



The Feminine Subject

SUSAN HEKMAN

— The Feminine — Subject

Susan Hekman

polity

Copyright © Susan Hekman 2014

The right of Susan Hekman to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2014 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-8783-4

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-8784-1(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Acknowledgments

This book began at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in Wassenaar, Netherlands, in the fall of 2010. It is hard to imagine a more perfect setting for scholarly work. Scholars from an array of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities are housed in an idyllic setting in a small town near The Hague and the North Sea. I was greatly enriched by the intellectual interaction with a diverse group of international scholars in residence at NIAS. I am deeply grateful for the experience.

The book was completed during a Faculty Development Leave from the University of Texas at Arlington in the fall of 2013. Along the way portions of the book were presented at conferences in Los Angeles, Stockholm, Utrecht, and Umea, Sweden. My thanks to the scholars who commented on my work at these conferences.

Throughout the years I have been sustained by the friendship and scholarly support of a group of close friends at UTA. Laurie Porter, Wendy Faris, and, particularly, Stacy Alaimo helped me through a difficult time in my life as well as encouraging my work. My sincere thanks to them. But my deepest thanks go to John for giving me a new life. Together with our equine companions, Pepper and Shiner, as well as our canine friends, Honey and Glory, we have created a life together that is rich and full. In gratitude I dedicate this book to them.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
1 Simone de Beauvoir and the Beginnings of the Feminine Subject	1
2 Difference I: The “French Feminists”	27
3 Difference II: Radical Feminism and the Relational Self	48
4 Continuing the Tradition: Liberalism and Marxism	77
5 From Difference to Differences: Postmodernism, Race, Ethnicity, and Intersectionality	113
6 The Material Subject	147
<i>Notes</i>	186
<i>Bibliography</i>	191
<i>Index</i>	212

Simone de Beauvoir and the Beginnings of the Feminine Subject

I. Introduction

The recent re-translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* begins with a simple declarative sentence: in 1946 Simone de Beauvoir began to outline what she thought would be an autobiographical essay explaining why, when she tried to define herself, the first sentence that came to mind was "I am a woman" (Thurman 2010: ix). In the course of writing the book Beauvoir soon discovered that trying to explain what it meant to be a woman was far from simple. Somewhat to her surprise, what started as an autobiographical essay turned into a two-volume, nearly 800-page analysis that ranges widely over a disparate group of elements that define "woman" in society. It made Simone de Beauvoir both famous and infamous, and is commonly described as launching the contemporary feminist movement.

It is hard to imagine that anything new can or should be written at this point either on Simone de Beauvoir or *The Second Sex*. The book and its author excited intense interest, both positive and negative, after its initial publication. Since then its reception among feminists has gone

through several phases. From the outset feminists recognized the book as the first radical statement of the situation of women. As the feminist movement matured, however, many feminists had second thoughts about Beauvoir. She was accused of masculinism, blind acceptance of Sartrean existentialism, even a rejection of the female body and maternity. Then, beginning in the late 1980s, a spate of books and articles re-evaluating Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* brought the book back into the feminist limelight. Many of these works are attempts to define Beauvoir's philosophical orientation and to place her work in a more positive light than that of the previous commentaries.

My goal in the following is not to evaluate, one more time, Beauvoir's work in general and *The Second Sex* in particular. Nor is it to refute all the previous interpretations of her work. It is, rather, to go back to Beauvoir's original question and evaluate her work in light of the answer that she gave to it. Beauvoir asked the question that has and must orient feminist theory: what, really, does it mean to say "I am a woman"? How do we go about answering that question and where does that answer lead us? What I want to emphasize in the following is that the question of the identity of "woman" is the central question in the tradition of feminist theory that has evolved in the wake of Beauvoir's work. Beauvoir, obviously, has much to say about this question. And so do all the feminist theorists that follow her. The identity of "woman" is at the center of all the feminisms that have developed in the 60 years since *The Second Sex*. From liberal to psychoanalytic, to socialist, to postmodern, to the current rage, material feminism, "woman" hovers over each one of them. Each begins and ends with an understanding of the identity of woman both philosophically and socially. In other words, Beauvoir asked the question that would define the tradition of feminist theory that she quite literally initiated.

It is misleading, however, to characterize feminist theory since Beauvoir as a simple linear development following in

the footsteps of her theory. It would be more accurate to describe feminist theory since Beauvoir as attempts to get "woman" right and, in the process, to show the errors of previous theories. As feminism evolved, the proponents of each new iteration of "woman" claimed that previous attempts to define "woman" were, at the very least, seriously flawed and that the definition of "woman" now being advanced has, finally, gotten it right. I think that this approach is seriously wrong-headed. It is much more productive and, I would argue, incumbent on feminist theorists to look at the last 60 years of theories about "woman" as a positive cumulative enterprise, each theory building on the one that went before and adding to our understanding of "woman." I do not think that feminist theorists should be in the business of refuting previous feminist theorists but should, rather, be looking for elements in their work that have added to our understanding of "woman." Our goal, in other words, should not be to, finally, get "woman" right but, rather, to explore in contemporary terms what we can contribute to our understanding of this central concept, an understanding grounded in previous theories.

