The Future of Differences
For Marilyn, Judy, and John
who taught me about difference
The Future of Differences

Truth and Method in Feminist Theory

Susan J. Hekman

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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. 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
dualism and argued that women can attain equality with men, de Beauvoir's analysis reveals that woman is trapped in this dualistic epistemology. De Beauvoir's argument that woman represents both the opposite of the active, agentic male subject and the definition of the absence of subjectivity makes the conception of a "liberated" feminine subject an epistemological impossibility. Furthermore, de Beauvoir's philosophical rigor combined with her emphasis on the "liberation" of women highlights the epistemological difficulty of escaping from the One/Other dualism. Her logic leads her to conclude that there is no escape from the dualism; yet, as an advocate of "women's liberation," she cannot accept this conclusion. The inconsistent resolution she offers thus highlights the impossibility of the dilemma she so carefully details.

The aim of this book is to examine the problem of difference in feminist theory. I begin that examination with de Beauvoir, most obviously, because her work is path breaking; it set the agenda for feminist theory for decades. But there is also a less obvious reason for beginning with de Beauvoir: the philosophical rigor of her work reveals why that agenda ultimately fails. De Beauvoir provides a clear outline of the strategies that are open to women seeking "liberation" from the dualisms that structure patriarchy. The first strategy is to become the One, to abandon the status of Other and the negativity and lack that it entails. The second is to imbue the Other with the autonomy of subjectivity and thus elevate it to equality with the One. De Beauvoir argues that feminists should pursue the first strategy. Conversely, her rejection of the second strategy, her almost obsessive devaluation of the feminine, has become legendary. But the logic of de Beauvoir's analysis just as clearly indicates that neither strategy can succeed. There are two conclusions to The Second Sex: the political admonition to seek the equality of women and the philosophical conclusion that this goal is impossible.

The evolution of feminist theory over the next four decades can be interpreted as the process of working out the possibilities of the two strategies that de Beauvoir outlines, culminating in the conclusion that both are epistemologically bankrupt. This evolution was, of course, due in large part to the fact that the epistemology that informs de Beauvoir's analysis was not of her invention: the gendered dichotomy she explicates is central to the modernist tradition from which she writes. It is no surprise, then, that neither she nor the succeeding generations of feminists were willing to abandon it. Reading de Beauvoir today, it seems obvious why both strategies failed. As both the first and then the second strategies were being pursued,
however, there were compelling reasons why each, in turn, appeared to be the best option for the feminist movement.

Much has been written about what might be called “the difference shift” in feminist theory. The outlines of that history are now clear: first, the effort to erase the differences between men and women; second, the emphasis on those differences and the valorization of the feminine; third, the exploration of differences among women. I am going to begin my analysis of the problem of difference in feminist theory by sketching the outlines of this history, for several reasons. First, I think that the epistemological significance of the progression has not been fully appreciated by contemporary feminists. Along with many others, I argue that, epistemologically, the first and second strategies are two sides of the same coin; both spell defeat for the effort to “liberate” women. But I also argue that it was the process of exploring these two strategies that led feminists to what is, in Althusser’s metaphor, a new continent of thought. In other words, the failure to make sense out of difference led feminists to differences. As a consequence of that move, feminism has been and continues to be, on the forefront of the paradigm shift that characterizes late twentieth-century thought, the shift from foundational to anti-foundational thought.

My second reason is that I think it is imperative that feminists get on with the task of devising a theory and method for differences. If, as I am arguing, the exploration of differences defines a new epistemological space, then feminism needs a new definition of truth and method to operate in that space. In the era of differences new problems arise that demand new solutions. How can we work for the liberation of women when the general category of “woman” is a problematic concept? What truth does our method seek if truths are multiple and perspectival? It is my contention that developing a new understanding of truth and method is the major challenge facing contemporary feminism. A better understanding of the epistemology of difference in feminist theory is a necessary first step in meeting that challenge.

