

“The Bodily Experience of the ‘Second Sex’”

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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze the feminine style of movement and speech, which is imposed upon women by their oppressive situation. In order to pursue this investigation, I use Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of movement and speech to provide my study with a general account of these bodily experiences. I also use de Beauvoir's account of the situation of women to explain how this situation encourages women to adopt a feminine style of being-in-the-world. Finally, I argue that in experiencing the world in a certain way, women typically adopt a feminine style of movement and speech. As a result of an oppressive social structure, women experience space as confined, and this leads to a limited experience of movement and speech, in which women's creativity and freedom are restrained. I suggest that this analysis can be used to help explain the limited participation of women in practical and socio-political realms.

Introduction

Our life is nothing but having different types of experiences, experiences that are constituted by activities such as imagining, acting, feeling emotion and desire, and so on. What is intrinsic to being human is our conscious experience. Here, what is meant by “conscious” is not being involved in theoretical thinking; we normally do not think about our experience abstractly while in the process of undergoing it. Rather, each “I” knows that *I am* the one who is experiencing and *living through* different types of experience, and I relate to experience as intimately my own. Our specific kind of being is not separable from our experience.

Given the primacy of human experience, the phenomenological tradition claims that the most proper foundation of all philosophical investigations is the study of human experience, and phenomenology is the very study which undertakes this fundamental investigation. As Merleau-Ponty maintains, phenomenological study “is an attempt to provide a direct *description* of our experience such as it is.”¹ That is, phenomenology is the study of human experience in which the experience is not considered to be an object separate from the one who is undergoing it. Investigating human experience through the first-person perspective, then, is what distinguishes phenomenology from other sciences, which study different aspects of human life separated from the one who experiences those aspects. Ignoring this first-person perspective deprives us of a solid basis for other human sciences, because “science is the second-order expression of the basic experience of the world,” and without such a perspective “scientific symbols would be meaningless” (lxxii). In other words, my knowledge of the world and what I experience,

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), lxx. Citations of this text will be given in parenthetical references.

including my scientific knowledge, is based on a perspective, which undergirds any thematization of any object or set of objects in the world.

However, it may be asked how a study could describe human experience through a first-person perspective when there are as many perspectives as there are people in the world. Human experience has a general structure, which provides phenomenological study with a common ground. According to this common structure, our experience has general characteristics, one of which is that our experience happens against a background. We are not simply “beings,” separable from our environment. Rather, our experience unfolds as a relation to a world. We cannot be distinguished from the world, and our experience is tied tightly to it as background. Phenomenological discourse has called this inextricability from our environment our “being-in-the-world,” the totality of which must be taken into account if we want to investigate the conditions of our experience in general.

Another aspect of this common structure of experience is that our experience is always experience of *something*. We always think, imagine, change, feel, touch, and move *some thing*. Our experience is dependent on things outside us in the world, things that also need us in order to be experienced. We experience the thing or “object” as outside of ourselves *immediately*, never as the consequence of an extended process of logical deduction, for instance. Instead, we find things as outside of ourselves through what might be called a “pre-objective” experience, and this is again a characteristic of the common structure of our experience. In fact, without this fundamental pre-objective experience of things, we would not be able to think about them, because it is the pre-condition of any form of experience, including thinking.

Yet another aspect of this common structure of experience is that the world is not experienced as outside of one’s mind only; rather, it is experienced as outside of one’s body. As

Merleau-Ponty argues, the body is not an object among others in the world that “admits of external and mechanical relations among its parts or between itself and other objects” (75). Rather, our bodies are our points of view on the world. In other words, “the body is the vehicle of being in the world” (84), *not* the vehicle of consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty maintains, “having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein” (84). Indeed, what experiences is the conscious body; the body is where we start and continue to experience the world. What we see and do not see, what we do and do not do, and what we become and do not become depend upon the way in which we experience the world with our bodies throughout our lives. As Merleau-Ponty explains, we *are* in the world with our bodies, and only a phenomenological account of this pre-objective experience of the world lived by our bodies can provide “a common ground between ‘physiological facts’ (which are in space) and ‘psychological facts’ (which are nowhere)” (79). Without such a “common ground,” there would be no connection between these two different accounts about the same phenomenon of body.

According to this account of embodiment, to make a distinction between the mind as what understands and the body as the matter which carries out this source of understanding is incorrect. Rather, there is a conscious body which perceives, imagines, acts, moves, desires, and so on. In this way, the body is our power to experience the world in which we live, to deal with the objects around us, to aim at different kinds of significations, and to accomplish certain tasks and projects. In the process of accomplishing different tasks and projects, we are *engaged* in the habitual practices of everyday life with the “habitual body,” the body that *uses* instruments, and the body that experiences consciously prior to any objective perception. This body is what connects us to the world, and we are nothing but this body. As Merleau-Ponty asserts, “the

habitual body acts as a guarantee for the actual body” (84), the latter of which is the body considered as an object. That is, in order to be able to observe and investigate the body as an object, the body must already belong to a world and be engaged in habitual activities. In other words, my body is that which supports my attempts to make it into an object and observe it.

Thus, there are (at least) three common characteristics of the structure of experience: we are being-in-the-world; our experience is always an experience of something; and we do not live this being-in-the-world and experience these “somethings” with our minds, but rather live this experience with our conscious bodies. The fact that human experience has a common structure—it is being-in-the-world, it is *of* something, and it is bodily—does not deny, however, that each individual is situated differently in the world and experiences it in various ways. Despite the common structure of experience, each of us experiences the world through what Merleau-Ponty calls the “gaze” (*regard*) or “a certain manner of reaching the object” (69). We see the world through our own specific lens, which differs from one person to another. Each perspective focuses on objects from one and only one specific angle.

Our different perspectives and different experiences come from our different forms of “bodily situatedness” in the world. The way different situations in the world and different ways of bodily being-in-the-world affect different kinds of experience is exhibited, among other ways, in the differences between the experiences of men and those of women. My goal in this project is to analyze the difference between these two kinds of experience, focusing on the situation of women, and to discuss the influence of the specifically feminine situation on women’s experiences of movement and speech. My claim is that the limits imposed on feminine existence by society explain the relatively limited contributions to the practical and socio-political realms made by women. I will use the analysis of the situation of women by Simone de Beauvoir to

show that women are *situated* differently than men in the world, and that because of their different situations, they tend to *see* the world from different angles and experience it differently than men do. I will then employ Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily experience to highlight how experience is lived differently by women's bodies. A certain style of being-in-the-world that we will call "feminine" is imposed upon women, shaping their bodies to *move* and *speak* in certain ways. I will argue that this experience of being-in-the-world has been imposed upon women by oppressive social structures.

I develop my account of women's bodily experience of movement and speech in three chapters. In the first chapter, I explain Merleau-Ponty's account of the human experience of movement and speech through two separate sections. In the first section, I explain how the experience of movement is related to our experience of the spatiality of the body and other objects, how the body acquires new motor *habits*, and how a normal subject experiences movement. In the second section of the first chapter, I explain the expressive nature of speech from Merleau-Ponty's point of view, how the body acquires new *linguistic habits*, and how a normal subject experiences speech. In the second chapter, I discuss the situation of women in the world, and how the oppressive structures of patriarchal societies force her to live in a system of barriers and obstacles that lock her in a limited space and confine her to engaging in certain activities, which are considered as her service in a world made and ruled predominantly by men. Finally, in the third chapter, I analyze how the oppressed situation of women influences their experiences of movement and speech, again through two sections. In the first section of this chapter, I explain how the situation of oppression affects women's bodily experience of space and limits their movement and their ability to acquire new motor habits. In the second section, I

show how women's particular way of being-in-the-world is expressed by their particular style of speech, and how living the experience of oppression limits their ability to speak.

The specific way in which women tend to experience the world has led to a certain style of moving and speaking, which I will call throughout the following "feminine style." Although women are different in adopting this style, in that their style of movement or speech can be less or more feminine, and although, thanks to social and political action in pursuit of gender equality, the situation of oppression has improved over time, it is undeniable that a certain style exists, one whose development tends to keep women in the position of the inferior "other" to men throughout history. As I will argue, the effects of this process include the limitation of her participation in the practical and political realms of human life. By analyzing women's bodily experience of the world and its effect on their participation in different realms of society, we can see what fundamental changes have to be made in order for them to be able to act effectively and for their situation to undergo substantial improvement. That is, through a phenomenological analysis, we will be able to see that women's limited participation in our practical and socio-political worlds is rooted in the way in which they experience the world and are situated in it, rather than from some "natural" or physical limitations inherent to the female body.

Chapter One:

The Bodily Experience of Movement and Speech

Introduction

In order to develop a specific account of the feminine experience of movement and speech, in this chapter I explain Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of movement and speech as experienced by a human being in general. I discuss these two kinds of experiences in two sections. In the first section, I explain how the body experiences and inhabits space and how this experience of space makes it able to move. Then I explain the experience of movement and the process by which motor habits are acquired and by which the body understands motor significations, a process that shapes the subject's practical world. In the second section, I explain Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view of speech, which is different from the empiricist and intellectualist's views, and I explain the experience of speech and how the body is the power of signification and acquires linguistic habits in this experience.

Section One: The Bodily Acquisition of Motor Habits

Merleau-Ponty, in the chapter called "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity" of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, explains how the body gives the world a practical significance. The body is not an object among other objects, and so the space in which it moves and its movement are different from other objects. This, again, is a thesis that emerges from the

consideration of *experience*; it is a thesis about the way in which we experience our bodies and the way in which we experience objects. As Merleau-Ponty explains, there are two types of spatiality: “positional” and “situational” (102). “Positional spatiality,” also called “external space,” is the kind of spatiality that belongs to external objects, whereas “situational spatiality” belongs to the body and its parts. Objects are positioned independently in space; each object occupies a specific space that is outside of the space the other object occupies. Thus, when I say the book is beside the vase, the location of the book is described in relation to another *external* position. In this way, the location of each object is not dependent on the location of the others; rather, the locations of objects are independent and changeable. The type of spatiality that is specific to the body and its parts is different, however. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “my awareness of the location of my shoulders is enveloped in my awareness of my hands and my entire stance is read” (102). Although my hand can be *on* my shoulder, and although they are independent in some sense, I do not experience my hand and my shoulders as positioned independently in space. The awareness of where my hand is involves implicit awareness of where my shoulder is. Body parts are not alienated from each other, and there is an *internal* relation between them that envelops the space of each one in that of the others. My awareness of the locations of my hand and my arm when I am scratching my arm, for example, is not the same as the awareness of the location of the book and vase when I want to put them beside each other, since the former is the result of an internal coordinate and the latter is that of an external coordinate.

The internal coordinate, as Merleau-Ponty explains, comes from “the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its tasks” (103). In other words, I am aware of the space of my body parts, not because they are positioned in space like external objects, but rather because I am dealing with objects. Moreover, it is this awareness and

the internal coordination of the body parts that makes any external coordinate possible, and talking about the position of the objects as “on,” “under,” or “beside” each other could not make any sense “for the subject who could not be situated by his body in front of the world” (103). That is, we could have no sense of the relation between the locations of independently positioned objects if we did not experience situational space.

