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D · U · N · E

AND PHILOSOPHY



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**DUNE AND
PHILOSOPHY
MINDS, MONADS, AND
MUAD'DIB**

Edited by
Kevin S. Decker

WILEY Blackwell

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Contributors

Navigators, Mentats, Fremen, and Bene Gesserit

Galipcan Altinkaya decided to pursue an academic career after trying his luck and failing miserably at being a professional baliset player. He is currently an assistant researcher in the Ege University Department of Philosophy, writing his dissertation on Avicenna's psychology. His ulterior motive is to learn from the philosophers how to predict the future purely for personal gain. He insists that Avicenna gave him his blessings in person in a dream after a night of heavy melange use.

Steve Bein is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Dayton, where he is a specialist in Asian thought. He has written chapters for 11 different volumes on philosophy and popular culture, on topics ranging from *Blade Runner* to Wonder Woman. He's also a science fiction and fantasy novelist, and his sci-fi short stories make the occasional appearance in Philosophy and Science Fiction courses across the US. Steve knows fear is the mind-killer, and he can recite the Litany Against Fear by heart. However, these days he thinks the Litany Against Wasting Your Whole Night Watching Netflix is just as important.

Matthew Crippen has wormed his way across the world, touching down for visits in about 60 nations and holding academic positions in five, as well as doing other jobs ranging from teaching and performing music to coaching gymnastics to machete work on farms. The intercultural waters of his life – which range from living in Egypt and Korea to excavating indigenous ruins to tramping through African bush on anti-poaching patrols – has spiced his *Dune* chapter. It has also flavored his research, which burrows through the sands of history, cognitive science, and cross-cultural value theory informed by one another and orbiting ecological concerns.

Kevin S. Decker is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern Washington University. He has edited or co-edited more than a dozen anthology books in philosophy and popular culture and is the author of *Who Is Who? The*

Philosophy of Doctor Who. He failed the gom jabbar test on his first try, so his saga is over.

Alexandru Dragomir is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. He actually took up saber fencing after reading *Dune*, but had to quit to pursue his dream of becoming a Mentat-philosopher. Currently, he's doing research on the ethics of human enhancement and the problem of post-personhood. This involves mostly "armchair" conceptual analysis, so he won't get to travel the galaxy with a pain box in one hand and a gom jabbar in the other in search of superbeings.

Sam Forsythe studied philosophy and war studies at King's College London, and now works as a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt while finishing up his doctorate at Goethe University, Frankfurt. He has recently contributed chapters to the *Springer Handbook of Abductive Cognition* (2022), the *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security* (2022), and his first book, *Every Day Catastrophes*, will be published by Urbanomic/MIT Press in 2022. His current research interests led him into the wilderness between scientific inquiry, strategic rationality, and international politics, where he navigates using the concepts of C.S. Peirce as a philosophical para-compass. Otherwise, Sam spends his time as a good Fedaykin ought to: studying the secret Chakobsa hunting language and practicing prana-bindu grappling arts.

Luke Hillman did his graduate studies at the University of Arkansas and the University of Oklahoma, despite no formal Bene Gesserit instruction. His contribution in this volume is his first Wiley Blackwell publication, but hopefully not his last. His philosophical interests include philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, and Wittgenstein. Ever since Luke bought his first copy of *Dune* at a garage sale in high school, he's remained awestruck by Herbert's expansive universe, captivated by the history of House Atreides, and lost in the smell and taste of spice melange.

Ilmari Hirvonen is a doctoral student working on the philosophy of pseudoscience at the University of Helsinki. The Orange Catholic Bible has become quite familiar to him since, in his spare time, Hirvonen has been dabbling in the philosophy of religion. His other work and interests lie within metaphilosophy, epistemic justification, the epistemology of modality, philosophy of language, history of empiricism, and the Bene Gesserit venture of creating the Kwisatz Haderach. Hirvonen also makes Filmbooks on philosophy and worldview studies for high school students.

