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# The Degendering of Virtue: Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft on Virtue and Equality

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## **The Degendering of Virtue: Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft on Virtue and Equality**

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### **Abstract**

Feminist philosophers Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, although separated by centuries and their respective approaches of political liberalism and existentialism, converge to a remarkable degree in their descriptions of women's situation under oppression and, in particular, in their analysis of the role gendered virtue plays in that oppression. In this paper I identify their common project of "degendering" the virtues as a crucial part of the broader project of theorizing women's equal humanity. I extrapolate from Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir's critique to clarify the ways patriarchy sets up gendered virtue as a moral trap for women, one in which "feminine" virtues are virtues for which women are both praised and condemned, affirming their feminine value while denying them the value of a full and equal humanity. I argue that a program of "degendering" the virtues, as embarked upon by Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir, is necessary to the feminist program of gender justice, both to the negative program of rejecting an inherently unfair patriarchal morality and to the positive program of envisioning what women *could be* once freed from patriarchal influence.

**Keywords:** gender, virtue, equality, existentialism, liberalism, feminism

The figures of Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir loom large in the history of feminist philosophy, albeit while occupying very different standpoints, as prototypical "liberal" feminist and existentialist respectively. Despite the different approaches of their respective key feminist works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Second Sex*, Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir describe the situation of women in extraordinarily similar ways, and at the heart of this similarity is their analysis of gendered virtue. In particular, both adopt a critical focus on woman's personality and what are considered to be her "feminine" virtues, arguing that there is a truth about women that underlies and resists these formations. In part, this is due to their shared commitment to an envisaged future equality of women and men that rests upon a rejection of women's supposed inferior otherness, a belief that women

have exactly same ontology or potential as men.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I wish to draw out from the work of Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir a shared critique they offer of the ideal and practice of gendered virtue and to extrapolate from their critique an explicit account of how such ideals are put into practice to dehumanize women, both at the level of social practice and at the level of the language of virtue. In order to do this, I identify Wollstonecraft's and Beauvoir's respective accounts of "the human," and I will argue that what makes us human according to these thinkers is exactly what is denied through the discourse of "feminine" virtue. I wish to reflect upon their respective accounts of the gendering of virtues in patriarchal society and of the relationship between those virtues and the formation of women's personalities and behaviors in that society. I want to emphasize the insight their analysis of virtue offers into the illogic of misogyny, effectively uncovering the strategies men use to construct women as both ontologically and morally inferior. I want to place their respective projects in the broader and ongoing feminist project of the degendering of virtue and to argue that even if one takes the position that some virtues, on a feminist analysis, turn out be gendered after all, this initial degendering of the virtues is a necessary prior condition to such regendering.

### **The Importance of the Concept of "Virtue"**

Following the context of Wollstonecraft's and Beauvoir's discussions, I use "virtue" to refer to positive qualities of human beings that form a basis upon which they may be rightly morally praised and are considered relatively stable, due to habituation over time.<sup>2</sup> This is a more specific usage than the broader meaning of "any kind of good personal quality." For example, in popular usage we might say "She has the virtues of athleticism and intelligence," but we would not normally consider these to be the basis for moral praise—these are goods, but not obviously moral goods. My usage may include but not be limited to Aristotelian or Christian conceptions of virtue. Certainly, Wollstonecraft's conceptual framework for virtue in her early work is that of Christian theology (Botting 2016), upon which, of course, she puts her own feminist gloss,<sup>3</sup> while Sandrine Bergès (2013) identifies in Wollstonecraft's conception of virtue key aspects of Aristotle's virtue theory—namely, the idea of the perfectibility of

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<sup>1</sup> Such shared ontology is usually called "humanity" or "humanness," and indeed, as we shall see, both philosophers present a distinct account of what it is to be human.

<sup>2</sup> Habituation, or the forming of habits over time, is a key part of traditional accounts of virtue, such as Aristotle's.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Botting (2016) identifies particular "dissenting Protestant" theological influences on Wollstonecraft's early political thought.

human nature and the role of “habituation.”<sup>4</sup> Most importantly for Wollstonecraft, virtue is founded in reason and requires it to make sound moral judgments. Underpinning this focus on reason is her explicitly egalitarian reading of the Bible, summarized in the *Vindication* as follows: “The nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 122). In other words, since human beings are all (equally) made in the image of God (*imago dei*), and reason being the divine element that constitutes such an image, then it follows that reason must not admit of degree: one either has it or one does not; one is either human or one is not—and women are definitely human! This is an essentially ungendered notion of reason: by starting with this, Wollstonecraft need not commit herself to any other preexisting account of virtue in order to defend the rights of women as human.

What is it about the concept of virtue that has so much significance for a feminist analysis of life? One important reason for its importance is that the so-called feminine virtues form the basis on which patriarchal society judges women, as both morally and ontologically inferior. For example, as both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir point out, it encourages (or even requires) women to concern themselves with trivial matters and then judges them for being so concerned. In their respective feminist works, Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir also make moral judgments aimed at women, but they consider the judgments to be *of the behavior* and not of the women concerned. This is a crucial difference between a patriarchal critique of women’s behavior and a sincere feminist one: the patriarchal will always involve a concomitant critique and negative judgment of the women *themselves*—both as individual women (who are each personally blamed for these failings) and “woman” as a kind. These failings are then used by the patriarchy to “prove” that woman as a kind is an inferior sort of being. Clearly, the concept of “women themselves” is an important one here: it names some element of women’s identity that precedes and is not identical with the sum of their behavior, and it is pertinent to whether a charge of misogyny can be upheld or not.<sup>5</sup> What Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft believe to be a woman’s “true” self, qua human, is different, as we shall see, but they are united in their identification of how deep the effects of patriarchy on a subject go. Accordingly, both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft describe oppression as something that is internalized by women. Beauvoir, however, has the advantage of a systematic and explicit philosophical

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<sup>4</sup> Bergès makes clear, however, she is not attributing to Wollstonecraft any commitment to Aristotelian virtue theory, and certainly there seems to be no evidence to that effect.

<sup>5</sup> Both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir have—particularly during the rise of third wave feminism—been accused of misogyny (for example, Lloyd 1993; Gubar 1994; Taylor 1999).

vocabulary of concepts (those of existentialism in the European philosophy tradition) to assist her in delivering her description.

Although Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft have different beliefs about what women are, these beliefs, I will argue, play the same role in their respective analyses—namely, to point beyond the contingencies of women’s behavior under patriarchy to a potential for freedom that is almost unimaginable from within the patriarchy. There are echoes of Wollstonecraft’s feminist claims in Beauvoir’s work, and it is worth emphasizing that Beauvoir, unlike Wollstonecraft, has the benefit of writing into an established (although insufficiently recognized) tradition of women’s philosophical and political writing, in which Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* plays no small part.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Beauvoir acknowledges Wollstonecraft in two places in *The Second Sex*, firstly as one of two co-initiators of the “feminist movement” (2011, 139);<sup>7</sup> and secondly as one of a “few isolated women” who “protested against their harsh destiny” (148). Since Beauvoir includes in this group of “isolated women” such greats as Sappho, de Pizan, and de Gouges, it is clear the esteem in which she holds Wollstonecraft and her work. As I discuss below in the section “Virtue and Human Nature,” Wollstonecraft carefully sets out a description of how women are constructed rather than merely influenced to play a restrictive gender role. Does Beauvoir’s famous opening line to book 2 of *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (2011, 283), rest upon Wollstonecraft’s previously articulated gender constructivism? Whatever the truth of the genealogy, it is fair to consider Beauvoir as building upon, albeit with different tools (those of phenomenology and existentialism), an extension of the powerful life-changing ideas not only that patriarchal notions of women are constructed but also that what can be constructed can be deconstructed and then reconstructed, replaced with a broad vision of women as human, rational, and free, whose choices can fill out the details of their lives on their own terms.