Merleau-Ponty explains that I am aware of my body “as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a body schema” (100). The experience of the space of one body part is inextricable from that of other parts, all of which are united to accomplish certain tasks. The body is not “an ensemble of organs juxtaposed in space” (103). In other words, I do not find my body parts as external objects and pieces laid beside each other. What is meant by “body schema” here is not the image of my body in my mind and a “summary of our bodily experience developed gradually throughout childhood” (101). Rather, it is the existence of the body in situational space, the very internal awareness of the location of my body parts as enveloped in each other, as a kind of determinate readiness. That is, the body schema is finding my body as a unity in and towards the world, which is a network of external objects and certain activities. It is an experience of the body dealing with objects and accomplishing certain tasks; it is what “gives a motor sense to the verbal instruction” (142). The body schema is what we need to be able to move and act.

As Merleau-Ponty maintains, “bodily space and external space form a practical system” (105). In this system, bodily space is the background without which external space could not be perceived or experienced. If I did not experience a body schema, i.e., finding my body parts enveloped by each other and engaged in certain activities and external objects, I would not find objects in different positions and external coordinations. The spatiality of my body is “the

background against which the object can stand or the void in front of which the object can appear as the goal of our action” (105). We are introduced into external space through the body, as the first model, which renders us able to experience the objective world.

The body schema is not the same as a body image. As Shaun Gallagher explains:

A body image consists of a system of perception, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body. In contrast, a *Body schema* is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring.... So, the difference between body image and body schema is like the difference between a perception (conscious monitoring) of movement and the actual accomplishment of movement, respectively.²

The body schema is in fact the basis for the body image, because in order to observe the movements of my body and develop a belief about it, I already have to have embodied experience. In this sense, the body schema works, as Scott Marratto writes, “as a kind of functional and coordinated directedness-in-movement” that guides movement prior to our adopting attitudes about it.³ Finding the body as a unified whole situated in space that makes sense in relation to oneself makes one able to move towards external space and objects.

Experiencing the body as a unified power, we are able to experience movement. Some of these movements are frequently performed by the body, as when it carries out repetitive projects and tasks. Merleau-Ponty calls such movement “habitual” or “concrete” movement (108).

² Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24.

³ Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 149. See especially pp. 148-155 for a detailed explanation of body schema in Merleau-Ponty’s account. In this section, Marratto reports the result of studies about infants’ motor abilities, which was conducted by Philip Rochat and others. According to these studies, infants are able to move their hands towards their mouths, while they even open their mouth, anticipating their hands. As Marratto explains, “this goal-directed motor action would seem to indicate that infants are born with a basic functional awareness of their bodies’ powers of movements and an ability to organize the movements of parts of their bodies in relation to each other” (150). Since these movements happens even immediately after birth, these results confirm that such an awareness, i.e., body schema, is prior to any observational cognition.

Concrete movement is that familiar action that is directed at an actual task and performed in a concrete milieu in which the body is engaged. For example, my movements when I am cooking food in my kitchen or when I drive to school are this kind of movement, in which my body moves in ways that have become sedimented, because of much repetition, so as to accomplish a project.

Merleau-Ponty explains, however, that a normal subject “does not have his body available merely as implicated in a concrete milieu. He is not merely situated in relation to the tasks set by his trade, nor is he merely open to real situations” (111). Rather, he can go beyond the actual and perform tasks that are unfamiliar or new, whether set by himself or others. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls “practical” or “abstract” movement, movement towards a possible practical milieu. If a ballerina, for instance, starts to learn belly dancing, the moves are abstract movements before becoming habitual and concrete. This ability to engage in abstract movement enables us to broaden our practical realm. If it were not for this ability, the body would not be able to hone and change its movements and enter into new practical milieus or create new practical milieus for itself.

Intellectual psychology wrongly explains this distinction, as Merleau-Ponty argues, by affirming that it “is the distinction between physiology and psychology, between existence in itself and existence for itself” (124). That is, intellectual psychology presumes that concrete movements are “automatic reflexes” performed by the body as an object, and that abstract movements are performed by the conscious subject. This explanation, however, is based on the assumed division between body and mind, which are associated with “thingness” and consciousness respectively. Merleau-Ponty rejects this view that considers the body the vehicle of the mind and consciousness. He asserts that the body with which we live in the world cannot

be considered an object, unless we isolate it from its “being-in-the-world” and *look at* it as or *take it to be* an object. Thus, he maintains that the difference between concrete and abstract movement is not that the first one involves “automatic reflexes” in the classical sense and the second one “presupposes a consciousness of the goal” (123). There is no human movement that is not conscious, so it is not the case that there are some movements that emerge from our thingness, which is located in the body, and other movements that emerge from our consciousness, which is located in the mind.

What makes concrete and abstract movements different, instead, is their respective backgrounds. Every movement has a background, and this background is not something external to the movement; rather, “it is immanent in the movement, it animates it and guides it along at each moment” (113). Our movements do not come from nowhere; they are guided by the milieu that has been fashioned around us through living in the world. As Merleau-Ponty says, “the background of the concrete movement is the given world, [while] the background of the abstract movement is, on the contrary, constructed” (113). That is, in order to perform a concrete movement there is no need to “make” a background, because the background is already made and the movement is performed on that familiar and regular basis. However, since there is no pre-made background for an abstract movement, in order for it to be performed a background is required and needs to be made.

The example of an actor can help us to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by given and constructed backgrounds. An actor has an actual life, which is the familiar milieu in which she engages in certain everyday practices. These practices make sense and are performed based on the background that has been formed since her childhood. However, when she is acting in a movie, she needs to create a background that is not actual. She *acts* as a doctor, for example, and

performs activities that are not included in her own familiar practical milieu. This ability to construct new backgrounds is of course not specific to actors. It is the ability of our bodies to throw themselves out of their actual milieus and practices and to make other possible practical milieus actual. The ability to perform abstract movement guarantees our free and creative activities. This also means, to be clear, that the actor's abstract actions are similarly not limited to those performed in her movies; rather, as a human being, she is able to perform creative and free movements whose backgrounds are fashioned by her.

In order to describe the ordinary experience of movement, Merleau-Ponty analyzes people who do not have an ordinary experience of movement. The patient Schneider is one such person; because of an injury, he cannot perform what Merleau-Ponty calls abstract movement. He is able to move his body when he is engaged in familiar tasks; however, he cannot follow instructions that ask him to move his body in certain ways. Merleau-Ponty says that the patient is capable of moving his habitual body insofar as he "need not seek a situation and a space in which to deploy concrete movements, this space is itself given, it is the present world" (108). However, for this patient this present, given world and this bodily space are the only milieu in which his body can move. What is missing for the patient is the ability to transcend this milieu and become connected to "external" space. The patient "is his body and his body is the power for a certain world" (109). For example, a similar patient who has been a carpenter for years can make a wooden box without any trouble, knowing how to use his arms and his tools, which are the extensions of his body and his bodily space. However, if he is asked to pick up the hammer with his left hand, he is not able to do so, because performing this task requires him to find the hammer and his left hand abstractly in "external" space, whereas he can only find the hammer when it is experienced "internally," as a resource for a concrete task.

As Merleau-Ponty argues, the patient is not able to construct a background for possible movements because “the patient is enclosed in the actual” (111). The patient’s body can only perform those movements that already have a background. Since every movement must have a background, the patient is not able to perform any movement other than the ones whose scope he already knows. Merleau-Ponty argues that “the normal function that makes the abstract movement possible is the function of ‘projection’” (114). This function enables the subject to come out of the actual and to organize “before himself a free space in which things that do not exist naturally can take on a semblance of existence” (114). That is, the function of projection is to set up a background for movement that does not already have a background, thus creating the conditions for the possible movement to be made actual.

According to Merleau-Ponty’s account, the normal subject is able to pursue new projects that he sets up and to broaden his existing practical milieu. The realm of abstract movement, then, is essential to our freedom in our practical life. For people who cannot perform abstract movement, however, “the world no longer exists... except as a ready-made or fixed world” (115). Facing a ready-made world, the patient lacks the freedom to set up a background for himself, and to move in an unfamiliar milieu and make it a part of his familiar world. For the normal subject, the body “acquires the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation” (143), and repetition of this new response leads to the acquisition of a “habit.” The patient is not able to inhabit new practical milieus and to acquire new habits.

In order for a habit to be acquired, the body must be open to being “penetrated by new signification” (148). This openness leads to the “understanding” of a new movement. This definition of habit, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, leads us to see the notions of “understanding” and “signification” in a new way. In this way, “the acquisition of the habit is surely the grasping of a

signification, but it is specifically the motor grasping and motor signification” (144). The patient who cannot perform abstract movements when instructed understands the intellectual signification of the instructions; however, the thought of the movement does not lead to the actualization of the movement without the understanding of its motor signification *by the body*. The body’s understanding involves being able “to experience the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization” (146). In each moment of the movement involved in my hand putting the cup of tea on the table, I am realizing the intention. This “I” is not my mind; rather, it is my understanding body. Understanding is the act of the body, as it realizes the intention of the movement. This realization makes the movement possible, and this is what Merleau-Ponty calls “motor intentionality” (112).

As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, habit is not a matter of knowledge or an automatic reflex that is acquired through repeating a movement; rather, it is the result of a bodily effort that leads to a bodily understanding of a new movement. What happens in the process of learning how to dance, for example, is not that the mind understands and the body moves; rather, it is the body that learns and grasps how to move in a certain way. This is the body that understands a movement and adds it to its familiar practical milieu. Learning how to play an instrument, as another example, is a process through which the body understands new movements guided by an intention. Mastering these movements, the instrument and its space become a part of the player’s body and bodily space. The body aims at a new sense that is not acquired by its mind and through the process of thinking; rather, it is a practical and motor sense that is understood by the body and through bodily efforts. This is what is meant by the claim that the body makes its own “significations”: it signifies the meaning of space with its self-directed movements. As such,

what prevents a person from performing abstract movements is her inability to understand new movements as new motor significations.

To summarize, Merleau-Ponty provides us with a phenomenological account of the bodily experience of movement. This account explains the relation of this experience with our pre-thematic engagement in the world and inhabitation of space. In this way, the body lives in space as a unity of power that is able to move towards what is outside its lived space and make it into lived space. With this ability, the body is able to go beyond its lived space and concrete movements so as to acquire new motor habits and perform abstract movements through the process of the bodily understanding of new motor significations. This is how the subject broadens her practical milieu and exercises her creativity and freedom in the practical realm. As we will see in more detail in the second chapter, this phenomenological account of the human experience of movement helps us to examine the problems and disorders that can be seen in movements performed by certain subjects.

Section Two: The Bodily Acquisition of Linguistic Habits

In the chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception* called “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty pursues a phenomenological investigation of speech, and examines how the body gives a social signification to the world. Since he believes that the classical dualities of subject-object and body-mind conceal what human experience truly is, he also believes that the traditional accounts of speech that rest on such dualities are not able to exhibit the nature of this experience properly. Thus, he aims to put these accounts aside and presents a different account that considers speech as a “deliberate act of signification” (179). As he characterizes it, since for

the empiricist the human being is reducible to the physical and causal relations that influence it, the empiricist's account of speech understands it as a physiological mechanism and a function of our nervous system. On the other hand, the intellectualist says that speech is the ability to subsume what is given by our senses under an *idea* and a *category*. This is because "to name an object is to tear oneself away from what its individual and unique properties are in order to see it as the representative of an essence or of a category" (181). In this way, there is a categorical operation behind the word that imposes sense upon it, "but the word itself does not *have* this sense" (182). In both of these accounts, words themselves have no meaning, and there is no speaking subject: that is, in the first account, the existence of the subject with a certain kind of nervous system is prior to the meaningful word. Speech is not an act experienced by a speaking subject; rather, it is a function performed by the physical mechanism of a subject, and this subject is not engaged in the sense-making process. And in the second account, there is a subject, but it is not a speaking one. Rather, thought conditions speech, and there is a thinking subject that is beyond or prior to words.

