

# Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality\*

IRIS MARION YOUNG

*Department of Philosophy, Miami University*

In discussing the fundamental significance of lateral space, which is one of the unique spatial dimensions generated by the human upright posture, Erwin Straus (1966) pauses at "the remarkable difference in the manner of throwing of the two sexes"<sup>1</sup> [p. 157]. Citing a study and photographs of young boys and girls, he (Straus, 1966) describes the difference as follows:

The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position. . . . The ball is released without force, speed, or accurate aim. . . . A boy of the same age, when preparing to throw, stretches his right arm sideward and backward; supinates the forearm; twists, turns and bends his trunk; and moves his right foot backward. From this stance, he can support his throwing almost with the full strength of his total motorium. . . . The ball leaves the hand with considerable acceleration; it moves toward its goal in a long flat curve [p. 157-158].<sup>2</sup>

---

\*This paper was first presented at a meeting of the mid-west division of the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) in October 1977. Versions of the paper were subsequently presented at a session sponsored by SWIP at the Western Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association, April 1978; and at the Third Annual Merleau-Ponty Circle meeting, Duquesne University, September 1978. Many people in discussions at those meetings contributed gratifying and helpful responses. I am particularly grateful to Professors Sandra Bartky, Claudia Card, Margaret Simons, J. Davidson Alexander, and William McBride for their criticisms and suggestions. Final revisions of the paper were complete while I was a fellow in the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship in Residence for College Teachers program at the University of Chicago.

<sup>1</sup>Erwin W. Straus, *The Upright Posture*, in *Phenomenological Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 137-165. References to particular pages are indicated in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Studies continue to be performed which arrive at similar observations. See, for example, Lolas E. Kalverson, Mary Ann Robertson, M. Joanne Safrit, and Thomas W. Roberts, *Effect of Guided Practice on Overhand Throw Ball Velocities of Kindergarten Children*, *Research Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, May 1977, pp. 311-318. The study found that boys had significantly greater velocities than girls.

See also F. J. J. Buytendijk's remarks in *Woman: A Contemporary View* (New York: Newman Press, 1968), pp. 144-115. In raising the example of throwing, Buytendijk is concerned to stress, as am I in this paper, that the important thing to investigate is not the strictly physical phenomena, but rather the manner in which each sex projects her or his Being-in-the-world through movement.

Though he does not stop to trouble himself with the problem for long, Straus makes a few remarks in the attempt to explain this "remarkable difference." Since the difference is observed at such an early age, he says, it seems to be "the manifestation of a biological, not an acquired, difference" [p. 157]. He is somewhat at a loss, however, to specify the source of the difference. Since the feminine style of throwing is observed in young children, it cannot result from the development of the breast. Straus (1966) provides further evidence against the breast by pointing out that "it seems certain" that the Amazons, who cut off their right breast, "threw a ball just like our Betty's, Mary's and Susan's" [p. 158]. Having thus dismissed the breast, Straus considers the weaker muscle power of the girl as an explanation of the difference, but concludes that the girl should be expected to compensate for such relative weakness with the added preparation of reaching around and back. Straus explains the difference in style of throwing by referring to a "feminine attitude" in relation to the world and to space. The difference for him is biologically based, but he denies that it is specifically anatomical. Girls throw in a way different from boys because girls are "feminine."

What is even more amazing than this "explanation" is the fact that a perspective which takes body comportment and movement as definitive for the structure and meaning of human lived experience devotes no more than an incidental page to such a "remarkable difference" between masculine and feminine body comportment and style of movement. For throwing is by no means the only activity in which such a difference can be observed. If there are indeed typically "feminine" styles of body comportment and movement, then this should generate for the existential phenomenologist a concern to specify such a differentiation of the modalities of the lived body. Yet Straus is by no means alone in his failure to describe the modalities, meaning, and implications of the difference between "masculine" and "feminine" body comportment and movement.

A virtue of Straus' account of the typical difference of the sexes in throwing is that he does not explain this difference on the basis of physical attributes. Straus is convinced, however, that the early age at which the difference appears shows that it is not an acquired difference, and thus he is forced back onto a mysterious feminine essence in order to explain it. The feminist denial that the real differences in behavior and psychology between men and woman can be attributed to some natural and eternal "feminine essence" is perhaps most thoroughly and systematically expressed by de Beauvoir. Every human existence is defined by its *situation*; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation. We reduce women's condition simply to unintelligibility if we "explain" it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence. In denying such a feminine essence, however, we should not fall into that "nominalism" which denies the real differences in the behavior and

experiences of men and women. Even though there is no eternal feminine essence, there is (de Beauvoir, 1974) “a common basis which underlies every individual female existence in the present state of education and custom.”<sup>3</sup> The situation of women within a given socio-historical set of circumstances, despite the individual variation in each woman’s experience, opportunities, and possibilities, has a unity which can be described and made intelligible. It should be emphasized, however, that this unity is specific to a particular social formation during a particular historical epoch.

