

Theodor von Hippel, *On Improving the Status of Women* (1792)

Abstract

Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1741–1796) was an early voice advocating for the political equality of women. In his texts *Über die Ehe* [On Marriage, 1774] and *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* [On the Civic Improvement of Women, 1792], von Hippel ruminated on the “natural” qualities of women and sought to understand how marriage and motherhood affected women’s characters. In this section, von Hippel considers the origins and effects of sexual difference on human society, a topic with explosive potential as German states wrestled with the political implications of Republicanism and democracy at this time. Determining who had political and civil rights – and on what basis – was a central issue that eighteenth-century reformers needed to address. Consider reading Christian von Dohm’s essay, “Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews,” published two years before in 1781, to see how this topic was applied to religious minorities.

Source

II. Are There Other Differences between Man and Woman besides Those of a Sexual Nature?

[...]

In the formation of the two sexes, nature does not appear to have intended to establish a noteworthy difference or to have favored one sex at the expense of the other. Differences of a sexual nature between man and woman may not serve as an answer to the question whether the male sex was endowed with significant physical and intellectual superiority over the female. Differences other than those of a sexual nature have until now eluded the anatomist’s knife; nevertheless this instrument has continued to hold fast to the golden rule: Know Thyself—an undeniable influence. On the whole, noble iron has served the human race to a far greater extent than that exhibitionist, gold. Whoever first gave the magnet the name Bride of Iron showed to both the magnet and iron a respect which they fully deserve.^[1]

What could have prompted Nature to bestow honor and fortune on one half of her greatest masterpiece, while allowing the other to decay through neglect—and this precisely to the extent that she favors the first? In fulfilling that great purpose of Nature in which human beings display the divine image of God, the female sex plays a disproportionately more significant role than the male with respect to both matter and form.^[2] So in order to work quite reasonably toward the aforementioned end, Nature is supposed to have wanted to make women weaker or even to leave them half finished?

“Not necessarily weaker,” said a woman-hater as he read this part of my manuscript, *“but not such a commonplace thing. Let women be steel, and let the men be iron.”*

Not so! And why this ambiguous comparison, since pure and unadulterated right stands on the side of the women! People think that we men, thank the Lord, were created as complete as possible; after our creation the Master broke the mold of clay and the second sex, represented in the figure of Eve, was simply a chance undertaking; was made as an afterthought; was sooner abandoned than carried through to completion; was begun and never completed!

Is woman, to whom the actual business of the humanization of the divine creation was entrusted,

thought to bear upon her breast the mark of feebleness and insufficiency? Is Almighty Nature supposed to have allowed her own representative to remain in a feeble state, so that woman could bring into the world not only *feeble* individuals of *her own* sex, but *strong* ones of *our* kind as well? Such would seem to be the case; and surely when experience speaks, then it is up to sophistry to be silent, to genuflect and worship her. Experience is the only artifice Nature has left—but then what does it teach us here? If we were to trust in its conclusions, then the other sex is, on the whole, of a smaller and weaker constitution, possesses less physical strength, and is subject to various disabilities. Is further evidence necessary to accommodate Reason in her conclusion that these are imperfections of their sex from which women, according to the order of things, can never be liberated?

Everything is good which cannot be otherwise, and in the word *must* there lies a treasure-house of grounds for complacency, grounds by means of which anyone, with a little philosophical legerdemain, can so reconcile the words *I must* with the words *I want to* that in such an instance every curse is transformed into a blessing, and the wicked, evil world into the best of all possible worlds.^[3] Let us be at peace with Nature and with the fair sex; let us all be at peace with one another!

But what if there existed such things as illusory experiences and illusory conclusions? If appearances were deceiving? Reason is afraid of the senses; and even if we have fully resolved in our mind to allow surgery to be performed on our body, we still turn our eyes away at the hour of truth. Reason, the heart, and the senses all play into one another's hands; and not only the heart of man, but also his reason and his senses are in turn both defiant and discouraged—who can deny it?

