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# **What is Assertiveness?**

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B.S. Biology, Northern Illinois University, 2008

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## **What is Assertiveness?**

### **Abstract**

My main aim is to define assertiveness, to distinguish assertiveness from aggressiveness, and to raise the question of whether we should be assertive. Most articles on assertiveness are from the field of psychology. In psychology, assertiveness is defined as a healthy way of expressing oneself. But what does assertiveness mean? How should we define assertiveness and is assertiveness desirable, or is it closely connected to aggressiveness? Should we say that assertiveness is a part of our character, an innate quality, or an acquired skill? In this thesis, I will define assertiveness and show how to distinguish assertiveness from aggressiveness. Most issues arise due to the close linkage between these two terms, but assertiveness is different from aggressiveness. Since this topic is rarely explored, I approach it from the angle of continental philosophy and look at what assertiveness means in the philosophy of language, psychology, literature, and mythology. I conclude that even though assertiveness could be a very complex term and difficult to define, it is distinct from aggressiveness. There are three important factors connected to assertiveness: freedom, courage, and respect. The wish for freedom and courage are necessary for each person to acquire assertiveness. Respect is required in social interaction and it is essential in distinguishing assertiveness and aggressiveness.

## Defining Assertiveness

How can we define assertiveness? If we look for the definition of assertiveness in dictionaries, it is defined as “the quality of being confident and not frightened to say what you want or believe” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Or it could be also defined as forceful and confident behavior (Lexico, 2022). The former definition gives the impression that being assertive is a healthy expression of yourself, standing for what you believe in, but the latter definition implies that it is a form of aggression. It seems that when we try to define assertiveness, we have an issue of ambiguity, and there is no clear explanation of what assertiveness is.

If we immerse ourselves more into the philosophy of language and try to explore the adjective *assertive*, the same issue of ambiguity arises. As synonyms of the adjective *assertive*, we can find: confident, decisive, firm, bold, forceful, insistent, pushy, self-assured, self-confident, aggressive, and militant.

When describing a person, if we use adjectives *confident* or *decisive* instead of *assertive*, there is no negative connotation. Being confident or decisive could mean that a person knows what she wants and she is not slow in making decisions, which could be an advantage in certain situations, especially in emergencies. But if we take the adjectives *aggressive* and *militant* as synonyms for *assertive*, then a problem arises. An aggressive or militant person is associated with disruptive and destructive behavior, and that implies potential problems in most environments.

We can only imagine what would happen if a person who is looking for a job, instead of describing herself as an assertive or confident person in her cover letter, writes

that she is an aggressive or militant person. Every manager would be happy to have a confident person on their team, a person who believes in herself and her abilities, but not all managers want to have an aggressive person in their professional environment. Being aggressive means that a person could cause potential problems in her work environment and constantly impose her opinions on others. We could see why the definition of assertiveness is very complex and why it could be even problematic. And since there is an ambiguity in the definition of the word, when describing herself as an assertive person in a cover letter, a person could encounter some problems with people's initial perceptions. The manager of a work team who is reading her cover letter could perceive her as a self-confident, decisive person who knows what she wants and does not waste her time, but a person from the team could perceive the attribute of assertiveness as a form of aggression leading to potential problems with colleagues.

On the other hand, when we try to define what being unassertive means, explanations go from being submissive to being unconfident or nonaggressive. And the synonyms for unassertive are meek, submissive, unconfident, modest, timid, and passive. There is nothing ambiguous about what being unassertive means, and there is a very clear distinction between being assertive and unassertive. But what about the distinction between being assertive and aggressive? As we have seen, these two attributes could be synonyms for each other, so they do not necessarily exclude each other, nor are they contradictory.

This is what Milivojević and Dragović argue in "Aggressiveness and assertiveness in communication – shortcomings and limitations". They believe that assertiveness and aggressiveness do not exclude each other immediately, as is the case

with assertiveness and unassertiveness (Milivojević & Dragović, p 108). They turn to Jakubowski and Lange and agree with them, that assertiveness needs an ethical framework. They believe that unassertiveness does not have to be unethical, since it could limit only the person who possesses that attribute, but assertiveness includes other people and it could be unethical (Milivojević & Dragović, p 108).

