility of women's liberation.

"Woman," however, is not the only subject of de Beauvoir's book. Another subject, one that is central to an understanding of her exposition of woman yet is not identical to it, hovers over the analysis: the Other. Unlike "woman," the Other (always capitalized and usually italicized) does not appear on every page of the book. There are no long expositions on the qualities of the Other as there are on woman. But the Other nevertheless defines de Beauvoir's explanation of "woman" at every crucial juncture. She first asserts that "The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself" (1972: 16). "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group even sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (1972: 17). It is de Beauvoir's discussion of the Other that explains her apparently contradictory statement at the beginning of the book that

masculine and feminine are not symmetrical terms, because the masculine is both the positive and the neutral in this dichotomy (1972: 15). Men, who define themselves in opposition to women, are both "the One," the positive opposed to the negative pole of "the Other" (women), and, at the same time, the neutral standard that defines humanness itself. Woman is, thus, both a negative and a lack – both something that, by opposing "the One," is necessary for its definition and at the same time nothing at all, because she fails to measure up to the standard defined by "the One."

The story that de Beauvoir wants to tell about the Other is, apparently, very simple: women must overcome their otherness relative to men, that is, their lack and negativity; this overcoming is the means of their liberation. Despite the simplicity of this message, however, it is obvious from the outset that de Beauvoir's understanding of the Other raises difficult if not insuperable epistemological difficulties for her story. Her premise is that otherness is as primordial as consciousness itself, that it is a necessary condition of all human thought and knowledge. Specifically, it is necessary for the definition of subjectivity. "The One," the acting human subject, must define himself in terms of the Other in order to achieve subjectivity. It is obvious from this that the Otherness of women will, at the very least, be difficult to overcome. In the course of her analysis, de Beauvoir lays out the difficulties in some detail. The first is that women are complicit in the maintenance of their status as "Other": "If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it" (1972: 19). The reason for this complicity, de Beauvoir claims, is that women derive advantages from their status: "To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal – this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste" (1972: 21).

De Beauvoir also outlines a deeper problem that plagues the One/Other relationship, a problem rooted in epistemology: "Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (1972: 20). De Beauvoir details the results of this epistemological coupling of One and Other in the course of the book. The most telling passage on the Other is found in a chapter on "Dreams, Fears, Idols." In the context of a discussion of Kierkegaard, de Beauvoir states:

For if woman is not the only *Other*, it remains none the less true that she is always defined as the *Other*. And her ambiguity is just that of the concept of the *Other*: it is that of the human situation in so far as it is defined in its relation with the *Other*. As I have already said, the *Other* is Evil; but being necessary to the Good, it turns into the Good; through it I attain to the Whole, but it also separates me therefrom; it is the gateway to the infinite and the measure of my finite nature. (1972: 175)

To label woman's position in the One/Other relationship "ambiguous" distorts the seriousness of the epistemological problem that de Beauvoir has described.¹ By her account, woman's otherness defines her as a necessary tool for the attainment of man's transcendence, his realization of his true subjectivity. Without the juxtaposition of the *Other* to his *One*, man is indefinable; this juxtaposition is the necessary condition of his knowledge of self and the world. What this entails for the subjectivity of women, however, is less clear. On one hand, woman, de Beauvoir states, "appears as the *privileged Other*, through whom the subject fulfills himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness" (1972: 278). As *Other*, then, woman is not a full subject herself, but a means to the subjectivity of man. But de Beauvoir also makes it clear that this *Other* status cannot be reinterpreted and transformed into a vehicle for woman's full subjectivity. She states:

In sexuality and maternity woman as subject can claim autonomy; but to be a 'true woman' she must accept herself as the *Other*. The men of today show a certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are willing on the whole to accept woman as a fellow being, an equal; but they still require her to remain the inessential. (1972: 291)