No sooner does man consider himself a god than it occurs to him that he is hardly less an animal. Naked and unprotected he comes into the world, and if other animals are armed or protected, then His Majesty the human being cannot be expected to refrain from exercising his kingly right over the animals in order to feed and clothe himself. This regulation of his treasure is often carried out so painfully by means of the rod, however, that the animals could very well file at nature's court of justice the bitterest of complaints against their most illustrious rulers—and without doubt they do file such complaints, if indeed the apostle Paul has observed correctly.^[4] For in truth nature conducts a terrible, secret court of justice—the most terrible which can be imagined! Necessity teaches one to pray, to beg, and to take; nevertheless, she is also a wise teacher of moderation and restraint, and whoever fails to recognize this, in him is not the love of the Father of us all, the Father whose child is everything having life and breath. Without his teacher man can do nothing more than weep—as a sign that he is far from having drawn the longest straw in the lottery. For inasmuch as man has not proven able to settle accounts with himself, his gains have often turned out to be worse than his losses.

My dear fellow! That sort of complaint is overcome through the mighty word *Reason*. Without his weaknesses man ceases to be man, and whoever strives toward something higher in this earthly life runs the risk of being something less and upsetting the plans of the Creator.

Do we know of a more noble creature than man which also possesses the power to conceive of God or a virtue in its abstract form? And even the most depraved among us has still not given up this privilege. Man can renounce the image of God for a moment, but not forever. Is Reason not greater than all else; and does she deserve her name at all if she is not able to set a limit to our appetites? Is it not possible for us to exalt the beast in man to a rank just below that of the gods, and thereby to intimidate his passions, which are like the great surges of the sea?

Wherever *she* is to be found, there resides humanity, and to undervalue this dignity in the other sex deliberately, amidst the radiance of her divinity, is equivalent to leaving no stone unturned in the determination of our own importance. Not a mere code of laws written on clay tablets would be shattered here; rather, we would be sinning against the divine spirit which resides within ourselves. Can anything be an affair of God which contradicts Reason; or does God ever desire that His affairs be

conducted by means of such things as contradict her? By means of Reason, the very echo of His voice, He remains ever close to each of us who through her have become like Him, and in Him “live and move, and have our being.”^[5]

The standard which I bear is no empty pronouncement by some authority, but truth and justice. Is the female sex actually smaller, as a rule, than the male? Is not the size of a person altogether a relative matter—a matter in which we find more significant influences from climate, nourishment, and other factors unknown to us, than from sexual differences? On the other sides of the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, as well as below the equator, the human race is much smaller than in the area between these two parallels of latitude. Past the twentieth and the sixtieth degrees of latitude our recruiting officers would experience about as much success as would a stopover by pirates at the caves of the Alacaluf Indians on Tierra del Fuego. Travelers report that men and women there maintain the very same pace, and were they not aided by the difference in the clothing and the beards of the men, they declare that they would not be able to tell one sex from the other. Nevertheless, one might say, perhaps the climate there is more favorable to the development of the female body. Not at all; their premature withering away contradicts this conjecture, for already in their fortieth year they are covered with wrinkles. Even in more temperate climates variations exist with respect to size; and within these climates there are also individual races which differ from the norm, just as the inhabitants of the lowlands are, as a rule, larger than those of the mountains—as if nature when creating these people had compensated for the great size of the mountain. And in the final analysis, what does size matter?

“But surely one cannot deny the frailty of the female body in comparison with the sinewy, angular male body?”

Certainly this ought to prove more; nevertheless, I fear that in this case as well, experience actually tells us less than we are accustomed to letting her say.

Before we begin battle, however, it is necessary to muster our troops. If we dismiss from our own side the elegant and fun-loving groups and the other sex lets the fashionable women of the higher classes return, together with their ladies-in-waiting, to their beloved menfolk of these same groups—on whom do you want to bet? Indeed, even if these elegant and fashionable ladies were to enter into warfare with our elegant young men—on which side ought we to place our hopes?