It is true that an unassertive person only limits herself in expressing her needs and wants, but she does not hurt anyone else. The opposite is true for an assertive person. To express assertiveness, there are at least two persons involved. A person can be assertive with herself, but it will not lead to aggression, since every fully functional person will not be aggressive toward herself. But when other people and their emotions are involved, there are no guarantees that an assertive person will not be perceived as aggressive, especially if she tries to impose her opinions on others. Assertiveness can easily be perceived as aggressiveness or dominance.

In his book *Manliness*, Harvey C. Mansfield is focused on what the title of his book is: manliness. For him, manliness is the same as assertiveness, and he connects it with *thumos* from Plato's notion of the soul, and explains it as a quality of spiritedness that encourages men "to risk their lives in order to save their lives" (Mansfield, preface xi). Mansfield thinks that manliness does not want comfort, but wants risk (Mansfield, p 94), and that every human being has it, but that so-called "the manly" humans have it in excess (Mansfield, p 85). He believes that manliness or assertiveness is a quality of the soul (Mansfield, p 22). To equate manliness and assertiveness would lead us to believe that assertiveness is the same as aggressiveness. And it is probably true that too much manliness or assertiveness could be called aggressiveness or dominance. But is

assertiveness the same as aggressiveness? In psychology, assertiveness is explained as a healthy way of defending your rights, of being self-confident, without being aggressive.

Where is that fine line between being assertive and being aggressive?

Mansfield writes that for him manliness “is an assertion of man’s worth” (Mansfield, p 53). But is it not true that the assertion of man’s worth is a possible characteristic of any person in this world, not only of “manly man”? Is it not what Rosa Parks did when she refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery in 1955? Did not she exhibit assertiveness?

In her autobiography, *My Story*, Rosa Parks writes:

“People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in” (Parks & Haskins, p 116).

To assert yourself and show your worth as a human being, as Rosa Parks did, is what every human being should do to save her human dignity when feeling oppressed. Rosa Parks was tired of giving in, and she did not want to give up her seat to a white man. She requested the same treatment for herself as for any white man based on her human worthiness, not on the color of her skin. Can we say that this act of assertiveness is an ability of only “manly men”? And in this case, it was a woman who asserted herself, stood up to authority, and with that action demanded respect for herself and her fellow beings. She was not aggressive or militant, for she quietly disobeyed orders.

Could we say that in this case, assertiveness is courage, boldness? In the case of Rosa Parks, it was an act of boldness, because she stood up and fought for her rights. But

she was not aggressive, and neither did she attack her oppressor. She only defended her rights. Does that mean that assertiveness is the same as defensiveness? We need to be assertive in situations when our rights are violated, and we need to defend them. But again, defensiveness could be explained as an act of protecting oneself, of deterring aggression or an attack, and that is the opposite of aggressiveness. This put us at the beginning of the whole discussion, without making any definite conclusion about what assertiveness is. It seems that the problem lies in the possibility that this word or this characteristic in a person could go both ways, toward fighting for a good, but also toward harming others.

If we look at different languages' words for assertiveness and their meaning, there is one word that keeps showing up as a synonym of assertiveness – it is self-confidence. Since the word assertiveness came from the Latin word *assertus*, some languages like Serbian and Greek do not have it in their vocabulary. If we translate assertiveness into the Serbian language, it is translated as *samopouzdanje* (self-confidence). Tovilović argues that in the Serbian language, the word assertiveness did not exist; it is imported from the English language as a new term in psychology (Tovilović, p 36). That way it is adjusted to the Serbian language and to sound more like a Serbian word, now exists as *asertivnost*. In the Greek language, the word assertiveness does not exist. What does exist are two synonyms that differ depending on the situation. If we talk about a person and describe her as being assertive, adjectives in the Greek language similar to the adjective assertive are: confident and positive. If the word assertiveness is applied to the action or manner of how someone acts, then in the Greek language the words categorical and explicit are used



instead of assertive. But according to native Greek speakers in both situations, there is no bad connotation to the synonyms of assertiveness.