As shall be seen, both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft paint a picture in which under patriarchy women are ascribed “virtues,” but these are gendered, limited, and often of ambiguous value, revealing the fundamental contradiction at the heart of

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<sup>6</sup> Marso (2019, 283) identifies as common to the two philosophers a “monstrous” approach to writing: “Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir speak to each other across time as they embrace queer identities, monstrous ways of writing, and unnatural forms of mothering and reproducing.” Certainly, as will be discussed, the two share an antinaturalist account of mothering, which squarely opposes the prevailing views of their respective times.

<sup>7</sup> “The feminist movement begun in France by Condorcet and in England by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* . . . never succeeded for lack of a concrete base” (2011, 139).

patriarchy—those qualities it deems positive, moral, and attractive in women are precisely the qualities for which it condemns women to an inferior position in the sexual hierarchy. A program of “degendering” the virtues is thus necessary to the feminist program of restorative justice: both to the negative program of rejecting an inherently unfair patriarchal morality and to the positive program of envisioning what women *could be* once freed from patriarchal influence. At the time of writing, we are still waiting to see what this could look like.

### **Beauvoir’s Analysis of Feminine Virtue**

Beauvoir’s existentialist commitments are such that she cannot subscribe to any traditional virtue theory, particularly one grounded in a notion of natural law. However, while there can be no natural *law* for existentialists, with their commitment to a deep ontological freedom (as a “whole consciousness, an irreducible freedom” [Beauvoir 2011, 657]), there can be a natural *freedom*, and such naturally occurring freedom is the ontological basis from which both a critique of virtue is executed and any potential reconstruction of virtue mounted.

Beauvoir’s most extended treatment of the “feminine” virtues is found in the chapter “Women’s Situation and Character” in *The Second Sex*, in which she analyzes woman’s character and behavior in existentialist terms:

It is clear that woman’s whole “character”—her convictions, values, wisdom, morality, tastes and behavior—is explained by her situation. The fact that she is denied transcendence usually prohibits her from having access to the loftiest human attitudes—heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, and creation—but they are not so common even in men. (Beauvoir 2011, 661)

Note the nuanced relationship to the gendered virtues here—the “faults” of her character are due to an (unchosen) situation; the male-gendered virtues are denied her, but Beauvoir is careful to point out that men may also fail to achieve these. The nature of the critique is not that of a comparison to men as holding superior virtue; it is a critique of the man-made situation women find themselves in and of the fiction that the male-gendered virtues actually naturally predominate in males.

In these existentialist terms, the freedom that is consciousness in humans may be degraded by circumstances, Beauvoir argues. Transcendence—the capacity to exercise such freedom—can be both denied with regard to oneself (in bad faith, as Jean-Paul Sartre originally notes) or denied on behalf of others (Beauvoir 2011, 661). Specifically, it may be denied to women by men; for example, in men accusing women of being obsessed with trivialities—being unable to transcend their own material worlds—and in reducing women to their bodies. Transcendence is a capacity not able

to be fully exercised by women under patriarchy: in an important sense, they have freedom, but it is an unexercised capacity—it has yet to be realized. As Beauvoir (2011, 664) puts it, “In woman this freedom remains abstract and empty, it cannot authentically assume itself except in revolt: this is the only way open to those who have no chance to build anything.” What Beauvoir describes here is slave morality in the Nietzschean sense (Nietzsche 1996, 22)—that is, a morality developed in response to enslavement, as a matter of survival: woman’s freedom, denied a broad “horizon,” must exercise itself in tortuous, insidious ways. Although it is a kind of “revolt,” in Beauvoir’s view it is ultimately an ineffective one. The concept of slave morality becomes more apparent in the following passage, which describes vices that clearly display the quality of being “ignoble”—the opposite of the values of a free and self-defining Master: “Many of the faults for which they [women] are reproached—mediocrity, meanness, shyness, pettiness, laziness, frivolity, and servility—simply express the fact that the horizon is blocked for them” (Beauvoir 2011, 643). Interestingly, Wollstonecraft names a similar pattern of behavior in the following passage: “Whilst [women] are absolutely dependent on their husbands[,] they will be cunning, mean, and selfish” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 222). Such behavior is both expressive of an oppressive situation and an (indirect) response to it. As Beauvoir (2011, 649) describes: “There is much feminine behavior that has to be interpreted as protest.”

For instance, frivolity in woman—an obsession with trivial things—is, explains Beauvoir (2011, 644), due to the fact that “she lacks access to big ones.” Servility is the natural consequence of being treated as a slave; that is, as someone whose freedom to self-determine is denied: “She has no choice but to endure all humiliations; a slave cannot understand the meaning of ‘human dignity’” (Beauvoir 2011, 644). Other vices mentioned in this connection are “foolishness,” “narcissism,” and “egotism” (Beauvoir 2011, 645).

Beauvoir’s treatment of virtue is enlightening in that it helps us understand that the set of “virtues” is gendered in ways that may not be apparent at first. By pointing out the social overlay of the “feminine” gender upon an originally ontologically free human, Beauvoir gives women the ability to distinguish between what “belongs” to them and what has been “thrust upon them,” so to speak. This distinction then enables women to critique and possibly subsequently reject aspects of “the feminine” *without* at the same time critiquing and rejecting *women themselves*. And to critique the “feminine” is to critique a scheme of gendered virtues in which behaving “like a woman” means exhibiting a particular set of supposedly good qualities coded by men as feminine.

### **Wollstonecraft on Virtue: A “Virtuous Equality”**

Wollstonecraft, too, finds herself concerned with virtue; however, unlike Beauvoir, she does not develop a systematic language to articulate precisely what concerns her about the moral “character” of women and how it is talked about in her time and place (eighteenth-century England). Nevertheless, she finds aspects of what women do abhorrent, and she names those aspects clearly while refraining from *casting blame upon women as a group*—that is, women qua women—for these failings. The failings identified do not, contra the patriarchal view, belong to the Being of women as some kind of inherent ontological inferiority but rather are socially constructed by the patriarchy itself. This is not to say that women do not have some freedom and responsibility to resist such construction—both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir argue precisely this, that women have the capacity to resist such societal pressures. If there is “blame” to be assigned here (and perhaps “responsibility” is a better word), it is at least not wholly or even chiefly assigned to women but also to the patriarchal society to which they belong.