Among peoples who stand at the lowest level of culture, the lot of the female sex is a hard one. For hunting peoples, to whom domestic animals are unknown, the women are the beasts of burden which accompany the men on the hunt and carry the captured game back to the hut; among pastoral and agricultural tribes their lot, if it were possible, is even harder: they cultivate the fields; they run mills and produce manufactured goods by preparing for consumption that which the field and the herd offers them in the way of food and clothing; in addition to this they must also manage a household (although a very simple one) while the man of the house devotes his own time to the pursuit of leisure.

Even among peoples who have achieved a certain degree of culture, the part played by the other sex among the members of the working class is not of the kind which would allow us to infer a greater frailty in this sex. Those tasks performed in the cultivation of the soil and at the harvest—are they not divided more or less equally between both sexes? It would in fact be difficult to say which share of the labor is more often overlooked here. Indeed upon examining *all* the occupations which employ the hands and the energy of mankind—does not the portion of work allotted to women invariably entail a greater expenditure of energy? With happy heart the harvester returns home to his hut to rest after his exhausting labor, while even in the simplest country household there still remain manifold tasks for the woman to perform—for the woman, who, by the sweat of her brow, has already bound the sheaves, a task for which no lesser expenditure of energy is required. The radiantly healthy country girl, her face rouged with the unfading hue of summer, is a living refutation of the above unfavorable comparison, and

she would be a match for anyone who would care to tempt the strength of her muscles. Female illnesses are the scourge merely of that class of women who bear the honorable title *women* only for the sake of the state and the purpose of ostentation, in the same way that the devoted *valets de chambre* in their employ deserve the title *men*.

Can and should Nature be held responsible for the evils which manners, morals, and conventions—whose name is legion—have brought upon her? The companions of our folly and the accomplices in our arrogance should not be added to the account of Nature, who created man in such simplicity and, regardless of where he took up his abode, provided shelter, food, and clothing—daily and in abundance. Was it ever her wish that he should fetch spices from India, which do nothing more than poison his blood? Or exotic foods which merely weaken his nerves? Did she offer ice to the people of India, or place wine before the inhabitants of the Arctic Circle? Did she not rather give to each that portion which was both allotted and suited to him? And how, O Nature perfect in thy goodness, the degenerate multitude of thy children doth accuse thee because of their own sicknesses—the cause of which they gathered, with unflagging greed, from the East and the South—while the little band of thy contented children, following the precepts of its dear mother, walks before thee amidst these wild, degenerate ones and still remains devout, knowing nothing of the hysterical torment or of the countless host of convulsions against which neither the *materia medica*, nor perhaps the whole of Nature herself has any remedy at her disposal! Do not call Nature unjust, when it is you who travel unnatural paths. Nature, it appears, possesses remedies only for natural diseases; for ailments which are a consequence of our unnatural culture she has neither herb nor plaster, and her single remedy is merely: Do penance and believe in the Gospel of Nature!

O, that you would do penance and believe! If we do not become as little children, and return home once more to philanthropic Nature, on whom we have turned our backs, then we are a betrayed people sold into bondage, to whom now and then the well-intentioned utterance reverberates: “Adam, where art thou?” and who try meanwhile to hide from our own image as well as we can.^[6] The fifth and final act is the ruin of most women, just as it is for a large number of playwrights. Love, the fortune of her life, becomes her misfortune; her heart has been trained to love virtue, and it is not fate which transforms it into a transgressor, but her own negligence. The working class knows of no distinctly female diseases. Pregnancies and births are impeded only by secondary circumstances which have their origins in manners, morals, and dress, and are so little to be considered illnesses that physicians could forthwith—and occasionally already do—prescribe them as medication. In the case of some of the so-called primitive tribes it is not the woman but the man who holds a celebration at the time of parturition. Hardly is the woman delivered of her burden, when she bathes it in the nearest river, offers the new arrival her breast—thereby saving herself from lacteal fever and the vexation of enlisting a wet-nurse—and performs her household duties just as before; while the man, stretched out on his bed, lets himself be ministered to and receives visits as well as congratulations from his neighbors because he—just think of the effort—has borne a child by his wife!^[7] And yet there are also heroes upon whose memory history has bestowed glory and praise because they had deigned, by their good grace, to allow battles to be won and victories gained while they themselves, without exposing their person in the slightest to any combat whatsoever or feeling the least inclination to lie at rest upon the bed of honor, observed very comfortably from a position at best far beyond the range of the cannon just how many arms and legs a couple of laurel sprigs cost.