A.M. Houot completed his master's degree in Philosophy of Science, Technology, & Society at the University of Twente in The Netherlands. He podcasts, blogs, writes articles, and will pursue further graduate work. He is currently working on his first book, about psychedelics. *Dune* has been his favorite science fiction story since childhood, before he even knew what mind-altering drugs were. A friend of Frank Herbert once sent him peyote as a cure for writer's block; fortunately, A.M. did not experience writer's block at any point during the writing of his chapter.

Aaron Irvin is Associate Professor of the Ancient World at Murray State University. His research examines human organization, government, empire, and religion in the Roman world. Completely lacking any sense of rhythm, he can proudly boast that he has never attracted a sandworm.

Kara Kennedy is a researcher, writer, and educator in the areas of science fiction, writing, and digital literacy. She completed her doctoral dissertation on the Bene Gesserit in the *Dune* series and is the author of *Women's Agency in the "Dune" Universe: Tracing Women's Liberation Through Science Fiction*. She has also published articles on world-building in *Dune* and runs the blog DuneScholar.com. She put off taking the gom jabbar test for too long and is now on the run from the Sisterhood as a suspected thinking machine.

Tommi Kokkonen is a philosopher of science, mind, and technology, with both personal and professional interest in science fiction. He has a PhD in theoretical philosophy and a MSocSc in practical philosophy, both from the University of Helsinki. This doubling down in philosophy is but one reason his colleagues consider him a genuine thinking machine. His dissertation discussed human evolution, a vision of which revealed itself to him after a feast of spicy food and Irish water of life. He currently works on how to introduce AI applications in society in ethically responsible ways. This is going to lead to a disaster, but someone has to take the first steps on the Golden Path.

Mehmet Kuyurtar has completed both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the Ege University Department of Philosophy, Turkey. His main research interests and publication areas include moral and political philosophies of Alfarabi and Ibn Khaldun. Also, out of contempt against the Missionaria Protectiva, he studies religious pluralism and liberation theologies. In 2016 he participated in the organization of the International Borkluce Mustafa Symposium. Since the Harkonnen raids of January 6, 2017, he and his co-workers have been defending the Ege University Department of Philosophy against the evil empire.

R.S. Leiby is a PhD candidate in philosophy at Boston University. She has recently contributed a chapter to Wiley Blackwell's *The Expanse and Philosophy*. When she's not thinking about political philosophy or science fiction, she's eagerly awaiting the Butlerian Jihad (since only the absolute destruction of thinking machines will get her off of the internet and back to work on her dissertation).

"**Greg Littmann**," intoned Korba of Muad'Dib's Quizarate, "you are accused of being a philosopher, of conducting a personal hunt for truth rather than accepting the truth of Muad'Dib or submitting to any orthodoxy." Numb with terror, Littmann only shook his head. Korba glanced at the charge sheet. "You're Associate Professor in the Philosophy Department at SIUE," he pointed out. Littmann tried to speak but no words came. "The charges state that you willfully and with malice aforethought did publish on paradoxes of self-reference, evolutionary epistemology, and the philosophy of professional philosophy, among other topics. And not content to keep your heresies to academia, you wrote chapters for the public, tying philosophical issues to popular culture. You have contributed to numerous such volumes, including books dedicated to *Black Mirror*, *Doctor Who*, *Game of Thrones*, Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*." Littmann looked desperately to his lawyer, who avoided his eyes and studied the courtroom floor. Korba put down the charge sheet and smiled. "Dr. Littmann, we Fremen have a saying. *Polish comes from the cities, wisdom from the desert*. Perhaps if you are quick, you will find some wisdom before Shai-Hulud takes you. Take him away."

Matti Mäkikangas is a teacher and an author of philosophy and worldview studies. His philosophical interests lean toward ethics and political philosophy and his worldview toward the needs of the invisible nobodies. On some mornings, Matti wakes up from dreams where he finds himself leading a great revolt against venture capitalists and fossil-fuel-driven conglomerates.