Merleau-Ponty maintains, in contrast to these traditional accounts of speech, that words have meaning. He believes that "the designation of objects never happens after recognition, it is recognition itself" (183). That is to say, there is no thought independent of its expression, and speech is not simply the indication of an independent thought. Rather, "speech possesses a power of signification of its own" (187). Merleau-Ponty explains that writing and speaking do not express previously formed thoughts; rather, speech brings signification and thought into being. This view is different from the empiricist's account of speech, which claims that people "can speak in the way an electric lamp can become incandescent" (180), and from the intellectualist's account, which considers speech as a mere container of thought. In this way, Merleau-Ponty calls

the idea of an “inner life” and of the existence of thought “for itself prior to expression” (188) an illusion. In fact, when we are silent and think that we are simply thinking, we are actually recalling thoughts that have already been expressed. By this account, then, thoughts come into existence when they are expressed, and there is no absolute separation between thought and speech.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the act of expression happens through gestures, and language is a gesture. There are two kinds of gesture: those in which we use words, and those in which we do not. What both kinds of gesture have in common is that they are the sense itself; it is not true that there are senses behind these gestures that these gestures simply express. The gesture of anger, as Merleau-Ponty explains, “does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself” (190). I read the happiness, anger, astonishment, and so on *in the gesture*, and it is not the case that I *understand* the hidden feelings behind these gestures.⁴

These two kinds of gesture and the ability to understand them make communication possible and make our engagement in a social world possible. Understanding certain gestures, i.e., understanding a certain language or having the ability to read certain non-verbal gestures, is the result of being in a certain world. In this sense, these gestures are parts of the equipment by which we are related to others in the world (189). We can communicate with others who have lived in the same world with us through both kinds of gesture. I can understand my sister’s words when she says “I am angry” just as I can understand her non-linguistic gesture of anger.

⁴ For a detailed discussion about the relation between language and gesture as a certain type of the embodied movement, see Chapter 5 of Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). In this chapter, Gallagher argues that there are four different types of movement: reflex (sneeze-automatic motor programs), locomotive (walking-body schema), instrumental (reaching-body schema), and expressive (gesturing-communication) movements. According to this account, non-verbal gestures and language depend on a certain type of movement that is not organized by the body schema; rather, it is expressive movement, as the actual movement of putting on a hat is different from its gesture.

When we communicate with others through speech, as Merleau-Ponty argues, “we do not communicate with ‘representations’ or a thought, but rather with a speaking subject, with a certain style of being, and with the ‘world’ that he aims at” (189). Speech is related to a certain style of being in the world. It is the act of expressing the world in which we live, and it is strongly and necessarily related to this world, in such a way that the experience of speech cannot be separated from the way we experience the world. Through being in a certain world, we use “available significations, namely, previous acts of expression” (192). We are in a world in which language is already *instituted* (189), and we see no division between the world in which we live and our linguistic world. It is in this linguistic world that our effortless communication and comprehension become possible. Insofar as communication and comprehension allow us in turn to *shape* our social world, the way in which it is shaped is based on the way we are already situated in it, for this situation is expressed through a certain type of speech.

As Merleau-Ponty maintains, there is a common but false belief about the origin of shared acts of expression. It is often thought that “emotional gestures and gesticulation are ‘natural signs,’ which are the result of having a certain nervous system, whereas speech is a ‘conventional sign’” (193), which is the result of living in a society and feeling the need for communication. He rejects this belief and explains that gestures are neither purely natural nor purely conventional. Even emotional gestures are not purely natural; if they were, there would be no difference between the gestures of people from different cultures. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “having the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects. What matters is the manner in which they make use of their body, the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion” (195). On the other hand, language cannot be purely conventional, because this would mean that the whole

system of a language is arbitrary and empty, and that we use different arbitrary language systems to express a single thought. However, as I explained earlier, language is not the expression of independently existing thoughts; rather, it is the expression of a world. The language we speak belongs to the world we experience. If there were a “universal thought” or a “universal experience” of the world, that would mean that there would be one language. Different languages, then, are “several ways for the human body to celebrate the world and to finally live it” (193). All gestures, including language, are both natural, which makes them dependent on a certain system of nerves and physical structure, and conventional, which makes them dependent on a social and cultural structure.

Language is a “habit” that my body acquires by living in and expressing a certain world. The body, which has a certain physical structure, develops linguistic habits to express its being-in-the-world through the experience of speech. According to Merleau-Ponty’s definition, habit is the developed understanding of a signification— whether motor or intellectual—by the body. What happens in our linguistic experience from our childhood on is the constant acquisition of linguistic habits, although many people stop this process at some point and remain in the realm of certain acquired habits and available sources of signification.

But in any given moment, we are in a world in which language is already instituted, and there is an already available source of significations that have been developed by human bodies to express the world to which they are inextricably bound. Merleau-Ponty calls this type of speech, which “enjoys the use of available significations like that of an acquired fortune” (203), “spoken speech.” This type of speech is the result of a linguistic and cultural world that works as a background for other possible significations. Just like those habitual movements that are merely performed to conserve our practical life, this type of speech conserves our social life

without adding new significations to it. However, speech is the power of signification (200); thus, it is in principle an infinite process of creating sense. Speech that is attuned to this possibility Merleau-Ponty calls “speaking speech.” Speaking speech refers to the act of signifying through which the body acquires a new habit and signification. As Merleau-Ponty says, when a child begins to speak, and when a philosopher, a scientist, or a writer brings new meanings to being (203), or when a lover talks about his/her emotions in new ways, new idioms are created; this is what Merleau-Ponty means by speaking speech.

It is in the realm of speaking speech that we are truly creating significations, and where there is no real distinction between thought and words. However, “a sense does not come from nowhere” (203); rather, speaking speech and spoken speech have a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, speaking speech and creating sense takes place in a context of available significations. A writer, for instance, uses these available senses in order to create new meaning understandable for people who live in the same world; thus, her speech is dependent on the realm of spoken speech that has already been established for the particular linguistic world. On the other hand, each new signification comes to join already created and established significations or spoken speech. Creating new significations through speaking speech makes our available significations richer and more sophisticated. Thus, spoken speech is also dependent on the new acts of signifying involved in speaking speech.

Since speech is the act of expression enacted by the body, and since the body is vulnerable to illness and inabilities, there are people who suffer from disorders in speech. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of patients with these disorders in order to clarify his account of the ordinary human experience of speech. For the patient Schneider, “the same word that remains

available to the patient on the level of automatic language escapes him on the level of spontaneous language” (180). Merleau-Ponty describes this situation as follows:

He hardly speaks unless he is questioned, or if he takes the initiative of a question, he only ever asks stereotypical questions such as those he asks his children each day when they arrive home from school. He never uses language to express a merely possible situation, and false statements (“the sky is black”) are meaningless for him. He can only speak if he has prepared his sentences in advance (202).

According to this example, the patient is unable to create new significations and acquire new linguistic habits. In other words, the patient is enclosed in actual speech and his available significations, and he is not able to go beyond this realm and make possible significations actual. The patient’s linguistic and social world is limited to the actual, never going beyond this actuality. That is, for the patient, language is not the infinite process of creating significations anymore; rather, this process has stopped at what is already actual, and he cannot aim to make new significations.

For a normal subject, however, language can be the open project of signifying, and can construct and broaden the cultural and social world around us. There is no cultural and social world for us without communication, and this world would remain at its basic level without the open project of signifying. This open project has made human communication more sophisticated, and has led to a broader and more complex social world. Living in a society means that we are living in a certain shared milieu, in which there are people with whom we can communicate and interact. That is, experiencing a common world, as the background of our experience, we are able to express our experience to each other. This communication is possible

according to common established discourses about different things that the members of a society experience. In this way, these members use a common source of words, terms, expressions, and linguistic structures. When the members of society experience something in a new way, or when they recognize an experience alternative to the one that is already dominant, new possibilities for discourse are opened. For example, the emergence of a new mode of reality like the internet allows for the development of a whole new set of words and expressions which come to shape the social world in a new way, changing the character of our communication with each other, our experience of space, our access to knowledge, and so on. When the experience of homosexuality was recognized, it gained its voice, changed the available source of significations about sexuality, added new significations to an existing supply.

In summary, Merleau-Ponty provides us with a phenomenological account of speech that exhibits its relation to being-in-the-world. According to this account, speech is the expression of the way we are in the world. It is not the expression of pre-existent thought; rather, the existence of the thought and its expression are not separable. Speech is the act of signifying and acquiring linguistic habits by the body. This power of the body provides us with an available source of spoken speech that becomes broader and richer through the ongoing input of speaking speech, which is a constant project of sense-making. This phenomenological understanding of speech helps us to investigate the root of problems in experiences of speech, and will act as the basis by which we can address the problems experienced specifically by women in the domain of language.

Conclusion

Our experience of movement has two layers: concrete movement, or movement that is performed repeatedly and based on a given and familiar background, and abstract movement, or movement that relies on the body undergoing the process of acquisition of a new motor habit and positing the new background that this habit requires. The bodily acquisition of a motor habit takes place when the body understands a motor signification, and this understanding is the result of bodily openness to being penetrated by new possible motor significations. This ability of the body to understand such significations makes it able to shape and broaden a practical world around itself and exhibits its practical freedom.

In the case of the experience of speech, first, speech is the act of signification and not a mere result of the physical function of our nervous system, nor a mere container for pre-made thoughts. Moreover, studying this act of signification shows that there are two layers of speech, one that enjoys the available source of significations and another that is engaged in the open project of signification. Merleau-Ponty calls the former “spoken speech” and the latter, which shapes and broadens the socio-political world of the subject, “speaking speech.”

This discussion of the human experience of movement and speech in general provides us a basis upon which to investigate not simply human experience as such but the experience of women in particular. Let us now take this general structure of the human experience of movement and speech and use it to investigate the limited practical and socio-political participation of women in the world.

Chapter Two:

“The Second Sex” in the Cage of Oppression

Introduction

In her introduction to *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir asserts that each human being is situated in a unique concrete way, and the way in which women happen to be situated is *different from* the way in which men happen to be situated.⁵ Although we are all human beings, and although we cannot determine exactly and forever what it means to be a woman or a man, we cannot deny the fact that, *situationally*, these two categories of individuals are clearly distinguishable in society. In this chapter, I discuss the situation of women in the world and how they experience a certain style of being-in-the-world that characterizes them as an oppressed group, which I will follow Iris Marion Young in calling “feminine.”⁶

“Femininity” can be used in different contexts and can convey different meanings. What I mean by this term is based on Young’s definition, which is “a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves.”⁷ In this sense, women’s experience of femininity varies from woman to woman, and not all women should be understood to be feminine. According to their individual situations and particularities, some women might be less or more feminine than others, or there might be women who are not feminine at all.

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 4. Henceforth citations of this text will be made in parenthetical references.

⁶ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005), 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Therefore, in explaining the situation of women, I do not deny the particularity of women's experiences and the result of women's individual and collective actions in changing their oppressive situations. There are women who believe that the experiences that I discuss in this chapter do not completely accord with their experiences, and there are women who would find similarities between this description and their own experience. However, what cannot be denied is the existence of systemic oppression and injustice experienced by women as women in many societies, which keeps women in positions inferior to those of men and supports a feminine style of being-in-the-world. What I discuss is this oppressive situation and this style of being, which, despite recent remarkable changes in the situation of women, still exists.