If we look at the French language and the meaning of the word assertiveness, the translation is *affirmation de soi* or *assurance de soi*. The term *affirmation de soi* means self-affirmation or the act of affirming one's worthiness, while *assurance de soi* means self-assurance. Looking at the Italian and Portuguese languages, there is a certain resemblance of the word assertiveness: in Italian is *assertività* and in Portuguese is *assertividade*; both meaning confident behavior. According to native language speakers of any of these languages, there is no bad connotation connected to the concept of assertiveness.

To come back to the root of the word 'assertiveness' in Latin, *assertus*, the meaning of that word also goes in two directions. *Assertus* could mean: having been claimed as a slave but also having been liberated from slavery (WordSense Online Dictionary, 2022). It seems that in history the word assertiveness could be applied only to the slaveholders who had the power to enslave or liberate a person.

Is this why we perceive assertiveness as a word that could be ambiguous, that could have both positive and negative connotations? Is this bad connotation customary only in the English language? I do not believe that is true.

### **The Emergence of the Term Assertiveness**

The term 'assertiveness' showed up in the 1950s after Andrew Salter put the word in the dictionary. In his book, "Conditioned Reflex Therapy", Salter argues that most of

our emotional responses are conditioned by the environment in which we grew up. He believes that early in childhood, we learn how to respond to certain stimuli, and over time that response becomes a pattern, and our emotional response to that certain stimulus is always the same. This is what Pavlov showed when he trained dogs to react to the sound of the bell. According to these studies, the sympathetic part of the brain could be trained to respond to certain stimuli. Salter believes that submissiveness or meekness is not an innate characteristic, but only an emotional response that we learn by being inhibited by the people around us. According to him, from an early age, we learned to inhibit certain emotional responses and, consequentially, we became submissive to the opinions of others.

Salter believes that this behavior of submissiveness or unassertiveness could be unlearned, and with training, assertiveness could be acquired and applied in any situation. He perceived assertiveness as a positive characteristic, a necessary condition for leading a happy and satisfying life. Salter believes that people do not act because of intellectual reasons, but because of their emotional habits. Everyone is born free, but the environment puts all people “in chains” and they become inhibited. For him, excitement is a necessity of life, and without that, a man cannot progress much (Salter, p 37-40). It is also a matter of emotional freedom, which he believes is necessary for a person to be happy (Salter, p 47). A person who is inhibited will try to be everything to everybody and finish by being nothing to herself (Salter, p 52). Salter seems irritated by the religious notion of meekness: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth” (Matthew 5:5). He comments sarcastically that “the meek shall inherit the earth because their faces are in the

dust” (Salter, p 54) and states that those who spit will inherit the earth (Salter, p 69). Does Salter go too far when talking about meekness?

### **Assertiveness in Literature and Mythology**

Assertiveness, or better the lack of it, is also explored in literature, through the characters of heroes or heroines of English literature. The famous Gothic novel, “Rebecca” written by Daphne Du Maurier in 1938, has as an underlying theme the importance of assertiveness and the dangers of being a submissive person, easily manipulated by others. Coming to a new, beautiful castle, called Manderley, a property of her husband, Mrs. de Winter is enchanted by her new home. Naively looking at her new environment as a thing from fairy tales, where everyone lives “happily ever after”, Mrs. de Winter is faced with the shadow of the late Rebecca, her husband’s first wife. Rebecca was a strong, beautiful, and fearless woman, and the new Mrs. de Winter, with her shyness, diffidence, and immense desire to please others, constantly compares herself to Rebecca. Because of her nature, Mrs. de Winter becomes easy prey to the manipulative Mrs. Danvers, a devoted servant of late Rebecca. With her psychological games with clear intentions to frighten the new Mrs. de Winter and make her leave the house, Mrs. Danvers pushes her new employer to the edge of madness.