Ethan Mills is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he trains student-Mentats in the weirding ways of Greek and Asian philosophy as well as philosophy and popular culture, including a course during which students make their own horror films. When he's not writing articles and books about classical Indian philosophy, he follows a Golden Path of engaging philosophically with popular culture in a *mélange* of locations from *Philip K. Dick and Philosophy* (2011) and the *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy* to his personal blog: *Examined Worlds: Philosophy and Science Fiction*. He became a *Dune* fan at age 15, but his attempts to usurp the Imperium were thwarted by his lack of water discipline and love of walking in rhythm.

Jennifer Mundale is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at the University of Central Florida. She finds gholas intriguing and sometimes wonders if she is one. Her chapter would have been done sooner but the Mentat she hired to do the research ran off with a Bene Gesserit to market skincare products on Arrakis.

William Peden researches the philosophy of economics at Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. He wrote his PhD thesis at Durham University (UK) after studies in Cambridge (UK) and Edinburgh. Before all that, he was a high school student in Scotland, where *Dune* was one of his first experiences of philosophy. Unfortunately, his school banned Frank Herbert's books as senior English literature dissertation topics, due to "insufficient literary merit" (the list of forbidden subjects also included anything by Tolkien, Bram Stoker, Isaac Asimov, and Ian Fleming!). After waiting so many years to write about the Duniverse, he is glad that this volume will prove just how much there is to say about it.

Eduardo Pérez spent years as a Spice Driver, learning the Fremen ways and the cries of the water-sellers (Soo-Soo Sook!), before giving it all up for the contemplative life of an English professor. While the skill set Edwardo acquired comes in handy during faculty meetings and "office hours," it's the eyes – the blue within blue within blue – that keep his students mesmerized through lessons on critical and rhetorical theory. And it's the secret stash of melange, hidden in a compartment carved into the pages of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, that allows Edwardo to endure semester after semester of endless grading. Kull Wahad!

Kenneth R. Pike teaches philosophy and law at the Florida Institute of Technology, where from his office window he watches spaceships leave the planet. He writes at the intersection of moral theory and technology, and is especially interested in the challenges posed by values inculcation – both in his own four children, who are probably not gholas, and in the mechanical minds he hopes will one day constitute humanity's collective offspring. As an aspiring transhumanist and techno-optimist, he will be first against the wall when the Butlerian Jihad comes.

Zachary Pirtle, PhD, is an engineer and policy practitioner working on lunar exploration. He also teaches systems engineering and publishes research in philosophy of engineering, including the co-edited book *Engineering and Philosophy: Reimagining Technology and Social Progress*. He wanted to help Leto II with the Golden Path, until one day he sparked the fury of the Worm.

James R.M. Wakefield teaches political theory and government at Cardiff University, Wales. For reasons that made sense back in graduate school, he

writes mainly about Italian philosophy, and sometimes translates it into English. He also has interests in ethics, the philosophy of education, and neglected thinkers of the past. When not worrying about these things, he's usually pretty good value in a pub quiz. After spice melange, his favorite spice is probably smoked paprika. It's so versatile!

Zach Vereb teaches philosophy, critical thinking, and environmental ethics at the University of Mississippi. There, he goes off on tangents about the mental lives of zombies and the virtues of coffee (the true spice of earth). Zach also thinks anime is cool, and so recently published a chapter in *Neon Genesis Evangelion and Philosophy* with Open Universe. Since he began practicing kung fu, Zach often lets his hands do too much talking. One day he even hopes to master the crysknife.

Introduction

“He Who Controls the Spice Controls the Universe”

Kevin S. Decker

A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct. This every sister of the Bene Gesserit knows.