The Feminine Experience of Being-in-the-World

The particular expectations that come to condition the experience of many women can be seen in various aspects of their lives. In their domestic lives, women are often expected to do housework and childcare more than men. This expectation forces or persuades them to spend their time working at home and nurturing their children instead of being employed outside of the home in the context in which they can make money. This expectation influences women's economic agency and keeps them economically dependent on men who become the economic "heads" of their households. Although in other cases women also work outside the home and support the household financially, this participation did not change the expectations of women to perform the bulk of the labor related to housekeeping and child-rearing. Rather, the new responsibility of supporting the family financially was simply added to the old responsibility to run the household. As a result, a woman who has a job is hardly considered successful if she

does not also meet the deep-rooted expectation to perform housework and childcare proficiently.

Moreover, in terms of their employment status, women are paid less than men to perform the same jobs, keeping them economically dependent on men even in spite of their labor outside the home. It is also less likely for a woman to obtain top career positions or careers that are related to leadership and governing. In fact, there are certain jobs that women are not expected to take because they require physical strength, and women are not expected to be capable of performing the required tasks properly. This assumption results in fewer available positions for women in such jobs and fewer applications from women overall.⁸

Regarding their sexual life, women are expected to care about their appearance and appear sexually attractive and to follow certain social standards of beauty, yet at the same time are restricted in the expression of their sexuality. As Marilyn Frye explains, if a woman is not sexually active or does not keep up with social standards that determine sexual attraction, she is labeled as “cold,” “frigid,” and so on.⁹ But she could also be thought of as sexually promiscuous and be criticized if she shows that she is sexually active and ascribes to the social standard of beauty. In addition, the female body has often been objectified, reflecting the expectation that women ought to be sexually passive. In this way, it is not surprising that one of the few professions for which women are paid more than men is the porn industry, which is mostly based in the objectification of their bodies.¹⁰ This objectification of women’s bodies is also

⁸ As an example of discussions about the exclusion of women from certain occupations that require physical strength, see Maia B Goodell, “Physical-Strength Rationales for De Jure Exclusion of Women from Military Combat Positions,” *Seattle University Law Review*, Vol. 34, No. 17 (2010). This article observes that although the number of women joining the U.S. military has been increasing in recent years, the military is one of those areas that exclude women and do so with the support of governmental laws. The article examines the factors that are given to justify this exclusion and argues that they are not sufficient to do so.

⁹ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1941), 3.

¹⁰ For discussions of the wage difference between men and women in the porn industry, see Marianne Mollmann, “Women CAN Earn More Than Men – But Only in One Industry. Porn,” *Rewire*, March 16, 2012, <<https://rewire.news/article/2012/03/16/women-can-earn-more-than-men-but-only-in-one-industry-porn/>>, and Maggie Freleng, “Women Earn the Most in This Industry, Except When Men...,” *Vitamin W*, April 10, 2014,

accompanied by their vulnerability to sexual harassment and rape.

In bodily activities such as athletics, women have made limited contributions throughout history. Women's sport is a relatively new phenomenon, and men still dominate this realm.¹¹ Although there are women who participate in different types of sports, women are not usually encouraged to pursue athletic activities, especially the ones that require great muscular strength. A female athlete usually does not accord with the accepted image of "a lady" and is considered "tough" and "masculine," and this is one of the reasons that people do not usually follow women's sport events and do not find them worth watching. In addition, being largely ignored by the mainstream media, women can hardly exhibit their abilities in the world of sport, which was defined by men and for men.¹²

Another of the realms in which women are not expected or encouraged to engage is academic realm and academic positions. Women hold fewer faculty positions globally, and they often earn less than men as faculty members.¹³ The participation of women is particularly limited in the scientific fields. Women are not expected to work in the sciences, and their chances of being hired as faculty members or researchers are much less than those of men.¹⁴ The number of

<<http://vitaminw.co/culture-society/women-earn-most-industry-except-when-men>>. In these articles, we can see how this difference exists and how it is used to claim that men are getting paid less than women in some professions and that they therefore also experience wage inequality.

¹¹ For more information about the beginning and the development of women's sport, see Lucy Danziger, *Nike Is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports*, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999).

¹² For an interesting study about the participation of women in sport competitions, see Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-century Women's Sport* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). In this book, Cahn explains how the entrance of women in the sport scene, which was a "male" realm, has influenced the construction of U.S. sport in twentieth century. Based on this explanation, she also analyzes how people form gender and sexuality arrangements, and how people's activities are confined by their beliefs about gender and sexuality.

¹³ For a statistical resource about the participation of women in academic positions, see "Women in Academia," *Catalyst*, July 9, 2015, <<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-academia>>. In this report, we can see the percentage of this contribution in the academies of six countries.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive survey about the participation of women in science academies, see "Women for Science: Inclusion and Participation in Academies of Science." *ASSAF Academy of Science of South Africa*. ASSAF, February 29, 2016, <http://www.assaf.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=254:women-underrepresented-in-world-science-report-finds&catid=20:assaf-news&Itemid=116>. This document reports the result of a survey published by Academy of Science of South Africa and supported by the global network of science

female inventors has also been much less than male inventors in different fields throughout history,¹⁵ as women are thought to be less capable of working in laboratories and scientific sites. Additionally, although the number of female writers has increased remarkably in recent years, male writers still dominate the worlds of literature and literary criticism.¹⁶

From this admittedly brief description we can see differences between the situation of women and men in various aspects of their domestic and reproductive lives, their respective degree of economic agency, their employment conditions and opportunities, their sexual lives, their physical engagement with the world, and their possibilities for academic and literary work. The extent to which women experience limitations in these realms varies from one person to another, based on their personal lives and the specific societies in which they live. However, what cannot be denied is that the situation of women is different from that of men, and this situation, as exhibited in their everyday lives, limits their opportunities for their active engagement in the social, political, intellectual, and physical realms of society. In order to understand and change this oppressive situation of women, we need to investigate the root of these differences.

There have been many attempts to explain the difference between the situations of men and women, some of which, as de Beauvoir notes, introduce “feminine essence” as the root and try to prove that such an inequality is natural and inevitable. De Beauvoir argues, however, that

academies (IAP). This report shows that the average participation of women in 69 national science academies is only 12%.

¹⁵ For a detailed statistical analysis about female inventors, see Jessica Milli, Barbara Gault, Emma Williams-Baron, Jenny Xia, and Meika Berlan, “The Gender Patenting Gap,” *Institute for Women’s Policy Research*, IWPR #C440, July 2016, [iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/C441%20\(2\)](http://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/C441%20(2)).

¹⁶ An American organization for women in the literary arts, Vida, has examined a noticeable number of publications, including the *New Yorker*, the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Granta*, in 2014, and has claimed that gender imbalance still exists in all those publications, both in the choice of reviewers and of books that are chosen to be reviewed. See “The 2015 VIDA Count.” *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*. 30 Sept. 2016. Web. <<http://www.vidaweb.org/the-2015-vida-count/>>.

there is no such thing as a feminine or masculine essence; rather, every human being's existence is defined by social, historical, cultural, and economic circumstances and situations (4). These circumstances and situations have brought it about that there are women and men in concrete life, and that their different situations affect their lives in real ways, but this is a truth of *experience*, as phenomenology sees it, and cannot be used to confirm anything about essences. As I have said, our lives are nothing but the undergoing of different types of experience, and these experiences appear against the necessary background of our being-in-the-world. The way we are situated in the world brings about a certain style of being, and thus a certain way of engaging the possibilities for our experiences. There is nothing that we can access prior to the experience itself, and as such there is no explanation for experience to be found outside that experience. We cannot say that we are born with a fixed identity and essence, nor can we say that our identities fixed by us at some point in our lives. What we know is that we are always in the process of *becoming*, and this process takes place and is shaped by the particularities of our particular situations. In this sense, a change in our situation can influence who we are, what we experience, and in the end who we become.

De Beauvoir maintains that the situation of women is at bottom defined by the fact that there is a nonreciprocal relationship between men and women. In this relationship, woman is determined in relation to man, and he is not determined in relation to her (6). Her description builds on Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which Hegel analyzes the way in which the self-conscious individual encounters itself and others. As he maintains, self-consciousness finds itself to be the one to whose desire the world answers. What self-consciousness sees around itself is a world of objects over which it seems to have absolute dominion. However, in its encounter with another self-consciousness, it finds this other as

“something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes.”¹⁷ That is, self-consciousness finds itself faced with something that has the same claim of essentiality as its own claim. In this different experience, self-consciousness attempts to posit itself as the essential subject in opposition to the other, which is posited as inessential. However, as we know, Hegel asserts that self-consciousness should develop itself so as to find itself in a reciprocal relation of recognition with the Other. In this way, consciousness would be simply acknowledging what it is to be a self, which is to require recognition by another self-consciousness, to be independent only through one’s dependence. It is through this fundamental opposition and the subsequent mutual recognition between two individuals that a self-conscious individual becomes a subject capable of confirming its own essentiality.

Hegel’s account can help us to understand the nature of the relationship between men and women, which has led to the oppressive situation of women in a man-made world. As de Beauvoir argues, although the duality between Self and Other is “as original as consciousness” (6), and all individuals or groups define themselves in opposition to an Other, the mutual relation has not typically been seen in the case of sexes; one sex has often asserted itself as the essential one, denying any relativity, while the other has come to be treated as if her entire existence was merely to serve the recognition of that essentiality. As de Beauvoir argues, there is much evidence in literature, philosophical works, and religious texts to show the way in which inferiority and inessentiality are attributed to women as compared to men. And as we have seen, there are real examples in women’s lives that exhibit the dependence of women on men in different aspects, such as domestic life, economy, knowledge, sexual life, and so on.

There is no doubt that, as women and men have made efforts to redress the problems women have encountered historically, the situation of women has changed over time. Moreover,

¹⁷ G.F.W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977), §182.

the particularity of each woman's experience in different families and societies, which shapes her opportunities and possibilities, cannot be denied or ignored. However, as de Beauvoir writes, there is "a common basis which underlies every individual female existence" (279). Although there are women who have had the privilege of being treated equally to the men around them, or who have won the fight to retain their rights in their personal lives, every woman's life is in some ways influenced by the socio-historical circumstances that impose an inferior situation upon them and prevent them from contributing to society in the same way that men do. No woman can escape completely the social significance of her sex, and women who try to reject the consequences of the imposition of femininity are still facing the consequences of the long-established hierarchical distinction between the two sexes.

De Beauvoir argues that women have experienced oppression, just as people of colour and other oppressed groups have experienced it. In order to understand the situation of women as oppressed, Frye's definition of oppression is helpful. The term "oppression," as Frye explains, is often misunderstood and misused, as what is usually implied by this word is the experience of "limitation" and "suffering."¹⁸ In this sense, if someone states that women are oppressed, it can also be claimed that men are oppressed too, since they also face certain limitations and suffer in some ways in their lives. Similarly, if oppression means facing limitation and suffering, a white person can claim that people of colour are not the only ones who find themselves suffering from racism and the difficulties of oppression; white people also suffer from prejudices and from feeling shame for being white. However, although every human being's life is confined by some sort of limitation, facing limitations is not the equivalent of facing oppression. People can suffer without being oppressed.

¹⁸ Frye, 1.

As Frye explains, oppression has two main characteristics. First, oppression is a macroscopic phenomenon. That is to say, “the experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction.”¹⁹ Frye uses the example of a cage to describe an oppressed person’s situation. She explains that if one looks at the wires of the cage separately, one can ask why the bird does not go somewhere else. But when one sees the cage as a set of attached wires and a whole, it becomes evident that the bird is not able to go anywhere.²⁰ Oppression is often invisible because it is difficult to see it as a network. A white person might be shamed for being white sometimes, or be a victim of anti-white activity, but her life is not confined to a network of limitations because of her race, a network from which there is no escape.