Much of the commentary on Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* revolves around placing her philosophically, examining her reliance, or lack thereof, on the philosophical currents of her time. I am going to advance a different thesis here. Although it is undeniable that Beauvoir was deeply influenced by the philosophies of her day, I will argue that in taking on the question of "woman" Beauvoir encountered an obstacle that effectively exploded the boundaries of these philosophies. The question of "woman" did not fit into the vocabularies of any of the philosophical positions that were available to her. As a consequence she had to make her own way, to forge a new method in order to deal with the unique question of woman, a question that the tradition of western philosophy had hitherto avoided. I am not going to claim that Beauvoir's method was flawless or even that she articulated her rejection of previous

philosophies clearly. But I am going to claim that what Beauvoir proposes is unique and, most importantly, that she articulated a position that would define feminist theory in the aftermath of *The Second Sex*: the introduction of “woman” into the philosophical tradition requires a radical change in method, a change that alters the tradition of philosophy as we know it.

Another way of putting this is that many feminist theorists have lost sight of the radical nature of Beauvoir’s thought. We tend to get caught up in the heated arguments between the proponents of different approaches. Those who espouse a particular approach to the subject spend too much of their theoretical energy trying to prove their opponents wrong. We do not see the forest but get lost in the trees. What we lose sight of is that Beauvoir invites us to enter, in Althusser’s words, a new continent of thought. Although throughout the course of feminist theory we have approached this project from different perspectives, our goal is the same: transforming “woman.”

In subsequent chapters this understanding of Beauvoir’s work will ground my examination of the evolving tradition of feminist theory. In chapter 2, I look at the French feminists that came after Beauvoir. I interpret them not, as they sometimes claim, as repudiating her conception of “woman,” but as continuing to explore how “woman” explodes the categories of philosophical thought. Despite the differences between the work of Beauvoir and that of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, and their differences from each other, they are continuing Beauvoir’s legacy. Irigaray’s concept of “jamming the theoretical machinery” summarizes not only her work, but the course of feminist theory that is emerging. In chapter 3, I interpret the emphasis on difference that characterizes radical feminism and the relational self in the same light. The “difference feminists” were, in a Beauvoirian spirit, exploring a definition of “woman” outside the boundaries of the masculine paradigm and, in so doing, adding new dimensions to the concept. I focus specifically on the work of Carol Gilligan,

a theorist who has been, I think, unfairly pushed to the sidelines in contemporary feminism. Gilligan accomplishes an amazing feat: redefining the basis of western moral theory. I do not believe she has received full credit for this. In addition, her work on the development of adolescent girls is pathbreaking. Beauvoir suggested that it is in adolescence that girls acquire the sense of inferiority that characterizes the feminine. Gilligan's research proves this to be the case.

In chapter 4 I take a different tack. I argue that feminists who attempted to fit "woman" into the traditions of liberalism or Marxism effectively proved Beauvoir's thesis that "woman" does not fit into masculine traditions. Despite the valiant efforts of these feminists, they failed in their attempts to find a common ground with these theories. In both cases, introducing "woman" into these theories necessarily changes their fundamental assumptions. We have learned an important lesson from the efforts of these theorists: no tweaking of the tradition will suffice; we have to move beyond the parameters of western thought to redefine "woman."

The era of differences I examine in chapter 5 presents distinctive challenges. Previous feminists, including Beauvoir, assumed that they were trying to define a unitary conception of "woman." Postmodern feminists, theorists of race and ethnicity, and those who embrace intersectional analysis challenged this assumption. They argued that "woman" is multiple, that no one definition will fit all women. For some feminists this was a difficult transition, but it soon became clear that it was necessary to accommodate the diversity of women's lives. It also became clear that there was no going back to the era of difference.

I conclude with a discussion of the present era in which feminists are returning to the material after the linguistic turn of postmodernism. A widespread understanding of this approach is that it corrects the over-emphasis on the linguistic that defines postmodernism. Although this is not inaccurate, it also over-simplifies the relationship. A better

characterization is that the turn to the material brings in issues, most notably the body and biology, that were sidelined in the linguistic turn. This approach has made a significant contribution to feminist theory. It has opened up new avenues of research that will enhance our understanding of the feminine subject.