De Beauvoir (1974) proceeds to give such an account of the situation of women with remarkable depth, clarity, and ingenuity. Yet she also to a large extent, fails to give a place to the status and orientation of the woman’s body as relating to its surroundings in living action. When de Beauvoir does talk about the woman’s bodily being and her physical relation to her surroundings, she tends to focus on the more evident facts of a woman’s physiology. She discusses how women experience the body as a burden, how the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, during menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman’s existence by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality.<sup>4</sup> By largely ignoring the situatedness of the woman’s actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world, de Beauvoir tends to create the impression that it is woman’s anatomy and physiology *as such* which are at least in part determinative of her unfree status.<sup>5</sup>

This paper seeks to begin to fill a gap that thus exists both in existential phenomenology and feminist theory. It traces in a provisional way some of the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space. It brings intelligibility and significance to certain observable and rather ordinary ways in which women in our society typically comport themselves and move differently from the ways that men do. In accordance with the existentialist concern with the situatedness of human experience, I make no claim to the universality of this typicality of the bodily comportment of women and the phenomenological description based on it. The account developed here claims only to describe the modalities of feminine bodily

---

<sup>3</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. xxxv. Cf. Buytendijk, pp. 275–276.

<sup>4</sup>See Chapter I, *The Date of Biology*.

<sup>5</sup>Firestone claims that de Beauvoir’s account served as the basis of her own thesis that the oppression of women is rooted in nature, and thus requires the transcendence of nature itself to be overcome. See *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970). De Beauvoir would claim that Firestone is guilty of desituating woman’s situation by pinning a source on nature as such. That Firestone would find inspiration for her thesis in de Beauvoir, however, indicates that perhaps de Beauvoir has not steered away from causes in “nature” as much as is desirable.

existence for women situated in contemporary advanced industrial, urban, and commercial society. Elements of the account developed here may or may not apply to the situation of woman in other societies and other epoch, but it is not the concern of this paper to determine to which, if any, other social circumstances this account applies.

The scope of bodily existence and movement with which I am concerned here is also limited. I concentrate primarily on those sorts of bodily activities which relate to the comportment or orientation of the body as a whole, which entail gross movement, or which require the enlistment of strength and the confrontation of the body's capacities and possibilities with the resistance and malleability of things. Primarily the kind of movement I am concerned with is movement in which the body aims at the accomplishment of a definite purpose or task. There are thus many aspects of feminine bodily existence which I leave out of account here. Most notable of these is the body in its sexual being. Another aspect of bodily existence, among others, which I leave unconsidered is structured body movement which does not have a particular aim—for example, dancing. Besides reasons of space, this limitation of subject is based on the conviction, derived primarily from Merleau-Ponty, that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world. Thus focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence.<sup>6</sup>

Before entering the analysis, I should clarify what I mean here by "feminine" existence. In accordance with de Beauvoir's understanding, I take "femininity" to designate not a mysterious quality or essence which all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, 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. Defined as such, it is not necessary that *any* women be "feminine"—that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women.<sup>7</sup> This

---

<sup>6</sup>In his discussion of the "dynamics of feminine existence," Buytendijk focuses precisely on those sorts of motions which are aimless. He claims that it is through these kinds of expressive movements—e.g., walking for the sake of walking—and not through action aimed at the accomplishment of particular purposes, that the pure image of masculine or feminine existence is manifest (pp. 278–9). Such an approach, however, contradicts the basic existentialist assumption that Being-in-the-world consists in projecting purposes and goals which structure one's situatedness. While there is certainly something to be learned from reflecting upon feminine movement in noninstrumental activity, given that accomplishing tasks is basic to the structure of human existence, it serves as a better starting point for investigation of feminine motility. As I point out at the end of this paper, a full phenomenology of feminine existence must take account of this noninstrumental movement.

<sup>7</sup>It is not impossible, moreover, for men to be "feminine" in at least some respects, according to the above definition.

understanding of "feminine" existence makes it possible to say that some women escape or transcend the typical situation and definition of women in various degrees and respects. I mention this primarily to indicate that the account offered here of the modalities of feminine bodily existence is not to be falsified by referring to some individual women to whom aspects of the account do not apply, or even to some individual men to whom they do.

The account developed here combines the insights of the theory of the lived body as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as developed by de Beauvoir (1974). I assume that at the most basic descriptive level, Merleau-Ponty's account of the relation of the lived body to its world, as developed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), applies to any human existence in a general way. At a more specific level, however, there is a particular style of bodily comportment which is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular *modalities* of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world.<sup>8</sup>

As a framework for developing these modalities, I rely on de Beauvoir's account of woman's existence in patriarchal society as defined by a basic tension between immanence and transcendence.<sup>9</sup> The culture and society in which the female person dwells defines woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied by the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity which are definitive of being human and which in patriarchal society are accorded the man. At the same time, however because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence and she knows herself to be. The female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence. My suggestion is that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality exhibit this same tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object.

