

Women, Humanity and Nature

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There is now a growing awareness that the Western philosophical tradition which has identified, on the one hand, maleness with the sphere of rationality, and on the other hand, femaleness with the sphere of nature, has provided one of the main intellectual bases for the domination of women in Western culture.

There are plenty of good reasons for feminists to distrust both the concept of rationality and the notion of links with nature and the concept of nature. Both of these concepts and their contrasts have been major tools used to inferiorize and exclude women (as well as other groups). The main function of the concept of rationality, which has a confusing array of senses in which it is often hard to discern any precise content, seems to be a self-congratulatory one for the group thought to possess the prized quality and the exclusion and denigration of the contrasting group which does not. Thus the sphere of rationality variously contrasts with and excludes the sphere of the emotions, the body, the passions, nature, the non-human world, faith, matter and physicality, experience and madness. The masculine rational sphere of public life, production, social and cultural life and rational justice is contrasted with the feminine sphere of the private, domestic and reproductive life, the latter representing the natural and individual as against the social and cultural. Again, the rational masculine sphere is a sphere where human freedom and control are exercised over affairs and over nature, especially via science and in active struggle against nature and over circumstances. In contrast, the feminine natural and domestic sphere represents the area of immersion in life, the natural part of a human being, the sphere of passivity, acceptance of unchangeable human nature and natural necessity, of reproduction and necessary and unfree labour. In these cases there is not merely a contrast but an unfavourable one: the sphere associated with femininity and nature is accorded lower value than that associated with masculinity and freedom. In all senses of rationality, the 'rational' side of the contrasts is more highly regarded and is part of the ideal human character, so that women, to the extent that they are faithful to the divergent ideals of womanhood, emerge as inferior, impoverished or imperfect human beings, lacking or possessing in a reduced form the admired characteristics of courage, control, rationality and freedom which make humans what they are, and which, according to this view, distinctively mark them off from nature and the animal. Feminine 'closeness to nature' in this sense is hardly a compliment. The ideals of the masculine sphere and those of humanity are identical or are convergent. Those of femininity and humanity are divergent. To put the point another way, the ideals of the rational sphere give us a character model of the human which is masculine.

The concept of nature too has been and remains a major tool in the armoury of conservatives intent on keeping women in their place and supporting a rigid division of sexual spheres, or worse. It is allegedly nature, not contingent and changeable social arrangements, which determines that the lot of women will be that of reproduction and domestic arrangements and which justifies inequality. Women have been seen as connected with nature in both its two major different contrast senses: that of nature in contrast to culture or society, the realm of necessity in contrast to that of freedom, of controllable human cultural and social arrangements; and that of nature in contrast to the *human* world, or what is distinctively human in the world. The first sense, in which what is natural is what is not open to explanation or change, inspires the following conservative comment:

Nature isn't fair, and never will be—it is not concerned with justice. Nature has made Man with more Assertion, so that he will not willingly let Woman take first place. If she tries to he will always feel his manhood affronted, and he will not like her so much It isn't fair, but it is a fact...

Without women men will always fight and drink and live like crows—they are really little savages. It's women who are the homemakers, the civilisers, the gentle, the beautiful ones—and all they require of men is Security and Love. But they get more enjoyment out of the Arts, more fun out of being creative, more love out of little children, more depth out of life. To ask to be equal as well—is it really fair?²

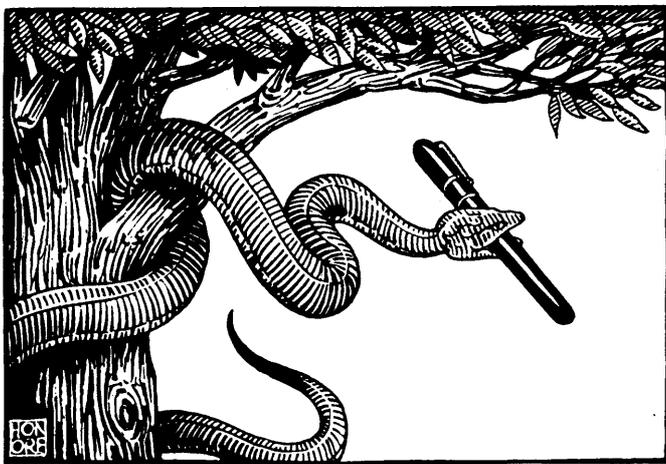
(No, it's not a contemporary of Rousseau's. That appeared in a book published in 1985.)

As Genevieve Lloyd has noted in her book *The Man of Reason*, however, the attitude to both women and nature resulting from the identification has not always been a simple one, and as Carolyn Merchant notes, it has not always been purely negative.³ The connection has sometimes been used to provide a *limited* affirmation of both women and nature, for example, in the romantic tradition. But the dominant tradition has been one in which the connection with nature accords women a lower status (even if one that is sometimes accorded some virtue as a 'complement'), and has been used to confine them to limited and impoverished lives.

Given this background, it is not surprising that many feminists regard with some suspicion a recent view, expressed by a growing number of writers in the ecofeminist camp, that there may be something to be said *in favour* of feminine connectedness with nature, and that there are important connections

between the oppression of women and the domination and destruction of the natural world which feminism cannot afford to ignore. The very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body and in unreflecting experiencing of life.

It is both tempting and common therefore for feminists to view the traditional connection between women and nature as no more than an instrument of oppression, a relic of the bad old days which should simply wither away once its roots in an oppressive tradition are exposed. After all, this is 1987. It seems obvious enough that women must now claim full and equal participation in the sphere of humanity and rationality from which they have been excluded, and to which their traditional sphere of nature has been opposed. Freed of traditional prejudice and of the traditionally enforced tie to the natural, women can at last take their place simply as equal human beings. The connection with nature is best forgotten. Women (especially modern women) have no more real connection with nature than men.