In the case of women, looking at individual women’s lives and not being able to see the situation of women as inferior and oppressed is similar to looking directly at one wire of the cage and not seeing the whole thing. This is what Frye describes as seeing the oppressive situation “microscopically” rather than “macroscopically.”²¹ Considering women’s situation as a “macroscopic phenomenon,” however, we can see the system of forces “which conspire to the immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives we live.”²² Women’s lives are shaped inside this network; thus, they are systematically prevented from entering certain realms in society. In this way, as Bailey explains, “when the effects of sexism, for example, are not understood macroscopically as the products of systemic injustices, they are understood

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*

microscopically as the exclusive problems of particular women who have made bad choices, have poor attitudes, are too sensitive, or who are overreacting to a random incident.”²³ Thus, oppression cannot be seen if we fail to see it as a system.

The second characteristic of oppression, as Frye notes, is that oppression does not happen to an individual. That is, “to recognize a person as oppressed, one has to see that individual as belonging to a group of a certain sort.”²⁴ No individual is the mere “inhabitant” of the cage of oppression; rather, it is a group of people that, because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and so on, experience oppression. Frye agrees with de Beauvoir that it is difficult for many people and even women themselves to see women as an oppressed *group*, because “they have been fooled by the dispersal and assimilation of women throughout and into the systems of class and race which organize men.”²⁵ Although men can be oppressed, for example, as a member of a specific racial group, they are not oppressed as men.²⁶

Frye’s analogy of the cage can help us understand the different experiences of oppression that women have. For instance, some women might face more barriers because of their individual situations, while there are some women who, as women, experience the cage of oppression with fewer wires around them because of the same reason. For example, a woman whose husband thinks that the most proper place for a woman is her home and the most appropriate job for her is raising her children faces more limitations on activity outside of the home than a woman whose family supports her social activity. Moreover, some women can be members of other oppressed groups, and this means that they experience cages of oppression

²³ Alison Bailey, “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s ‘Oppression,’” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1998), 105.

²⁴ Frye, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For further remarks on Frye’s discussion of oppression, see Claudia Card, “Oppression and Resistance: Frye’s Politics of Reality” *Hypatia*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1986): 149-166. Card explains how men cannot be considered as oppressed as men, although they can be oppressed because of other aspects of their identity, such as their sexual orientation or their race.

“inside of” each other. For example, a black Muslim woman typically faces more limitations than a white Christian woman.²⁷

Frye argues that there is a specific experience that puts women in cages similar to those of other women. This common experience is their *service*, which, no matter their race, class, or other significant differentiating characteristics, “includes personal service (the work of maids, butlers, cooks, personal secretaries), sexual service (including provision for his genital sexual needs and bearing his children, but also including “being nice,” “being attractive for him,” etc.), and ego service (encouragement, support, praise, attention).”²⁸ These services are common activities for women, performed in the limited space inside the wires of the cage of oppression. One might say that women often willingly perform these activities and no one is forcing them to, in most cases, so that performing such services cannot be considered a result of oppression. However, the problem is that first, the word “*service*” gives a certain meaning to an activity. These activities have been considered by men and many women as services to men throughout history. For the one who is serving the other, the goal is “serving,” which means that the server does not focus on her own goals. Rather, she provides the required circumstances in which someone else’s goals can be achieved. Since her activities are limited to these services, the server stays where she is, while the one who receives the service moves forward with his own projects. In this way, even if a woman provides these services willingly, the aim of the activity, which is someone else’s flourishing, and its consequence, which is standstill for her, remains the same. Second, even if a woman provides these services willingly, these activities are specifically the

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of oppression based on Frye’s analogy, see Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 1-15. Roberts maintains that all oppressed groups have common experiences, and these common experiences lead us to believe that there is actually one oppression rather than many. She also argues that considering oppression as a singular phenomenon can help oppressed groups move towards freedom and equality as a common goal, instead of standing against each other as distinct groups.

²⁸ Frye, 9.

ones that are “allowed” within the cage. And the system of oppressive structural forces will usually appear only when a woman attempts to perform other activities from which she has been prohibited historically. For example, when a woman tries to be politically active and successful, the system of barriers may oppose her, excluding her from an essentially man-made structure, in which she cannot easily survive. Thus, stating that *women are good at these activities* has the negative connotation that *they are not good at anything other than these activities*.

As de Beauvoir asserts, these behaviors, which provide a common ground for women, one according to which they can be considered a *group* of people who experience the same situation, are not “dictated to woman by her hormones or predestined in her brain’s compartment: they are suggested in negative form by her situation” (638). That is, what puts women in the same cage of oppression is not that they have a female body or a female essence; rather, women’s activities and behaviours, whose details can vary based on their cultures and personal situations, are imposed upon them by the situations they inhabit. Women live in a world that has been “shaped” and is generally “ruled” by men, and the service they have been told to provide is posited as their specific responsibility. As de Beauvoir observes, women are “enclosed” in their bodies and their homes (639); there is a specific familiar space posited for them in which they are required to be engaged in certain activities. The world, as de Beauvoir believes, “does not appear to a woman as a ‘set of tools’ halfway between her will and her goals” (639), and this is because she does not set up the goals by herself. The goals are set and the tools are chosen by her situation, so it is improper to imagine that there is an independent will here that seeks its own means for achieving its own goals.

De Beauvoir explains that since the world has been shaped by men, it is ruled by what she calls “masculine reasoning” (640). This reasoning tends to be under-employed by women,

because the activities in which they are engaged do not require “masculine logic.” That is, “masculine reasoning is not relevant to the reality she experiences” (640) because she does not do the activities that are considered “real.” A woman is not encouraged to make her thoughts herself; rather, she is expected to think pre-made thoughts, to adopt the position of one who acquiesces to the way things are done. She is not empowered to have her thinking lead to a project; her thoughts are expected to go no further than the realm in which she is engaged. She is not encouraged nor expected to think, talk, and write in her own way, there is no “way” for her to adopt, and there is no use for such activities in the cage anyway.

The world is given as it simply is to a woman, and, according to de Beauvoir, she is encouraged to believe that there is nothing that she can add to this given world. The future does not appear as open to her, and her history is not a process of “becoming.” As de Beauvoir explains, the woman “is busy without ever doing anything” (644), because what she usually does is repeat herself, as she is not encouraged to be creative or adventurous. Time is different in the cage of oppression; it is not going anywhere. She is engaged in routines, as “time has no dimension of novelty for her, it is not a creative spring; because she is doomed to repetition, she does not see in the future anything but the duplication of the past” (640). Engaging in *real action* needs courage and ambition, which are not nurtured in her, and it takes a lot of effort for her not to merely repeat the kinds of activities that do not require the confidence she lacks, and to raise her confidence and be involved in other activities.

It can be said that there are a lot of men who simply enact routines, who also do not seem to be changing and shaping the world. This is true, but, to refer again to what Frye says about oppression, the situation is different for women, because there is *always* an “I can’t” mixed with a woman’s will. She is not encouraged to do activities related to “shaping,” “creating,” and

“ruling,” and even if a woman wills to engage such activities, the system of barriers does a lot to frustrate and discourage her. A man may also face problems and obstacles and fail to achieve his goal, since “it seems to be the human condition that in one degree or another we all suffer frustration and limitation.”²⁹ That is, social structures impose barriers on everyone, and everyone inevitably practices freedom within these barriers. Indeed, human freedom does not make any sense outside this structure which conditions the wills of human beings. But the barriers men face as men come from the necessities of human life, and not from a systematic oppression that encloses them in a certain situation. The barriers that block the individual’s will constitute that individual’s oppression, as Frye believes, if the *context* has the characteristics of oppression, or, in other words, if the barrier is part of a network of barriers and is imposed upon a group in order to immobilize its members.³⁰

As de Beauvoir asserts, every subject finds itself as a “transcendence” (16). That is, as de Beauvoir believes, every subject “is originally free, in the sense that he spontaneously casts himself into the world” and “projects [himself] toward something.”³¹ In this way, the human subject is not doomed to be stagnant within a situation; rather, it is able to transcend itself by surpassing its present to move towards new ends. Every subject accomplishes its freedom through its projects and its continuous movement towards an open future. The subject never finds itself completely accomplished at any specific point of its life; rather, it finds an open path ahead of itself to take, despite the barriers that might appear on this path. When this transcendence fails and the subject takes a step back to immanence, its freedom is blocked. This failure can be caused by oneself, which is a moral fault, or by others, which is considered oppression. De Beauvoir believes that there is an “absolute evil” in both cases (16).

²⁹ Frye, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), 25.

The oppressive situation that I have explained above leads to and maintains a feminine style of being-in-the-world, and it involves in the incapacity to live authentically in relation to the aspect of transcendence. The feminine style of being-in-the-world, according to this explanation, can be formulated as follows. The woman who adopts this style, as a human being, wants to posit her existence as transcendence; however, she finds herself in a world in which she is obliged by men to consider herself as an immanent other. She is forced to choose immanence, and her transcendence is transcended by the will of an oppressive consciousness that is taken to be essential. In this way, she struggles between her claim to transcendence and essentiality, on the one hand, and the situation in which she is considered an inessential object, on the other. This struggle between transcendence and immanence, which is imposed upon her by a man-made world, prevents her from participating in practical and political realms and making history.

The limited participation of women in history has brought about false presumptions about their abilities and has reinforced their oppressive situation. In this way, “great men” have been said to occupy history, and whenever women are successful in any practical or political field, these successes are considered exceptions. We do not typically hear news about men who have done something for the first time unless when by “men” what is actually meant is “humanity” as a whole. By contrast, one regularly hears news about women who have done for the first time a thing that men have already done in the past. What often makes us admire successful female politicians, writers, or athletes is that they could achieve such successes despite being women. However, in fact what should be admired is that, despite living within a system of oppression that encloses women in a specific space and time, some women have been able to participate in history. On the other hand, some people use the examples of “successful” women to show that gender inequality no longer exists, and that women can be successful and active practically and

politically if they want to. This is similar to saying that, because there are some black people who have been successful politicians in recent years, black people no longer experience oppression. However, success on the part of some black individuals does not make the network of limitations that black people experience deniable. Similarly, what women experience in their everyday lives confirms that although significant progress has been achieved, we are still far from the eradication of oppression.

Conclusion

Women have been living a particular situation throughout history. This situation has resulted in a feminine style of experiencing the world. Living in a man-made world with its own logic and rules, women have been trapped in a system of barriers that has prevented them from *doing* anything but what male-dominant society has wanted them to do. There are certain activities and habits that are considered *their* activities. These activities tend not to be genuinely transcendent actions, since they are repetitive and not based on the creative positing of goals and setting up of projects that propel development. Existing social structure and the expectations associated with it tend to lead women to take the same path repeatedly, while at the same time celebrating men's achievements, which are thought to make human life better and broaden the human world. Having experienced systematic oppression, women have not been active in the practical and political realms. In the next chapter, I build on Merleau-Ponty's accounts of speech and movement to explain how this oppressed condition leads to a certain style of *embodied* being-in-the-world.