Section I offers some specific observations about bodily comportment, physical engagement with things, ways of using the body in performing tasks, and bodily self-image, which I find typical of feminine existence. Section II gives a general phenomenological account of the modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility. Section III develops these modalities further in terms of the spatiality generated by them. Finally, in Section IV, I draw out some of the implications of this account for an understanding of the

---

<sup>8</sup>On this level of specificity there also exist particular modalities of masculine motility, inasmuch as there is a particular style of movement more or less typical of men. I will not, however, be concerned with those in this paper.

<sup>9</sup>See de Beauvoir, Chapter XXI, Woman's Situation and Character.

oppression of women, as well as raise some further questions about feminine Being-in-the-world which require further investigation.

## I

The basic difference which Straus observes between the way boys and girls throw is that girls do not bring their whole bodies into the motion as much as the boys. They do not reach back, twist, move backward, step, and lean forward. Rather, the girls tend to remain relatively immobile except for their arms, and even the arm is not extended as far as it could be. Throwing is not the only movement in which there is a typical difference in the way men and women use their bodies. Reflection on feminine comportment and body movement in other physical activities reveals that these also are frequently characterized, much as in the throwing case, by a failure to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities.

Even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, one can observe a typical difference in body style and extension. Women generally are not as open with their bodies as men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body than is the feminine stride to a woman's. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm in his step. Though we now wear pants more than we used to, and consequently do not have to restrict our sitting postures because of dress, women still tend to sit with their legs relatively close together and their arms across their bodies. When simply standing or leaning, men tend to keep their feet further apart than do woman, and we also tend more to keep our hands and arms touching or shielding our bodies. A final indicative difference is the way each carries books or parcels; girls and women most often carry books embraced to their chests, while boys and men swing them along their sides.

The approach persons of each sex take to the performance of physical tasks that require force, strength, and muscular coordination is frequently different. There are indeed real physical differences between men and woman in the kind and limit of their physical strength. Many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength, however, are due not so much to brute muscular strength, but to the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks. Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men. For

example, in attempting to lift something, women more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task—the arms and shoulders—rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. When turning or twisting something, to take another example, we frequently concentrate effort in the hand and wrist, not bringing to the task the power of the shoulder, which is necessary for its efficient performance.<sup>10</sup>

The previously cited throwing example can be extended to a great deal of athletic activity. Now most men are by no means superior athletes, and their sporting efforts more often display bravado than genuine skill and coordination. The relatively untrained man nevertheless engages in sport generally with more free motion and open reach than does his female counterpart. Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common, first, that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second, that the woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention.

For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds them in imagination which we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space. Thus, for example, in softball or volley ball women tend to remain in one place more often than men, neither jumping to reach nor running to approach the ball. Men more often move out toward a ball in flight and confront it with their own countermotion. Women tend to wait for and then *react* to its approach rather than going forth to meet it. We frequently respond to the motion of a ball coming toward us as though it were coming *at* us, and our immediate bodily impulse is to flee, duck, or otherwise protect ourselves from its flight. Less often than men, moreover, do women give self-conscious direction and placement to their motion in sport. Rather than aiming at a certain place where we wish to hit a ball, for example, we tend to hit it in a "general" direction.

Women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims. There is, I suggest, a double hesitation here. On the one hand, we often lack confidence that we have the capacity to do what must be

---

<sup>10</sup>It should be noted that this is probably typical only of women in advanced industrial societies, where the model of the Bourgeois woman has been extended to most women. It would not apply to those societies, for example, where most people, including women, do heavy physical work. Nor does this particular observation, of course, hold true of those women in our own society who do heavy physical work.

done. Many times I have slowed a hiking party in which the men bounded across a harmless stream while I stood on the other side warily testing out my footing on various stones, holding on to overhanging branches. Though the others crossed with ease, I do not believe it is easy for *me*, even though once I take a committed step I am across in a flash. The other side of this tentativeness is, I suggest, a fear of getting hurt, which is greater in women than in men. Our attention is often divided between the aim to be realized in motion and the body that must accomplish it, while at the same time saving itself from harm. We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our body to make sure it is doing what we wish it to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies.