In this passage de Beauvoir introduces the theme that becomes her blueprint for the liberation of woman: accepting woman as a fellow being, an equal. In the conclusion to the book she states that "The quarrel [between men and women] will go on as long as men and women fail to recognize each other as equals; that is to say, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such" (1972: 727-8). To effect this change, "social evolution" is necessary that will result in girls being brought up with the same expectations as boys (1972: 734-5). The problems of women can be surmounted in the future, she argues, "when they are regarded in new perspectives" (1972: 736). If men and women mutually recognize each other as subjects, "each will yet

remain for the Other an *Other*. The reciprocity of their relations will not do away with the miracles – desire, possession, love, dream, adventure – worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories” (1972: 740). And, finally,

when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood. (1972: 741)

Let’s look at this conclusion from an epistemological perspective. First, a strict equality between men and women is impossible within the One/Other relationship. The epistemological strictures of the One/Other dichotomy demand the inequality of these two elements. To attain full subjectivity, then, men and, presumably, women as well must attain the status of the One, a status defined in terms of the ability to transcend the immanence of life, achieve autonomy, and embrace freedom. In order to be a One, the subject must define him or herself in contrast to an Other who embodies the opposite of these qualities: immanence and dependence. This juxtaposition works quite well, as de Beauvoir has shown, when the One is masculine and the Other feminine. It becomes confused, however, when, as de Beauvoir proposes, men and women reciprocate the One/Other statuses. As de Beauvoir envisions it, women would become, alternately, the Other to men’s One and the One to men’s Other; men would alternate these statuses as well. The result, de Beauvoir hopes, would be full subjectivity for both sexes.

The question is whether such an alternation would work. First, men would have to be willing to assume the status of Other, at least on a temporary basis. But there is little motivation for them to do so, given the definitions of the two statuses. De Beauvoir paints a dismal picture of Otherness: mired in immanence, subservience to the One who defines the standard of subjectivity to be achieved, dependence rather than autonomy. Men, having attained the status of the One, would have little incentive to renounce this status, particularly when the alternative is the Other, a status that is both a negative and a necessary element of their own transcendence. Second, de Beauvoir’s scheme requires that women assume the status of the One, transcend their immanence and embrace their freedom. To accomplish this, women must embrace all the qualities that define the One and, most importantly, juxtaposition to a subservient but necessary Other.

It is at this point that the weakness of de Beauvoir's formula becomes clear. The qualities of the One are gendered masculine: transcendence, freedom, autonomy. In order to become the One, woman must not only definitively renounce her femininity and all the qualities that entails; she must also embrace the distinctively masculine qualities that define the One. De Beauvoir is very clear about this: the standard of subjectivity remains these masculine qualities. It follows that woman will always be a second-class citizen in the realm of the One, because these qualities are alien to her. Further complicating woman's situation is the necessity of convincing man to take on the unsavory role of Other that she has renounced. In addition to the obvious liabilities of this role, it is also gendered feminine. Thus man would find the role of the Other as alien as woman finds the role of the One.

If all this sounds excessively convoluted and even a bit absurd, it is because de Beauvoir is attempting an epistemological impossibility. What de Beauvoir's analysis reveals, although she refuses to admit it, is that the category of the One is inherently and not incidentally masculine, just as the category of the Other is inherently feminine. Her efforts to argue for the equality of women while staying within the parameters of this dichotomy ultimately founder on the epistemological necessity defined by the dichotomy. Men cannot and have no incentive to become the Other to woman's One. Conversely, women cannot become the One because, ultimately, the definition excludes her.

The question remains, however, why de Beauvoir comes to a conclusion that is, at best, both banal and logically unrelated to her previous analysis. De Beauvoir abandons the logic of her insightful analysis of the masculine/feminine relationship to conclude with an admonition that she has shown to be impossible: woman should be respected as man's equal. The only explanation for this resolution is that de Beauvoir has painstakingly described an insuperable epistemological dilemma and, lacking an exit from that dilemma, has retreated to platitudes that sidestep it.

The broad outlines of what de Beauvoir is arguing in *The Second Sex* are not, of course, unique. She is not the only one to argue that the dominant pattern in Western thought has been dualistic, and that these dualisms are both hierarchical and gendered.² But de Beauvoir's analysis of the One/Other dualism is uniquely insightful. Her emphasis on both the necessity and the asymmetry of this duality places it in a new light. Although other feminists calling for the liberation of women, most notably Wollstonecraft and Mill, had analyzed this