Chapter Three:

The Feminine Bodily Experience of Movement and Speech

Introduction

As I have explained, de Beauvoir believes that every human being is situated in a certain way, and Merleau-Ponty argues that our experience of our situations is a bodily experience. In this chapter, I use Merleau-Ponty's accounts of space and movement and of speech, which I have discussed in the first chapter, to explain the feminine bodily experience of movement and speech in the particular situations that I discussed in Chapter Two. This explanation exhibits how the bodily experience of women is affected by and can affect the situation of women, and shows how feminine experience of the world has led to limited participation on the part of women in practical, social, and political fields.

This chapter has two sections. Through these two chapters, I show how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be used to understand the experience of women in their particular situation. In the first section, I show how Merleau-Ponty's account of spatiality, concrete movement, and abstract movement can be used to understand the feminine bodily experience of movement. I believe that the experience of oppression influences the feminine experience of space, which subsequently leads to a specifically feminine experience of movement. In the second section, using Merleau-Ponty's account of speech, I discuss the feminine experience of speech in the oppressed situation. Women have been practically and politically less active than men throughout history, and this is the consequence of a certain experience of being-in-the-world, which leads to a certain experience and style of movement and speech. Thus, analyzing women's

experience of movement and speech will help us to understand the root of their limited participation in the practical and socio-political realms. In this chapter, I follow Young in using “feminine existence” instead of “woman” to show that what I am discussing here is a certain style of being, called “femininity,” which although is the result of women’s oppressive situation and is mostly attributed to women, not all women experience it to the same extent. In this sense, there are also men who are considered as feminine, but just because they are adopting behaviors that are originally attributed to women.

Section One: The Feminine Experience of Movement

In her essay called “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” Young maintains that “there is a particular style of bodily comportment which is typical of feminine existence.”³² There are particular ways of running, throwing, fighting, sitting, walking, and performing other bodily movements that are usually considered feminine, and there are studies that focus on these particular styles and their difference from non-feminine styles.³³ A feminine bodily style, according to Young, is a style in which body parts are kept close to each other, and feminine movement is understood as weak and ineffective movement, movement in which the body is not fully engaged with its whole power. Some physiological and physiological studies try to explain the root of the sex differences in movement, and they mostly relate these difference to physical and muscular

³² Young, 31.

³³ For a detailed study of sex difference in human movements, see Warren O. Eaton and Lesley Enns, “Sex differences in human motor activity level,” *Psychological Bulletin* 100, no. 1(1986): 19-28. This study examines sex differences in activity level using the result of 127 independent sex-difference studies as well. The study indicates that men are generally more active than women, although social influences can change this result in particular cases.

strength or a “feminine attitude” towards the world that is rooted in a “feminine essence.” However, as I have argued in the second chapter, it is unreasonable to posit that there is a feminine essence; rather, every human being is situated in a certain way, and this situation is to some extent definitive for them. Moreover, although there is a real difference between the structure of men and women’s bodies and their muscular strength, what is known as a feminine style of movement is, according to Young, “due not so much to brute muscular strength, but the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks.”³⁴ Living a particular *situation*, feminine existence uses and moves her body in a particularly feminine way.

Having been encouraged to experience their bodies as fragile and incapable of doing and creating certain things, women are discouraged from discovering the brute capacities of their bodies, in turn causing them to be excluded from participating in many of the practical activities in which our society engages. For instance, for years, the world of sports championships was dominated by men, and although women’s sport is recognized today, this is still a recent development. There are certain male-dominated occupations, such as firefighting, military combat positions, and so on, to which women do not normally apply because of a physical strength requirement. Though they may in fact be physically capable of lifting the required weight, women often avoid carrying heavy items because they assume in advance that their bodies are not capable of performing the task, causing them not to develop the strength of which their bodies are not inherently incapable. Teenage girls do not usually try hobbies such as skateboarding because they seem too dangerous to them. These examples show the lack of confidence of a group of people who in fact have different bodily structures and strength, individually speaking; however, their *common situation* causes them to consider their bodies as not strong enough *because* they are women.

³⁴ Young, 33.

According to Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body, we experience the world with our bodies. We begin from the body and move towards the world of possibilities with that body, and our actions shape the world by turning possibility into actuality. Living in the situation of oppression, feminine existence experiences her body "as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment" of her aims.³⁵ She has confidence in her body to perform those actions that sexist society wants her to do, i.e., *services*; however, she usually does not engage her whole body in other actions, especially the ones that require physical strength, because she already assumes that such action is beyond her bodily ability. That is, she does not have the required confidence to use her body, because she is worried about her body getting hurt more than focusing on performing the action. For example, the first time that I was trying to learn how to play volleyball, I couldn't easily follow the instructions because I was so afraid that the ball would hurt my fingers, or, when the ball was coming towards me, instead of focusing on the move that I was supposed to make, I would try to protect my body against the ball. This experience of the body leads to a frustration that can easily lead one to stop the practice. This lack of confidence limited my ability to engage the entirety of my capacity for movement into the activity in which I was engaged.

As discussed in the first section, Merleau-Ponty links the discussion of movement to the discussion of spatiality, since it is our bodily experience of space that enables the body to move. That is, as I have explained, experiencing the location of body parts in situational space as enveloped in each other makes the experience of the body as a power to move towards external space possible. It is in the relation of bodily and external space that a practical system is shaped. In this way, the experience of movement is related to the experience of space, and the first step in the analysis of feminine movement is an analysis of feminine spatiality, because feminine

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

existence, as a human being, experiences her body as a unity in “situational space,” a space that belongs to her body, in a way, and makes dealing with external objects possible. The situational space gets broader as a result of the habit of *using* objects and having a lived relation to them, which leads one to experience them as akin to body parts, as a cane is for a blind person. For feminine existence, moreover, as with other forms of human existence, there is “positional space,” which belongs to external objects that are independently positioned in space, their locations external to each other.

Observing the style of feminine movement, however, shows us the main characteristic of feminine spatiality. Situational space for a normal subject, as Merleau-Ponty argues, is the space of “I can” and of “familiarity,” since it is in this space that the body is experienced as a powerful unity and united with its surroundings. This power pushes the body forward to move outside of familiar realms and links it to unfamiliar realms, making them available and eventually familiar. Feminine existence, however, experiences space in a way that “the space which belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted, and the space beyond is not available to her movement.”³⁶ That is, situational space, for feminine existence, is circumscribed or limited. For feminine existence, space is divided into two parts: the space that belongs to her and the space that does not easily seem available to her. That is, the “practical system” that is the result of the link between bodily and external space is not formed or is not formed properly, precluding the performance of effective actions.

Being enclosed in a limited situational space in which some familiar movements are performed and other movements are impossible renders activity for feminine existence limited. Young explains how feminine spatiality is exhibited in the movements of feminine existence, using the following examples:

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

Women tend not to open their bodies in their everyday movements, but tend to sit, stand, walk with their limbs close to or enclosed around them. I also observed that women tend not to reach, stretch, bend, lean, or stride to the full limits of their physical capacities, even when doing so would better accomplish a task or motion. The space, that is, which is *physically* available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space which she uses and inhabits.... A further illustration of this confinement of feminine lived space is... that in sport, for example, women tend not to move out and meet the motion of the ball, but rather, tend to stay in one place and react to the ball's motion only when it arrives within the space where she is.³⁷

These examples and other similar examples show how the experience of space is limited for feminine existence, which is the basis of the limitation of her practical realm in general. As a human being, feminine existence has the capacity to move, the general guidelines of which are provided by the body schema—that is, by her awareness of the unity of her body in situational space. However, the required link to the spatially external domain is hard to form for her; thus, her space of activity is confined.

Using Merleau-Ponty's account of movement, we can see that the range of feminine movement is usually limited to those movements the scope of which is known and familiar, i.e., concrete movements. As I have explained, concrete movement is movement that is performed habitually by the body, the background of which is already constructed. This is what de Beauvoir explains as being engaged in repetitive actions and not having new projects and goals to accomplish. Abstract movement, on the contrary, is movement that broadens one's practical milieu and involves the acquisition of new motor habits, and its background needs to be

³⁷ *Ibid.*

constructed. Feminine existence, according to this account, has a more difficult time performing abstract movements. This distinction helps us to see the roots of the limited movement and limited practical participation that often characterizes feminine existence.

What is not fully developed in the specifically feminine style of movement we have discussed is the “function of projection,” the function by which the subject mobilizes in front of her a free space in which to move, a space in which she can make a possible movement actual. Her capacity to experience space as expansive is restricted by the existing state of social structure and the expectations associated with it, and she is expected to perform certain kinds of activities and not others. For those movements that she is expected to perform in her confined space, the background is already given by a man-made society that defines her position and determines the activities associated with that position. She has been taught by society to act in a certain way from her childhood, and the expected activities are coherently performed based on an already given background. That is, she is mostly engaged in certain concrete movements that are performed based on a given background. She performs these movements habitually in the limited space that she finds as hers. However, since she usually does not experience an open space towards which she can move, she is not empowered to construct a background for a possible action outside her space and she faces frustrations performing an abstract movement. She is nurtured to see her body as the power of moving in “her space,” and it is not easy for her to see herself capable of changing and participating in the performance of movement that requires her to go beyond this space. Outside her space, she does not usually trust her body to be able to perform a movement, so she typically avoids abstract movements and stays in the realm of concrete and habitual movements, those which she can trust her body to perform.

Being enclosed in an existing practical milieu and not trusting the body to be able to perform outside this milieu means that feminine existence does not normally put herself in the situation of acquiring new “habits” in addition to her familiar habits and activities which are expected from her by society, and she does not usually take up inhabitation in new practical milieus outside the familiar practical milieus that are defined for her. As Merleau-Ponty believes, in order for a habit to be acquired, an “openness” is needed; the body should be open to new significations, and this openness leads to a *bodily* understanding. In the case of feminine existence, this openness can hardly be experienced. The feminine body does not come to understand new motor significations, because the open space in front of her required for the acquisition of such a habit is unavailable. In her confined space, certain movements are available to her and possible for her to perform, but the possibility of acquiring new motor habits and aiming at new motor significations is not similarly available.

Observation of the feminine experience of movement exhibits that having difficulty performing abstract movements, which have the capacity to broaden one’s practical milieu, is not merely caused by physical injuries, as in the case of patients like Schneider (as we saw in the first chapter). Rather, having a non-ordinary experience of movement can be the result of a person’s social and cultural situation as well. In spite of the similarities between feminine experience and Schneider’s experience of movement, the roots of their experiences are different. Moreover, since some physical injuries are not curable, the patient’s experience of movement cannot be expected to change. However, in the case of feminine existence, since it is the social situation that leads to the limited practical milieu, a change in this situation can result in a change in the experience. In other words, femininity is never fixed and ineradicable because it is not a physical, natural, or essential problem. As Young argues, feminine experience of movement is

the result of the “lack of practice in using the body and performing tasks.”³⁸ However, this does not mean that it is merely the lack of individual effort; rather, “for the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop specific bodily skills.”³⁹ In the cage of oppression, the experience of feminine existence is formed in a certain way, but the cage of oppression does not need to be a permanent situation.

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler maintains that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as a mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519).⁴⁰ That is, one’s gender identity is not a fixed identity with which one is born; rather, one is encouraged to repeat the acts that are associated with femininity, for example, so that the actor and the audience believe in femininity as a fact. On the one hand the acts are performed by individuals, but on the other hand it is as if social structure and cultural context “direct” the acts. As Butler argues, “gender is an act which has been rehearsed” by individuals, according to a social and cultural script.⁴¹ The performativity of gender shows that femininity and feminine movement is not unchangeable, and acts change as the script changes. The script of gender performance in sexist societies keeps the practical milieu of feminine existence limited and enclosed. However, given the performative and therefore contingent character of this script, changes to that script that encourage her to move and engage the world more fully can literally “open space” for her. Considering gender as performative in this way confirms the fact that feminine existence is not

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 526.

limited in the same way as the patient is, as the limitations on her experience, *qua* social, are anything but permanent.

