

# “THROWING LIKE A GIRL: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEMININE BODY COMPORIMENT, MOTILITY, AND SPATIALITY”\*

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>

. . . 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 revealing of the structures of feminine existence.<sup>3</sup>

Before entering the analysis, I should clarify what I mean here by “feminine” existence. In accordance with de Beauvoir’s understanding, I take “feminine” 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

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women be "feminine"—that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women.<sup>4</sup> This 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>5</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>6</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....

Argument

## I Feminine Movement

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>7</sup>

Sports

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.

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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 counter-motion. 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 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>8</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>9</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. . . .

IV

*Live existence in accordance to politeness*

. . . 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>10</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" 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>11</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>12</sup> and that girls ought to remain close to home while boys can roam and explore.<sup>13</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.

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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>14</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

Free Subject

fact that the woman lives her body as object as well as subject. The source of this is that 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>15</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.

Essential part of female existence

→ 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.

Consequence of objectification

by men

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>16</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.

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.

(1980)

NOTES

1. 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.
2. 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.

3. 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.
4. It is not impossible, moreover, for men to be "feminine" in at least some respects, according to the above definition.
5. 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.
6. See de Beauvoir, Chapter XXI, *Woman's Situation and Character*.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. Lenore J. Weitzman, Sex Role Socialization, in Freeman, Ed., *Woman: A Feminist Perspective* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 111-112.
14. Op. cit., Maccoby and Jacklin, pp. 93-94.
15. 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 ontological category of being-for-others is an objectification-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 Sand Bartky, Psychological Oppression, in Sharon Bishop and Margorie Weinzweig, Ed., *Philosophy and Women* (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 33-41.
16. See Nancy Henley and Jo Freeman, The Sexual Politics of Interpersonal Behavior, in Freeman, op. cit. pp. 391-401.

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