Dune

Frank Herbert’s *Dune* is a space-opera treasure trove, and its sequels show it to also be a Pandora’s Box of latent surprises and long games. In the Duniverse we explore *so many* things – survival, honor, deep ecology, strategy, weird psychic and physical capabilities, psychology, gender, prophecy, religion, and cultural mutation over millennia. But one omnipresent theme in the *Dune* tales – a theme that also characterizes the popularity of the book series and film and television adaptations – is *endurance*. Paul Atreides finds a way to endure his tests for taking over the Ducal seat from Leto. Jessica and Paul endure the Arrakeen desert’s daily hostility – sand getting everywhere, winds whipping at hundreds of miles per hour, every drop of water needing to be saved, and, of course, the sandworms. And the *Dune* saga endures – over the six books that Frank Herbert published between 1965 and 1985, to the many prequel and sequel books written by Herbert’s son Brian and Kevin J. Anderson, loads of fanfic, Sci-Fi Channel television miniseries, and two-and-a-half feature films and counting (Alexander Jodorowsky’s *Dune* was never filmed, but Jodorowsky’s mid-1970s script adaptation would have resulted in a 14-hour film; and that deserves a little credit). Director Denis Villeneuve’s latest adaptation, released in 2021, garnered enough critical praise and audience fervor to justify at least one sequel. The brief timeline of the *Dune* series included in this book shows that even without dipping into the XD Duniverse – mostly constituted by the quasi-canonical writings of Herbert *files* and Anderson – the stories of the great houses of the Landsraad, the Emperors, and the God Emperor unfurl over a jaw-dropping 16,000 years’ span of time. *That’s* endurance.

The Duniverse began in two novellas, *Dune World* and *The Prophet of Dune*, serialized in *Analog* between 1963 and 1965. Herbert developed the sands and sieves of what would become *Dune* the novel with the editorship of the great John W. Campbell. For the magazine *Analog*

(formerly *Astounding Science Fiction*), Campbell “demanded that his writers try to think out how science and technology might really develop in the future – and, most importantly, how those changes would affect the lives of human beings.”¹ This new level of sophistication raised *Analog* above its peers in the dust chasm of SF pulps, and many of the chapters in this book stress the importance of Herbert’s careful research in historical, cultural, and ecological themes – among others – to meet the demands of Campbell’s stricter approach.² Knit together and published in 1965 by Chilton (yes, the publisher of those incredibly detailed car manuals), the *Analog* novellas became *Dune*, winner of the prestigious Hugo and Nebula Awards.

Dune was part of the New Wave of science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, which was characterized by literary experimentation with shifting styles, differing narrative points of view, and unreliable narrators, and with the integration of elements of the “psychedelic” culture of the period. Authors like Herbert, Joanna Russ, Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin represent this movement. In the *Dune* books, plots are often driven by futuristic developments of psychedelic culture like mind-expanding drugs (Arrakis’s spice melange), psychic powers (the weirding ways of the Bene Gesserit), dystopian themes (the culture of House Harkonnen, the genetic manipulations of the Tleilaxu), race memories, and martial arts that allow control of the mind and the body. All are explored in their philosophical richness in the pages of this book.

Many of the chapters you’re about to read rightly emphasize the ecological themes of Herbert’s book series. The immersive experience Herbert wished for readers of *Dune* was based on his own immersive experiences in the Pacific Northwest. John Notarianni of Oregon Public Broadcasting wrote:

In the early 20th century, the coastal Oregon city of Florence was under threat of being consumed by the nearby dunes that were being whipped across human structures by the coastal winds. Roads, railroad tracks, even homes were being swallowed up by blowing sand. Starting in the 1920s, the US Department of Agriculture ran a program to try and stabilize the dunes by planting European Beach Grass . . . Herbert came to Florence in 1957, planning to write an article documenting this battle between man and nature. He was awestruck by the power of the blowing desert sand. As he wrote in a letter, “These waves can be every bit as devastating as a tidal wave in property damage.”³

In turn, the scenarios of Herbert’s Duniverse frequently depict not only the uncontrollable power of nature’s majesty, but also the sublimity of its vast expanses of space and time. Fans frequently recommend reading Herbert to initiates based on the scale of *Dune*’s worldbuilding. Whether the treachery of twisted Mentat Piter De Vries or the Golden Path plotted out meticulously

by the God Emperor Leto II, strategic and military brinksmanship often takes years or centuries to play out.