De Beauvoir explains that the conditioning to perform acts in the feminine style begins in the woman's childhood. As she argues, "the passivity that essentially characterizes the feminine woman is a trait that develops in her from her earlier years" (de Beauvoir 294), and the way girls and boys are treated in terms of their physical activities is different. The girl is warned about getting hurt; she is told that she shouldn't get dirty and that she should be careful about her clothes more than boys. Whereas boys usually "serve a veritable apprenticeship in violence, developing their aggressiveness, their will for power, and their taste for competition," girls "exactly at this moment renounce... rough games" (343). Everything around her, from her mother's advice to "her historical and literary culture, the songs, and legends she is raised on" (303) lead her to be a "true woman," a woman who is as feminine as she can be. She accepts her limited practical milieu and is not even aware that space and the possibility of movement in various directions can be open to her body because "the more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile, and the more she actively enacts her own body inhabitation."⁴² Thus, feminine movement takes shape without confidence having been planted in her body, and that is why she would only relate to certain tasks as unfamiliar, as beyond her bodily capacity.

As I have explained, according to de Beauvoir, every human being finds herself as transcendence, a constant movement towards possible choices and an open future. We have invoked Merleau-Ponty to show how this transcending process is pursued *in action*: by aiming towards new motor signification and developing new motor habits, i.e., performing abstract movements. The situation of feminine existence imposes a certain path upon her transcendence,

⁴² Young, 44.

providing specific limits and restrictions. Feminine existence does not find her body as a power directed towards infinite possible movements; rather, she finds it as a power to move in a certain space engaged in certain activities.

Thus, feminine existence suffers from an oppressed subjectivity which limits her freedom, her creativity, and the realm of her “I can.” As Merleau-Ponty believes, “for any lived body, the world appears as the system of possibilities which are correlative to its intentions” (131). However, for feminine existence, the system of possibilities and her intentionality are confined, and this confinement is not because of the frustrations imposed by human condition, in which everyone faces frustrations and barriers in one degree or another; rather, it results from the specific network of barriers imposed upon women’s lives by their oppressive situation. As Merleau-Ponty believes, “along with existence, I receive a way of existing, or a style. All of my actions and thoughts are related to this structure” (482). The feminine style of movement exhibits what she has received as her way of existing in a sexist world and the cage of oppression, and all of her actions and thoughts are related to this structure.

This lack of confidence in the body to perform abstract movements is of significant consequence for the issues that continue to face women and that we identified above: the character of their domestic, economic, sexual, and intellectual life. Bodily lack of confidence has an impact on how women take up space. It can cause women to remain in a sheltered sphere, keeping them at home and convincing them that domestic life, house work, and childcare are all that they should be involved in. They experience the home to be the environment in which they are the most comfortable, as this environment only requires of them the habitual movements they already feel comfortable performing. This assumption that women are good at performing certain activities and not others activities *by their very nature*, an essentialism that is confirmed to her by

her limited practical participation in society, makes many women believe that they should stay at home, which in turn decreases their engagement with the social and political realms, prevents them from applying to certain jobs that are considered men's jobs, and maintains the gender wage gap. All of these consequences can, in turn, lead to the economic dependence of women on men.

Concerning their sexual life, women's distance and lack of trust in their bodies can lead to their sexual passivity. In their sexual life, many women act based on what men want them to do, instead of acting authentically. This limitation of her authentic movement also limits the character of women's engagement in physical activities and affects their participation in sport. The more a woman develops trust in her body to be capable of moving in new ways, however, the more she finds herself capable to do things that are not expected in the cage of oppression, and this confidence will help eliminate the false assumptions about her capability to perform transform her world.

Section Two: The Feminine Experience of Speech

Just as there is a certain style of movement characteristic of the feminine, there is a feminine style of speech. Experiencing the situation of oppression, women are encouraged to adopt this feminine style of speech, although there are, again, women who do not adopt this style. This style is an unassertive or less assertive way of speech than the masculine style of speech, which is more forceful. As Robin Tolmach Lakoff writes, the feminine style of speech

appears in different levels of grammar.⁴³ She asserts that differences between the feminine and masculine styles of speech can also be seen “in the choice and frequency of lexical items; in the situation in which certain syntactic rules are performed; in intonational and other supersegmental patterns.”⁴⁴ For instance, as Lakoff notes, some lexical items are associated with the feminine and “*ladies*” are expected to avoid use of certain particles. What is relevant here is the strength of these particles and how strongly they allow one to express oneself. For example, a lady does not use “oh, shit” or “damn”; instead she says “oh, dear” or “oh, my goodness.”⁴⁵ Some adjectives are associated with the feminine, such as “adorable,” “sweet,” “divine,” and so on.⁴⁶ There are certain words that are associated with feminine usage, such as “mauve” or “lavender.” Also, in a feminine style of speech, sentence-forms are less assertive. For example, the frequency of using tag questions is higher in a feminine style, as such questions are less forceful, sound more *polite*, and leave the decision open.⁴⁷

As I have explained, we cannot make any claims about such a thing as a feminine essence, and the root of this style of speech should be sought, rather, in the situation of feminine existence. In fact, this style is the result of her *involvements* and the way she her *use* of language develops according to her everyday dealings. Her space to move is limited to the cage of oppression, and since this cage becomes her world, her style of speech typically matches her confined, oppressed situation in the world. The difference between “mauve” and “lavender” may seem trivial and irrelevant to a masculine existence, and if he uses such words one may think that he is imitating a woman or homosexual. However, for feminine existence, these words might

⁴³ Lakoff explains the characteristics of feminine style of speech in the English language, but she maintains that these characteristics can be found in other languages used in other societies in which women have been considered inferior to men. As a Persian speaker, I can clearly see these characteristics in the Persian language as well.

⁴⁴ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

easily be included in everyday, active vocabulary, because deciding if something is lavender or mauve might become important in her dealings. Also, the fact that men can express themselves more forcefully shows their “position of strength in the real world: for sure we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions.”⁴⁸

As I have explained, Merleau-Ponty believes that language is an open project of signifying that causes a social and cultural world to be constructed around us. Women have had very limited participation in this construction. For years, women were not encouraged to write, or they kept their writings and poems in private, as unshareable personal belongings. As Hélène Cixous believes, “nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition... that has been operating and turning out its ‘truth’.”⁴⁹ Throughout history, such a tradition determined what was “right” or “wrong,” what was “real” and “unreal,” and what was “important” and “unimportant.” That is, there is a kind of epistemology dominant throughout history, a theory of knowing that evaluates differently the knowledge of men and the knowledge of women. This epistemology, as Audre Lorde asserts, comes from the way our “european white father,” such as Descartes, saw the world; it is a man-centered and man-identified epistemology.⁵⁰ In this way, a large population of the world has been excluded from production of what is considered to be knowledge about the world.

This man-centered epistemology has produced a dominant language for its expression, a dominant language that is supposed to express a “universal experience” of being in the world. Thus, as Lorde asserts, feminine existence sees herself “diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusation of childishness, of non-universality, of changeability, of sensuality,” which

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs*, (1976), 880.

⁵⁰ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2007), 37.

prevents her from having confidence to express the way she experiences the world in her own way.⁵¹ Women have not written because, as Cixous maintains, “writing is at once too high, too great” for them, as “it is reserved for ‘great men’.”⁵² Just as feminine existence is not involved in shaping her practical world, neither is she involved in shaping and broadening the social and cultural world.

Language, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, is a *habit* acquired by the body to express a certain world, and it is strongly related to a certain style of being in the world (189). This habit is acquired based on the available significations that have already been created, since we come to the world in which language is already instituted. We all depend on and benefit from the available source of signification, which is enriched by the constant project of signifying. This available source of signification, which Merleau-Ponty calls “spoken speech,” works as a background that makes the act of signifying, i.e., speaking speech, possible. Feminine existence, however, has been encouraged to use available and pre-made significations and discouraged from participating in the process of signifying. In other words, the linguistic world of feminine existence is typically limited to the realm of spoken speech and is not empowered to enter the realm of speaking speech. Her body acquires a certain type of linguistic habit, because she experiences the world in a certain way, which expresses her style of being as enclosed in what is actual, inferior, and inessential in a man-made world, which is expressed with a man-made language. Thus, although there are women who stood against oppressive situations and are engaged in the project of signification, feminine existence has been generally kept removed from an “authentic” usage of language, and, even if she creates any signification, it tend to be irrelevant to the real world and associated with inessential parts of it.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cixous, 876.

The feminine experience of speech shows that the inability to perform speaking speech is not merely the result of physical injuries, such as the situation of the patient described by Merleau-Ponty; rather, social structure and one's situation in the world can influence the ordinary experience of speech and the ability to create sense. Merleau-Ponty's account can help us see how the experience of oppression influences women's experience of speech. Experiencing herself as the other, feminine existence is unable to speak in an authentic way. As Josephine Donovan writes, in this situation, "to enter the public realm of history... means in a sense to capitulate to male domination. But to remain in the pre-literate, pre-Oedipal realm of the Mother, of female dominance and authenticity, means to remain silent."⁵³ Here, remaining silent means being enclosed in the realm of spoken speech and not having *real speech*, which builds up a social and cultural world around us by giving voice to new experiences.

As Lakoff explains, a sexist society influences women's experience of speech in two ways: "in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them."⁵⁴ In these ways, women's bodies are taught to acquire certain linguistic habits, which are known as feminine, and by the acquisition of these habits and the usage of a certain style they actively enclose themselves in those habits and confirm their inability to have an ordinary experience of speech. Society, in the form of family members, friends, or teachers, keeps the little girl in a certain realm of speech, which is removed from creativity, by punishing, scolding, and ridiculing her for talking roughly or using forceful language, just as it prevents her from aggressive activities and physical competitions. As Amy Sheldon explains, "the prescription of silence has historically restricted women and girls from expressing their authentic voice in

⁵³ Josephine Donovan, "Toward a Women's Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (1984), 102.

⁵⁴ Lakoff, 39.

speaking and writing.”⁵⁵ The girl is taught to speak “politely” and “nicely,” not disruptively. She is told to “avoid conflicts and not to let the disagreement reach to the point of confrontation; thus, she is less assertive, less forceful, and unable to tolerate or resolve conflicts.”⁵⁶ In learning these lessons and acquiring this certain style of speech, the girl, and the woman she will become, is in turn thought to be unable to speak forcefully, properly, and precisely so as to be able to participate in serious conversations.

The structure of our social world, which has been built up with little participation from feminine existence, keeps her away from the power that comes from the authentic expression of one’s individual and particular style of being in the world. As Joanna Ruth writes, women’s expression in any form of art, especially writing, has faced prohibitions throughout history, and “it is important to realize that the absence of formal prohibitions against committing art does not preclude the presence of powerful, informal ones.”⁵⁷ One of the most powerful informal prohibitions is discouragement in the form of convincing someone that writing is not for her or that nobody will take her writing seriously. However, if a woman writes, despite prohibitions, the man-made system, including readers, writers, publishers, academia, institutions, and so on, attempts to discourage her by associating with her a masculine mind or by denying her experience as inferior or less than man’s experience and thus denigrating her work, by absorbing it into men’s categories.⁵⁸ This suppression has made many women believe that they are not able to write, they should not make their writings public, or they should write with male pen names in order to be read by public. Considering this situation, it is not surprising that feminine existence has not participated in the process of meaning-making throughout history. Although this

⁵⁵ Amy Sheldon, "Talking Power: Girls, Gender Enculturation and Discourse," *Gender and Discourse* (1997), 288.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁷ Joanna Ruth, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983), 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

situation has changed substantially during recent years, there are women who still experience this suppression or deal with the long-term effects of this situation. For instance, while studying philosophy at the University of Tehran, my female classmates and I always faced this suppression in many ways. If a woman received a good grade for her writing as a course requirement, it would be considered as the result of her good relationship with the professor, or the way she knew how to write for that professor to receive a good grade. However, if the same thing happened to a male student, everyone assumed that he received a good grade simply because he wrote well. Having faced these different types of discouragement, many female students still dealing with the lack of confidence when they try to write.