What I want to argue in this paper is that there are several reasons why this widespread, 'commonsense' approach to the issue is unsatisfactory. There are several reasons why the question of a woman-nature connection can't just be set aside, why the question should be examined carefully by feminists. The first of these, which is developed in the first part of the paper, is that it is essential to give critical examination to the issue because of its repercussions both for the model of humanity and for the treatment of nature.

The second reason, which is developed in the later part of the paper, is that the ecofeminist argument reveals an important ambiguity in feminist theory itself. Examination of the ecofeminist argument can throw valuable light on questions at the heart of feminism itself, and has significant implications for distinguishing different strains of feminism and different associated strategies.

The commonsense approach might better be called the 'naive' approach on analogy with naive realism in epistemology, since like naive realism it takes to be unproblematic what is not unproblematic. According to the naive view, the connection of women with nature should simply be set aside as a relic of the past, the problem for both women and men being that of becoming simply unproblematically and fully *human*. But the question of what is human is itself now highly problematic, and one of the areas in which it is most problematic is in the relation of humans to nature, to the non-human world.

Another problem is that what is in question is not just a model of *feminine* connectedness with and passivity towards nature, but also a contrasting and complementary one of masculine *disconnectedness* from and domination of nature. But the assumptions in the masculine model are not seen as such because the masculine model is taken for granted as simply a *human* model and the feminine as a deviation from that. Hence to simply repudiate the old tradition of feminine connection with nature and to put nothing in its place, usually amounts to implicitly endorsing an alternative *masculine* model of the human and of human relations to nature, and to implicitly endorsing also female absorption into this model. It is not, as it might at first appear, a neutral position, because unless the question of relation to nature is explicitly put up for consideration and renegotiation, it is already settled—and settled in an unsatisfactory way—by the dominant model of humanity into which women will be fitted. This is a model of domination and transcendence of nature, in which freedom and virtue are construed in terms of control over, and distance from, the natural sphere. The critique of the domination of nature developed by environmental philosophers in the last ten years has shown I think that there are excellent reasons to be critical of this model.⁴ Unless there is some critical re-evaluation of this masculine model in the area of relations to nature, the old female-nature connection will be replaced by a dominant model of distance from, transcendence and control of nature which is masculine. Some critical examination of the question then has to have a place, and an important one, on the feminist agenda if a masculine model of the human and of human relations to nature is not to triumph by default.

There is another reason then why the issue cannot be set aside in the way the naive view assumes. As a number of ecofeminists have observed, feminism needs to put its *own* house in order on this issue. If women do not have to fight the battles of other groups in a display of traditional altruism and self-abnegation, to carry the world's ills in recognition of motherly duty, as some arguments from peace and environmental activists suggest, it is also true that they can't base their own freedom on endorsing the continued lowly status of the sphere from which they have lately risen. Moves upwards in human groups are often accompanied by vociferous insistence that those new recruits to the privileged class are utterly disassociated from the despised group from which they have emerged—hence the phenomenon of lower middle-class respectability and the officer risen from the ranks. Arguments for women cannot convincingly be based on a similar put-down of the non-human world.

But much of the traditional argument has been so based. For Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, what is valuable in the human character ideal to which women must aspire is defined in *contrast* to the inferior sphere of brute creation. Thus she begins her *Vindication* by asking: 'In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation, consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than a whole, in Reason.' And she goes on:

For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes.

Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue and humanity that distinguish the individual from that of the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flows...⁵

In her argument that women do have the capacity to join men

in 'superiority to the brute creation', the inferiority of the natural order is simply taken for granted. It is certainly no longer acceptable for feminists to argue for equality in this way.

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Several critiques converge to necessitate reconsideration of the model of feminine connection with nature and masculine distance from and domination of it and to problematize the concept of the human. They are:

(a) the critique of masculinity and the valuing of traits associated with it traditionally;

(b) the critique of rationality: relevant here is not only the critique of the masculine and instrumental character of rationality, but also its *overvaluation* and use as a tool for the exclusion and oppression of the contrasting classes of the non-human (since rationality is often taken to be the distinguishing mark of the human) and of women (because of its association with maleness). The overvaluation of rationality is deeply entrenched in Western culture and intellectual traditions, not always taking the extreme form of some of the classical philosophers (for example the Platonic view that the unexamined life was worthless, or the Augustinian one that rationality was the ultimate value to which all others are instrumental)⁶ but appearing in many more subtle modern forms, e.g. the limitation of moral consideration to rational moral agents;

(c) the critique of the human domination of nature, human chauvinism, speciesism, of the treatment of nature in purely instrumental terms and the low valuation placed on it in relation to the human and cultural spheres. Included in this is a critique of the model of the ideal human character and of human virtue, which points out that the Western human ideal is one who maximises difference and distance from the natural and the animal: e.g., the traits thought distinctively human, and valued as a result, are not only those associated with masculinity but those unshared with animals.⁷ Usually these are taken to be mental characteristics. An associated move is the identification of the human with higher, mental capabilities and of the animal or natural with lower, bodily ones, and the identification of the authentic human individual with the mental sphere.⁸