From erasure to emphasis

De Beauvoir was not the first feminist to advocate what I am calling the first strategy – the erasure of difference and the pursuit of equality. Previous advocates of women’s liberation had, like de Beauvoir, also based their argument for the equality of women on the
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erasure of difference. What sets de Beauvoir's account apart, however, is the radical extreme to which she takes this argument. In her attempt to erase difference, she takes on the aspect of femininity that is both its defining feature and its most valorized attribute: maternity.

A comparison between de Beauvoir's position in *The Second Sex* and a previous attempt to erase difference, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* ([1869]1971), reveals the distinctiveness of her position. The theme of Mill's book, like that of de Beauvoir's, is apparently very straightforward: women are equal to men and thus must be granted equal rights. But even a casual examination of the book reveals the ambiguity of Mill's argument for the equality of women and throws serious doubt on the possibility or even the desirability of attaining this goal. Mill spends a great deal of time agonizing over the question of whether men and women have different natures, ultimately concluding that, under present conditions, it is impossible to tell. Anticipating the subsequent rise of a social constructionist position, he argues that what we define as the "nature" of men and women is the result of social and cultural forces, not necessarily that of innate differences. But his most revealing argument comes in his discussion of rationality. Mill concedes that women's deficiency in rationality is a product of their inferior education and argues that man's capacity for rational abstraction is the cause of the intellectual advancements of mankind. He does not, however, adopt the obvious conclusion to this argument: that women embrace man's style of rationality and abandon the womanly style. Rather, he argues that

it remains to be shown whether this inclusive working of a part of the mind, this absorption of the whole thinking faculty on a single subject and concentration of it on a single work is the normal and healthful condition of the human faculties, even for speculative uses. ([1869]1971: 502)

What Mill suggests instead is a thesis that enjoyed much popularity in the nineteenth century: complementarity. The masculine capacity for sustained abstract thought, he claims, should be complemented by woman's more practical, intuitive style. Thus, in this crucial area Mill shies away from a radical advocacy of the erasure of difference. He wants to preserve some of the differences between men and women while at the same time arguing for their equality. Significantly, it is the traditional division of labor between
men and women that he wants to preserve. That men engage in tasks requiring muscular exertion and women concern themselves with the fine arts is, he claims, "natural" and "healthy" (Mill and Mill 1970: 77). And, although he does not state it explicitly, Mill assumes that the most natural role for women is that of wife and mother, a role that most women will "choose" over other occupations ([1869]1971: 484). Ultimately, Mill does not want to erase the differences between men and women but, rather, to retain certain "feminine" traits, a move that precludes the equality he claims to seek. 

De Beauvoir's argument for the erasure of difference exhibits no such ambiguity. She rejects the complementarity thesis simply because she sees no advantages to the feminine side of the masculine/feminine dichotomy. What is distinctive about de Beauvoir's argument is that her denigration of the feminine extends to what has seemed to both the advocates and the opponents of feminism to be its essence: maternity. Even the most enthusiastic proponents of the equality of men and women had shied away from arguing for erasing the presumably sexual difference embodied in the role of maternity. Maternity was seen as both the "natural," biological role of women and the embodiment of all the positive values associated with the feminine. De Beauvoir rejects both these assumptions. She identifies maternity as the obstacle to the equality of women and, with her characteristic logical rigor, argues that this difference, above all others, must be erased.

De Beauvoir insures that none of her readers miss the point of her argument by beginning her section on "The Mother" with a long discussion of abortion. Her conclusion is that "contraception and legal abortion would permit woman to undertake her maternities in freedom" (1972: 510). She moves from this to her now infamous condemnation of the female body and its functions. Women who are continually pregnant, she states, are "fertile organisms, like fowl with high egg-production. And they seek eagerly to sacrifice their liberty of action to the function of their flesh: it seems to them that their existence is tranquilly justified in the passive fecundity of their bodies" (1972: 513).

Few feminists had been quite so scathing in their denunciation of the sacred role of motherhood. De Beauvoir's unqualified rejection of the female body has led many feminists to reject her work in its entirety. But there is an important epistemological lesson in de Beauvoir's position that is significant for an understanding of the history of difference. It follows from her rejection of all things female that any attempt on the part of women to employ their immanence as