Aware of her submissiveness and incapacity to assert herself as a new mistress of the house, Mrs. de Winter becomes more self-effacing. Only when there is a possibility that her husband would be accused of the murder of the late Rebecca, new Mrs. de Winter finally finds the courage to stand up for herself and confront Mrs. Danvers. She clearly states her own opinions on what needs to be done in the house and requests things

to be done the way she wants them. At the moment when Mrs. de Winter gains her confidence and eloquently expresses what she wants, Mrs. Danvers senses that she finally loses power over her new mistress. As the narrator of the story, Mrs. de Winter contrasts her timidity as a novice in her new home, which was ruled previously by Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers, with her newfound confidence. This confidence that she found in herself, Mrs. de Winter calls “a quality” and she praises it (Du Maurier, p 9).

In the case of Mrs. de Winter, who at the beginning of the book lacks assertiveness, we can see why being assertive is important in any situation. Being submissive and unassertive could lead to unpleasant situations, where one’s psychological well-being is in danger. So maybe Salter was right when he argued that assertiveness is something that could be learned.

If we look at Greek mythology, one of the first names that come to mind is Zeus, who was the ruler of both humans and gods. Hesiod in his book *Theogony* writes that when Zeus speaks, he speaks with assurance, and with this attitude, he stops the conflict between mortals and gods (Hesiod, p 26). But besides being assertive, Zeus is known for his aggressiveness, even cruelty, when he perceives disobedience from his dependents. To punish Prometheus for giving fire to humans, Zeus chains him to a cliff and sets an eagle to eat Prometheus’ liver every day (Hesiod, p 40). Of all the goddesses, the only equivalent to Zeus is his daughter Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, who by nature is confident and wise.

If assertiveness is a skill that could be acquired, what is necessary to obtain it? For this, I will turn again to Greek mythology and the muse Calliope. Muses were goddesses of literature, science, and arts. They were inspirations for artists. Calliope was one of the

muses who presided over poetry and eloquence. Her name means “beautiful-voiced” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022). For Hesiod, she was the most important muse of all (Hesiod, p 25). Since Calliope was the muse of eloquence, could we say that she was the epitome of assertiveness? Eloquence is defined as “the quality of forceful or persuasive expressiveness” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022) or “the quality of delivering a clear, strong message” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). If one did not express oneself clearly or one was inhibited, as Salter pointed out, one would have issues with stating oneself. And like we have seen in the case of Mrs. de Winter, once she found a way to express herself eloquently, she earned respect from her employee. But I have to point out something obvious here: to express herself eloquently, Mrs. de Winter had to find courage in herself.

This is what Malarchick writes in his work “Philosophies of Assertiveness”. He assumes assertiveness is equivalent to self-esteem and is connected with personal growth. A person who grows personally and whose self-esteem is healthy does not have a problem asserting herself and eloquently expressing herself. For Malarchick, being assertive is a part of the courage to be (Malarchick, p 20). It is true that assertiveness is connected with self-esteem and that being assertive is a part of the courage to be yourself, to be faithful to your authentic self. This is what we have seen in the case of Rosa Parks.

### **Assertiveness in Psychology**

Another interesting idea that both Mansfield and Du Maurier highlight in their work is that confidence or assertiveness is some kind of quality. Mansfield thinks that the assertiveness of the so-called “manly man” is a quality of the soul (Mansfield, p 22). It is

similar to what Du Maurier expresses, through the words of her heroine Mrs. de Winter: “And confidence is a quality that I prize, although it has come to me a little late in the day” (Du Maurier, p 9).

For Mansfield, who argues that assertiveness is a quality of the soul, it is the feature that is in the nature of man. And since it is in the soul, one is born with that quality. He believes that women are submissive and weak, because of their gender and their nature. But as we have seen in the work of Du Maurier, that quality came later in life for her heroine. This is what Salter argues, that assertiveness is a conditioned response, something that could be learned. Does that mean that women are conditioned to be submissive and non-assertive?

Some studies confirm Mansfield’s argument about assertiveness in men and women. A recent study in a group of medical students showed a clear discrepancy between the assertiveness of women and the assertiveness of men. Studies have shown that women are less assertive and ask fewer questions, especially in large groups that meet in person. When some classes were smaller in size, women more freely asked or answered questions. When classes moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamic of interaction changed. Women more freely expressed their opinions and asked more questions in virtual classes (Cromer et al, p 1). The consistent thing in each of these situations was that the female medical students used more respectful language than men.