The critiques converge for several reasons. A major one is that the characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are also those used to define what is distinctively human, e.g. rationality (and selected mental characteristics and skills), transcendence and activity, i.e. domination and control of nature as opposed to passive immersion in it (consider the characterisation of 'savages' as lower orders of humanity on this account), productive labour, sociability and culture. These last characteristics are assumed to be confined to humans but also associated with the masculine sphere of public life as opposed to the private, and domestic, individual, reproductive sphere assigned to women. *Masculine* virtues are also taken to be *human* virtues, what distinguishes humans from the sphere of nature, especially the qualities of rationality, transcendence and freedom. Some traditional feminist arguments also provide a striking example of this implicit identification of the human and the masculine. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication* appeals strongly to the notion of an unsexed human character as an ideal for both sexes ('the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being'⁸), but this human character is implicitly masculine. The human character ideal she espouses diverges sharply from the feminine character ideal, which she rejects, 'despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners'. In-

stead, she urges that women become 'more masculine and respectable'. The complementary feminine character ideal is rejected—both sexes should participate in a common human character ideal (p. 23) which despite some minor modification (men are to become more modest and chaste and in that respect to take on feminine characteristics) coincides in its specifications with the masculine character. A single 'unsexed' character ideal is substituted for the old two-sexed one, where the old feminine ideal was perceived as subsidiary and sexed.

The key concepts of rationality (or mentality) and nature then form a crucial link between the human and the masculine, so that to problematise the concept of masculinity and rationality is also at the same time to problematise the concept of the human and, with it, the relation of the human to the contrasted non-human sphere. The naive approach mistakenly takes the concept of the human to be unproblematic and fails to observe its masculine bias. This dual problematisation then is another reason why the issue of the traditional connection of women and nature can't be simply ignored, why the problems raised must be considered.

The concept of the human is itself very heavily normative. The notion of being fully or properly human carries enormous positive weight, and usually with little examination of the assumptions behind this, or of the inferiorisation of the class of non-humans this involves. Things are deplored or praised in terms of conformity to a concept of 'full humanity'. But the dignity of humanity, like that of masculinity, is maintained by contrast with an excluded inferior class.⁹



The concept of the human plays then an important but often somewhat shadowy role in the problem, and assumptions about the ideal nature of the human often stand silently in the background in discussions on masculinity and femininity, as well as in other areas. Thus for example behind the view that there is something insulting or degrading about linking women and nature stands an unstated set of assumptions about the inferior status of the non-human world. Behind the view that the traditional connection between women and nature can be forgotten stands the assumption that women can now be fitted unproblematically into the current concept of the human, and, again, that this concept itself is unproblematic.

Once these assumptions are made explicit, the connection between the stance adopted on the issue of the woman/nature connection and the different possibilities for feminism becomes clearer. In terms of this framework the main traditional position—the point of departure for feminism—can be seen as one in which the ideal of human character is not, as it often

pretends to be, gender neutral, but instead coincides or converges with that of masculine character, while the ideals of womanhood diverge. Included, and indeed having pride of place, in this character ideal are the ideals of rationality, activity, self-expression, freedom and control via transformation and domination of the natural. Womanly character ideals of emotionality, passivity, acceptance and nurturance stand in contrast. Thus, as Simone de Beauvoir has so powerfully stated, the tragedy of being a woman consisted not only in having one's life and choices impoverished and limited, but also in the fact that to be a good woman was to be a second-rate human being.¹⁰ So that to the extent that these 'neutral' human character ideals were subscribed to and absorbed and the traditional feminine role also accepted, women must forever be forced to see themselves as inferior, and to be so seen. Because women were excluded then from the activities and characteristics which were highly valorised and seen as *distinctively human*, they were forced to be satisfied with being mere spectators of what the *distinctively human* business of life was all about, the real business of the human struggle with nature.

De Beauvoir's proposed solution to this tragic dilemma is also stated with great force and clarity—change was to come about by women fitting themselves and being *allowed* to fit themselves into the dominant model of the human, and women were thus to become *fully human*. The model itself, and the model of freedom via the domination of nature it is especially itself based upon, are never themselves brought into question. Similarly for others, e.g. Harriet Taylor and Mary Wollstonecraft. As this earlier feminism saw it, the tragedy of women was that they were treated as less than fully human, or that prevented from becoming fully human they were kept at the level of the brutes.



This has been called the first, *masculinising*, wave of feminism.¹² The problem for women was to claim full *humanity*, i.e. conform to the main human character ideal, defined by traits characteristic also of the masculine, and to fit into, adapt themselves to, the corresponding social institutions of the public sphere. These might require some minor modification but basically it was women who were to change and adapt (sometimes with help), and women (or what society had made of them) who were the problem. The position can be summed up as that of demanding equal participation by women in a masculine concept or ideal of humanity, and the associated activist strategy as that of demanding equal admittance for women to a masculine-defined sphere and masculine institutions.

Central to these was the domination of nature. Women, in this strategy, are to join men in participation in areas which especially exhibit human freedom, such as science and tech-

nology, from which they have been especially strongly excluded. These areas are especially strongly masculine not only because their style strongly involves the highly valorised masculine traits of objectivity, abstractness, rationality and suppression of emotionality, but also because of their *function* which exhibits most strongly the masculine virtues of transcendence of, control of and struggle with nature. In the equal admittance strategy, women enter science, but science itself and its orientation to the domination of nature remain unchanged.

This masculinizing strategy is the one which is being implicitly adopted when the problem of the woman-nature connection is simply sidestepped or set aside. It is assumed that the solution is for women to fit into a masculine model of human relations to nature which does not require change or challenge.

In the last decade this first, masculinising strategy of feminism has come under strong criticism from several quarters and a number of its problems identified.