For Wollstonecraft (1994, 221), virtue is critical to her argument for women’s equality: “There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind are chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride.” In calling for a “virtuous equality,” Wollstonecraft references the idea that women so far have not exhibited the virtues or excellence that they are capable of. She thus calls for a nongendered set of virtues—virtues that would be the consequence of sexual equality once women become “unchained.” Grounding this call, in the second *Vindication* she delivers two kinds of argument for equality. One proceeds from the basic nature of women qua human beings—that is, that women have inherent properties of (equal) humanness, couched in terms of rationality, that entail they should be treated equally.<sup>8</sup> Another is a consequentialist argument, to the effect that an equal society would be a more virtuous one, in which women generally would exhibit the same range and degree of virtues as men: “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 283). The second kind of argument is, I believe, a strategic one: Wollstonecraft is operating from the viewpoint that men who may not be open to the premise that women are equal human beings may be more likely to be open to the premise that virtue in society is valuable. If men value virtue, Wollstonecraft argues, they should value equality too.

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<sup>8</sup> Recalling this passage: “The nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 122).

What Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir observe and describe in giving accounts of women's "character" is a *general* state of affairs, an aggregate of women's behavior across the population of women in their respective places and times. Arguably, these philosophers themselves represent exceptions to the general observations and constitute a proof of the ability of women to at least partially overcome the effects of patriarchy even while continuing to live within it. Both philosophers accept that women in patriarchal society *generally* (1) lack the masculine-gendered virtues and (2) possess the feminine-gendered virtues; but the latter are understood as not truly "owned" by women themselves—they are imposed from above by such society. Some of these virtues are also of *ambiguous value* in a patriarchal society because, as mentioned above, the patriarchy encourages women to embody these qualities yet simultaneously judges them negatively for doing so. (The mechanism by which the patriarchy does this will be discussed in the section "'Feminine' Virtues as Animal Virtues and Slave Virtues" below.)

There can be, of course, exceptions to gendered construction of character, because patriarchy is not all powerful—there remains, even after the social construction of and imposition of femininity upon women, a core of human being (understood by existentialists as free consciousness) that retains the ability to create and assert itself. Despite the encouragements and impositions of patriarchy, individual women may still on occasion exhibit the masculine-gendered virtues (for example, bravery) or fail to exhibit the feminine-gendered virtues (for example, humility). Indeed, under patriarchy there has been a "vice" variously named as "being unfeminine" or "unsexed" or "aping men," wherein if women exhibit "masculine" virtues, against the odds, these virtues magically turn into vices!

Women's lack of the virtues gendered as male is identified by Wollstonecraft as a consequence of inequality. Regarding the so-called feminine virtues, she refuses to accept that the qualities preferred or endorsed by men in women as goods are *actual* goods—in fact, she names them as "vicious" (Wollstonecraft 1994, 223); that is, as the very opposite of virtue: "Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing" (Wollstonecraft 1994, 13). Having rejected such faux virtues, Wollstonecraft then exhorts women to take up what she considers actual virtues instead, such as "exertion and self-denial" (Wollstonecraft 1994, 222)—the first, at least, being an example of a virtue that is clearly gendered as masculine.

That the vices that Wollstonecraft names as such are, sometimes at least, construed as virtues by the patriarchy she lives in is a fact that she stops just short of making explicit. She does identify that men encourage behavior that is *nonvirtuous*, but she fails to make the claim that men also name such behavior as, literally, "virtuous." If she had taken this next step of the analysis, the illogic of patriarchal values would have become more apparent: namely, that it construes as virtuous the

behavior that it also considers vicious. It encourages the behavior that it deplors, thereby creating a no-win situation for women—the very epitome of “setting up people to fail.” As Beauvoir (2011, 645) says succinctly of woman: “Her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly.” If we further analyze this, what we have is a hierarchy of virtues, wherein men embody clear, unambiguous virtues, while women embody shifting, ambiguous virtues (virtues that turn into vices). The logical consequence of this hierarchy is that virtuous men are more virtuous than virtuous women.

### **“Feminine” Virtues as Animal Virtues and Slave Virtues**

In what way are the feminine-gendered virtues set up as inferior to the male-gendered virtues? Both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir identify the mode of inferiority in their references to the “animality” of the virtues ascribed to women. For instance, Wollstonecraft draws on analogies with animal behavior to identify the behavior she disapproves of—for example, “spaniel-like affection” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 222) and “slavish obedience” (231). And Beauvoir makes reference to the supposed animality of women in this passage from *The Second Sex*: “What man thus cherishes and detests first in woman, lover as well as mother, is the fixed image of her animal destiny, the life essential to her existence, but that condemns her to finitude and death” (Beauvoir 2011, 183).

“Animal destiny” is a reference to the idea that woman qua animal is simply doomed to carry out the activities appropriate to an animal; virtue then is no more than following an instinct. Given that it is commonly held nonhuman animals do not have a choice other than to follow their instincts for survival and reproduction, in linking woman with “animal destiny” there is a corresponding denial of her free will and a denial of the possibility of attributing to her moral praise.<sup>9</sup>

The animality of the virtues assigned to women allows the conceptual move of reinterpreting such virtues as vices for which women should be blamed or judged as inferior in some respect—the “cherishing and detesting” referenced by Beauvoir

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<sup>9</sup> Men may also be ascribed animal virtues, but they are “allowed” to have both kinds of virtue, whereas women are only allowed the animal ones. For example, to ascribe to a man the nonmoral good of (physical) “strength” does not rule out also ascribing to him the moral good of “bravery”—in fact, empirically, these two often occur together. By contrast, to ascribe to a woman the nonmoral good of “gentleness,” under patriarchy, is to preclude her from ascriptions of bravery. More explicitly, men may point to a woman’s gentleness as evidence of her inability to be brave. Thus the gendered clusterings of purported virtues under an overarching patriarchal taxonomy of virtue function to limit woman’s potential and deny her full humanity, by denying her the full range of human virtues.

above. What is important here is that what is a virtue in nonhuman animals is at the same time a vice in humans: for example, women are praised for being submissive but denigrated for being incapable of true leadership. Women are not so much praised for being obedient humans as for being obedient *subhumans*—in their obedience they prove their subhumanity. To make clear the analogy with nonhuman animals, we do not expect our pet dogs to lead, so we praise them for being submissive to our authority: a good dog is an obedient dog. A woman who is praised for being obedient is at the same time damned as being subhuman. The ambiguity of the virtues set up as feminine trades upon a conceptual slippage between human and animal virtues—that is, between two different senses of “virtue.” This slippage between the two different senses of “virtue” is exploited by the patriarchy to great effect. That is, under patriarchy women have to deal with not just an unfair system of gendered morals but also an obfuscatory moral *language* that conceals the contradiction and double standard therein. Part of the project of degendering the virtues is to draw attention to the import of this language and thus disable its power.

Wollstonecraft is also concerned to alert women to this double standard, and she implores them to reject the (male-authored) feminine-gendered virtues in order to make space for the assertion of women’s full humanity. There is surely here a concern to disprove the claims of sexist Enlightenment figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau,<sup>10</sup> whose misogyny in the midst of his assertion of “man’s” freedom and equality so incensed Wollstonecraft. She is insisting against the patriarchy that women are both more and other than a cluster of feminine-gendered subhuman virtues: “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 283); which is to say, “Give us political equality and we will demonstrate this to you!”