Inasmuch as such individuals do exist, then, let us not be too critical of the childbed behavior of the men mentioned above.

All of you who consider women to be weaker than you because of their pregnancies and childbearing, tell me: how could Nature have brought her greatest masterpiece, the propagation of the human race, into association with such evils on purpose; how could she have poured wormwood into a goblet filled with

the most exquisite nectar; how could she have accompanied an action, upon which she bestowed her greatest blessings, with such a terrible curse by allotting to the one side unalloyed joy, to the other unmitigated sorrow? To be sure, pregnancies, childbearing, and the suckling of an infant require the expenditure of a certain amount of energy; nonetheless the female body, if it is not impaired, possesses sufficient substance not only to sustain this expenditure of energy, but also to compensate for the expenditure with no loss of time in the process. The objection which derives from observing so many women of fashion is not valid, for the latter appear already to be so lacking in strength that every pregnancy shakes their flimsy edifice to its very foundations, and every birth threatens to destroy it entirely.

O you inventors, abounding with ideas, who have thought up calculating machines, who have taught an automaton to play chess,[8] have undertaken voyages by air,[9] and who even in your confusion help people more than if they had been graduated *in gradum doctoris utriusque medicinae*:[10] you, who have the spirits under your command just as the centurion at Capernaum his servants,[11] come down a step or two and condescend to a mere trifle. Invent a contrivance by means of which our ladies of fashion may be freed from the burden of bearing children. Let sons and daughters grow like apples and pears; cause them to be planted like cabbages. Even if the political census-taker should, due to this invention, register a minus in the first few years (for no man is born a master of his craft), nevertheless even in these years of lean-fleshed kine[12] the true mettle of the human race will set things aright, and—wonder of wonders!—there would result even more so an undeniable plus, inasmuch as the state would be made up not of small coin, but of individuals worth their weight in gold! What is a Persian army measured in parasangs[13] compared to a Macedonian phalanx?

But no! you must remove your shoes, for this place is sacrosanct. The most legitimate, the most sacred claims of the human race to a disclosure of the truth which were ever based on reason shall not here be offended through mockery, which, like malicious slander, always leaves a bitter aftertaste. Let only human kindness approach this burning bush![14] The power of inertia, which is said to act mischievously on every body so as to keep it continuously in its present state—a state which resists motionlessness when the body is in motion, and movement when the body is at rest—does not have the honor of being to my liking. A power which only resists and yet is not able to be effective in and of itself is not a power about which one is able to do very much bragging. The noblest nation must accede upon occasion to a war of aggression through which we demand our rights and that which is owed to us, and call to account that person who has trespassed against us. He is neither great nor small who is able to possess and to express greatness or smallness merely to the degree to which he is resisted in their attainment. Let both sexes return once more to their original integrity and to their true nature and we shall find that the longer such a happy state prevails, the more we shall find that man and woman are of one body in this instance as well.

But are they also of one soul? Up to now, psychologists have not been successful in advancing far enough into the realm of the intellect to determine whether a significant difference actually exists; at least no Linnaeus of the mind has yet come to classify the mental powers.[15] Let Rorario account for the fact that he finds a greater use of reason among animals than among men; and Helvetius for putting those souls on which a body with hoofs has been bestowed in the same class with those which have received hands; and let both of them settle their accounts with Descartes for bringing about the destruction of his world of machines.[16]

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NOTES

[1] In this difficult passage, Hippel apparently equates iron with the male sex and the magnet with the female—ostensibly because of the magnet's power of attraction over iron. It seems to be his

intention to show the equality (of respect) in such a relationship, but the “woman-hater” (probably Scheffner) in the paragraph below rejects this comparison, wishing instead for the woman to be steel. The emphasis seems to be on the highly refined and noble qualities of the metal, rather than its hardness. This comparison is in turn rejected by Hippel, because steel, by virtue of its process of manufacture, is also subject to being interpreted as mere “adulterated iron” and “pure and unadulterated right stands on the side of women.”