One problem is that the masculine model of the human and corresponding social, institutions has been arrived at precisely by exclusion and devaluation of women and of 'feminine' characteristics. Because it has been defined by *exclusion*, it is loaded against women in a variety of subtle and less subtle ways and women will not benefit from admittance to it as much as they think. As G. E. Lloyd notes, 'Women cannot easily be accommodated into a cultural ideal that has defined itself in opposition to the feminine.'¹³ Absorption into the masculine model is not likely to be successful.

Other major criticisms come from those who see the need to reject or modify the masculine character ideal as well as (or in some cases instead of) the feminine character ideal rejected or modified in the masculinizing strategy. There are several different angles from which this criticism is directed. One is from difference theorists, who reject the masculine character ideal as a model, at least for women and in some cases for both men and women. Another is from ecofeminists, who reject the masculine model especially in the area of human relations to nature, and argue more directly that this masculinising strategy amounts to having women join men in belonging to a privileged class in turn defined by excluding the inferior class of the non-human; that is, it is a strategy of having women equally admitted to a now *wider* dominating class, without questioning the structure of, or necessity for, domination. The conceptual apparatus relating superior to inferior orders remains intact and unquestioned.¹⁴ What is achieved is a broadening of the dominating class, without changing or challenging the basis of domination itself. And the attempt to simply enlarge the privileged class by extending to and including women not only ignores a crucial *moral* dimension of the problem, it ignores the way in which different kinds of domination act as models for and as support and reinforcement for one another, and the way in which the same conceptual structure of domination reappears in very different inferiorised groups, e.g. women, inferior humans, slaves, manual labourers, 'savages', black people—all 'closer to the animals'.¹⁵

What seems to be involved here is often not so much an affirmation of feminine connectedness with and closeness to nature¹⁶ as distrust and rejection of the masculine character model of disconnectedness from and domination of the natural order. The masculine character ideal is similarly rejected by the broader ecofeminists and by some theorists of non-violence who link the masculine character ideal (and in some cases biological maleness) to aggression against fellow humans, especially women, as well as against nature, and reject the absorption of women into this mode, which is perceived as yielding a culture not of life but of death.¹⁷

One thing that has emerged from the discussion so far is that a critical and thoroughgoing contemporary feminism is and must be engaged in a lot more than merely challenging and revising ideals of feminine character, that it is and must be engaged in revising and challenging as well the ideals both of *masculine* and of *human* character. The masculinizing strategy is unsatisfactory and superficial precisely because it does not do this. In the light of this understanding it seems worthwhile to try to compare and evaluate some alternative strategies for revising the human character ideal, and to try to spell out more clearly what alternative model the ecofeminist argument is really appealing to. It seems clear that the basic common ground of the ecofeminist and the non-violence argument is rejecting the masculine model of the human as a character ideal, at least for women; but beyond that there is confusion, ambiguity and indeterminacy, and a number of different alternatives are possible.



Perhaps the most obvious way to interpret the ecofeminist argument is as one which replaces the masculine model of the human character by a new feminine model. That is, if the masculinizing strategy rejected the feminine character ideal and affirmed a masculine one for both sexes, this feminizing strategy rejects the masculine character ideal and affirms a feminine one for both sexes. The masculinizing wave of feminism is succeeded by a new feminizing wave. Several slogans sum up this feminizing strategy, e.g. 'the future is female', 'Adam was a rough draft, Eve is a fair copy' (courtesy Macquarie University toilet door). There are several different forms the assertion of a feminine character ideal can take, and it is important to be clear about the differences.

First, a feminine character ideal can be affirmed *not* as a rival to the masculine model but as a *complement*. The masculine model is not really challenged in this strategy, although there may be some degree of upward revaluation of the relative worth of feminine traits. For example, the romantic tradition often does this, affirming the value of the feminine but in a way which does not really challenge the masculine ideal, but rather complements or adds a separate feminine model.

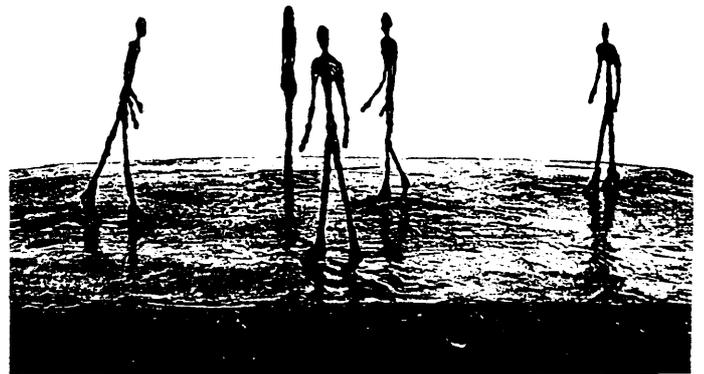
An associated strategy is that of affirming a traditional model of feminine character obtained by reversing the values, so that traits previously regarded as lowly and despised become instead virtues and are given a high value: e.g. closeness to nature, previously used to put women down, is recast as a virtue.

'There is a fairly strong tendency for a position which thus simply reverses the values of traditional feminine traits to collapse into a complementary position, and conversely for a complementary affirmation of feminine character to affirm traditional traits. One reason for this is that really traditional feminine traits include appropriate attitudes of subservience or self-abnegation which require a masculine complement. Thus where feminine virtues are developed in a situation of exclusion and complementation there is a problem about how they can stand on their own.¹⁸ The associated social change strategy is that of separate spheres—recognising and revalorizing traditional femininity as a complement to masculinity. It is a pre-feminist or anti-feminist strategy distinct from the strategies rejecting masculinity and is included here for completeness, and so that it can be seen in relation to the other positions.