All the above factors operate to produce in many women a greater or lesser feeling of incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness. We have more of a tendency than men to greatly underestimate our bodily capacity.<sup>11</sup> We decide beforehand—usually mistakenly—that the task is beyond us, and thus give it less than our full effort. At such a half-hearted level, of course, we cannot perform the tasks, become frustrated, and fulfill our own prophecy. In entering a task we frequently are self-conscious about appearing awkward, and at the same time do not wish to appear too strong. Both worries contribute to our awkwardness and frustration. If we should finally release ourselves from this spiral and really give a physical task our best effort, we are greatly surprised indeed at what our bodies can accomplish. It has been found that women more often than men underestimate the level of achievement they have reached.<sup>12</sup>

None of the observations which have been made thus far about the way women typically move and comport their bodies applies to all women all of the time. Nor do those women who manifest some aspect of this typicality do so in the same degree. There is no inherent, mysterious connection between these sorts of typical comportments and being a female person. Many of them result, as will be developed later, from lack of practice in using the body and performing tasks. Even given these qualifications, one can nevertheless sensibly speak of a general feminine style of body comportment and movement. The next section will develop a specific categorical description of the modalities of the comportment and movement.

---

<sup>11</sup>See A. M. Gross, Estimated versus actual physical strength in three ethnic groups, *Child Development*, 39 (1968), pp. 283–90. In a test of children at several different ages, at all but the youngest age-level, girls rated themselves lower than boys and rated themselves on self-estimates of strength, and as the girls grow older, their self-estimates of strength become even lower.

<sup>12</sup>See Marguerite A. Cifton and Hope M. Smith, Comparison of Expressed Self-Concept of Highly Skilled Males and Females Concerning Motor Performance, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 16 (1963), pp. 199–201. Women consistently underestimated their level of achievement in skills like running and jumping far more often than men did.

## II

The three modalities of feminine motility are that feminine movement exhibits an *ambiguous transcendence*, an *inhibited intentionality*, and a *discontinuous unity* with its surroundings. A source of these contradictory modalities is the bodily self-reference of feminine comportment, which derives from the woman's experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity.

1. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*,<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962) takes as his task the articulation of the primordial structures of existence, which are prior to and the ground of all reflective relation to the world. In asking how there can be a world for a subject, Merleau-Ponty reorients the entire tradition of that questioning by locating subjectivity not in mind or consciousness, but in the *body*. Merleau-Ponty gives to the lived body the ontological status which Sartre, as well as "intellectualist" thinkers before him, attribute to consciousness alone: the status of transcendence as being-for-itself. It is the body in its orientation toward and action upon and within its surroundings which constitutes the initial meaning giving act (p. 121; pp. 146-147). The body is the first locus of intentionality, as pure presence to the world and openness upon its possibilities. The most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings. There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body as capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions.

While feminine bodily existence is a transcendence and openness to the world, it is an *ambiguous transcendence*, a transcendence which is at the same time laden with immanence. Now once we take the locus of subjectivity and transcendence to be the lived body rather than pure consciousness, all transcendence is ambiguous because the body as natural and material is immanence. But it is not the ever present possibility of any lived body to be passive, to be touched as well as touching, to be grasped as well as grasping, which I am referring to here as the ambiguity of the transcendence of the feminine lived body. The transcendence of the lived body which Merleau-Ponty describes is a transcendence which moves out from the body in its immanence in an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action. The lived body as transcendence is pure fluid action, the continuous calling forth of capacities, which are applied to the world. Rather than simply beginning in immanence, feminine bodily existence remains in immanence, or better is *overlaid* with immanence, even as it moves out toward the world in motions of grasping, manipulating, and so on.

---

<sup>13</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans. (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). All references to this work are noted in parentheses within the text.

In the previous section, I observed that a woman typically refrains from throwing her whole body into a motion, and rather concentrates motion in one part of the body alone while the rest of the body remains relatively immobile. Only a part of the body, that is, moves out toward a task while the rest remains rooted in immanence. I also observed earlier that a woman frequently does not trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things. Consequently, she often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected.

2. Merleau-Ponty locates intentionality in motility (pp. 110–112); the possibilities which are opened up in the world depend on the mode and limits of the bodily “I can” (p. 137, p. 148). Feminine existence, however, often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident “I can.” For example, as noted earlier, women frequently tend to posit a task which would be accomplished relatively easily once attempted as beyond their capacities before they begin it. Typically, the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination which are available to it. Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an “I can” and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed “I cannot.”<sup>14</sup>

An uninhibited intentionality projects the aim to be accomplished and connects the body’s motion toward that end in an unbroken directedness which organizes and unifies the body’s activity. The body’s capacity and motion structure its surroundings and project meaningful possibilities of movement and action, which in turn call the body’s motion forth to enact them (Merleau-Ponty, 1962): “To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance . . .” [p. 144; see also pp. 101, 131–132]. Feminine motion often severs this mutually conditioning relation between aim and enactment. In those motions which when properly performed require the coordination and

---

<sup>14</sup>Much of the work of Seymour Fisher on various aspects of sex differences in body image correlates suggestively with the phenomenological description developed here. It is difficult to use his conclusions as confirmation of that description, however, because there is something of a “speculative” aspect to his reasoning. Nevertheless, I shall refer to some of these findings, with that qualification in mind.