The great achievement of the 24 philosophers represented in this book is how they deploy their synthetic imagination. Without even needing to convert the poisonous Water of Life, the philosopher has the ability to see the big picture – how things are and how they could have been. She can also tease out the implications of the smallest threads of relevance, whether from Herbert’s books or from the Denis Villeneuve film adaptation. This kind of guidance, reminiscent of the teaching of Socrates or Hypatia, isn’t a luxury when exploring the vastness of the Duniverse – it’s a necessity.

So it’s entirely appropriate to acknowledge the influence on this volume of the first, groundbreaking book about the philosophical themes of *Dune*, editor Jeffrey Nicholas’s 2011 *Dune and Philosophy: Weirder Way of the Mentat*. When I met Jeffrey at a Spokane-area Ethics Bowl shortly before his book was to be published, I was both excited for its release and disappointed that I hadn’t thought to submit a chapter proposal myself. It’s satisfying to finally be able to offer up one’s own contribution to the enduring *Dune* phenomenon.

A note on the many editions of *Dune*: as a worldwide publishing phenomenon, there are numerous publishers of the book series, volumes of which have been translated into at least 14 languages. Each chapter author has been asked to identify their preferred edition, and page references in their chapter will follow that edition.

My family – Suzanne, Kennedy, Ethan, Jack, my brother Keith and his family, and my mother, Carolyn, provided support in many ways while I edited and wrote, and I appreciate them beyond words. Partners in philosophy and pop culture Jason T. Eberl, Rob Arp, and Bill Irwin also deserve a big “thanks!” The existence of this book also acknowledges the daily inspiration, challenge, and joy that my colleagues in Philosophy and the Humanities at Eastern Washington University provide, which it turns out is absolutely necessary while trying to produce a book like this in the middle of climate change catastrophes and the COVID-19 pandemic. So I cannot offer thanks enough to Kerri Boyd, Garry Kenney, Scott Kinder-Pyle, Chris Kirby, Kathryn Julyan, Terry MacMullan, Mimi Marinucci, and David Weise. This book is dedicated to them, and in memoriam to a colleague lost too soon, Henry-York “Hank” Steiner, who loved stories.

Notes

1. Trevor Quachri, “History of Analog Science Fiction and Fact,” *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, at <https://www.analogsf.com/about-analog/history>.
2. A captivating tale of the early days of Campbell’s editorship and the way in which he cultivated SF Golden Age authors can be read in Alec Nevala-Lee’s *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron*

Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018).

3. John Notarianni, “How an Oregon Battle Between Human and Nature Inspired Frank Herbert’s ‘Dune,’” *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, October 23, 2021, at <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/10/23/florence-oregon-movies-dune-frank-herbert-science-fiction-novels>.

A Brief *Dune* Series Timeline

1000 BG	Beginnings of space travel.
201 BG	The Butlerian Jihad begins.
108 BG	End of the Butlerian Jihad.
88 BG	Battle of Corrin; House Corrino establishes the Imperium.
80 BG	Founding of the order of Mentats.
0 AG	Founding of the Spacing Guild; Royal Houses of the Landsraad established; CHOAM (<i>Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles</i>) founded.
2000 AG	The Great Convention is signed, saying that the combined power of the Great Houses may destroy anyone who uses atomic power against human beings; the Commission of Ecumenical Translators compiles the Orange Catholic Bible on Old Earth; Great Convention rule observed throughout the galaxy for the next 8000 years.
10111 AG	House Harkonnen gains stewardship of Arrakis, holding the planet in quasi-fief under a CHOAM company contract to mine the spice melange.
10156 AG	Elrood IX dies; Shaddam Corrino IV becomes Padishah Emperor.
10176 AG	Paul Atreides is born.
10189 AG	Leto Atreides I master trains a small, Sardaukar-level force, threatening the Emperor.
10191–95 AG	Events of <i>Dune</i> (published 1965).
10203 AG	Events of <i>Dune Messiah</i> (published 1969) begin.
10212 AG	Events of <i>Children of Dune</i> (published 1976) begin.
13712 AG	Events of <i>God Emperor of Dune</i> (published 1981) begin.
15212 AG	Events of <i>Heretics of Dune</i> (published 1984) begin.
15214 AG	Events of <i>Chapterhouse Dune</i> (published 1985) begin.