A different strategy is that of affirming a feminine character ideal as a *rival* ideal, attempting to replace the masculine character ideal, not merely to complement it. To be a genuine rival, it has to be affirmed as a rival model of the *human*, displacing or competing with the masculine model of the human. The human ideal then becomes a feminine rather than, as traditionally, a masculine one, and human virtues are now feminine virtues and character traits rather than masculine ones. Thus a feminine ideal is seen as desirable for both sexes, although there may be doubts as to how far biological males can ever approximate to it. Thus, according to Sally Miller Gearhart,

... it is time to dare to admit that some of the sex role mythology is in fact true and to insist that the qualities attributed to women (specifically empathy, nurturance and co-operativeness) *be affirmed as human qualities* capable of cultivation by men even if denied them by nature.¹⁹

The 'primacy of the female' (i.e. of feminine character traits, not necessarily biological femaleness) would be acknowledged 'as primary, the source of all life'.²⁰



Another strand of this feminizing strategy is what has come to be called 'difference theory', the celebration and articulation of woman's difference from the masculine character ideal. In contrast to the above sort of position, which assumes that the identification of feminine traits is clear and that they can be known to include such traditional traits as nurturance and empathy, this alternative strand takes the form of the celebration of the genuinely feminine, a 'feminine principle not to be defined'.²¹ The project is the discovery and emergence of the genuinely feminine, conceptualised not as something whose character has been formed by exclusion from the masculine -

sphere, but as an independent force, silenced and unable to reach expression under patriarchy, but ready and able to emerge once the barriers of phallogocentric society to its expression are removed. Women's bodily experience is taken as the starting point in the attempt to give expression to the silenced and unknown feminine.²²

If the strategy associated with the first, masculinizing model is that of equality (in masculine institutions), and of the second, complementary feminine form is that of separate (but equally valued) spheres, the strategy of the third, feminizing form is that of separatism, in which the feminine virtues can be developed and come to dominate, or the unknown and yet to be discovered feminine can emerge.

There seem to be numerous difficulties in both strands of the position. This paper is mainly concerned with understanding the motivation for and structure of the ecofeminist argument, and to understand the range of options available and which account of the human character ideal it appeals to, rather than with the development of the detailed critique and evaluation of these different positions that is undoubtedly required. Nevertheless some critical comment on the third 'feminizing' approach seems to be in order, if only to motivate the examination of alternatives.

Much of the problem turns on the question of what the characteristics of the alternative feminine ideal are, and of how the desired traits can be identified as feminine. If the position of the first strand is adopted, some virtues (e.g. nurturance, empathy in Gearhart) are identified as feminine or feminine-associated and put forward as the new ideal for the human. But how is this identification of the traits as feminine arrived at? Are the traits in question taken to be characteristic of all women under all circumstances (which is not very convincing), or only under traditional and complementary circumstances, in which case how can we know that they will survive translation to a different non-traditional and non-complementary context? Or is there some other alternative? Are they really traits of all *actual* women (or only some?), arrived at by examining what actual women are like, or are they traits simply traditionally attributed to women? So if traditional traits are affirmed, there is the problem Lloyd points to as to how traits developed in a complementary context (e.g. nurturance) can stand alone as a human ideal.

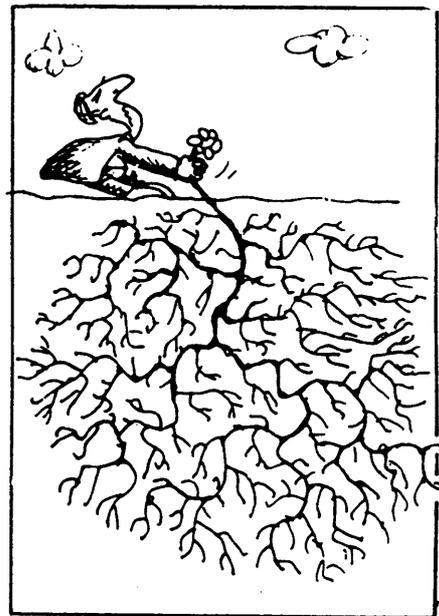
Gearhart skirts the problem, by referring to the relevant traits as 'feminine-associated', an expression which is neatly four-way ambiguous between 'attributed (traditionally) to women', 'attributed traditionally to women', 'occurring with women', and 'occurring with women in the traditional context'. The ambiguity enables her to assume that those traits attributed to women in fact occur with them unproblematically in a non-traditional context.

Gearhart also conveniently overlooks numerous negative traits associated with women under patriarchy, such as subservience, and does not explain what ensures that we will get the desirable characteristics but not the undesirable ones. Are the undesirable characteristics assumed to be produced by a patriarchal context, and the desirable ones somehow not? There are a host of problems.

If we examine the second, difference theory strand we encounter a different set of equally serious problems, now turning on specifying what the characteristics of the alternative feminine ideal are. Independent criteria for the selection and identification of feminine traits are lacking.

Since these are not *traditional* virtues or character traits associated with the feminine, what are they? There has to be some way of determining which traits are to be affirmed in op-

position to masculine traits. Usually they are not identified or taken as identifiable (e.g. because of silencing), or as to be discovered. The genuinely feminine is either unknowable or as yet unknown, to be brought into existence. In this case there seems no way of showing whether desirable characteristics, e.g. alternatives to masculine domination of nature will or will not be present among the group of traits. Arguments from psychoanalysis may suggest that they will be but are hardly conclusive as they stand; and as Clair Duchen suggests, relying solely on them appears to involve denying the importance of other non-individual and social influences and bases of character.²³



The problem then is how to say what this concept of the 'feminine' is, and what the ideal human character being affirmed is like. Obviously its character cannot be determined by examining the sorts of characteristics actual women *now* display, since these have been determined by exclusion under patriarchy. Thus for example it is hardly convincing to suggest that passivity, insecurity, and the poorly developed sense of self and of independence many women are obliged to develop under patriarchal conditions are genuine but unrecognised human virtues. Again it seems impossible not to recognise that the oppression of women has produced undesirable as well as desirable character traits.