[2] Hippel here refers to the theory of “preformation” popular from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. According to this early notion of heredity, the new organism was already present in complete form in either the egg or the sperm at the time of conception, gradually becoming visible as the parts grew in size. Hippel here sides with the “ovists” against the “spermists,” who sought to minimize the contribution by the female to the heredity of her progeny.

[3] This is to be understood as a thinly veiled criticism of the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who taught that the existing world, as the work of God, must be the best of all possible worlds, for if a better world were possible, then God’s wisdom would have recognized it, His goodness would have desired it, and His omnipotence would have had to create it. In Hippel’s time the belief was no longer widely held.

[4] See Romans VIII:22.

[5] Acts XVII:28.

[6] Cf. Gen. III:8–9.

[7] This phenomenon is called “couvade” or “men’s childbed.” Among the theories that have been suggested to account for the couvade is that during this period the father has to take care of himself to avoid an injury that could be transmitted to the child by sympathetic magic. Another is that the father asserts his paternity by appearing to take part in the delivery. A third explanation is that the father simulates the wife’s activities in order to get evil spirits to focus on him rather than her” (Charles Winick, *Dictionary of Anthropology* [New York: The Philosophical Library, 1956], p. 137).

[8] The famous chess-player of Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734–1804) for many years astonished and bewildered Europe. Kempelen’s automaton was later revealed to be a fraud utilizing a complex system of mechanical devices to carry out the movements of a concealed player.

[9] The first successful flight in an air balloon was made by the brothers Mongolfier in 1782.

[10] “With the degree of doctor of both branches of medicine,” a play on the phrase “in gradum doctoris utriusque legis,” “with the degree of doctor of both laws,” i.e., canon and civil. \

[11] Cf. Matt. VIII:5–10.

[12] Cf. Gen. XLI.

[13] The parasang is a unit of length (about 3.5 miles). Hippel means here that any army—even a very large one—can easily be defeated by a solidly massed one if it is weakened by being extended over too great a territory. But in a larger sense, the entire passage is a satire on the women of the upper class for whom the rigors of both motherhood and an active social life proved so great that they were not able to fill their roles in either sphere successfully. In the next paragraph Hippel repents of this momentary descent to mockery, however.

[14] Cf. Exod. III:2–6.

[15] Carolus Linnaeus (Karl von Linné, 1707–1778), a Swedish naturalist and founder of the “Linnean system” of nomenclature in botany and zoology. He was the first to develop the criteria for defining genera and species, and insisted on a uniform usage of specific (Latin) names for all plants and animals.

[16] The Italian ecclesiastic writer Girolamo Rorario (1485–1556) wrote a curious treatise entitled *Quod Animalia bruta saepe Ratione utantur melius Homine* [That brutes often reason better than man], first published in Paris in 1648, and translated into German in 1728. In his work *De l’esprit* (1758), the philosopher Claude Adrien Hevétius (1715–1771) proposed the idea that all man’s

faculties may be reduced to physical sensation, the only difference between man and the animals being one of external organization. In the philosophy of René Decartes (1596–1650), chemistry and biology are both subsumed under the one science of physics and reduced to a problem of mechanism. Such a reduction, he believed, would afford an explanation of every phenomenon of which we have knowledge, and the most daring and remarkable application of this theory was to account for the phenomena of organic life, especially animals and man. All organisms are in this way regarded as machines which by virtue of the laws of motion have arranged themselves (always under the governing power of God) in the particular animal shapes in which we see them.

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