One of his findings is that women have a greater anxiety about their legs than men, and he cites earlier studies which have come to the same results. Fisher interprets such leg-anxiety as anxiety about motility itself, because in body conception and body image it is the legs which are the body part most associated with motility. See *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 537. If his findings and his interpretation are accurate, this tends to correlate with the sort of inhibition and timidity about movement which I am claiming is an aspect of feminine body comportment.

directedness of the whole body upon some definite end, women frequently move in a contradictory way. Their bodies project an aim to be enacted, but at the same time stiffen against the performance of the task. In performing a physical task the woman's body does carry her toward the intended aim, but often not easily and directly, but rather circuitously, with the wasted motion resulting from the effort of testing and reorientation, which is a frequent consequence of feminine hesitancy.

For any lived body, the world appears as the system of possibilities which are correlative to its intentions (p. 131). For any lived body, moreover, the world also appears as populated with opacities and resistances correlative to its own limits and frustrations. For any bodily existence, that is, an "I cannot" may appear to set limits to the "I can." To the extent that feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, however, the same set of possibilities which appears correlative to its intentions also appears as a system of frustrations correlative to its hesitancies. By repressing or withholding its own motile energy, feminine bodily existence frequently projects an "I can" and an "I cannot" with respect to the very same end. When the woman enters a task with inhibited intentionality, she projects the possibilities of that task—thus projects an "I *can*"—but projects them merely as the possibilities of "someone," and not truly *her* possibilities—and thus projects an "*I cannot*".

3. Merleau-Ponty gives to the body the unifying and synthesizing function which Kant locates in transcendental subjectivity. By projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings; through the vectors of its projected possibilities it sets things in relation to one another and to itself. The body's movement and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being (p. 143). Within the same act that the body synthesizes its surroundings, moreover, it synthesizes itself. The body synthesis is immediate and primordial. "I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself" [p. 150].

The third modality of feminine bodily existence is that it stands in *discontinuous unity* with both itself and its surroundings. I remarked earlier that in many motions which require the active engagement and coordination of the body as a whole to be performed properly, women tend to locate their motion in a part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile. Motion such as this is discontinuous with itself. That part of the body which is transcending toward an aim is in relative disunity from those which remain immobile. The undirectedness and wasted motion which is often an aspect of feminine engagement in a task also manifests this lack of body unity. The character of the inhibited intentionality whereby feminine motion severs the connection between aim and enactment, between possibility in the world and capacity in the body, itself produces this discontinuous unity.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate enactment of intentions, it cannot exist as an *object* (p. 123). As subject, the body is referred not onto itself, but onto the world's possibilities. "In order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the 'in-itself'" [p. 139]. The three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence—ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity—have their root, however, in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act. Feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world (Fisher, 1964) because it is referred onto *itself* as well as onto possibilities in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Several of the observations of the previous section illustrate this self-reference. It was observed, for example, that women have a tendency to take up the motion of an object coming *toward* them as coming *at* them. I also observed that women tend to have a latent and sometimes conscious fear of getting hurt, which we bring to a motion. That is, feminine bodily existence is self-referred in that the woman takes herself as the *object* of the motion rather than its originator. Feminine bodily existence is also self-referred to the extent that a woman is uncertain of her body's capacities and does not feel that its motions are entirely under her control. She must divide her attention between the task to be performed and the body which must be coaxed and manipulated into performing it. Finally, feminine bodily existence is self-referred to the extent that the feminine subject posits her motion as the motion that is *looked at*. In Section IV, we will explore the implications of the basic fact of the woman's social existence as the object of the gaze of another, which is a major source of her bodily self-reference.

In summary, the modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence does not experience the body as a mere thing—a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing which exists as *looked at and acted upon*. To be sure, any lived body exists as a material thing as well as a transcending subject. For feminine bodily existence, however, the body is often lived as a thing which is other than it, a thing like other things in the world. To the extent that feminine existence lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities.

---

<sup>15</sup>Fisher finds the most striking difference between men and women in their general body image is that women have a significantly higher degree of what he calls "body prominence," awareness of and attention to the body. He cites a number of different studies which have come to the same results. The explanation Fisher gives for this finding is that women have a higher degree of body awareness because they are socialized to pay attention to their bodies, to prune and dress them, and to worry about how they look to others. *Ibid.*, pp. 524–525. See also *Sex Differences in Body Perception, Psychological Monographs*, 78 (1964), Number 14.

## III

For Merleau-Ponty (1962) there is a distinction between lived space, or phenomenal space, and objective space, the uniform space of geometry and science in which all positions are external to one another and interchangeable. Phenomenal space arises out of motility and lived relations of space are generated by the capacities of the body's motion and the intentional relations which that motion constitutes. "It is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being and an analysis of one's own movement should enable us to arrive at a better understanding of it" [p. 102; cf. pp. 148–149, p. 249]. On this account, if there are particular modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility, then it must follow that there are also particular modalities of feminine spatiality. Feminine existence lives space as *enclosed* or *confining*, as have a *dual* structure and the feminine existent experiences herself as *positioned* in space.