So, since it cannot be *actual* existing women whose character forms the basis for the ideal, this position sets off a search for some sort of feminine essence which eludes expression in present societies, but appears as an unrealised potential, so much unrealized that it is, in some versions, almost essentially inexpressible. Since it seems that this character can never be instantiated by actual women in existing oppressive societies, the position has difficulty in explaining exactly how the ideal character appealed to 'belongs to' women, and *which* women it belongs to, i.e. what makes it feminine. And it seems inevitably either nebulous or circular, since we are asked to undertake a remaking of the human in the mould of a set of 'feminine' characteristics which cannot be specified unless and until that remaking is achieved, and whose relation to actually existing women is, at best, unclear. And the search for the essence of the feminine seems to parallel the search for the essence of the

human, for those character traits which will in the one blow distinctively mark off the human and also establish the ground of their superiority to the natural or masculine order.

The body is sometimes then introduced in an attempt to solve the problem of identifying the feminine, in what appears to be a form of reverse dualism. (The position apparently accepts the mind-body division and its correspondence to masculinity and femininity, but replaces the masculine notion of identity as based in the mind or consciousness with the supposedly feminine one of identity as based in—and apparently reducible to—the sexed body. To the extent that bodily difference is taken as determining of the feminine, that the feminine is endorsed as the ideal human character, and that what is involved is the assertion of a rival human ideal which men will necessarily never be able to participate in, the position seems to have built into it another hierarchy, another exclusion. There may be difference here, but too much remains the same.

In brief, the position, whether interpreted according to strand 1 or strand 2, faces a dilemma as a base for the ecofeminist argument. If it follows strand 1 and specifies the traits, selecting only desirable ones such as nurturance, it faces the problem of explaining how these relate to existing women and how they are feminine. If it fails to do so, specifying them only in their relation to female bodies or to the emergence of an unspecified potential 'genuine femininity', it fails to provide any basis for believing, what is needed for the ecofeminist argument, that the desirable traits are included or will emerge. In neither case can the ecofeminist argument be adequately based on position 3. Is the argument therefore to be abandoned?

I want to argue that it doesn't have to be, although this particular form of it needs to be. Initially it seems obvious that the ecofeminist and peace argument is grounded on accepting a special feminine connectedness with the natural or with peaceful characteristics, and then asserting this as a rival ideal of the human (or as part of such an ideal); but on closer examination this is not so clear.

The argument doesn't have to take this form. The ecofeminist argument basically involves the rejection of the masculine model of the human and of the aggression towards and domination of nature and of other humans seen as part of that model. But to reject the masculine model of the human is not necessarily to affirm a rival feminine ideal, nor to accept any other special connection between nature and the feminine. To free the concept of the human from the connection to the masculine which has lain behind its guise of neutrality doesn't mean that it has to be replaced by a rival feminine ideal specified in reaction to the masculine ideal.

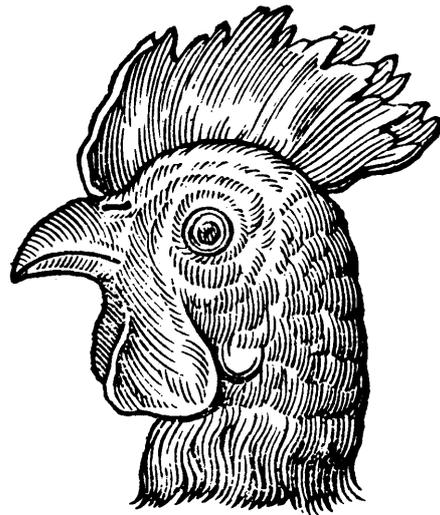
The choice between the masculine model of the human and its feminine rival is, fortunately then, a false choice. This can be seen clearly if we examine the logical options for the human ideal and its relation to a masculine or feminine ideal. They can be set out as follows (using the symbol 'R' to mean 'reject' and the symbol 'A' to mean 'accept').

- (1) A masculine model, R feminine model
- (2) A masculine model, A feminine model
- (3) A feminine model, R masculine model
- (4) R masculine model, R feminine model

This set of alternatives is exclusive and exhaustive of the possibilities for an ideal, but of course a further set of options can be generated if the necessity for a human character ideal itself is question, viz. *no* character ideal at all.²⁴ It is apparent from this set of alternatives that the assumption that an alternative to (1) (the traditional model) or (2) (the romantic complementary or separate spheres model) must be (3) (the feminine model) is

wrong.