If we further analyze this, masculine-gendered virtues are virtues that presuppose a full, free, and transcendent human being. Feminine-gendered virtues, on the other hand, presuppose an incomplete, unfree, and immanent quasi-human being (more animal than human). I will investigate Beauvoir’s and Wollstonecraft’s respective definitions of humanity below, but here I note Beauvoir’s great insight was to clearly and systematically identify the purported *ontological underpinning* of the gendering of virtue. The patriarchy assigns virtue according to gender because it believes one gender to be *less human* and *more animal* than the other.

In sum, according to Beauvoir, the virtues the patriarchy ascribes to and encourages in women are often of ambiguous value. They are either squarely “slave values” in the Nietzschean sense described above (for example, submissiveness,

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<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft takes umbrage particularly at Rousseau’s assertion that women should be “subjected to a severe restraint, that of propriety” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 225).

obedience), which we would not consider virtues today, or they are what I am calling “animal virtues”—that is, the “virtues” of doing what is instinctual. These actually require no moral effort and therefore turn out not to be virtues (in the moral and distinctively human sense) at all. Neither of these types of virtue are valued unambiguously by the patriarchy—the “proof” of the goodness of a woman (one who is good at being a woman) conveniently doubles as the proof of her inequality and inferiority.

As stated above, human moral virtues are qualities for which a person can be morally praised, because they are held to be the result of a choice, and normally we acknowledge that morality requires effort.<sup>11</sup> Animal virtues are qualities that “naturally” inhere in that person qua the sort of animal (in this case, human mammal) that she is. Because they occur naturally, they are not the result of any moral effort or choice and therefore cannot form a basis for moral praise.

The patriarchal scheme of virtues, as identified by Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir, prompts the question, which of the feminine-gendered virtues are *actual* virtues (those we should judge as “positive” or “moral” qualities) and which are *faux* virtues (those we should judge as “negative” or “immoral” qualities)? It is also important to stress that some of the masculine-gendered virtues, too, may turn out, on a feminist analysis, to be faux virtues.

Degendering the virtues, then, does not necessarily entail that women reclaim all of the originally masculine-gendered virtues for themselves. What is required is that women critically examine the complete range of purported virtues, identifying and then rejecting the faux virtues (“virtues” that turn out to be vices), so that what we are left with is a set of virtues understood as unambiguously morally positive qualities that, *prima facie*, we consider ought to be strived for by all genders (see table 1).

I have set out in table 1 a schema to capture the steps of the critical analysis of gender that feminists have been and are still engaged in. Distinguishing between real and faux virtue is only the beginning. Even accepting a virtue is a “real” one, there is the possibility of its not having been accurately described under the patriarchy (in ways I will explore below). The patriarchy has consistently *misdescribed* and *misclassified* gendered virtues in its own interest, and therefore such descriptions must be critically assessed and women’s own redescriptions substituted if necessary.

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<sup>11</sup> Phillipa Foot (2002) famously identifies this feature of virtue as causing a dilemma for Aristotle, who wants to maintain that virtues pertain to what is difficult for humans *and* that those who are virtuous “effortlessly” should be praised more. Acknowledging this tension, we can accept the general praiseworthiness of virtue as an uncontroversial feature.

**Table 1: The Feminist Critical Analysis of Virtue: The Degendering of Virtue**

Actions	Masculine-gendered virtues			Feminine-gendered virtues		
	Actual virtues		Faux virtues (vices)	Actual virtues		Faux virtues (vices)
Distinguish:	Described accurately, e.g., “honesty”	Misdescribed e.g., “bravery” as essentially military	e.g., paternalism	Described accurately <sup>12</sup>	Misdescribed e.g., “nurturing” as a “maternal instinct”	e.g., submissiveness, “slavish obedience,” “spaniel-like affection”
Outcome:	Accept, in a degendered form	Redescribe accurately and accept	Reject	Accept, in a degendered form	Redescribe accurately and accept	Reject

Such analysis is made easier through the use of the linguistic and conceptual tools a philosopher such as Beauvoir provides. Wollstonecraft lived at a time in which she did not have the benefits of the explicit framing device of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, nor Heidegger’s analysis of human being, nor the existentialist focus on Being-for-itself as distinct from Being-for-others. However, she did draw upon a tradition of identifying the changes wrought to subjectivity through master-slave relations (Coffee 2013; Halldenius 2019), particularly understood through the lens of female “dependency.”<sup>13</sup> As Alan Coffee (2013, 123) summarizes Wollstonecraft’s view, “Since no woman, regardless of education, class or position, could be independent, no woman could be said to be free.” Simply due to her chronological position in the development of Western philosophy, Wollstonecraft has fewer philosophical tools available than Beauvoir has to perform an analysis of women’s condition; nevertheless, she does it with remarkable success—work that is crucial to

<sup>12</sup> It is questionable whether *any* of the feminine-gendered virtues under patriarchy are accurately described: their description generally seems to entail some kind of limit or moral ambiguity. Nevertheless, if some such virtues *were* accurately described, as judged by feminists, then they should rightly be accepted, on this view of the degendering project.

<sup>13</sup> Halldenius (2019) identifies the Roman Republican tradition as underpinning Wollstonecraft’s analysis of the slave’s position, with its defining of unfreedom as being subject to another’s will. This as an important element in Wollstonecraft’s account of women’s subjection in marriage.

a proper feminist reassessment of the moral virtues and the unearthing of the role their promotion plays in constructing as unequal the “feminine” gender.

### **The Role of Reason in Wollstonecraft’s Enlightenment Feminism**

Wollstonecraft, as an Enlightenment intellectual, holds reason to be of crucial importance for humans, but this causes problems for an avowed believer in female equality, for, as Genevieve Lloyd (1993, 37) has argued, “It is not a question simply of the applicability to women of neutrally specified ideals of rationality, but rather of the genderization of the ideals themselves.” Substitute “virtue” for “rationality” and we have Beauvoir’s and Wollstonecraft’s position on virtue. They would agree that virtues generally, as ideals to which we aspire, are not “neutrally specified” but rather are clustered together in gendered groups and described in theoretically loaded ways. The purported presence of virtues in human activities are described in such a way as to associate common women’s duties with a very circumscribed and ambiguous set of virtues and, correspondingly, associate common men’s duties with a fuller set of unambiguous virtues.