1. There is a famous study which Erik Erikson (1964) performed several years ago in which he asked several male and female pre-adolescents to construct a scene for an imagined movie out of some toys. He found that girls typically depicted indoor settings, with high walls and enclosures, while boys typically constructed outdoor scenes. He concluded that females tend to emphasize what he calls "inner space," or enclosed space, while males tend to emphasize what he calls "outer space," or a spatial orientation which is open and outwardly directed. Erikson's interpretation of these observations is psychoanalytical: girls depict "inner space" as the projection of the enclosed space of their wombs and vaginas; boys depict "outer space" as a projection of the phallus.<sup>16</sup> I find such an explanation wholly unconvincing. If girls do tend to project an enclosed space and boys to project an open and outwardly directed space, it is far more plausible to regard this as a reflection of the way each sex lives and moves their bodies in space.

In the first section, I observed that women tend not to open their bodies in their everyday movements, but tend to sit, stand, and 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. Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space which belongs to her and

---

<sup>16</sup>Erik H. Erikson, *Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood*, *Daedalus*, 3 (1964), pp. 582–606. Erikson's interpretation of his findings is also sexist. Having in his opinion discovered a particular significance that "inner space"—which he takes to be space *within* the body—holds for girls, he goes on to discuss the womanly "nature" as womb and potential mother which must be made compatible with anything else the woman does.

is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted, and the space beyond is not available to her movement.<sup>17</sup> A further illustration of this confinement of feminine lived space is the observation already noted that in sport, for example, women tend not to move out and meet the motion of a ball, but rather tend to stay in one place and react to the ball's motion only when it has arrived within the space where she is. The timidity, immobility, and uncertainty which frequently characterize feminine movement project a limited space for the feminine "I can."

2. On Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account, the body unity of transcending performance creates an immediate link between the body and the outlying space. "Each instant of the movement embraces its whole space, and particularly the first which, by being active and initiative, institutes the link between a here and a yonder . . ." [p. 140]. In feminine existence, however, the projection of an enclosed space severs the continuity between a "here" and a "yonder." In feminine existence there is a *double spatiality* as the space of the "here" which is distinct from the space of the "yonder." A distinction between space which is "yonder" and not linked with my own body possibilities, and the enclosed space which is "here," which I inhabit with my bodily possibilities, is an expression of the discontinuity between aim and capacity to realize the aim which I have articulated as the meaning of the tentativeness and uncertainty which characterizes the inhibited intentionality of feminine motility. The space of the "yonder" is a space in which feminine existence projects possibilities in the sense of understanding that "someone" could move within it, but not I. Thus the space of the "yonder" exists for feminine existence, but only as that which she is looking into, rather than moving in.

3. The third modality of feminine spatiality is that feminine existence experiences itself as *positioned in space*. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the original subject which constitutes space; there would be no space without the body (pp. 102; 142). As the origin and subject of spatial relations, the body does not occupy a position coequal and interchangeable with the positions occupied by other things (p. 143; pp. 247-249). Because the body as lived is not an *object*, it cannot be said to exist *in space* as water is *in the glass* (pp. 139-140). "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in the face of its tasks" [p. 100].

Feminine spatiality is contradictory insofar as feminine bodily existence is both spatially constituted and a constituting spatial subject. Insofar as feminine existence lives the body as transcendence and intentionality, the

---

<sup>17</sup>Another of Fisher's findings is that women experience themselves as having a more clearly articulated body *boudary* than men. More clearly than men they distinguish themselves from their spatial surroundings and take a distance from them. See *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior*, p. 528.

feminine body actively constitutes space and is the original coordinate which unifies the spatial field and projects spatial relations and positions in accord with its intentions. But to the extent that feminine motility is laden with immanence and inhibited, the body's space is lived as constituted. To the extent, that is, that feminine bodily existence is self-referred and thus lives itself as an *object*, the feminine body does exist *in space*. In Section I, I observed that women frequently react to motions, even our own motions, as though we are the object of the motion which issues from an alien intention, rather than taking ourselves as subject of motion. In its immanence and inhibition, feminine spatial existence is *positioned* by a system of coordinates which does not have its origin in her own intentional capacities. The tendency for the feminine body to remain partly immobile in the performance of a task which requires the movement of the whole body illustrates this characteristic of feminine bodily existence as rooted *in place*. Likewise does the tendency for women to wait for an object to come within our immediate bodily field rather than move out toward it.