Thus it is open to an ecofeminist to agree with the commonsense view and assert that women are in fact no more significantly connected to nature than men (except as all oppressed groups are connected and as an alleged connection has been used to inferiorize both) but that what is needed is an account of the human ideal for both sexes, which accepts the undesirability of the domination of nature associated with masculinity. This would be a strategy which rejected the masculine concept of the human; but because it denied any special significant connection between nature and the feminine, was not committed to a rival feminine ideal. The fact that the concept of the human is up for remaking doesn't mean that it has to be *remade in the mould of either the masculine or the feminine.*



Not only *can* an ecofeminist argument appeal more satisfactorily to the fourth model than the third, this is clearly what it often does. For example, Rosemary Ruether, one of the pioneers of the position, is clearly appealing to model 4, not model 3, when she writes

Both men and women must be resocialised from their traditional distorted cultures of masculinity and femininity in order to find that humanized culture that is both self-affirming and other-affirming. It is precisely in this creation of a humanity that is truly affirming of all life, both one's own and that of all others, that the writers seek to find the deepest connections between feminism and non-violence.²⁵

In some writers the adherence to model 4 over 3 is even more explicit: e.g.

If the masculine character ideal supports militarism, what can support peace? Femininity? No, for that character ideal also has been shaped by patriarchy and includes along with virtues such as gentleness and nurturance a kind of dependency which breeds the passive-aggressive syndrome of curdled violence.²⁶

The rejection of the masculine character ideal does not imply acceptance of corresponding feminine traits, and a critique of both masculinity and femininity and their complementary characters is involved. Further, the rejection of both the masculine and feminine character ideals is linked with the rejection of the traditionally associated dualisms of mind/body, rationality/emotionality, public/private, and so on, which are

also rejected as false choices, so that the *transcendence* of the traditional gendered characters become part of, is linked with, the systematic transcendence of the wider set of dualisms.²⁷ These dualisms are subject to independent criticism in the ecofeminist literature.²⁸

The inadequacy of the reactive model of simply redefining the human and feminine becomes clearer when we consider in detail the way in which one might go about assembling characteristics for the formal alternative, the remade model of the human, along lines which are neither masculine nor feminine. This may be seen as a degendered model, in that it presupposes that selection of characteristics is made on the basis of independent criteria of worth. Criteria selected will often be associated with one gender rather than the other, and perhaps may turn out to resemble more closely the characteristic feminine rather than characteristic masculine character traits. But they're degendered in the sense that they won't be selected *because* of their connection with one gender rather than the other, but on the basis of independent considerations.

The fourth model is sometimes seen as not merely degendered but as an *androgynous* model. Thus Kokopeli and Lakey continue:

We are encouraged by the vision of androgyny, which acknowledges that the best characteristics now allocated to the two genders indeed belong to both; gentleness, intelligence, nurturance, courage, awareness of feelings, co-operativeness.... Many of these characteristics are now allocated to the feminine role which has led some men to conclude that the essential liberating task is to become effeminate. We don't agree, since some desirable characteristics are now allocated to the masculine role (for example, initiative, intelligence).²⁹

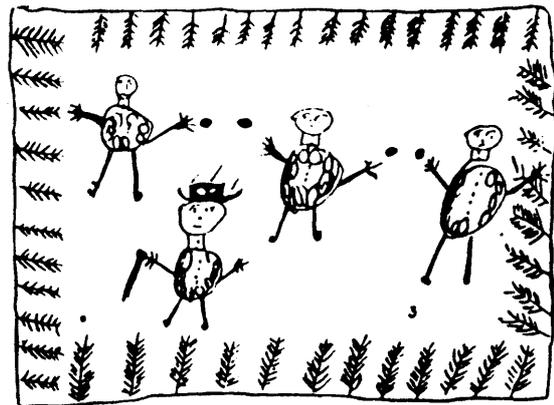
But androgyny is not the only construction to place on the fourth degendered model, and in turn has its problems. The concept of androgynous human character suggests a recipe analogy, in which the new human ideal is put together from existing ingredients: take good points of each gender and place in a bowl, mix gently, throw bad points into the dustbin.

But such a model is far too simple and shallow, ignoring relations of exclusion, complementation and so on between traits and suggesting that their allocation to their respective sex is arbitrary. It treats the problem as if it could be solved by an amalgam of certain *existing* characteristics thrown together, just as the androgynous human is pictured as a physical composite of existing male and female organs. Similarly, the androgynous terminology suggests that no significant character differences should remain between masculine and feminine characteristics, that there will be a single model for both sexes composed of the same set of character traits.

These assumptions are both unsatisfactory and unnecessary, and are not an inevitable part of a degendered model. The androgynous strain should be distinguished from the transcendence strain, where what is involved is not an amalgam of the genders leading to identical gender roles, but a transcendence of the dualistic gender characteristics to produce a third set of characteristics that will often be different from either. The androgynous model overlooks the fact that the gender contrast of existing character traits are often false contrasts. In fact the gender categories and associated institutions can be seen as a systematic and related network of false choices. A good example is provided by the egoism/altruism contrast, associated with masculinity and femininity respectively. If egoism is taken as consisting in the pursuit of a person's own selfish interest, and altruism that of a person's denying or setting aside their own

interest in favour of those of others, the false contrast standardly presented between the two overlooks the alternative of interdependence of interest, the situation where interests are not discrete and disconnected but where a person's interest essentially involves the interests of others.³⁰ Similar points can be made for most of the other gender-related dualisms.