Looking at this particular study, could we say that women are unassertive because they are brought up that way, not because their nature is meek and submissive? Or that Mansfield is correct in his musings that women are generally submissive? It is difficult to make a conclusive statement regarding this issue, since historically in many countries

women were oppressed and limited in many ways by the laws and social norms. To assert oneself, a person needs confidence in her abilities and her human worth, and if she was conditioned not to express herself or she was told that she is inadequate, how could she gain self-confidence and be assertive?

Another thing related to Mansfield's notion of assertiveness as a quality of the soul is the question of heritability. Is it true that assertiveness is a part of our genetic makeup and not some skill that we all could acquire? I will turn to two different studies, conducted in the 1980s, that explored behavioral traits as a possible heritable characteristic. In 1986, Rushton and his colleagues conducted a study on twins to evaluate if altruism and aggression are a part of genetics, or if they are a part of cognitive social learning. Even though this study was based mainly on researching altruism and aggression, it included research on assertiveness, empathy, and nurturance as well. The results showed that aggressiveness was positively correlated to assertiveness, but negatively correlated to altruism, nurturance, and empathy. Assertiveness was inconsistently related to altruism, nurturance and empathy, while the last three were positively correlated to each other (Rushton et al, p 1193). This means that an aggressive person could be very often assertive, but rarely altruistic, nurturing and empathic. Women scored lower on aggressiveness and assertiveness than men, but more on empathy and nurturance. Researchers pointed out that these findings were in line with previous studies.

The researchers also tried to make a correlation between the genetics of twins, their common environment, and also the specific environment of each twin. According to them, studies showed that altruism for twins is 51% due to genetics, 2% to twins'

common environment, and 47% to twins' specific environment. Similar results came for empathy, nurturance, aggressiveness, and assertiveness (Rushton et al, p 1195). They concluded that the genetic basis of behavior should be considered (Rushton et al, p 1196).

According to this study, Mansfield might appear to be right when he said that assertiveness is an innate quality of the soul, one more common in men than in women.

To see that scientific studies cannot give us a conclusive statement regarding these traits, I will turn to another study conducted in 1989, just a few years after Rushton's paper was published. Pedersen and her colleagues also conducted a study on twins to explore Type A personality, and also the behaviors of hostility and assertiveness. A Type A personality is found in people who have a high drive to succeed, who are ambitious, and who constantly feel under pressure. These researchers wanted to explore how much twins' genetics, their common environment, and their specific environment influence this type of behavior. They found out that between 23% and 43%, of Type A personality is due to genetic factors, but that genetics does not play any part in hostility and assertiveness. According to them, hostility and assertiveness were behaviors that were mostly affected by a specific environment (Pedersen et al, p 437). The only consistency in both studies is the result that showed that men are more assertive than women.

Comparing these two studies, we cannot make any conclusive statement regarding whether assertiveness is due to genetics or the environment. It seems that the only common result in both studies was that women are less assertive than men. There are still many similar kinds of research that cannot help us to make any firm conclusion.



## **Assertiveness and Perceptions**

There is another perspective that we should consider when talking about assertiveness. Is there a possibility that there is no natural difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness, but there is only an issue of evaluative difference? <sup>1</sup>

We can take an example of how assertiveness could be seen in both positive and negative ways. In talking with her friend Sandra, Maria is aware that Sandra is making a huge mistake by quitting her job, because she is mad at her boss and frustrated with her current job position. Sandra believes that she works more than what she is paid for, and that she is not appreciated at work. Maria knows that Sandra does not have any other source of income, and it is clear that she makes a decision based on her temporary emotions. In the heat of the moment, Sandra is not attending to the possible consequences: being unemployed without a regular income and probable difficulty in finding a better job in the future. In the past, she made some important decisions based on her temporary emotions, not on reasoning, which had dire consequences. Maria starts being assertive with her friend, and demands that Sandra listens to her at this moment, since she cannot think clearly and it is not smart for her to give up her job.