Merleau-Ponty devotes a great deal of attention to arguing that the diverse senses and activities of the lived body are synthetically related in such a way that each stands in a mutually conditioning relation with all the others. In particular, visual perception and motility stand in a relation of reversability; an impairment in the functioning of one, for example, leads to an impairment in the function of the other (pp. 133-137). If we assume that reversability of visual perception and motility, the above account of the modalities of feminine motility and the spatiality which arises from them suggests that visual space will have its own modalities as well.

There have been numerous psychological studies which have reported differences between the sexes in the character of spatial perception. One of the most frequently discussed of these conclusions is that females are more often "field independent." That is, it has been claimed that males have a greater capacity for lifting a figure out of its spatial surroundings and viewing relations in space as fluid and interchangeable, whereas females have a greater tendency to regard figures as embedded within and fixed by their surroundings.<sup>18</sup> The above account of feminine motility and spatiality gives

---

<sup>18</sup>The number of studies coming to these results is enormous. See Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol N. Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 91-98. For a number of years psychologists used the results from tests of spatial ability to generalize about field independence in general, and from that to general "analytic" ability. Thus it was concluded that women have less analytical ability than men. More recently, however, such generalizations have been seriously called into question. See, for example, Julia A. Sherman, *Problems of Sex Differences in Space Perception and Aspects of Intellectual Functioning*, *Psychological Review*, 74 (1967), pp. 290-99. She notes that while women are consistently found to be more field dependent than men in spatial tasks, on nonspatial tests measuring field independence women generally perform as well as men.

some theoretical intelligibility to these findings. If feminine body spatiality is such that the woman experiences herself as rooted and enclosed, then on the reversability assumption it would follow that visual space for feminine existence also has its closures of immobility and fixity. The objects in visual space do not stand in a fluid system of potentially alterable and interchangeable relations correlative to the body's various intentions and projected capacities. Rather, they too have their own *places* and are anchored in their immanence.

#### IV

The modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality which I have described here are, I claim, common to the existence of women in contemporary society to one degree or another. They have their source, however, in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine "essence." Rather, they have their source in the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society.

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences which move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections. To be sure, there are actual women in contemporary society to whom all or part of the above description does not apply. Where these modalities are not manifest in or determinative of the existence of a particular women, however, they are definitive in a negative mode—as that which she has escaped, through accident or good fortune, or more often, as that which she has had to overcome.

One of the sources of the modalities of feminine bodily existence is too obvious to dwell upon at length. 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.<sup>19</sup> Girl play is often more sedentary and enclosing than the play of boys. In school and after school activities girls are not encouraged to engage in sport, in the controlled use of their bodies in achieving well-defined goals. Girls, moreover, get little practice at "tinkering"

---

<sup>19</sup>Nor are girls provided with examples of girls and women being physically active. See Mary E. Duquin, *Differential Sex Role Socialization Toward Amplitude Appropriation*, *Research Quarterly* (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation), 48 (1977), pp. 288–292. A survey of textbooks for young children revealed that children are thirteen times more likely to see a vigorously active man than a vigorously active woman, and three times more likely to see a relatively active man than a relatively active woman.

with things, and thus developing spatial skill. Finally, girls are not asked often to perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more.<sup>20</sup>

The modalities of feminine bodily existence are not merely privative, however, and thus their source is not merely in lack of practice, though this is certainly an important element. There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile. Studies have found that young children of both sexes categorically assert that girls are more likely to get hurt than boys,<sup>21</sup> and that girls ought to remain close to home while boys can roam and explore.<sup>22</sup> 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 inhibition. When I was about thirteen, I spent hours practicing a “feminine” walk which was stiff, closed, and rotated from side to side.

Studies which record observations of sex differences in spatial perception, spatial problem solving and motor skills have also found that these differences tend to increase with age. While very young children show virtually no differences in motor skills, movement, spatial perception, etc., differences seem to appear in elementary school and increase with adolescence. If these findings are accurate, they would seem to support the conclusion that it is in the process of growing up as a girl that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality make their appearance.<sup>23</sup>

There is, however, a further source of the modalities of feminine bodily existence which is perhaps even more profound than these. At the root of those modalities, I have stated in the previous section, is the fact that the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject. The source of this is that

---

<sup>20</sup>Sherman, *op. cit.*, argues that it is the differential socialization of boys and girls in being encouraged to “tinker,” explore, etc. that accounts for the difference between the two in spatial ability.

<sup>21</sup>See L. Kolberg, A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Children’s Sex-Role Concepts and Attitudes, in E. E. Maccoby, Ed., *The Development of Sex Differences* (Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 101.

<sup>22</sup>Lenore J. Weitzman, Sex Role Socialization, in Freeman, Ed., *Woman: A Feminist Perspective* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 111–112.

<sup>23</sup>*Op. cit.*, Maccoby and Jacklin, pp. 93–94.

patriarchal society defines woman as object, as a mere body, and that in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies. An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.<sup>24</sup> The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it.