The adoption of a degendered model does not imply either that a uniform character ideal must be adopted for both sexes, or that there will be no differences between the sexes in terms of character. Transcending the gender categories and the systematic network of false choices plainly does not imply the dissolution of all differences, only of a particular set. Nor is there any reason why there has to be a unique human character ideal, why there cannot be a multiplicity of such ideals. These various confusions have led to the degendered model being given less adequate consideration than it deserves.³¹



Where does all this leave the ecofeminist argument? How do we know what characteristics will be included in the outcome in the degendered model and whether they will be the ones the ecofeminist argument needs? It may seem initially to be completely open, so that any set of traits anyone takes a fancy to can be included. But in fact the selection of traits is determined by the critique of masculinity and femininity, and the transcendence of false choices particularly. The ideal of closeness to nature often seems to involve little content over the rejection of the masculine model. In the case of characteristics such as non-domination of the natural world and recognition of continuity with it, what is involved is a rejection of a masculine ideal of domination of and maximising distancing from the natural sphere, but this does not oblige us to embrace a feminine alternative of 'closeness to nature'. To the extent that a feminine alternative involves the denial of development to capacities for reason, intelligence and control of life conditions, this does not represent an attractive alternative ideal either. Yet it is precisely such a denial which has formed much of the feminine 'closeness to nature' and been part of women's historical experience. So a *different* concept of 'closeness to nature' than that given by exclusion from the valued features of human culture needs to emerge. Working this out is part of working out a model which transcends the masculine and feminine, i.e. a degendered model.

One of the things which could emerge from a degendered alternative is that the attempt to locate all value in the area of the human character that has been taken as both masculine and distinguishing of humans from the non-human world should be rejected; that we should not *overvalue* the characteristics that set humans apart from the natural world nor attempt obsessively to maximise the differences as the main source of virtue,

that we see value *also* (perhaps even sometimes primarily) in the characteristics that we as humans share with the non-human world. That would be a revolution indeed in our understanding of the ideal human character. In this fashion a degendered model could provide some sort of basis on which to mount a revised ecofeminist argument.

The aim of this paper has been limited to some clarification of the alternative bases on which the ecofeminist argument could proceed and the clarification of the structure of that argument. A more thorough account of both alternatives and of consideration of objections to them and their relative merits—the next problem which at this stage of the argument throws up—can cast, I think, a good deal of light on both the theoretical bases and practical strategies for feminism.

Notes

- 1 In this paper I use the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' to mean the masculine and feminine character ideals, i.e. the appropriate set of total character traits deemed proper to persons of male and female biological sex respectively. The concept of gender resulting is heavily normative and the traits identified variable over different cultures and times; and, as usual, persons of the same biological sex may exhibit different levels of the relevant character traits and thus participate to different degrees in the gender character ideal.
The sex/gender distinction has been under attack recently, but it remains, I believe, both defensible and useful, although often loaded with *additional* less defensible assumptions. As used here it carries no dualistic implications, e.g. that the character traits involved are purely mental (physical and integrated characteristics can and normally will be included), or that biological sex is a brute fact involving no element of social or cultural determination.
- 2 C. McT. Hopkins, *As You Take It*, Neptune Press, Geelong, 1985, p. 297.
- 3 G. E. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, Methuen, 1984; and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, Wildwood House, 1980.
- 4 See e.g. R. and V. Routley, 'Against the Inevitability of Human Chauvinism', in K. G. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayre (eds.), *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.
- 5 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Dent, London, 1982, p. 15.
- 6 For some account of this see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1979.
- 7 See, for example, John Rodman, 'Paradigm Change in Political Science', *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1980). Also Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man*, Methuen, 1979, Ch. 11, p. 40.
- 8 These points are developed in more detail in V. Plumwood, 'Ecofeminism: an Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments', in Janna L. Thompson (ed.), *Women and Philosophy*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement to Vol. 64, June 1986, pp. 120-138.
- 9 For examples see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, Penguin, 1983, pp. 41ff.
- 10 Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 11 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Foursquare Books, 1965.
- 12 Ariel Salleh, 'Contribution to the Critique of Political Epistemology', *Thesis Eleven*, 1984, no. 8.
- 13 G. E. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

- 14 For example Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Why the Green Nigger: Remythin Genesis*, Roundtable Press, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 1979.
- 15 See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman New Earth*, Seabury Press, New York, 1978; and Susan Griffin, *Women and Nature*, Harper & Row, New York, 1978.
- 16 Although this may be involved in some cases, e.g. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *op. cit.*
- 17 See e.g. Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland (eds.), *Reclaim the Earth: Women speak out for Life on Earth*, the Women's Press, London, 1983; and Pam McAllister (ed.), *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Non-violence*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1982.
- 18 On complementation see G. E. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, Ch. 7.
- 19 Sally Miller Gearhart, 'The Future—If There is One—Is Female', in McCallister, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 272. A similar position is found in Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1976; and in Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1984, Ch. 6.
- 21 Christiane Makward, 'To Be or Not to Be ... A Feminist Speaker', in Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (eds.), *The Future of Difference*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1985, p. 96.
- 22 For example Luce Irigaray, in E. Marks and I. Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms*, Harvester, Brighton, 1980, p. 103; or Chantal Chawaf, cited in Makward, *op. cit.*
- 23 Clair Duchon, *Feminism in France*, Routledge, 1986, Ch. 5.
- 24 This seems to be what is being suggested in Moira Gatens, 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles Without Answers', in C. Pateman and E. Gross (eds.), *Feminist Challenges*, pp. 28-29.
- 25 Quoted in P. McCallister, *op. cit.*
- 26 Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey, 'More Power Than We Want: Masculine Sexuality and Violence', in P. McCallister, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- 27 For an account of these linked dualisms and of how they are treated in the ecofeminist argument see V. Plumwood, 'Ecofeminism: Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments', *op. cit.*
- 28 See for example Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, *op. cit.*
- 29 Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- 30 For more details see R. and V. Routley, 'Against the Inevitability of Human Chauvinism' in K. Goodpaster and K. Sayre (eds.), *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, 1979.
- 31 For a more detailed discussion of these further points, see my 'A Defence of Degendering' (in preparation). Useful discussion on an earlier version of this paper was received from Denise Russell.

