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Responses of First and Second-Wave Feminism to Sexual Asymmetry

Women's road from being the property of their husbands to autonomous agents in modern-day society has been a long and arduous one, with feminists disagreeing over what the end goal for female liberation looks like. First-wave feminism largely began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, in which early feminists came together to write the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments to advocate for legally upheld female equality with men. This early wave of feminism mirrored ancient views on freedom. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle looked at happiness as the rational "activity of soul in accordance with...the best and most complete [virtue]" (43). He believed there was a greater, final good that was to be attained in doing so. Human beings should use their freedom to attain this good, better themselves, and pursue excellence. First-wave feminists wanted the freedom to do these things just as men can, focusing on political equality. On the other hand, second-wave feminism of the 1960s sprung more out of the ideas of early modern philosophers. This movement was focused on challenging the role of women as solely homemakers, wives, and mothers. Hobbes saw the world as incredibly violent, ruled by the urges of mankind to claim power at whatever cost. He rejected the idea of any higher good and instead, defines happiness as progressively satisfying desires and assuring the future satisfaction of these desires (*Leviathan*, 44). Locke viewed happiness as whatever brings a unique individual the most pleasure while avoiding pain (*Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, 54). Second-wave feminism took these ideas to create a very individual-centered

movement, wanting women to find and be able to pursue whatever brings them pleasure. These philosophical differences shaped how first and second-wave feminists responded to sexual asymmetry, the fact that pregnancy and childbirth have a disproportionately larger effect on women than on men. Both movements sought advancements for women in the economic, political, and social spheres, with first-wave feminism targeting the legal backbone perpetuating women as inferiors and second-wave feminism seeking to end the structures that used reproductive asymmetry as a grounds for oppression.

Pre-industrial revolution agrarian society practiced coverture, a system in which all of a woman's property rights went to her husband when she married. Initially, there were not many immediate harms to this system, as the family functioned collectively as an economic unit. Once the industrial revolution concentrated the men to work outside of the home as the sole breadwinner and the women to work inside the home as the sole caretaker, women's complete financial dependence on men became exacerbated. While some states allowed women to retain control over any money they earned independently, this did not help many women because they worked primarily as homemakers due to the biological reality that makes women more apt to stay home with a newborn. First-wave feminists wanted an end to coverture. Even if women were not receiving a wage for their work, they were still doing vital work and deserved to have joint property rights with their husbands. Second-wave feminists took this a step further and argued for the necessity of work outside the home for women. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argued that women need some kind of independent, creative, wage-earning work. Apart from being able to make money, this would have a myriad of beneficial effects for women. They would be less isolated from society, feel more purpose in their lives, have motivation, be less emotionally clingy towards their husbands, and have the opportunity to make bigger

contributions to society. Friedan acknowledged that many women cannot be away from home as much as a father might be able to. She advocated for a bill similar to the GI bill to fund women's education, emphasizing part-time work, independent study, and pursuing projects at home. First-wave feminists wanted women to have property rights within marriage, while second-wave feminists wanted women to have a real opportunity, tailored to women, to make economic contributions to the family.

First-wave feminism was born out of the political inequality of women. As outlined in the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, men “never permitted [a woman] to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise” and “compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.” These feminists thought that despite sexual asymmetry, women should be treated equally under the law. In *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argued that women are just as rational as men, just as disciplined, and just as capable of attaining virtue. Any seeming inequality between men and women in these areas would be born out of the fact that women have not been given the opportunities to develop in the same ways men have. Wollstonecraft stated that “Liberty is the mother of virtue,” meaning that political freedom and equality is necessary for women to fully flourish (164). While first-wave feminism aimed for suffrage, second-wave feminism looked for political support in circumventing the biological consequences of sexual asymmetry. This began with a push for contraception, which was strongly advocated for by Margaret Sanger in *Woman and the New Race*. She stated that for both economic and physical reasons, it may be best for a woman to avoid having children, something which women have always tried to do but can now be more effectively accomplished through birth control. Although Sanger's birth control clinic was shut down, birth control was ultimately legalized for married couples through *Griswold v.*

Connecticut and for unmarried couples through *Eisenstadt v. Baird* under the reasoning that individuals have a right to privacy. When birth control fails or other circumstances result in a woman getting unintendedly pregnant, abortion is the next resort to equalize the biological ramifications of sex for men and women. Second-wave feminists advocated for a right to abortion which was ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in which they stated that the suffering of a pregnant woman is “too intimate and personal for the State to insist.” While first-wave feminists focused their political goals on being treated equally under the law despite sexual asymmetry, second-wave feminists looked to the law to reduce sexual asymmetry.

These attitudes also permeate into the social and moral goals of these two waves. Both advocated for voluntary motherhood within marriage, giving the woman more control over when she has children instead of being at the whims of her husband’s sexual urges. Sarah Grimke described the heartbreak of wives who are subject to this treatment. Not only were their own physical health and that of their children jeopardized by pregnancies in quick succession, but their honor and dignity were violated by rape where the “so called husband has been the perpetrator of the unnatural crime” (*Marriage*, 209). First-wave feminists sought to raise the bar for men, looking to them to curtail their passions for the good of the woman. Elizabeth Cady Stanton even taught classes on women’s fertility and bodies. Voluntary motherhood is voluntary sex. To a second-wave feminist, however, voluntary motherhood is voluntary pregnancy. Just as men could have sex without pregnancy, so should women be able to. This lowered the chastity standards for everyone, and women could deal with the matter of their fertility on their own via birth control or abortion. Sanger conveyed that this absolute control on voluntary motherhood was essential for women to have complete freedom.

The different ways that first and second-wave feminism interacted with the matter of sexual asymmetry ultimately tie back into their philosophical groundwork. First-wave feminists, along with Aristotle, had a vision of flourishing that requires women be given political equality with men. They still objected to matters of birth control and abortion on the grounds of natural law or the concern that their usage would increase male sexual misconduct. This changed with the shift to second-wave feminism, which was much more focused on the individual woman trying to fend for herself in the world (in line with the thought of Locke and Hobbes) and giving her all the resources needed to be on an equal playing field with men. While there were many areas in which feminists were striving to achieve this, removing legal and social barriers to birth control and abortion were some of the biggest objectives. The transition of first to second-wave feminism marks a change in thought from seeking to obtain equality despite sexual asymmetry to seeking to remove sexual asymmetry so as to obtain equality.