Reason, whether considered a virtue in its own right or a condition for virtue, is clearly historically gendered as male. Lloyd’s example of how reason is understood in Aquinas’s scheme, is particularly pertinent here; as she describes it, women’s “meaning is bound up with the *reproduction* [my emphasis] of human nature, in distinction from those operations—including noble intellectual functioning—which define what human nature *is*” (Lloyd 1993, 36). That is, women’s meaning gets defined by her biological, animal, and mammalian functioning (reproduction, nurturing of her young—things *all mammals do*) rather than by the higher functions of her consciousness (things *only humans do*). Wollstonecraft would agree that it is rationality qua “noble intellectual functioning” that defines what humans are, but she obviously would disagree with the gendered distinction Aquinas (and her contemporary Rousseau) make. So she is placed in the difficult position of having to apply to women a concept of rationality that has been historically defined to exclude them. For Wollstonecraft, at a more abstract or, perhaps, spiritual level, there need be no conflict between reason and womanhood (recall that she believes women to be made equally in the rational *imago dei*); however, the application of concepts requires language. And when faced with the difficult task of describing motherhood (see “the case of mothering” below), she must wrestle with language that sets reason against emotion, while it indissolubly links emotion with such motherhood. Charlotte Witt (2002, 307) usefully outlines three possible paths of action arising from a feminist critique of reason, which I will summarize here: (1) completely reject the concept of reason, (2) reconceive reason along feminist lines and keep it, (3) retain reason as is but include women where they were previously excluded. I am arguing here that Wollstonecraft chooses option (2)—reconceive reason and keep it. It is particularly

because of Wollstonecraft's identification of the bifurcation of virtues of reason along gendered lines that it is impossible for her to simply include herself and other women under the existing rubric. How can she accept a form of reason that defines it with reference to activities usually gendered male while excluding traditional women's activities, including mothering, which is *the* stereotypical women's activity? No, as proof of being made in the *imago dei*, reason is too important to leave to men to practice and too diverse to leave to them to define.

Both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft identify that under the ascription of reason and other virtues women are excluded from instantiating the defining features of humanity, such as "noble intellectual functioning." Although reason is not the same concept as the existentialists' (free) consciousness, arguably both are necessary for "noble intellectual functioning"—the intellectual activity that is in philosophy traditionally named as *the* virtue of human beings qua humans.

### **The Role of Transcendence in Beauvoir's Existential Feminism**

Does a similar conceptual difficulty arise for Beauvoir in applying to women the concept of transcendence? For the existentialist, although there is no human nature as such, there is one thing we can't choose, and that is not to be free. We are "condemned to be free," as Sartre (2007, 29) says, and this does allow the assertion of one virtue associated with humanity, the virtue of "transcendence." "Transcendence" is a human capacity that, when exercised, is considered a human excellence—*the* human excellence for humans qua humans—by which a person demonstrates to herself and to others that she is free: it is the exercising of this freedom and the expansion of one's Being-in-the-world to its full extent. There is a potential problem with this notion of transcendence, however, as Lloyd notes, and that is the problem of *what* is transcended. What is transcended is our "facticity," which includes the facts of our biology, and Lloyd (1993, 101) states that this biology has been traditionally construed as "feminine" by male philosophers: "The male perspective has left its marks on the very concepts of 'transcendence' and 'immanence.'"

In defense of the notion of transcendence, however, it is important to be clear about what it is and is not. To "transcend" one's bodily facticity is not necessarily to reject it. Rather, it is to intentionally distance oneself conceptually so as to take a critical, reflective attitude toward it. Transcendence does not entail rejection, just as taking a critical attitude does not entail taking a negative one (the English word "criticism" is ambiguous in this sense). When I love and accept my body unconditionally, this is an example of transcending it; when I hate it, I transcend it; if I am indifferent to it, I transcend it—the activity of this "I" that is able to critically reflect upon its situation (including its bodily situation) is what the existentialists identify as being definitive of humanity. In this way immanence is faced up to and

“dealt with.” Transcendence has to coexist with immanence, remembering that Sartre (2003, 329) says, “Being-for-itself must be wholly body and it must be wholly consciousness.” Of course, this conceptual distancing itself may be challenged in various ways—for example, as the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty does in questioning its importance relative to our habitual immersion in our embodiment.<sup>14</sup> Some feminists may challenge whether such conceptual distancing is desirable or even possible. Nevertheless, what is relevant to assessing the accuracy of Beauvoir’s analysis of women’s situation is the fact that the overarching virtue of transcendence in the existentialist scheme does not necessarily entail a rejection of female embodiment; rather, it can be understood as a conscious, intentional relation to it, which may involve rejection, acceptance, or any other attitude a human may take.

### **On Correctly Describing Women’s Traditional Activities: The Case of Mothering**

As set out in table 1, a key part of the feminist project of degendering the virtues is a critical assessment of their description under patriarchy and, if necessary, a redescription. I wish to consider the case of mothering, as a key example of women’s traditional activities and context in which patriarchal descriptions of “feminine” virtue occur.<sup>15</sup> Ruth Groenhart, in her discussion of the “virtue of care,” cites the important work of Virginia Held as a key example of feminist redescription:

Virginia Held has pointed out the extent to which the activities women characteristically engage in, such as caring for children, preparing meals, and the like require careful reflection, theoretical interpretation, and all the other intellectual traits of a rational being. (Groenhou 1998, 183; citing Held 1993, ch. 6)

It is in the context of both this original examination of care and its ongoing reimagination along more fluid gender lines that we can examine Wollstonecraft’s redescription of traditional women’s duties:<sup>16</sup> “To fulfil domestic duties much resolution is necessary, and a serious kind of perseverance that requires a more firm support than emotions, however lively and true to nature” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 139). Here a tension arises between virtuous reason and possibly unvirtuous emotion, which

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2005) does not deny the existence of a transcendent “I,” but he challenges its importance to our sense of human identity. He thus demotes the transcendent “I” while promoting the immanent body-subject.

<sup>15</sup> I use “mothering” in an inclusive sense here to refer to the traditionally gendered role of nurturing infants and children, which role can be carried out by other genders, adoptive, trans, or nonbinary parents and carers.

<sup>16</sup> For a transsensitive rethinking of an ethics of care, see Marvin (2019).

Wollstonecraft never explicitly resolves. Martina Reuter (2016) has argued for an implicit resolution in Wollstonecraft's writings whereby emotions are seen as a necessary support and complement to rationality; and elsewhere, Reuter (2022, 345) emphasizes the role of the imagination for virtue: "Wollstonecraft claims that the activity of the imagination raises the reader above the level of mere animal-like appetite." An ability to imagine alternative possibilities to the restricted life of a woman under patriarchy seems essential to wanting to be a better human, which is surely the goal of virtue. Perhaps imagination plays a similar role to Beauvoir's existentialist "transcendence," to rise above not only animal "appetites" but animal destiny and affirm one's human freedom. Certainly, Wollstonecraft does not dismiss feelings but warns us against their overinfluence. She goes on to set the virtues of "resolution" and "perseverance" against the rival feminine-gendered virtues of "tenderness" and "compassion" (Wollstonecraft 1994, 139). She warns mothers against being "carried away by their feelings" (139), as being detrimental to the child and thus a barrier rather than an assistance in the discharge of mothering duties.<sup>17</sup> Note how she redescribes mothering as *requiring* rationality and its associated virtues (resolution, perseverance) rather than excluding it. This is where, I believe, she goes beyond a mere acceptance of rationality as it is construed in patriarchal society. *Contra* the common understanding of her as being a figure squarely within the political liberal tradition with its Enlightenment-influenced notion of reason, she squarely rejects an important feature of such a notion of reason: namely, its incompatibility with mothering. Reason on the patriarchal view is not just, for instance, "clear thinking"; it is "clear thinking, which is bad for mothering," and it is "clear thinking, which is incompatible with caring." That is, there is a suppressed feature of the Enlightenment notion of "reason," which defines its key features as being incompatible with the sorts of activities women commonly do. It is not merely that the patriarchy fails to apply the notion of reason to women but that it asserts there are qualities or features of reason that, when spelled out, *render it impossible to do so*.