My analysis of all of these theorists is driven by three theses. First, our exploration of the subject is a radical project that explodes the boundaries of previous theories. Beauvoir began this project by asking “what is ‘woman’”? and we are still exploring this question. Second, our effort is cumulative – each theory builds on what has gone before rather than repudiating previous theories. My third thesis is closely related: we should not assume that our goal is to, once and for all, get “woman” right. Looking for essences is a central aspect of masculinist thought that we should abandon. The search for “woman” is an ongoing process begun by Beauvoir that continues to evolve.

II. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Beauvoir first expresses the ideas that will guide her discussion of women in *The Second Sex* in her collection of essays, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.¹ Her concern in these essays is to get at the essence of the human subject, what it means to be a human being. At the beginning of the first essay she states that:

This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of subjects, is what he shares with all his fellow men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivization on which he depends. (1948: 7)

She goes on to assert that as long as men have lived they have felt this “tragic ambiguity of their condition” (1948: 7), ambiguity that, she later asserts, we must assume

(1948: 9). To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being, but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it (1948: 13).

These statements set the tone for the analysis that follows, an analysis that, at least initially, follows the lines of Sartrean existentialism. The first implication of man's ambiguous status is that there are not "foreign absolutes," no "inhuman objectivity" but, rather, it is human existence that makes values spring up in the world (1948: 14–15). Another way of expressing this ambiguity is that the fact of being a subject is a universal fact; the Cartesian cogito expresses both the most individual experience and the most objective truth, but the ethics of ambiguity denies that separate existents can be bound to each other and their individual freedom can forge laws valid for all (1948: 17–18).

So far so good. Life, and particularly ethics, is ambiguous in that we are both separate and collective beings. But, as Beauvoir works through her theory, this ambiguity gets more complicated. Freedom is the source from which all signification and values spring. To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision. This theory places all human beings on a moral plane as seekers of freedom. But, as Beauvoir develops her theory, problems arise for this neat formulation. There are, Beauvoir asserts, exceptions to this principle. There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is shielded over their bodies. Beauvoir first cites the example of women and slaves to illustrate her point, but as her argument progresses she turns her attention exclusively to women. Women in western countries, she asserts, lack an apprenticeship in freedom and, what is worse, consent to their servitude (1948: 37–8).

Women, in short, present a problem for the theory she is advancing. They do not fit neatly into the parameters of the ethics of ambiguity. In this context, however, Beauvoir

seems unwilling to deal with this problem and pulls back from the difficulties it poses. Instead she plunges into the issue of freedom and what it means for this theory. Freedom, she asserts, must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. It is not necessary for the object to seek to be, but it must desire that there *be* being. To will oneself free is to will that there be being as one and the same choice; they both imply the bond on each man with all others. It follows that "To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations... To make being 'be' is to communicate with others by means of being" (1948: 71). Freedom cannot will itself without aiming at an open future.

It follows, Beauvoir asserts, that existentialism is not solipsism: "Man can find a justification in his own existence only in the existence of other men" (1948: 72); "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (1948: 73). It also follows that there is a concrete bond between freedom and existence. To will man free is to will there to *be* being; it is to will the disclosure of being in the joy of existence (1948: 135).

In later years, Beauvoir described *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as the book that irritated her the most (Moi 2008: 168). Reading the book today from the perspective of *The Second Sex* is irritating because the position she articulates here lacks the clarity she will achieve in *TSS*. A number of things, however, are clear at this stage. First, Beauvoir is distinguishing her position from the implicit solipsism of early Sartrean existentialism. As many commentators have pointed out, Beauvoir's concept of subjectivity and freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is specifically social; we cannot be without the being of others (Kruks 1990: 93; Tidd 1999: 15). Second, it begins to emerge that the key to this social identity of "man" is his *existence*, the specifics of his individual place in the society that gives him his being and his freedom. This point will become a major focus of the analysis in *The Second Sex*. What will then be

identified as “situation” will take center stage in the analysis, whereas here it is still on the margins.

What is not clear, however, is how women fit into this scenario. In her commentary on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Toril Moi claims that for Beauvoir the human condition is characterized by ambiguity and conflict and that women embody this more than men. Thus, women incarnate the human condition more fully than men (2008: 195). I agree, but I think that the problem goes deeper than this. I think that what Beauvoir is beginning to realize is that women change everything. Yes, women do not fit into the philosophical position she is developing, but at this point she does not realize what follows from this. The philosophical position she is espousing cannot be adjusted to meet this problem. Women lack an apprenticeship in freedom. They cannot fit into the definitions of freedom and existence that Beauvoir is so carefully laying out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. And the reason for this failure lies in women’s unique situation, what she here calls their “infantile world.” In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir essentially sidesteps this problem. She mentions women, makes her central point regarding the sociality of human existence, and moves on. It is not until *The Second Sex* that she is forced to confront the problem of women directly. And there it becomes clear that the “ambiguity” of women’s situation is of an entirely different order from that of men. It also becomes clear that dealing with the “problem” of women will necessitate a radically different approach.

