

He's in My Head:

A Rhetorical Criticism of the Gendered Language in Widely-Regarded Philosophical Texts and the Insidious Effects of What it Means to be "Man"

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"The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native" - Frantz Fanon

Where "man" has been addressed and acknowledged explicitly in Philosophy, it has been overwhelmingly that of white men that have written the accepted foundations of the concept of "human nature," with "human" often used interchangeably with "man," "men," and other definitionally male terms. In these instances, I argue that there is no coincidental use of gendered language in philosophical writings. Because of this phenomenon of explicitly gendered philosophy, those not belonging to this identity of white and male must identify themselves in texts which they are not explicitly recognized. The masculinization of grammar in philosophical writing should not be viewed as an acceptable grammatical choice, but as a rhetorical weapon against women; one which has effectively made philosophy either "male" or "female" and drastically reduced the educational value of such texts.

I will be referring to this general concept as the "negative space" in the field of philosophy, wherein women are forced to interpret their existence relative to that which is *not* designated to men. Simone de Beauvoir's description of women as "The Second Sex" is intriguing as both a social mindset and a gendered space within women have been confined.

Why is it that every text of female origin is structured and interpreted as one of response to the universal truth of male thought? That *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens* survives as a parody of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen rather than its improved successor? These women's arguments are incidentally transcended to a meta level when they are subjected as a genre— female philosophers write about women's rights; male philosophers write about *rights*.

The "nominalism" de Beauvoir mentions is not lost in this consideration of Philosophy as a vocation; the "goal," so to speak, is not to consider philosophy of any gendered origin as "human" philosophy (604). Rather, we as scholars and citizens must revisit our understanding of the "foundational texts" that shape present-day law and Morality and reconsider the value of

“equality” as defined by those who did not practice it, nor extend its protection to any other than themselves.

The most successful of genocides will never be discovered, for a total genocide results in the complete erasure of the target group from the minds and memory of the other, surviving populations. It was hundreds of years before Aristotle’s *Politics* that the Library of Alexandria was burned and unknown knowledge was lost forever, and for thousands of years after Plato that women were barred from the facets of society that afforded their male counterparts the luxury of contributing to recorded philosophical thought.

Consequently, it is interesting that the men responsible for violence and war are the "philosophers" to say that such behavior is natural; far more intriguing is that such a designation makes violence a necessary tool in their formulation of morality. Punishment is rooted in violent methods: forced confinement and isolation, the aggression involved in the act of arrest, capital punishment by death. Is it perhaps true that *man* finds it in him natural to seek violence, as a retributive act or otherwise? No woman describes womankind in such texts as having such inclinations, nor does any natural law of "woman" claim her to be violent. Similarly, no notable writer of queer theory notes violence as a foundation within the queer person's reasoning.

When the white male philosopher claimed to naturally earn rights, he did not grant them, naturally, to the women beside him. Where is the line drawn to determine when the gendered claims within philosophy are written with willful intent or grammatical coincidence? When such claims have been interpreted as purposeful delineation, their meaning has been used to both officially and unofficially restrict others. When interpreted as mere "choice of words," they serve to alleviate the implications of their authors' self-proclaimed depravity. When the white male philosopher writes that "man deserves rights," man, and no other, is given rights. When the white male philosopher then writes that "man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction," (Einstein, 541) are we not to interpret that as true of only men? Are we to believe that their virtues are true only of them and not ourselves, yet their confessions to vanity and wrongdoings are to be understood as universal truths? I vehemently argue not!

John Locke exemplifies this hypocrisy well in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) as he differentiates between *natural liberty* and slavery, explaining that regarding “man,” the former “is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule” (218). The condition of slavery naturally follows: “no man can, by agreement, pass over to another that which he hath not in himself, a power over his own life...” (219).

Locke, however, has already designated women as an exception, casually using the example of the “power” of “a *husband* over his wife” in his deliberations on civil government (213). There are only two implications that can come from this: First, that women are the slaves of men. This follows from Locke’s definitions of natural liberty and slavery and his conspicuous subjugation of the female wife to her husband’s “power,” thus mutually excluding women from the right to natural liberty.