Already overwhelmed with her emotions, Sandra becomes mad at Maria and leaves the room with words: “You do not have any right to tell me what to do with my life! You are always bossy!”.

<sup>1</sup> The idea that assertiveness is valued differently by different people, comes from professor Eric Wiland. I shaped this idea into my master’s thesis from my perspective.

Could we say that in this situation Maria's behavior is unethical, and that she crossed the line by telling her friend what she should do, even though Maria had Sandra's best interests in her heart? Neither of them could indeed predict with certainty the consequences for Sandra in the future if she leaves her job. Maria, on one hand, assumes that Sandra's future after quitting her job would be unemployment, loss of income, and even possible difficulty for her to find a better job. For Sandra, on the other hand, quitting her job means freedom, other opportunities for a better job, and a stress-free environment. Where is the fine line between being assertive, expressing oneself with confidence, and being aggressive, trying to impose one's opinion on another person?

Looking at this example of two friends, should we say that Maria is assertive or aggressive? People who value assertiveness would praise that quality in Maria and her frankness, her readiness to help her friend not to live in illusions. But people who do not like assertiveness would see it as a restriction of Sandra's right to have a choice, and they will connect it with aggressiveness. Could we say then that assertiveness is clearly distinguished from aggressiveness, but it is valued differently from person to person and this is where the problem lies? We still need to understand better what assertiveness is.

### **Three Factors Connected to Assertiveness**

When Salter was talking about emotional freedom and the problem of meekness, which he did not consider beneficial, could we say that he was going too far? Is emotional freedom a key factor in defining assertiveness? In her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes about the same issues that Salter is concerned

with. Writing about freedom from an existentialist's point of view, she demands that every person has the freedom to decide how they will live their life. She believes that humans cannot escape from this world (de Beauvoir, p 75) and they need to know whether they want to live and under what conditions (de Beauvoir, p 14). But she also warns of the anguish that humans feel when they are faced with freedom (de Beauvoir, p 35). Humans want security, so they choose marriage, religion, and even politics to feel secure (de Beauvoir, p 59). For those that are "humble", Simone de Beauvoir, like Salter, does not have empathy. She accuses them of laziness, timidity, and dishonesty, and she mostly blames women for being meek (de Beauvoir, p 51). In this, Mansfield enthusiastically agrees with Simone de Beauvoir, and he cites her often in his book *Manliness*.

But what does all of this have with assertiveness? Is assertiveness closely connected to freedom? Or does assertiveness come from the wish of being free? As we have seen, in the case of Rosa Parks, assertiveness is connected to freedom. To achieve her freedom, Rosa Parks had to be assertive.<sup>2</sup> The reason why she was being assertive was her longing for freedom. But she also needed the courage to assert herself. As we have seen, for Malarchick, being assertive is a part of the courage to be (Malarchick, p 20). And in the book *Rebecca*, where the main character (could we even call her a heroine?) feels that she does not have the freedom to express her own opinion in her new home, her assertiveness is nonexistent. And going back to the Latin word *assertus*, it is connected to freedom or even to the lack of freedom.

It seems that freedom and courage are closely connected to assertiveness, especially in cases when one needs to express oneself. But what about in other social

interactions? How could we make a distinction between assertiveness and aggressiveness in social interactions? I believe that to solve that issue, we should consider respect as an essential factor that could finally help us to distinguish assertiveness from aggressiveness.

### **Final Thoughts**

As we have seen, the word ‘assertiveness’ in most languages means self-confidence, which has a good connotation. But it also seems that assertiveness is closely linked to aggressiveness, and this is where a problem arises. As some studies have already shown, aggressive people have an inclination to be assertive, so assertiveness goes hand-in-hand with aggressiveness.

To go back to the heritability question, I do believe that some people are assertive by nature. Those who are assertive by nature could have an inclination to overpower others and impose their opinions on them. They could become aggressive. This is what Mansfield points out when he writes that assertiveness is a quality of the soul.

To go back to Plato, from whom Mansfield borrowed the term *thumos* and connected it to assertiveness and aggressiveness, we could say that Plato was correctly concerned about people who have a strong *thumos* or spirited part of the soul. For them, he even proposed special education.