III. *The Second Sex*

Following in the footsteps of many feminist critics of Beauvoir, I initially dismissed her approach as masculinist and epistemologically inconsistent. Focusing on her concept of the Other as it is presented in *The Second Sex*, I argued that Beauvoir’s claim that the One/Other relationship is primordial and that the One is gendered masculine

precludes women from full subjectivity. Women cannot be the One, the fully human transcendent subject, and therefore Beauvoir in effect denies woman full subjectivity (Hekman 1999).

It is very easy to read Beauvoir this way. The first few pages of *The Second Sex* present the One/Other relationship as a fundamental and an inescapable aspect of the human condition. Read outside the context of the rest of the book, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that this relationship holds out little hope for women. There we learn that man represents both the positive and the neuter. Masculine and feminine are not symmetrical. Men, who define themselves in opposition to women, are the One, the positive pole. But men are also the neutral standard that defines humanness itself; woman is both a negative and a lack: “[woman] is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute; she is the Other” (2010: 6). The category of the Other is as original as consciousness itself: alterity is the fundamental category of human thought (2010: 6); “the subject posits itself only in opposition, it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the Other as inessential, as the object” (2010: 7).

Women’s position in this scenario is unambiguously inferior. Women do not posit themselves essentially as subjects. Worse, they do not protest male sovereignty; they are complicit in their definition of Other, they have done nothing to bring about a change. They have more in common with the men of their class than with other women. Furthermore, women derive advantages from this status as Other; to decline to be Other would be to renounce those advantages. The division of the sexes, Beauvoir concludes, is a biological given, not a moment in human history: “Their opposition took place in an original *Mitsein*, and she has not broken it.” The fundamental characteristic of woman is that “she is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each Other” (2010: 9).

I, and many other feminists, read these passages as an assessment of the hopeless condition in which women

find themselves. “Fundamental” and “primordial” seem to offer no escape for women. Beauvoir herself declared that the purpose of her book was to assess the condition of women. These passages go a long way toward doing just that, revealing the underlying cause of women’s inferiority in society. But there is another way to read these passages, an interpretation that is more consistent with the subsequent arguments in the book and with Beauvoir’s overall approach to the problem of “woman.” What if we read these passages not as a brutally accurate description of the roots of woman’s inferiority in society, but rather as the challenge that women must meet and transcend? What if Beauvoir is saying, in effect, that the One/Other dichotomy gives women no way out, and thus it is incumbent on us to develop a new approach – a feminist approach – to find that way out? And, finally, what if Beauvoir is saying that the tradition of philosophy in the west fails to provide a way out, that introducing women into philosophy entails radical changes and reveals the poverty of those philosophical conceptions?

I think that Beauvoir is arguing precisely this, although she does not say so directly in this or any other context. But discussions of the Other that recur with frequency throughout *The Second Sex* point in this direction. Early on she asserts that the perspective she will adopt is one of existentialist morality, a perspective that assumes that every subject posits itself concretely through projects:

It accomplishes its freedom only by perpetually surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an infinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence there is a degradation of existence into in-itself, of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if the fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an infinite need to transcend himself. (2010: 16–17)

This, then, defines the situation into which woman is thrust. The uniqueness of woman is that she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: "Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as an essential and the demands of a situation that posits herself as an inessential" (2010: 17).

Beauvoir then asks a number of questions. How in the feminine condition can a human being accomplish herself? How can she find independence with dependence? Answering these questions, Beauvoir claims, is the task of the analysis ahead. But although she does not make the argument explicit in this context, the logic of her argument compels the reader to ask further questions. Do the pre-suppositions of the philosophical approach Beauvoir has articulated make it impossible to "solve" the question of women? Does the topic of woman necessitate jettisoning this philosophy and, indeed, all previously articulated philosophical approaches? Does "woman" change everything and necessitate something entirely new?

Beauvoir returns to the concept of the Other frequently in the course of *The Second Sex*.² Some of these comments are consistent with the discussion of the Other that opens the book. Thus she states that woman emerged as the inessential who returned to the essential. But as the absolute Other she lacked reciprocity (2010: 160). This is then followed by the statement that "the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them" (2010: 162). She concludes, however, that it exists today in the hearts of all men. But then another theme emerges: ambiguity.

And her ambiguity is that of the very idea of Other: it is that of the human condition as defined in its relation with the Other. It has already been said that the Other is Evil; but as it is necessary for the Good, it reverts to the Good... through the Other, I accede to the Whole, but it separates me from the Whole; it is the door to infinity and the measure of my finitude. (2010: 163)