Of course, Locke does not refer to women as slaves at any point, instead presenting their place in the gender hierarchy as naturally-occurring and self-evident. By casually subjecting women to the same conditions that would be considered enslavement to a being with natural liberty, Locke has realized his disappointed role as “judge and party” (la Barre, 608), indubiously defining “women” as not deserving of natural liberty. Locke is correct when he says that the development of civilization has created “value” in “things,” depending “only on their usefulness to the life of man” (222). Men, not seeing women as deserving of rights, but necessary for survival, gave them the value of “wife” and removed them of their rights, their property, and their power.

There seems to be no true, identifiable source of any male philosopher’s claim to their rights over women other than a false sense of religiously-backed confidence. There is, however, a very simple explanation behind an author such as Locke’s view of women, located between the ellipses of our textbook’s calculated excerpts. In the space that has been removed from the “Of Political or Civil Society,” Locke seems to make a drastic jump from stating that “man” was gifted by God to not “be alone” to once again describe the rights of man in civil society. Between the cleverly placed breaks, however, Locke’s true publication follows with an in-depth discussion of *why* women are held to their husbands will. He states that “the chief, if not the only reason, why the male and female in mankind are tied to a longer conjunction than other creatures, viz. because the female is capable of conceiving” (Sect. 80). When conflicting wills emerge between “the husband and wife,” “[the rule] naturally falls to the man's share, as the abler and the stronger” (Sect. 82).

As Locke goes on to justify this “natural” oppression, given “the power of the husband being so far from that of an absolute monarch, [and] that the wife has in many cases a liberty to separate from him” (Sect. 82). Locke’s justification here uses a fascinating logic: that the oppression of women is of a different “kind,” and thus fair. Locke, here, is wielding a powerful weapon of oppression that can be likened to Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion in *The Second Sex* that “One of the benefits of oppression secures for the oppressor is that the humblest among them feels *superior*” (609). Using Locke’s argumentation as evidence, even the poorest peasant, oppressed by an absolute monarch, holds dominion over his wife.

It is necessary to reexamine aspects of our traditionally studied texts in order to properly respond to their claims and gauge their significance in the future of philosophy. Burning books and erasing these concepts from the public consciousness is not ideal, but continuing to consider their knowledge and reason as absolute and right is harshly incorrect. When authors like Montaigne explicitly recognize the purposefully-constructed gender hierarchy (608), or Locke compares women to dams and hens (Sect. 79), we can no longer view their words with impartiality. Philosophy, as it stands in higher education, is explicitly biased toward the male gender, and the gendered language being used is continuously excused as a nominal attribute of philosophical texts.

True, the philosophy of man and his natural rights has been written and should be considered and studied as such. There is a large mistake to be made in taking this to assume that

this indicates the philosophy of mankind has been written, as well. The consequences of dismissing the long-term effects of gendered philosophy, intentionally written or otherwise, is best explained by George Orwell in *Politics and The English Language*, for “an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely” (583).

Unfortunately in the case of women, Orwell’s hypothesis has proven true. I ardently agree with de Beauvoir when she calls the subject of women “irritating” and “not new” (603). Linguistically, women were excluded from the terminology that allowed men to grant rights to themselves. This barred women from socialization and education, thus preventing us from contributing to any continued discussions of such subjects, and evidence of this in the past can be found in the absence of evidence today.

Today, I am lucky enough to have been born into a time when women can openly discuss and attend school on such subjects. Regardless, we continue to study and internalize the texts that were written prior. As a female student, I often find myself fatigued by this continuous stream of degradation masked as philosophical intellect. Many ancient philosophers have claimed that humans are capable only of imagining ideas *a posteriori*. I can not speak for my Socratic sisters, but if women are to study the definitions of equality and natural rights as written by those who did not consider us a benefactor, how are we to properly identify our own oppression as it occurs? The answer is that we can not, and so we can not correct the wrongs we accept as truth, and so we continue to internalize them, and we come to understand ourselves as invisible, not-men, *and so on indefinitely*....

Bibliography

Authors cited from the book: Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, John Locke: *Second Treatise of Government* (specifically *Of Slavery and Of Property*), *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen/Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizen* by Marie Olympe de Gouges, George Orwell

Outside source for John Locke's *Second Treatise* in full:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm>