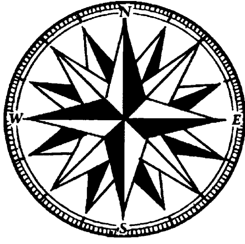

Book Review

We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives, by Manon Garcia. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 234 pp.

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Have you, like I, long intended to read yet fallen short of doing so *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir's pioneering work of feminist philosophy that spans nearly one thousand pages in answering the question, What is a woman? If so, I urge you to consider Manon Garcia's book instead (or, optimistically, in the meantime).

Garcia's lucid monograph, newly available in translation from the original French, is the first fully fledged philosophical treatment of submission from the perspective of women. It is also a delightfully accessible companion text to Beauvoir. By carefully considering Beauvoir's philosophy, as well as contemporary philosophers familiar to *BEQ* readers (e.g., Catherine MacKinnon, Iris Marion Young), Garcia crafts a response to her own research question: Why are not all women feminists? More concretely, Why is it that women submit to men?

Garcia begins by showing that, for women, "submission is not an exceptional but a shared and mundane experience" (13): accepting an unequal burden of domestic labor, dieting to shrink ourselves, paying a "time tax" in preparing our bodies for public view. The book is awash with familiar examples newly illuminated through Garcia's research question. The reality of female submission presents a challenge to canonical (largely male) political philosophy. If freedom is a human right (Rousseau 2012), and if pursuing freedom is a moral virtue (Sartre 1994), how can we make sense of the many ways in which women appear to *choose* to submit without *blaming* them for that submission? Following Beauvoir in adopting a phenomenological method—proceeding from women's lived experiences, not from abstract theories about humanity—Garcia demonstrates not only that women can *consent* to (if not "choose") submission but that this submission is *rational.*

Why is it rational for women to submit to men? It is rational, Garcia argues, because of the "situation" into which women are born and in which they find themselves: one in which political, social, and economic conditions make submission appear to women as *inevitable.* Garcia's account of the situation works against the idea that submission is naturally feminine, essential to being female, or that

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submission is inevitable for all women everywhere. In defining this situation, Garcia provides one answer to Beauvoir's original provocation: "to be a woman is to be in a situation where submission appears as one's destiny" (42).

Importantly, Garcia says, this situation is embodied, which explains why submission is specifically gendered: "women, unlike men, cannot escape their bodies and their social meaning" (132). This presents a strong challenge to dualism (the idea that body and soul are essentially different) espoused by male philosophers like Plato and Descartes. For Garcia, the preponderance of evidence suggests that before women are able to have an experience of their bodies *as their own*, they experience their bodies as objects in the eyes of men. She carefully articulates this point across several chapters to offer another response to Beauvoir: "to be a woman is, in part, to be unable to escape the fact that you are a body" (134).

Garcia thus clarifies the nature of the situation—again, the political, social, and economic conditions coalescing such that submission appears to women as inevitable—in which women experience their bodies as both their own and not their own, by which Garcia means always already viewed and judged by men. From puberty to street harassment and mainstream pornography, women are all too familiar with the ways in which social norms and discourse reinforce the notion that they are "flesh" (151) by drawing attention to their sexual objectification and thus their capacity for being acted upon by men. Take, for instance, the first time I attended an academic conference. A new acquaintance and I were getting to know one another. I shared with him that I had arrived from Paris, where I had spent the summer with my then girlfriend. He responded, "You are every man's sexual fantasy."

Garcia explains that this situation persists precisely because men have the social power to perpetuate and enforce it and because women have ample incentive to submit. Indeed, far from the absence of action, women *actively* "submit themselves" (17), in various degrees and along various axes. As the French reflexive verb *se soumettre* suggests, submitting requires a repertoire of actions, some of which can be quite time consuming and painful. Given the high costs and uncertainty associated with deviating from gender norms, costs and risks that Garcia enumerates throughout the book, it is in a sense no wonder that women do submit. "It does not mean that submission is always pleasant or that the pleasure taken in submission surpasses the unhappiness it can create," she explains. "But the truth that Beauvoir brings to light is as obvious as it sounds scandalous: submission is appealing" (158).

Furthermore, Garcia reasons that women should not be found morally at fault for this submission (cf. Rousseau 2012). Submitting oneself can be seen as an action *in good faith* because, in this situation, submission presents itself as a "rational choice" (10). Compare submission with freedom in this context—thinking otherwise, carving your own path, risking failure—and you realize that pursuing freedom comes with difficulty, too. But whereas Sartre conceives of the struggle between freedom and renunciation only in individual terms, as man against himself (Sartre 1994), Beauvoir first saw how social factors shape the calculus. Garcia extends this insight, showing us that "freedom appears as a universally shared drive but with unequally distributed costs" (194). Many benefits await women who submit to social norms of femininity, and many costs await women who do otherwise. But while all

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humans are tempted to renounce their freedom, there is specificity to women's submission. As Garcia writes, submission is gendered precisely because seeking freedom "comes at an excessively higher cost for [women] than for men. This is still true in the twenty-first century" (194).

One critique I would offer, one that Garcia acknowledges, is that we should seek to understand submission intersectionally. There is growing acknowledgment of the importance of theorizing structural oppressions, such as gender inequality, as they are experienced alongside other social forms of marginalization, such as race and sexuality (Crenshaw 1988). For reasons Garcia motivates in the first chapter, she focuses her analysis on heterosexual and Western women ("focusing on heterosexual relationships does not imply that we see these as the norm but rather that we see in them the ultimate locus of the oppression of women by men"), but much more needs to be said about how submission is experienced by women and nonbinary people who are not cisgender, white, heterosexual, and Western. My critique reflects a growing body of work in business ethics integrating feminist epistemology, which theorizes that knowledge is situated, meaning that it is influenced by the lived experience of gender, which is experienced intersectionally (Kaufmann 2022).

With that in mind, Garcia offers plenty for business and organizational ethicists to ponder. How do organizations establish incentives for stakeholders, but perhaps for women *in particular*, to submit? Do some women bear these costs more than others, and how do these costs influence their well-being and that of their communities? Whether you do research on gender or other social categories, or if you work in the area of existentialism, phenomenology, political philosophy, or critical theory, I offer this book for your consideration.

Ultimately, Garcia concludes that submission is a result—the "fruit" (200)—of the situation that women inherit. What room remains for liberation? She insists, and I agree, that "submission is not inevitable. . . . It must be seen as the result of historical power relations, and therefore that it can change" (42). Just as she argues that women do not bear full moral responsibility for consenting to their submission (with some caveats, but you will have to read the book for those), Garcia concludes that individual men are not fully at fault for the situation either (to the extent that they are not "doing anything to put women in submissive positions" [201]). After all, men, too, are born into and constrained by a world endowed with social meanings that preexist them. Crucially, the stakes are different for women and men: often without realizing it, men experience the privileges of the dominant, "which consists in seeing their perspective as the neutral, objective, and thus true one and naturalizing others' alterity" (201). Still, the situation constrains all of us and "saps even men's freedom" (201).

The last line of *The Second Sex*, as Garcia informs those of us who have not yet made it to the final page, is a call to action: "men and women must … unequivocally affirm their brotherhood" (202). Remember that Beauvoir wrote in French and that "brotherhood" is translated from *fraternité*, a core concept in the French Republic and a key value in another worthy challenge: the French resistance to Nazi Germany (226).

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The anachronistic "brotherhood" language is, I think, illuminating. Although the language we have at our disposal may be as tilted as the norms we inherit, we can *do* liberatory and counternormative work within our shared situation. Beauvoir, Garcia, and others show us that gender norms exist, in part, because we uphold them. As RuPaul famously sings, "we're all born naked, and the rest is drag." We all *do* gender, and Garcia's book gives us plenty of reasons to do gender differently. How do we make our places of work inclusive of all gender expressions? How do business actors and institutions influence gender norms, and how could they change? How might people of all genders, in coalition, work to advance the conditions under which we are together striving toward "fraternal freedoms" (202), of which we are all equally worthy?

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