2 Even though de Beauvoir and Salter were writing about individual emotional freedom and Rosa Parks was fighting for the collective freedom of African Americans, I would still like to focus on the general idea of freedom. I am grateful to Professor Gualtiero Piccinini for pointing out the difference between these two concepts.

Mansfield believes that *thumos* poses a problem for Plato, since “it is blind and wants only independence”, but it is also connected to pride and makes people self-sufficient (Mansfield, p 207).

Independent and self-sufficient people could pose a threat to society, where everyone should be doing their part of the job and cooperate for a common good, and where harmony is necessary for a society to function. Is that not the reason why Plato was concerned about *thumos*? But Mansfield thinks that there is a good side to *thumos* (or manliness, what he calls it) and that it “is biased in favor of action, not reflection”, without whom progress in society would not exist (Mansfield, p 20).

In that, I agree with Mansfield, and I believe that people who are by nature assertive do bring a certain quality to society. I think that there is great energy in people who possess a strong spirit, and they could be effective in finishing things, taking charge, and being assertive when needed. Mansfield writes about *thumos* or manliness, as he calls it: “Manliness brings change or restore order at moments when routine is not enough, when the plan fails, when the whole idea of rational control by modern science develops leaks” (Mansfield, preface ix). But there is a certain boundary that should be applied to those people. This boundary applied to assertive people should come from themselves in the form of self-control. Most people are aware of themselves and their personalities, and people who are assertive by nature should always take a careful approach when imposing opinions on others. A reminder for people who are assertive by nature should be to have respect for other people and their freedom.

Unassertive people are unlikely to be aggressive. It is not in their nature, and these people should learn how to be assertive. Those who are unassertive are more prone to be overpowered by assertive people, and they should learn how to express themselves and stand up for themselves, or they are in danger of becoming victims. In that case, Salter's training of assertive techniques should be applied more to people who are more submissive by nature, since they will benefit enormously in defending themselves. But before even starting Salter's proposed training, I believe that submissive people need to have the wish for freedom and to find courage in themselves if they want to acquire the skill of assertiveness.

There is no question that some people are born more assertive, even authoritarian, and on other hand, while others are born more docile and kinder, ready to please others. But we have to be aware that like anything in the world, nothing is black and white, and besides nature, nurture also plays a big role in one's life. And we saw that scientific studies still did not make any conclusive statement regarding nature and nurture, and how much each of them is involved in shaping character and one's behavior. I think that both heritability and environment play a role in shaping one's personality regarding assertiveness, but to what extent is difficult to conclude. So, any definite statement regarding this issue is difficult to obtain.

I would also like to turn to one more thing regarding assertiveness. It seems that Mansfield was right that men are more assertive than women. He was very adamant that it is in the nature of men to be more assertive and it is in the nature of women to be more nurturing and submissive. Mansfield was right that men are more assertive than women, which many studies have already shown, but I think that he immediately jumped to the

conclusion that it is due to heritability. That way he provided an immediate argument for his conclusions. As Salter sarcastically pointed out when talking about theology which insists that it has a monopoly on truth, “It uses its principles to prove its principles” (Salter, p 103). Maybe Mansfield should be reminded that this could apply to him as well. The rules are usually set by those who govern, and we know that this world was dominated by men. Many times men used their own principles to prove their principles. In addition to genetics, conditioning influences a person’s behavior.

Simone de Beauvoir argued that Western women should be more independent and take responsibility for their lives, and she accused them of being dishonest, humble, and lazy. Regarding her comment that women are to be blamed for their own fates, I think that she looked only through the perspective of her own experience of growing up in France and the freedom she had, and that she also ignored the fact that different women have different degrees of strengths.

Regarding assertiveness and even aggressiveness, it is true that different people have different perceptions of those terms. People who are by nature assertive might perceive aggressiveness as assertiveness, and people who are meek by nature might perceive any form of assertiveness as a form of aggression. This is why we should avoid defining assertiveness based on people’s perceptions.

