

# Young and feminine compartment essay



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Iris Marion Young- Feminine Comportment The aim of this essay is to evaluate and discuss Iris Marion Young's account of feminine comportment.

Much of her essay is based on theories and ideas expressed in the work of Merleau-Ponty and so to evaluate Young, this essay shall briefly discuss the work of Merleau-Ponty. The essay shall then turn to the overview of Young's essay. The evaluation of this argument shall be clearly and concisely encapsulated in a short conclusion. The first point that Young concerns herself with is that Erwin Strauss in his study of body comportment takes but a moment to discuss why young girls have the ineffective throwing style that they do. Strauss finds no conclusion as to why young girls awkwardly throw a ball and so puts it down to an "effeminate essence or feminine attitude".

However attitudes are built through socialization as in the blank paper socialization view- that perhaps seems the most possible if not rational. What is apparent is that attitudes are learnt- not acquired so where would a five year old girl have learnt of her "feminine essence"? In her own words Young seeks to "...fill a gap that thus exists both in existential phenomenology and feminist theory." (Young. 1990, p 145) Young seeks to find out how the body completes a definite task and this is done through combining the works of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir who both tackle and formulate different ideas concerning movement.

Awareness of body is inherent- our bodies have the ability to "learn" where we are in relation to space. With practice our bodies can act without cognitive thought, the things that we practice with thus become an extension of ourselves- as with an experienced typist that no longer needs to

look at a computer's keyboard, Merleau-Ponty likens this to his typewriter where a "motor space" opens under his hands and he is able to type without thinking about finding the letters. This can be noticed in sports too, for example when a squash player's racquet is an extension of the body. The player is aware of it, has an idea of where it is in relation to them and employs it as an extension of the body without much thought, in order to hit the ball. The same occurs in many other sports like hockey, competent practice for long enough turns the stick into an extension of the arms, the player is as aware of it as they are of a limb. When a ball is hit dangerously into a player's body, instead of raising hands to catch it, the stick automatically comes up to block it.

This is because the player has trained to do so and now gives the action no thought- it just happens. This could be likened to muscle memory- and even after not touching a stick or riding a bicycle, the person trying to do either would still be able to. This idea that we can so involve our bodies in the world around us should not be strange. Humans are too removed from their surroundings for the most part and this mechanism of acquired body movement should be perfectly natural as after all we control our bodies.

Young also mentions Simone de Beauvoir's study on feminine comportment. The problem with this study according to Young is that Beauvoir focuses on why women have always felt their body a burden- this mostly due to how carrying child and giving birth tends to create an earthy bond to nature that men do not experience. This in part oppresses women- also the fact that men don't carry children seems to be part of the natural oppression that women feel. However this does not address the issue of "feminine essence",

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as this has to do with a woman's physiology and not with a mysterious essence.

She starts with the basic movements- mapping the differences in stance while walking, standing and sitting and then moves to how things are carried and used in relation to the body. The general findings are that women try to protect themselves from harm; they do not believe themselves physically able to perform heavy tasks like men do. Also their actions reflect an inherent subordinate position in relation to the way men walk, stand and interact with objects. Men and women use their bodies differently according to Young- as if this was not immediately apparent, but to Young the " why" is what is important. Quite generally Young concedes that women do not feel as comfortable with space as men do, men tend to take a more active view of space, and sport is a good way of measuring this. But surely it is too easy to say that women are more afraid of getting hurt than men are and that they don't have confidence in their bodily abilities as men do- which Young offers as a two-prong answer to why women are at a base level more uncomfortable with space and actions.

She suggests that women do not trust their bodies as men do instead having to fight their bodies to fulfill an action. Young then defines the three modalities of movement that are inhibited by inherent femininity and these are: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality and discontinuous unity. To explain these terms- ambiguous transcendence is the idea that rather than moving through the body, women are uncomfortable in it, they do not forget that they have a body, rather they are perpetually aware of it, and yet not comfortable with it. Transcendence is when you are one with

your body, where your body is entirely you, you don't even think about it because it is the thing that does all the experiencing. Immanence is when you are aware of something as a thing.