Correspondingly, the qualities that are assumed to be essential to mothering (e.g., compassion, tenderness) are construed as being incompatible with clear thinking and with all the other qualities associated with or subsumed under "reason."

Turning to Beauvoir's treatment of "the Mother," she begins by rejecting the patriarchal scheme in which certain animal virtues are ascribed to the woman who carries out her maternal duties: she rejects this idea of the Mother achieving her "physiological destiny" or "'natural' vocation" because she subscribes to the

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<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft (1994, 139) writes that "women of sensibility [emotion] are the most unfit for this task [motherhood], because they will infallibly, carried away by their feelings, spoil a child's temper."

existentialist belief that “human society is never left to nature” (Beauvoir 2011, 524). By referring to examples of women who hold ambivalent or negative attitudes toward their young, Beauvoir (2011, 554) proves that “there is no such thing as maternal ‘instinct’: the word does not in any case apply to the human species.” Women, do not have pre-given instincts any more than men do; rather, attitudes are “defined by her total situation and by the way she accepts it” (554). So she is rejecting outright descriptions of (functional) mothering as simply a matter of mammalian instinct.

Recently, Kate Kirkpatrick (2020) has contextualized Beauvoir’s analysis of motherhood against its reception in postwar France, noting clearly the dual praising/blaming nature of society’s attitude toward the “virtues” of motherhood:

It was her [Beauvoir’s] treatment of motherhood that came under the most sustained attack. Beauvoir thought society was in extravagant bad faith: how could they not see the duplicity in showing contempt for women and respect for mothers? (Kirkpatrick 2020, 255–56)

To be precise, it is the animality of the traditional maternal virtues that supports a respect toward mothers for the following of instinct, conjoined with a contempt toward women for the subhumanity demonstrated by such following of instinct. To succeed at being a mother is to fail at being a human. Circumventing this praise/blame discourse, Beauvoir argues that if a mother successfully nurtures and cares for her young, she does so partly due to her preexisting situation (socioeconomic background, culture, and so on) and partly due to how she as an individual responds to her situation, while exactly none of this is due to “instinct,” maternal or otherwise.<sup>18</sup>

Both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft are concerned to emphasize that women have a capacity in their response to their situations to overcome the freedom-denying effects of such situations. What is important here is the fact that women *can* rightly be given moral credit for the effort and choice involved in successful mothering—it is not to be reduced to following an instinct but rather to be considered the exercising of a set of (human) virtues, involving consciousness, responsibility, assertiveness, and other virtues traditionally associated with men. And if we do credit the existence of

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<sup>18</sup> As Laura Hengehold (2017, 76) notes in her Deleuzian analysis of Beauvoir’s work: “Maternal biological and caretaking roles can be transcendent when they emerge from specific activities. But these roles are doomed to seriousness and immanence if they result from the desire to achieve a state of being”—that is, from a desire to achieve “motherhood” as an all-defining state of being rather than a freely chosen project.

“instincts” (and existentialism could only allow that such instincts are instances of *human* facticity, not gendered facticity, and that they are in principle able to be transcended), good mothering arguably requires a *repression* of instinct as much as or more than a following of them. For instance, it is far more “instinctual” (or biologically “natural”) for a woman to sleep through the night when she is tired than to wake every two hours to feed her baby.<sup>19</sup>

As for the feminine-gendered virtues associated with mothering, these must then be a subject of revaluation and possible rejection, affirmation, and/or redescription. The traditional “feminine” virtue of “tenderness” might be affirmed as relevant to good mothering but redescribed as an intentional, conscious effort to balance opposite emotions, such as frustration or anger, by exercising rational judgment as to when it is right to prioritize tenderness. Arguably, there are times to be stern and times to be tender, and women are capable of expressing both qualities at the appropriate times: it is not an either/or.

In describing motherhood, both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir make a case that women have trouble being good mothers when the realization of their ontological equality and independence is denied. In Wollstonecraft’s (1994, 233) case: “Woman . . . seldom exerts enlightened maternal affection; for she either neglects her children, or spoils them by improper indulgence. . . . To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers.” Note the identification of the “feminine” virtue “meekness” as being detrimental to mothering rather than advantageous to it. Here Wollstonecraft breaks up the ontological pairing of the “feminine” virtues with motherhood. Under her revisionist description, not only is meekness not advantageous to mothering, but it is doubtful whether it should still be considered a virtue at all.

However, as will be discussed below, Wollstonecraft also implies in the second *Vindication* that dysfunctional or unvirtuous mothering is class-based as well as gender-based—that is, it is associated with the effect of privilege and corruption in the upper classes rather than sexist manipulation alone. All women suffer from such dysfunction, but the supposed “privilege” of class exacerbates rather than relieves it (Wollstonecraft 2011, 224–25). Wollstonecraft’s picture of mothering under patriarchy is an ambiguous and inconsistent one, but her description of what mothering *should* be unambiguously rejects the “feminine” virtues traditionally

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<sup>19</sup> I can testify to this from my own experience. Breastfeeding itself felt “natural” to me, but the waking in the night felt extremely unnatural! I could feel my body protesting against it, at the same time that it complied by filling my breasts with milk. I describe my experience here simply to emphasize the need for better and more nuanced descriptions of parenting from parents themselves.

associated with it, painting a picture of a rational, assertive motherhood rather than a sentimental and self-effacing one.

Beauvoir's descriptions of motherhood evaluate it with respect to the existentialist value of authenticity (of wholly owning one's choices); therefore, when she surveys motherhood in a sexist world, she finds it to be mostly negative or at the most ambiguous. A positive motherhood is understood as an authentic one: "Maternal devotion can be experienced in perfect authenticity; but in fact, this is rarely the case. Ordinarily, maternity is a strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism" (Beauvoir 2011, 556).

Note the juxtaposition of sincerity with bad faith, and note the other oppositions. Mothering does not display a predictable cluster of "feminine" virtues; rather, it is ambiguous. It displays both a virtuous and a vicious side and prompts the question of how to identify which parts of mothering are authentic exercises of a woman's freedom and which are sexist social constructions—the tenets of patriarchy internalized and embodied. Descriptions of actual mothering, of the sort Beauvoir provides in *The Second Sex*, undermine patriarchal descriptions of the "maternal" virtues. Devotion, as Beauvoir points out, may be just as easily construed as a vice rather than a virtue—namely, in the form of "masochistic devotion" (Beauvoir 2011, 558–59). Here Beauvoir does for "devotion" as a "feminine," motherhood-enhancing virtue what Wollstonecraft does for "meekness," continuing the feminist divorce of such faux virtues from the real needs of mothering.

### **Virtue and Class: Women's Complicity in Oppression**

For both Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir, determining the level of personal responsibility that women hold for their negative behavior under patriarchy is not a straightforward task. Beauvoir accuses upper class women of being willingly complicit in women's oppression, in the following passage:

In the upper classes, women are willing accomplices to their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits they are guaranteed. We have seen that the women of the high bourgeoisie and aristocracy have always defended their class interests more stubbornly than their husbands: they do not hesitate to radically sacrifice their autonomy as human beings; they stifle all thinking, all critical judgement, all spontaneity; they parrot conventional wisdom, they identify with the ideal imposed on them by the male code. (Beauvoir 2011, 663)

Beauvoir's claim here is more than just her general criticism of women's behavior to the effect that they are not authentic inasmuch as they deny their freedom (bad faith). What she outlines here is the giving of implicit *consent* to patriarchal

oppression, because it is in their individual and class interest to do so. Arguably, some women benefit under patriarchy/misogyny: if a woman is presented as the ideal and virtuous woman under patriarchy, she may be allowed certain privileges—not the least of which is to join in the critique of other women as not being virtuous enough or not virtuous in the right way.

A question arises here of whether, outside such privilege, women could be said to “consent” to their oppression. Certainly, Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* describes the different stages of a woman’s development (e.g., in the chapter names in book 2: “Childhood,” “The Girl,” “Sexual Initiation,” etc.) in such a way that it is clear her life is most of the time not a matter of choosing what is in her direct interest; nor is she actively rebelling against her condition. Importantly for this discussion, Manon Garcia (2021) has provided a critical analysis of the role submission plays with regard to our concept of “femininity”: why and how it becomes considered constitutive of one gender. She points out that unlike in the case of slaves or defeated warriors, a woman’s “submission appears as chosen, and the woman is thus responsible for it” (Garcia 2021, 23). Turning to Beauvoir’s existentialist analysis of submission, Garcia (2021, 187) notes the ambiguity of the “choice”: “It is not that women actively choose submission but that they consent to the submission that is prescribed to them by social norms.” This understanding might help us to distinguish between the *passive* consent to an oppressive situation a girl or woman finds herself in and the *active* consent of a privileged woman who consciously chooses in line with her class interests.

On Wollstonecraft’s view, the privileges of class reduce rather than amplify women’s agency, robbing them of the virtues of honest and purposeful work: “Destructive, however, as riches and inherited honours are to the human character, women are more debased and cramped, if possible, than men” (Wollstonecraft 2011, 224), since upper class men of her time and place had the option of taking a profession such as soldier or politician, whereas this was out of bounds to women. On the other hand, she argues that class divisions corrupt all classes “almost equally.”<sup>20</sup>

Wollstonecraft here identifies a pattern that goes beyond the case of male-to-female oppression: she, like Beauvoir, suggests here a pattern to all oppression, in which both oppressor and oppressed are morally corrupted. Many years before Hegel’s articulation of the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*,

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<sup>20</sup> “The preposterous distinctions of rank, which render civilisation a curse, by dividing the world between voluptuous tyrants, and cunning envious dependents, corrupt, almost equally, every class of people, because respectability is not attached to the discharge of the relative duties of life, but to the station” (Wollstonecraft 2011, 225).

Wollstonecraft devises her own version of a dialectic that corrupts both parties,<sup>21</sup> however she does not express a belief in a key tenet of Hegel’s dialectic: the ability of slaves to harness their negative power to bring themselves to full subjectivity. In the case of Beauvoir, Toril Moi (1998, 86), in her essay “‘Independent Women’ and ‘Narratives of Liberation,’” observes Beauvoir’s “marked reluctance to cast [women’s] subjectivity . . . as a *necessary* element in women’s political struggle for freedom.” This rejection of slaves’ or dependents’ “negative power” is important because it explains why neither Wollstonecraft nor Beauvoir wishes to strategically reclaim for women the cluster of feminine-gendered virtues known as the “feminine.” Liberation must come through a changed subjectivity for women and a better, corrected understanding of the virtues. Subjectivity must change either before or with women’s liberation—it cannot be used for liberation as is. I believe this is because of their respective positions on what humans are: human being, as opposed to animal being, is a *capacity* to exercise freedom or rationality, rather than the exercise itself, which means that women’s subjectivity is not completely constructed as subjugated; it is only partially so, at the level of their characters and action. Both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft believe in a level of being that underpins the contingencies of women’s historical Being-in-the-world—for Wollstonecraft, a God-given rational nature; for Beauvoir, a free consciousness—which precludes the possibility of women, even strategically, fully identifying with those contingencies.

### **Virtue and Human Nature**

For here I throw down my gauntlet and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. (Wollstonecraft 1994, 119)

It may seem strange that when Wollstonecraft makes a call for women’s liberation, she expresses it in respect to their “manners”: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 113). This expression belongs to the eighteenth-century literature of advice, which, as Vivien Jones (2002) notes in her essay on such literature, is hard for modern readers to connect with feminism but, as she goes on to argue, is more closely connected to it than may first appear. Certainly, when we look at the context of this quote, we see the political dimension appear: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost

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<sup>21</sup> Such dialectic is not purely theoretical in Wollstonecraft’s time: as Botting (2021, 1311n1; citing Ferguson 1993, 22, 29) points out, she makes two “indirect allusions” to the Haitian Revolution, one of many enslaved people’s rebellions. Public racialized slavery is part of the second *Vindication’s* historical context.

dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labour by transforming themselves to transform the world” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 113).

The connection between the personal and the political is clearly established—politics begins at home but is not limited to it. We find here an optimistic view that human nature is in principle perfectible: characters can be changed for the better, and women, no less than men, have this capacity to transform themselves. It is a transformation of an already-existing personhood, not a complete self-creation of the sort Beauvoir advocates, but this transformation is indeed radical, implying that women will be almost unrecognizable in their “manners” (how they conduct themselves and show themselves to the world). Because women have been held back from achieving personal excellence, they need to focus on this goal, but it is at once a personal and a communal one, harnessing rationality to apply their agency as full humans in the world.

For Beauvoir, the framework in which she rejects the gendering of virtues is the existentialist rejection of a “human nature.” Beauvoir’s complaint against the version of “woman” that is represented under a cluster of “feminine” virtues is that it is not her nature to be this, simply because it is not her nature to be *anything in particular*. If a woman is, following the existentialist view, a transcendent free consciousness, then she can choose her own nature. The fact that she has hitherto not realized that freedom is, as Beauvoir points out, a contingent fact of history, not a necessary truth about the structure of her being. This of course leaves open the question of positive existentialist virtues.<sup>22</sup> If there are such virtues, I would argue they must be the subset of virtues that are somehow attached to the two key existentialist values of (1) facing up to one’s situation, and (2) freedom-responsibility, in the form of transcendence. These values support virtues such as being responsible, honest (with oneself and others), respectful of others’ freedom, brave (facing up to one’s situation even if it is one of horror or humiliation), creative, and so on. Most recently, Sabrina Vaccarino Bremner (2022, 521) has identified the “political virtue of moral invention” as foundational for Beauvoir’s understanding of virtue, emphasizing the (self-)creative aspect of a morally good and free human being.

For Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, the framework of her rejection of the gendering of virtues occurs within the traditional notion of a God-made human nature. Her complaint about the gendered virtuous woman is that her true nature is something *else*, not that she has no nature, and that although God ordained that men and women have some differences (biology and duties), these differences are not pertinent to the development of virtues nor the range of virtues a human being may instantiate.

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<sup>22</sup> For some recent explorations of this question, see Antich (2023) and Vaccarino Bremner (2022).