Having been kept away from the sense-making process and the dominant understanding of knowledge, the experience of feminine existence has been neglected and she has remained silent. This silence, consequently, has perpetuated her inferiority. As T. V. Reed explains, the women's movement "understood that knowledge was power, and that knowledge/power was vested in language."⁵⁹ Thus, there was a need for a "new language" that expresses a silent experience of being in the world, a language that is not dependent on a man-made, given source of significations, i.e., spoken speech. As Lorde believes, there is a dark place within each feminine existence where "an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and recorded emotions and feeling" is held, and the only way to reveal this hidden source is *to speak*—to speak about lived experiences, which have remained unspoken.⁶⁰

As I have explained, spoken and speaking speech are mutually dependent. In order to make new sense, an available source of significations is needed, and in order to make available a

⁵⁹ T. V. Reed, "The Poetical Is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Right," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, Ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 93.

⁶⁰ Lorde, 36.

source of signification, new significations need to be made through an open project of signifying. In this way, new significations make this source richer and make the expression more sophisticated. When feminine existence does not participate in the process of meaning-making, however, there is not available to her a source of signification that will allow her to express the particular character of her experiences as it is distinguished from that of the experiences of men.

To speak is for the body to acquire linguistic habits, and keeping feminine existence away from speech is the result of keeping her away from her body. She is convinced to ignore her body and consider it incapable, and just as she finds the capability of her body to acquire new motor habits limited, so also does she find the capability of her body to acquire new linguistic habits limited. As Cixous believes, writing will return feminine existence “to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.”⁶¹ She finds her body to be a stranger, she is removed from it, and so she does not find it as an agent of speech; rather, it *reads* a script written by others. For feminine existence, writing exhibits the body’s power of expression and gives her “access to her native strength.”⁶²

Returning to the body and its strength, feminine existence shows up in the political world and participates in shaping the social world, rather than being locked up in her personal sphere. Speaking, as Lorde believes, gives a name to the “nameless” and “formless”, and makes what is considered “non-political” and “personal” shareable.⁶³ In other words, speaking gives sense to what has been considered senseless and expresses it. Speaking about her experience, feminine existence creates new language and builds new social constructions. This new language adds new dimensions to the already existing social world, as women who have been silent, force the world to “hear” their particular experiences. As Cixous believes, this is “the beginning of a new

⁶¹ Cixous, 880.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Lorde, 36.

history.”⁶⁴ For this new history to be shaped, feminine existence should speak and write. She should express her way of being in the world in order to change her situation.

Among different types of speech, poetry has often been emphasized by women’s movements as the best tool with which to break the silence. As Jan Montefiore explains, “poetry is, primarily, the stuff of experience rendered into speech; a woman’s poems are authentic speech of her life and being.”⁶⁵ Because it is speaking speech in its purest form—because it is about new forms of signification—poetry may be the best way of expressing what has been unexpressed. As Lorde maintains, “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”⁶⁶ Poetry expresses the subject’s lived experience as it is in a pre-thematic stage; i.e., it is the expression of living an experience, rather than thinking it. As Reed writes, “good poetry makes personal experience available to others by giving it an outward form.”⁶⁷ If silent experiences need to be expressed by a new language, that new language should rise directly from experiences, and poetry is an ideal way in which this can happen.

As Lorde asserts, “for women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.”⁶⁸ It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into ideas, then into more tangible action.”⁶⁹ The current way of thinking is mostly the result of the expression of a masculine style of being in the world and a masculine signifying process, which mutes the expression of other styles of being. Poetry as a form of speech, because of its direct connection to the subject’s lived

⁶⁴ Cixous, 882.

⁶⁵ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing* (London: Pandora, 2007), 3.

⁶⁶ Lorde, 37.

⁶⁷ Reed, 90.

⁶⁸ Lorde, 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

experience and her style of being in the world, is a primary means of participating in the open project of signifying and, consequently, producing a new way for thinking.

The meaningfulness of women's experience is not communicable in spoken speech, since that speech has been constructed on the basis of their silence. In order for her experience to be heard, new forms of speech and new significations must be made. Women have not been confident in talking about their experience of oppression in their domestic lives, workplaces, or sexual lives in a way that brings into being a "new language" capable of expressing the particularity of that experience. Their particular ways of knowing have been excluded as illegitimate, and as a result are excluded from the process of meaning-making, causing them to be limited in their contributions to academic and literary worlds. Although the assumption that the literary world is not a proper place for women to be involved has been proven wrong by many great female writers, this world is still dominated by men precisely because feminine existence has been constrained—externally—in her capacity to use her body to create and express new significations, both in her movement and her speech.

Conclusion

In being condemned to a particular situation, feminine existence experiences space as confined. She is encouraged to see "here" as available space for her, and "there" as a space that is available to seemingly more capable others. She can move her body in her limited available space, but an oppressive social structure makes it difficult for her to see her body capable of moving outside this space. This limitation of her space makes her movements limited to certain movements that are her motor habits, i.e., "concrete movement." The ability to acquire new

motor habits, i.e., “abstract movement,” has not been empowered in her as a result of her experience of systemic oppression. Feminine existence does not easily see her body as a power to make actual the possible movements outside her limited space, which is the power that makes her practical world broader. In this way, she faces difficulties in participating in activities that shape our world in a fundamental way. This lack of participation shows how social structure can affect the experience of bodily movement and how change in it can change the experience of feminine existence in practical sphere.

Experiencing a limited space to move and not being involved in shaping the world, feminine existence experiences the world as capable of being expressed in a certain limited way. The expression of her “un-involvement” is her spoken “silence.” Masculine language is the expression of a masculine style of being in the world, which has been dominant throughout history. Feminine existence has remained silent about her experience, enclosed in the storage of “spoken speech” that is developed and bestowed to her by patriarchal society, and this has limited her ability to participate in the open project of signifying, acquiring new linguistic habits by her body and employing “speaking speech.” As a result, no way of thinking was formed based on her form of speaking, and she is considered by society as not being able to think properly or think constructive and serious thoughts. This is how an oppressive social structure influences her experience of speech and keeps her removed from the political and social world.

Conclusion

Given that they have existed in a man-made world and been judged according to masculine-centric ideas about how to live a human life, women have been considered inferior to men throughout history. This inferiority has often been attributed to a “feminine essence” that is inherent to women and has been used to justify women’s oppression, positing it as a factor that determines us, beyond our control. As we have seen, however, de Beauvoir argues that there is no such “essence,” as the character of every subject is shaped by the experiences she undergoes. With regards to the subject born female, this often means experiencing oppression. Although women experience this situation in different ways, and although there are women whose lives are less influenced by an oppressive situation because of the privileges granted by their personal or social lives or because of their individual or collective acts of resistance to this situation, women are typically encouraged to adopt a “feminine style.” In this phenomenological project, I have used Merleau-Ponty’s account of bodily experience of movement and speech and de Beauvoir’s account of the situation of women to argue how the experience of oppression can influence women’s style of being, analyzing their typical bodily experience of movement and speech. I have argued that the embodied situatedness of women includes oppressive impositions on their bodily experience of movement and speech that suppress their inherent capacity for transcendence and creativity, leading to their limited contributions to practical and socio-political domains throughout history.

According to Merleau-Ponty’s account of movement, subjectivity ordinarily experiences its body in a situational space, in which the location of each body part is enveloped in that of another. In this space, the body is experienced as a united power to explore external objects,

which are positioned beside each other in external space. This experience of body as a united power makes the body able to move and experience external space and to add it up to its situational or “lived” space, in which she can experience her power to shape the world around her. Feminine existence is nurtured and encouraged not to engage the external space available, and as a result, it is difficult for her to bridge the gap between “her space,” in which she has confidence in her body to move, and the space outside of her space, in which she is not habituated to move.

Merleau-Ponty argues that movement is a habit that is acquired by the body and is performed in situational space. The acquisition of a motor habit is the process of understanding a motor signification by the body through habit-forming repetitions of certain movements. Merleau-Ponty calls these motor habits “concrete movements,” which are performed based on a given background that is already constructed. However, in order to develop a new habit, i.e., abstract movement, the body needs to construct a new background and move towards external space. In being barred from certain experiences of space, the movements of feminine existence are often limited to repeated and habitual ones, and her ability to be creative in her capacities for movement is suppressed, limiting her options for ways of being in the world. She is encouraged to adopt a feminine style of movement that shows her undeveloped and suppressed ability to perform abstract movements. In this way, although there are women who stand against this suppression, the participation of women in practical realms has been limited throughout history.

Regarding the experience of speech, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the body acquires speech as a habit to express a certain style of being-in-the-world. Experiencing the world in a certain way leads to using a certain language to describe that experience. However, we express our experience of the world *both* by using an already available source of signification in spoken

speech and by creating new significations in speaking speech. Feminine existence, experiencing the world limited to the cage of oppression, experiencing a confined space, and being encouraged to be engaged in repetitive and trivial activities, is nurtured to adopt a certain style of speech. She is encouraged to rely on the available source of significations, which have mostly been cultivated by men to express their experience of the world. In this way, her ability to engage in speaking speech and to speak authentically is suppressed. Although there are individual women who are involved in making new significations through remarkable novels, poems, essays, and the like, women have been mostly discouraged from breaking their silence, creating significations, and expressing their experience. This discouragement has kept women away from creativity in the realm of speech, and has limited the participation of women in socio-political realms.

This phenomenological account of the experience of women exhibits that what society and women themselves need to “know” and “show” is that the situation of women is not a determinism, and it is tightly related to the bodily experience imposed upon them by social structure. In order to change patriarchal history, on the one hand, women, instead of being actively implicated in acting according to problematic expectations with regard to their bodies, should attempt to train their bodies in order to develop their abilities. There have always been women who have fought against the adoption of feminine style of movement and speech, and other women should see them not as special women who have special abilities that women typically lack, but instead as models who exemplify the fact that women, as human beings, have the capacity to creatively resist the style of being-in-the-world that is imposed on them by oppressive society. On the other hand, since oppression is a system of barriers imposed on women as a group, we cannot ignore that women’s resistance against adopting feminine style of being can face different sorts of frustrations. In addition to women’s attempts to be included,

society needs to be open to the inclusion of women in practical and socio-political realms. In this way, the more women disrupt this oppressive system, stand against discouragements, and develop their bodily power to act and speak, the more the structure of society is obliged to accept them and see them as individuals who can participate in shaping the world. And this acceptance, in turn, encourages more disruptive actions, and provides a better environment for women to flourish. Informing men and women about the specific ways in which women's bodies are oppressed through consciousness-raising projects can empower women to contribute to making a non-patriarchal history. It is time to make this history by empowering the bodies of women and helping little girls to develop their bodies so as to develop their experiences of movement and speech freely and authentically.

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