The hockey stick thus is immanent to us. Young is saying that for women, their bodies are only partly transcendent. At no time does a woman become lost in an activity and forget she has a body, she doesn't connect to the action through the body. She is always aware of the body as an object. She says that the fact that in, for example, throwing, women only move part of their bodies (just the arm, say) shows that the unmoving part is still an object for them. To describe inhibited intentionality, think that rather than your body reaching forward to get something, you hesitate.

Intentionality is involved with how directly one intends to do something. Young here is interpreting Merleau-Ponty's idea that people exhibit intentionality in their movement. Men have an excellent sense of intentionality while that of women is not as developed or is hindered by many factors. Discontinuous unity has got to do with the surroundings of the body.

Young describes how women isolate muscles and muscle groups in order to get a task done. This is not productive by any stretch as women don't use the major muscle groups to bear the weight. She also advocates the idea that women see themselves as objects within the situation. This is based somewhat on what Merleau-Ponty says about the unification of the body and the action, for Young it is possible that his experience is simply due to him being a man.

This indeed would make his interaction with the world different from hers. Thus simple tasks, if Merleau-Ponty is correct would require a woman to do both the task at hand and also fight her body- or compel it into doing the task. “ Woman takes herself to be the object of the motion rather than its originator” (Young. 1990, p150). Also it must be noted that Young takes the view that women see an object as coming at them not towards them, the idea of catching for instance must then difficult. The idea of the object coming at them must be conquered in order that the object can be caught.

This adds another dimension to a simple act, as the body must be coaxed into doing such a seemingly simple task. To sum up the implications of this are easy- Young postulates that women experience a sense of inherent otherness concerning their own bodies. As to Young’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s work, she uses his work in her discussion of modality, which she summarizes into three points. Albeit these three points deal apparently with the same concept and seem to have almost the same premises and conclusion. The first relates that Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the types of space that a human can experience.

The different ideas of space for him arise due to a man or woman’s relation to that space, from this, Young surmises that feminine space is different to that of males in that women find space enclosing and find themselves positioned in space- this must mean that men find themselves surrounded by space but not positioned in it- rather it around them. Merleau-Ponty finds that “ here” and “ there” to men are one and the same- as I would also have thought- being male- the view of men is that “ here” and “ there” are the same- joined by their bodies. Feminine spatiality again is not the same as it

assumes the view that “ there” is different from “ here”- Young labels this double spatiality (Young, 1990, p152). The third point starts with the idea that women find themselves positioned in space.

For Merleau-Ponty the world is made up of objects and objects require space, the body is not the object but the mechanism by which space can be measured. This cannot be so for women if they are positioned in space. Young sets out to propose that feminine bodily comportment is a complex issue and that it has nothing to do with a “ feminine essence” as Strauss wanted to believe. Instead for Young- and her study does lead one to the conclusion that- the modalities of female bodily comportment are in fact due to the oppression of women by men since time immemorial. This has nothing to do with the anatomy and physiology of the female form, instead with the “ situation” of women in society as Young calls it.

Women have always been objectified- to the extent that this objectification is part of what it means in this contemporary world to be a woman. When a young girl sees how women walk and act- something that they in turn did occurs- she imitates their stance and behavior. This can be seen in the case of “ tom-boys”, they are more likely to succeed at sport and they are generally stronger and more aware of space as they prefer the idea of being men when they are young. In conclusion, the work of Merleau-Ponty is compelling and intuitive- perhaps as I am a male- in all it is very concise, cogent and easy to understand.

The ideas and insights that Young shares on how women view their bodies and space also seems clear and cogent. However the way that she uses

Merleau-Ponty's work to give contrast to her work is excellent. The usage of the three points that were in contrast to Merleau-Ponty's study might perhaps have seemed repetitive but in fact they deal with miniscule differences that are seemingly unimportant until a further observation. In all this is a well written and intelligent argument or set of theories. The coup de grace is that as a male one cannot but blindly disagree- as one has no knowledge of what it is like to be a woman, or one must blindly agree as what is said about the way women relate to space does make sense.

The idea that the way women walk, carry and hold things too is easy to agree with, there is no doubt that women have been oppressed and objectified throughout history and this could very likely have changed their views on space and the body- as opposed to the views of men. From a male point it would be more rational and politically correct to agree with Young.

Words: 2052 List of Reference 1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962, Phenomenology of Perception, Routledge, London. 2.

Iris Marion Young, 1990, Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory, Indiana University Press, Bloomington