Unlike Beauvoir, Wollstonecraft still adheres to an idea of a God-given human nature, with a corresponding sexed biology and duties that flow therefrom. For Wollstonecraft, duties may (at least sometimes) be gendered but virtues are not: “Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil; but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 119). Given that both women and men share in the same human (rational) nature, these duties do not flow from their humanity but from their biological particularities. In Wollstonecraft’s time, women were considered to have the duty of carrying and taking the principal responsibility for rearing their young; to fail to do so—that is, to fail to adequately nurture their young—would then be considered a failure to do their duty. Virtues relate to the realm of the human: virtues can help us to perform our duties, whatever they be, to a high standard. Thus even in a gender-segregated society such as Wollstonecraft’s, a man may display the virtue of forbearance with his employees at paid work, and his partner may display such forbearance with her children at home. The same virtues help both men and women to discharge their respective duties to their dependents, although such duties be different. As Wollstonecraft writes, they are both “*human* duties.”

Nevertheless, even in the exercise of different duties, women, Wollstonecraft suggests, are capable of displaying the same range of virtues as men and would do so if conditions were changed: “It is reasonable to suppose that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 283).

“Transcendence” for Beauvoir plays the role in her feminist critique that “reason” does for Wollstonecraft. They argue:

1. Women do, *contra* the contentions of sexist society, have these capacities (for reason and transcendence).
2. These capacities define what it is to be “human” (and not an animal).
3. Women have these capacities but often in patriarchal societies do not exercise them—that is, they have the capacity to transcend the immanence of facticity (Beauvoir) and to use reason to identify and practice the human virtues (Wollstonecraft) respectively—but they fail to do so.
4. They fail to exercise these human-making capacities under the influence of a patriarchal society.

Beauvoir has the language of Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself, and Being-for-others, and of Transcendence/Immanence, which allows her to draw distinctions between the socially constrained and the free in woman. This allows Beauvoir to criticize the behavior and Being-for-others that women display under the influence of

patriarchy without criticizing woman qua human being—that is without criticizing her humanity or lack of it.

When an individual or group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they *are* inferior. But the scope of the verb *to be* must be understood: bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: to be is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself. (Beauvoir 2011, 12)

It is very hard for women to realize human excellence in a world that affords them so few possibilities other than the narrow range prescribed under patriarchy. The statement that “women are inferior” on a feminist analysis rather than a patriarchal one simply means that “their situation provides them with fewer possibilities” (Beauvoir 2011, 12–13)—that is, fewer possibilities to *become*.

Beauvoir explains in the introduction to *The Second Sex* her criterion for judging the extent to which women are to blame for failing to fully express their humanity: “Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into ‘in-itself,’ of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression” (Beauvoir 2011, 16). Beauvoir’s discussion of woman’s “character” is precisely a detailing of the ways in which women are frustrated and oppressed. And in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she writes: “But once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resignation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault” (Beauvoir 1976, 38)—in other words, a vice.

Wollstonecraft has, at the time she is writing, no such language, or clear distinctions, which leads her to appear sometimes as unfair to her own sex in the rather harsh judgments she makes throughout the second *Vindication*. However, there is in the *Vindication* an attempt from time to time to create such a language. It is not consistently done, but it does indicate something about Wollstonecraft’s view of the ontology of a woman’s character under patriarchy: “From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is *produced by oppression*” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 282; my emphasis).<sup>23</sup> She adds: “Oppression thus formed many of the *features of their*

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible that what would be considered “clever” in men is here reevaluated as “cunning” in women; that is, that it might turn out to be a misdescribed virtue.

*character* perfectly to coincide with that of the oppressed half of mankind” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 283; my emphasis).

So “cunning” and other vices, as “features” of a woman’s “character,” are held to be formed under the direct oppression of women by men. What Wollstonecraft criticizes, and passionately believes can be changed, is the historical and contingent character of women, rather than the essence of women themselves as fully human, rational beings. What Beauvoir criticizes, and passionately believes can be changed, is the Being-for-others of women, which, under the oppression by men, becomes a placeholder for her true Being-for-itself—her free consciousness. It takes up the space where her Being-for-itself would otherwise express itself. To criticize the Being-for-others of women is thus not to criticize women-in-themselves. Misogyny is averted. It is a criticism aimed at a woman’s socially constructed character that effectively suppresses the true expression of her full, free humanity. Until such a character is recognized as such (through consciousness-raising and education) and consequently dismantled, there can be no space for a woman’s true humanity to express itself.

Thus both Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft have to perform a balancing act between calling out negative aspects of women’s behavior as symptomatic of the effects of patriarchal oppression and affirming the enormous *potential* of women qua human beings—that is, their unshakeable ontology as fully human beings with a capacity to display the full set of real human virtues. As we have seen, the task of distinguishing what could be called human virtues *proper* from *faux* virtues and the true nature of women’s traditional activities from misleading and inaccurate descriptions by the patriarchy is a difficult one and is yet to be completed.

I contend that this ongoing task of degendering the virtues is one of the crucial tasks of feminism. As long as there are individuals who identify as a “woman” (whatever we think this may be), then there will be a corresponding need to resist the injustice and inaccuracy of the set of purported virtues attached to the idea of “woman.” As Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft demonstrate, such a system of gendered virtues, when investigated, denies to women their full humanity and produces their character or their Being-for-others (respectively) as displaying what may then be judged as “amoral” and/or “animal-like” qualities rather than allowing them to realize the excellence of their rationality or freedom to their full capacities.

### **Whereto for Feminists and Virtue?**

Indeed, feminists who start by asking questions about the gendered nature of the virtues will inevitably end up asking questions about the nature of the virtues themselves. What is so “good” about them anyway? It is not surprising that some

feminists will question the value of the good vs. unvirtuous (vicious) distinction,<sup>24</sup> which is analogous to Nietzsche's (1998) rejection of the "good vs. evil" distinction—woman's failure to be "good" does not necessarily make her vicious. (For instance, it might make her interesting instead—a notion expressed by the slogan "Good girls go to heaven; bad girls go everywhere"!)

Ultimately, neither Wollstonecraft nor Beauvoir definitively reject the concept of virtue. For Wollstonecraft, it plays a key role in her vision of equality and the rectification of the wrongs done against women. For Beauvoir, a key part of her existentialist ethical approach is the assertion of the moral excellence of personal freedom: the personal creation of, and taking responsibility for, individual values. This cannot be done until one realizes one's potential as a critically conscious, transcendent human being. She also, of course, emphasizes the ambiguous nature of ethical Being-in-the-world: "To say that [existence] is ambiguous is to say that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won" (Beauvoir 1976, 129). Even if one creates one's own values and "owns" them, this does not thereby render the moral universe black and white, nor are such values therefore fixed forever. Acting ethically (or "virtuously") involves an acceptance of acting without complete certainty of the morality of one's action and with the possibility of changing one's mind in the future.

Both philosophers engage in a feminist critical analysis of virtue and start a project that has persisted into the present day, that of degendering the virtues as part of a larger project of a revaluation or even transvaluation of values that must occur if women are to be enabled to fully realize their critical and moral Being-in-the-world.

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, Boryczka (2012) argues that virtue ethics, particularly as taken up in feminist "ethics of care," assumes the unattainable goal of "moral perfection," which ultimately undermines women's liberatory efforts.

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