**SONGS OF MUAD'DIB:
CULTURE AND RELIGION
IN *DUNE***

Liberating Women's Bodies

Feminist Philosophy and the Bene Gesserit of *Dune*

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Maybe Frank Herbert was too subtle in crafting the powerful and influential female characters in *Dune*, since some readers seem to overlook them. Women are everywhere in *Dune*, especially the members of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. From Princess Irulan and Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, to Lady Margot and Lady Jessica, Bene Gesserit women's voices and choices play crucial roles in the book.

But *Dune* doesn't seem to be a work of science fiction that promises a future of gender equality. Although set in the far future, it resembles a past of feudal dukes, barons, and counts owing loyalty to an emperor, who bequeaths planetary fiefs and favors as he sees fit. In this medieval setting, the women of the Bene Gesserit don't hold the same roles or have the same responsibilities as men. Instead, they still hold traditional female roles: concubines, wives, advisors, and religious figures.

Jessica is Duke Leto Atreides's bound concubine who bears an heir, Paul, and uses her business training to serve as Leto's secretary. While Leto's busy engaging in strategic military planning on Arrakis, she is instructing their new servants how to set up their household. At a formal dinner banquet, she plays the gracious hostess, calling for more dishes and making small talk with their guests. Leto sits at the head of the table and is the person called away when a potential emergency arises. Among the Fremen, Jessica is not allowed to be her own champion when Jamis calls for a ritual fight. These and many other examples show that Jessica isn't given the same opportunities or made part of the same action as men.

Mohiam is the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV's advisor and Truthsayer. She is trusted by him and provides crucial advice during his final confrontation with the Atreides family. But she is not a ruler; she must rely on her authority as a high-ranking Bene Gesserit and her ability to Truthsay. She may evoke fear, but she has to channel political influence through others, usually men.

The characters Margot and Irulan have more limited appearances, but also appear bound to follow the lead of the men in their lives. Margot travels with her spouse, Count Hasimir Fenring, who is the Emperor's friend and confidant. Irulan accompanies her father, the Emperor, to Arrakis and agrees without resistance to a marriage alliance with the Atreides family.

This does not mean the Bene Gesserit are sitting around letting men run the show, though. They maintain a silent partnership in the CHOAM corporation and have an agreement with the Emperor to keep a Bene Gesserit on the throne. Meanwhile, they have a nearly covert operation involving a genetic master plan, missionary work, and highly specialized training.

Given these factors, *Dune* appears to create an environment with separate gendered spheres in which men and women often have different responsibilities, activities, and skills. Women have their own thing going on, but they do it behind the scenes and don't occupy roles with overt authority. This is not a universe in which women and men are equal.

The Female Body: Friend Not Foe

If we look at what's happening with the female body, though, *Dune* promises more freedom for its women. The Bene Gesserit do not see their bodies as obstacles to their active and purposeful existence in the world. They reject the idea that women are inferior or less capable of doing things than men simply because they're female and can get pregnant. Instead, they embrace the fact that they can choose to birth children and control their genetic lineage. They see vast potential in the body that members of the Guild or Mentats have overlooked or neglected. The Bene Gesserit view the body as a valuable vehicle through which to perceive the world and achieve their aims. In other words, the body is a way for them to be active agents of their own lives rather than something that holds them back or weakens them. By striving toward a balanced relationship between mind and body, they uncover a possible future in which women creatively utilize their potential to make their mark on the world.