Before making a definite conclusion about what assertiveness is, I would like to reflect on one possible objection to my conclusion. One of the objections that could be offered as a defense of assertiveness and its limits concerns intentions. The proposed objection could be that depending on the intentions of a person, we could make a clear distinction if assertiveness is a form of aggressiveness and a hunger for power, or if

assertiveness is a form of love, caring for people when we have the best intentions for them.

As Plato pointed out in his *Republic*, there are certain types of people who have a hunger for glory. For Plato, those people had a strong spirit or *thumos*. Assertiveness is not a bad characteristic, nor a bad acquired skill and it is necessary for one's survival. But assertiveness that comes from the hunger for glory could lead to aggression. We also cannot exclude the possibility that people who are not assertive by nature, could acquire a hunger for glory.

On the other hand, assertiveness that comes from love and the best intentions could be distinguished from assertiveness that comes from the hunger for glory. Sometimes when people whom we love and have respect for making wrong choices in their life, or we perceive those choices as wrong, we feel that we should stop them, and then we are being assertive with them. But unfortunately, we could be perceived as aggressive. I believe that in the case of two friends, Maria's assertiveness came from caring for her friend and having the best intentions, not for pure enjoyment to be bossy and imposing her opinion on her friend Sandra. But on other hand, Maria should have in mind that her friend has the freedom to make a choice.

Even though this example could be seen as a reasonable objection, that people who care about us could be assertive for our own good, I believe that regarding relationships between adults, this objection is hard to argue for, since every adult should have the freedom to decide what is best for her.



## Conclusion

As we have seen, assertiveness can be very complex and if looked at from different angles or contexts, it can be very hard to define and distinguish from aggressiveness. I believe that there is a better approach for defining assertiveness and distinguishing it from aggressiveness.

First, I think that assertiveness could be defined as self-confidence and there is no bad connotation to it. Every person should be assertive or self-confident and express herself eloquently and clearly. To some people, it is given by nature and some would need to work on acquiring that skill. Two factors required for assertiveness are the wish for freedom and courage, and they are necessary for each person to have them, to be able to acquire the characteristic of assertiveness.

Regarding freedom, each person needs to feel free to express herself and be eloquent about what she wants or what she needs. Freedom is a longing that every person on this earth has, and, in the case when freedom is restricted, no human can function normally. Second, courage is necessary for a person to be able to stand up for herself. Some people are born courageous and maybe we could say that they are born more assertive and ready to fight for their rights, but some people are not born with that. That does not mean that after some time, as we have seen in the case of Mrs. de Winter, those people will not obtain courage and acquire the skill of assertiveness.

Second, I believe that we should try to distinguish between two situations when we are talking about assertiveness. When a person needs to state herself and what she thinks, assertiveness is necessary. But when a person is stating her opinion about the life

of other people, she should be very careful to keep herself within certain boundaries. As we have seen in the situation of two friends, one should be careful not to enforce one's opinion on others, and assertiveness could be perceived as bossiness or even aggressiveness. This second situation is what Milivojević and Dragović argued about and were concerned about the ethical framework. Establishing a certain ethical framework would be very complicated since every situation is different and many factors are involved. This is why I will not go further into this issue of an ethical framework, since its establishment would be almost impossible.

When a person is stating her opinion about the life of other people and in social interactions generally, she should be very careful to keep herself within certain boundaries. If she is imposing her opinion on other people and insists that they should accept it, she is leaning toward aggressiveness, and this is different from assertiveness. Assertiveness includes respect for oneself and keeping the right to have freedom and choice, but also includes respect for freedom and choices of other people, regarding their own lives. This is why I believe that respect is the main factor that enables us to distinguish between assertiveness and aggressiveness. Respect is crucial in social interactions, and without it, assertiveness becomes aggressiveness. There is a fine, but distinct line between assertiveness and aggressiveness.

The answer to my proposed question "Should we be assertive?" is: yes, we should be assertive and always state our wants and needs, but in social interactions, we should be very careful when expressing our opinion about others or imposing our opinion on them. In that case, we should be aware of other people's freedom to choose for themselves, and we should have respect for them and their choice.

*I dedicate this master's thesis to my late dad, Mitar Mitrović*

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