



Being and Freedom: Ahmed, Irigaray and Beauvoir on Subjectivity Lack and Liberation

Tanner Lyon

Department of Philosophy, University of Nevada, Reno



“The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal...” (Irigaray 1985)

Introduction

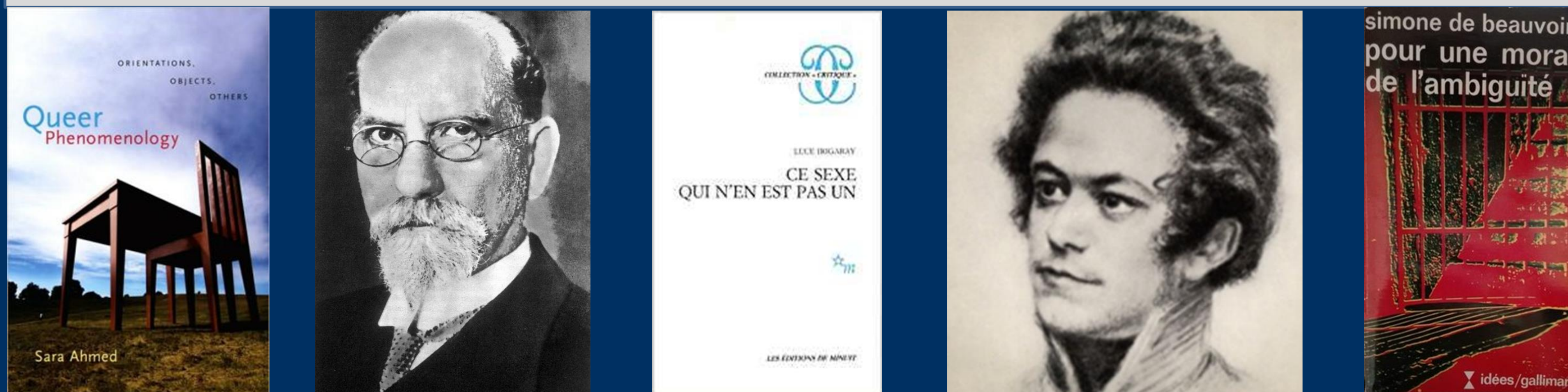
Sara Ahmed argues that Edmund Husserl (the founder of the phenomenological movement) finds barely perceived or unperceived objects, as the “background” of perception, to be interconnected with objects understood to be familiar. She states, “Husserl’s approach to the background as what is ‘unseen’ in its ‘thereness’ or ‘familiarity’ is extremely useful, even if he puts the familiar to one side. It allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed” (Ahmed 2007). The familiar relates to the background in two ways: first, the familiar fades into the background because it goes unnoticed, unlike objects in the foreground. Second, the familiar is also in the foreground as an object of repeated exposure. The flow of perception tends to adhere to unfamiliar objects; as one continues to perceive unfamiliar objects, it eventually becomes familiar and becomes unnoticed. Phenomenological inquiry would continue to notice the familiar object so that the process of becoming-familiar can be disclosed. Ahmed suggests that “wonder” encapsulates this process of (re)analyzing familiar objects.

Ahmed defines wonder as follows: “To wonder is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the ‘taking form’ of the familiar” (Ahmed 2007). Familiar things that are partially perceived in the background are essentially “forgotten.” When one perceives an unfamiliar object, it becomes the center of the foreground. As one repeatedly perceives the unfamiliar object, the object becomes familiar. When an object is familiar, the history of that object is forgotten. Wondering, then, is to remember the object’s history when perceiving the familiar and to perceive subsequent repetitions of the familiar as a becoming-familiar. Essentially, wonder relocates the familiar from the periphery to the center.

In the reification (thingification) of commodities, the history of the labor that produced the commodity is lost. Ahmed writes, “Insofar as Marxism emphasizes the disappearance of labor in commodity fetishism, then it too provides a model of history as disappearance. A queer phenomenology, in which phenomenology is in dialogue with psychoanalysis and Marxism, might ‘go behind the back’ to account for what disappears in how things disappear.” Using wonder to “go behind the back” of commodities reveals that labor disappears from the history of commodities. The history of labor disappears when the metaphysical qualities of value are bestowed upon the product of labor. Value is labor-as-lack.