Philosophers can help us understand how the depiction of the Bene Gesserit can be considered a science fiction vision of feminism despite *Dune's* lack of gender equality. In her groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) takes a bold step by saying that girls don't just naturally take on the characteristics and stereotypes associated with femininity and womanhood. There is no inner "feminine essence" driving their behavior: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."¹ In Beauvoir's view, what happens is that girls are socialized early on to think of themselves as weaker and so gradually femininize themselves. They are told to be modest, charming, and graceful to be accepted by society. But though they are rewarded for restricting themselves and

becoming “proper” women, they are also often treated as less valuable than their male counterparts in society. Over time, gendered restrictions and limitations become normalized, so it appears that women are destined by a “feminine essence” to always have certain attitudes and behaviors.

In the world of *Dune*, the Bene Gesserit have recognized the importance of socialization and flipped it on its head. Under the pretense of preparing girls to be concubines or wives placed in noble houses, they have developed a comprehensive education program that emboldens girls with a wealth of knowledge. In a presumably all-female schooling environment, girls are expected to study and master a broad range of subjects. Jessica tells the Fremen housekeeper, the Shadout Mapes, that “Tongues are the Bene Gesserit’s first learning” and shows off her fluency in Chakobsa, an ancient hunting language.² At the dinner banquet, she recalls a Bene Gesserit teacher’s lesson on espionage and counter-espionage while she uncovers a Harkonnen spy. Far from being merely a beautiful concubine and hostess, Jessica is a highly trained woman who actively uses her skills to analyze those around her and determine their level of threat to herself and her family on Arrakis.

Yet socialization also includes how girls learn to view themselves in relation to their body. Beauvoir says that in many cases, girls do not receive training in athletics, are forbidden from fighting or climbing or other “dangerous” activities, and are persuaded to avoid pushing their limits.³ This can have severe, long-lasting effects on their beliefs and behaviors, for “To lose confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in one’s self.”⁴ Beauvoir takes issue with these structures of sexism, suggesting that if girls were raised with the same expectations, freedom, studies, and activities as boys, they would grow up free from feelings of weakness, passivity, and inferiority. If girls and women did not experience their body as something to be ashamed of, or a handicap on their ability to do things, they could enjoy a more active and independent engagement with the world, just like men enjoy. They could see themselves as people who initiate, rather than people who passively sit on the sidelines. Beauvoir advocates for women to recognize themselves as fully capable human beings and explore the many possibilities that have historically been denied to them.

Understanding that an academic education is not comprehensive enough, the Bene Gesserit also focus attention on the body and its potential to empower girls and women. Rather than forbid intense physical activities, they encourage girls to perfect their skills in areas such as fighting. Jessica is more than capable of handling herself in sticky situations. We only get a couple sentences describing Jessica using her skill in a tussle with Stilgar, and it is over quickly: “A turn, a slash of her arm, a whirling of mingled robes, and she was against the rocks with the man helpless in front of her.”⁵ But Stilgar is in awe of her “weirding ability of battle” that requires no weapons, and this helps show us how amazing her skills are to “maste[r] an armed Fremen.”⁶ Her body is the only weapon she needs, having been

trained in the art of combat at her Bene Gesserit school. In fact, the Bene Gesserit are actually the standard of measurement for combat. In the Appendix in *Dune*, the definition of the Sardaukar, the Emperor's feared soldier-fanatics, states that "their cunning abilities at in-fighting were reputed to approach those of a Bene Gesserit adept."⁷ The Sardaukar only *approach* the skills of the Bene Gesserit! Although the Bene Gesserit certainly don't seek out a fight and aren't soldiers, their special combat skills give them the confidence and strength to move through a dangerous world as women.

Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) takes Beauvoir's rejection of a natural "feminine essence" a step further in "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality." Young looks closely at the female body and how its movements and limitations are conditioned by socialization. She's interested in how the female body orients itself toward its surroundings and why we might already find gender differences in body behavior and movement in children as young as five.