This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. As human, she is a transcendence and subjectivity, and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus, to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself, but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body. The objectifying regard which "keeps her in her place" can also account for the spatial modality of being positioned and for why women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs enclosed around themselves. To open her body in free active and open extension and bold outward directedness is for a woman to invite objectification.

The threat of being seen is, however, not the only threat of objectification which the woman lives. She also lives the threat of invasion of her body space. The most extreme form of such spatial and bodily invasion is the threat of rape. But we are daily subject to the possibility of bodily invasion in many far more subtle ways as well. It is acceptable, for example, for women to be touched in ways and under circumstances that it is not acceptable for men to be touched, and by persons—i.e. men—whom it is not acceptable for them to touch.<sup>25</sup> I would suggest that the enclosed space which has been described as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion. Women tend to project an existential barrier enclosed around them and discontinuous with the "over there" in order to keep the other at a distance. The woman lives her space as confined and enclosed around her at least in part as projecting some small area in which she can exist as a free subject.

---

<sup>24</sup>The manner in which women are objectified by the gaze of the Other is not the same phenomenon as the objectification by the Other which is a condition of self-consciousness in Sartre's account. See *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), Part Three. While the basic ontological category of being-for-others is an objectified for-itself, the objectification which women are subject to is that of being regarded as a mere in-itself. On the particular dynamic of sexual objectification, see Sandra Bartky, *Psychological Oppression*, in Sharon Bishop and Margorie Weinzweig, Ed., *Philosophy and Women* (Belmont, Calif. Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 33–41.

<sup>25</sup>See Nancy Henley and Jo Freeman, *The Sexual Politics of Interpersonal Behavior*, in Freeman, op. cit., pp. 391–401.

The paper is a prolegomenon to the study of aspects of women's experience and situation which have not received the treatment they warrant. I would like to close with some questions which require further thought and research. This paper has concentrated its attention upon the sort of physical tasks and body orientation which involve the whole body in gross movement. Further investigation into woman's bodily existence would require looking at activities which do not involve the whole body and finer movement. If we are going to develop an account of the woman's body experience in situation, moreover, we must reflect on the modalities of a woman's experience of her body in its sexual being, as well as upon less task-oriented body activities, such as dancing. Another question which arises is whether the description given here would apply equally well to any sort of physical tasks. Might the kind of task, and specifically whether it is a task or movement which is sex-typed, have some effect on the modalities of feminine bodily existence? A further question is to what degree we can develop a theoretical account of the connection between the modalities of the bodily existence of women and other aspects of our existence and experience. For example, I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities, is traceable in part to an original doubt in our body's capacity. None of these questions can be dealt with properly, however, without first performing the kind of guided observation and data collection that my reading has concluded, to a large degree, is yet to be performed.

## REFERENCES

- Bartky, S. Psychological oppression. In S. Bishop & M. Weinzwieg (Eds.), *Philosophy and Women*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979.
- Buytendijk, F. J. J. *Woman: A Contemporary View*. New York: Newman Press, 1968.
- de Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- Clifton, M. A., & Smith, H. M. Comparison of expressed self-concept of highly skilled males and females concerning motor performance. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 1963, 16, 199-201.
- Dunquin, M. E. Differential sex role socialization toward amplitude appropriation. *Research Quarterly*, 1977, 48, 288-292.
- Erikson, E. H. Inner and outer space: Reflections on Womanhood. *Daedalus*, 1964, 3, 582-606.
- Firestone, S. *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: Bantam Books, 1970.
- Fisher, S. Sex differences in body perception. *Psychological Monographs*, 1964, 78, (Whole No. 14).
- Fisher, S. *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970.
- Gross, A. M. Estimated versus actual physical strength in three ethnic groups. *Child Development*, 1968, 39, 283-290.
- Henley, N., & Freeman, J. The sexual politics of interpersonal behavior. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Woman: A Feminist Perspective*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975.
- Kalverson, L. E., Robertson, M. A., Safrit, M. J., & Roberts, T. W. Effect of guided practice on overhand throw ball velocities of kindergarten children. *Research Quarterly*, (Vol. 48). No. 2, May, 1977, 311-318.

- Kolberg, L. A cognitive-developmental analysis of children's sex-role concepts and attitudes. In E. E. Maccoby (Ed.), *The Development of Sex Differences*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1966.
- Maccoby, E. E., & Jacklin, C. N. *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. C. Smith (trans.), New York: Humanities Press, 1962.
- Sartre, J. P. *Being and Nothingness*. H. B. Barnes (trans.), New York: Philosophical Library, 1956. (Part Three).
- Sherman, J. A. Problems of sex differences in space perception and aspects of intellectual functioning. *Psychological Review*, 1967, 74, 290-299.
- Strauss, E. W. The upright posture. *Phenomenological Psychology*, New York: Basic Books, 1966.
- Weitzman, L. J. Sex role socialization. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Woman: A Feminist Perspective*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975.