Luce Irigaray argues that the masculine interpretation of sexuality denies the possibility of a feminine theory of sexuality. She asserts, “Psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth. A discourse that tells the truth about the logic of truth: namely that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male*

subjects, which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual [...] This model, a phallic one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility... and erection.” Psychoanalytic theory, as “the discourse of truth,” maintains that the feminine can only be represented through phallogocentric discourse because woman’s physical and mental differences ultimately escape this discourse. In fact, women cannot reflect this logic because their sex is not “one,” unlike the phallus. The consequence of such a reduction is that the feminine is understood through concepts that reflect patriarchal society rather than the subject of analysis, e.g. property, production, order, etc. This results in regarding the feminine as an extension, or a perversion, of the masculine. As males hold the subject position in the logic of truth, woman is ultimately subordinate to man in the phallogocentric (governance by men) order. Irigaray asserts, “Moreover, it is inasmuch as she does not exist that she sustains the desire of these ‘speaking beings’ that are called men [...] Man seeks her out, since he has inscribed her in discourse, but as lack, as fault or flaw.” The unfamiliar other holds a central position as one who can provide the familiar subject with that which he cannot provide himself. Thus, man includes woman in his logic as the representation of the sexual. Man does not ascribe subjectivity to the object of sexuality, however, because she must remain subordinate to the male subject in the discourse of truth. The out-of-place other lacks subjectivity because she cannot exist as both subject and object in a logic that upholds males as the only subject that has being. Woman has a place in this logic, but as a lack of being. The history of the unfamiliar other has disappeared in the discourse of truth.



By identifying the other as a lack of being within the dominant logic, Irigaray is not advocating to invert the existing logic by upholding woman as a subject and man as an object. As she writes, “The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal [...] rather, repeating/ interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, [woman] should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side.” Inverting the so-called logic of truth would merely uphold the same phallogocentric order and its values. Instead, this production of truth must be abolished by eliminating both the subject’s and the object’s priority of discourse. Though the other only exists as a lack within the logic of truth, she is still capable of affecting language’s metaphysical plane and disrupting its theoretical production. In this, the definitive duality of subject and object is threatened. Similarly to Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that the individual is a lack of being. She characterizes the lack of being as follows: “There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship ‘wanting to be’ but rather ‘wanting to disclose being.’ Now, here there is not failure, but rather success. This end, which [wo]man proposes to [her]self by making [her]self lack of being, is, in effect, realized by [her] [...] This means that [wo]man, in [her] vain attempt to *be* God, makes [her]self exist as [wo]man” Humans do not desire to be, as they are already engaged in the process of being; instead, one desires to know the contents of her being, or to “disclose” being. The determinist may argue that being unable to perceive the contents of one’s being is

a failure of the individual, but Beauvoir argues otherwise: since the disclosure of being is realized by the individual, the individual ultimately has the power to direct the process of disclosure, as opposed to leaving the question of being to a transcendent, metaphysical structure. The individual directs the process of the disclosure of her being by attempting to achieve an unattainable end, such as becoming God. Ultimately, for Beauvoir, freedom is the ability to direct the process of the disclosure of being. For one’s freedom to be valid, the disclosure of being must return to the question of freedom. Beauvoir writes, “Freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. An end is valid only by a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end [...] It is not necessary for the subject to seek to be, but it must desire that there *be* being.” The lack of being establishes the value of the end that she herself establishes. Unlike the concept of value that Marx critiques, the value of one’s end does not cause the individual’s history of labor to disappear; instead, by directing the process of the disclosure of being, the lack of being has complete control over the ascription of value and the disclosure of history, which keeps the individual unalienated from her labor. The value of one’s end is only valid, however, if her freedom is affirmed in a way that allows the process to return to affirmed freedom. For this to occur, one must will that there be being.

In order to will one’s own being, one must also will the being of others. Beauvoir states, “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. One can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men. No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects. To make being ‘be’ is to communicate with others by means of being.” Humans are thrown into a world amongst other humans. Since the individual’s project is inherently interconnected with the projects of others, to will the disclosure of one’s being is also to will the disclosure of the other’s being. As one desires her own disclosure, so too does she desire the disclosure of all beings. Beauvoir argues that this is true of all individuals, including those that deny the freedom of others.

References

- Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York City: Philosophical Library, 1949.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Achtenberg for her continued support throughout my time at the University of Nevada. I extend my deepest thanks to Dr. Scott Mensing, Rossmery Diaz-Preciado and KaPreace Young for granting me the HURA to complete my research. I would like to acknowledge Heather Williams and Dr. Karla Hernandez for reviewing early drafts of the essay. I would also like to thank the honors program and Dr. Erin Edgington for allowing me to demonstrate the culmination of my intellectual capabilities.

“If it came to be that each man did what he must, existence would be saved in each one without there being any need of dreaming of a paradise where all would be reconciled in death.” (Beauvoir 1949)