Why should there be such a thing as throwing like a girl, considered a derogatory accusation? If the human body is primarily used to accomplish tasks – whether those be throwing a ball, lifting a box, or walking to work – why do boys and men attempt these tasks with more ease and free motion than girls and women? Why are girls and women more likely to experience their bodies as a fragile impediment, instead of as a durable instrument that gets things done? For Young, responses might include lack of practice, lack of confidence, and a woman's perception of herself as being an object rather than an initiator. A woman sees things happening to her, instead of her making things happen. She worries about being treated as an object rather than as an equal human being. What is needed is for her to have complete trust in her body to do what she wishes, so she does not see her body as a burden that holds her back.

In the *Dune* universe, the Bene Gesserit give girls so much practice in honing their skills that it almost guarantees they will grow into supremely confident women who trust their bodies to follow through on any action they desire. When Jessica is confronted with potentially hostile Fremen – the Shadout Mapes and Stilgar – she secretly readies her body for battle through "the waiting whipsnap of her muscles."⁸ There is no sense that she views her body as something fragile or burdensome. She has full faith in her body to initiate action, thanks to her Bene Gesserit training.

Young argues that if women were not "physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified, they could see themselves as agents who could go out and master a world that belonged to them."⁹ There is one example of Jessica being inhibited that stands out as a clear contrast to how she normally operates. After being drugged by the traitor in the Atrides household, Jessica awakes to find her mind and body are sluggish and she has been bound and gagged. With both her and Paul thrown into an ornithopter to be dropped in the desert by the Harkonnen, she must wait

for her ungagged son to assist her in getting her gag removed before she can take control of the situation. In this case, she is restricted from immediately confronting the challenge ahead of her because the Harkonnen knew “what a deadly creature” she is and prepared accordingly.¹⁰ But at other times, when her body is not confined, Jessica does appear to be a woman who rises up to meet what life throws at her.

Liberated Women

The Bene Gesserit in *Dune* represent a fulfillment of the ideal of the liberated women Beauvoir and Young describe. They are a pseudo-religious organization that encourages its members to perceive and use their bodies differently than we might expect of women in a medieval, feudal age, or indeed by the standard of today’s societies. Sisters and Reverend Mothers measure themselves against Bene Gesserit standards, not male standards. In fact, looking at gender in *Dune* from this angle provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of its women than examining gender roles in terms of equality.

If women were “given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world” and encouraged “to develop specific bodily skills,” they could overcome some of the challenges in a sexist society and make their goals a reality.¹¹ They could avoid the hesitancy and timidity that can get in women’s way. The Bene Gesserit show this in action. The body is a core part of their toolkit, not an obstacle. And everything they do is geared toward a goal, whether small or large, immediate or far-reaching.

The Bene Gesserit have certainly developed specific bodily skills, and these extend beyond their more obvious fighting ability. They train in the art of minute perception, honing their eyes, ears, and other sensory organs to notice the smallest of details of their environment. Jessica frequently uses this ability to assess novel situations, the potential for danger, and the best course of action. During virtually every step of her and Paul’s journey on Arrakis, they are processing sensory information in subtle ways, using their training to navigate and survive in an often hostile environment. At the banquet, she is “following the conversation with Bene Gesserit intensity” and reading the body language of key political figures on Arrakis to determine whose loyalties lie where.¹² For instance, she determines that the banker is terrified of Dr. Liet-Kynes after hearing the fear in his voice and seeing it in his face, his breathing, and the pulsing of a vein at his temple. In an encounter with the Shadout Mapes, Jessica reads the “petit betrayals” in Mapes’s actions and appearance as Jessica reveals her knowledge of the Bene Gesserit-implanted legends while also preparing to defend herself against a possible attack.¹³ Her keen perceptive abilities serve her well, as she gains valuable political insights that help her survive and establish a secure foothold on the planet.